Communications and Culture

Communications has been defined as the conveying or exchanging of information and idea. This wide definition is taken as the starting-point for this series of books, which are not bound by conventional academic divisions. The series aims to document or analyse a broad range of cultural forms and ideas.

It encompasses works from areas as esoteric as linguistics and as exoteric as television. The language of communication may be the written work or the moving picture, the static icon or the living gesture. These means of communicating can at their best blossom into and form an essential part of the other mysterious concept, *culture*.

There is no sharp or intended split in the series between communication and culture. On one definition, culture refers to the organisation of experience shared by members of a community, a process which includes the standards and values for judging or perceiving, for predicting and acting. In this sense, creative communication can make for a better and livelier culture.

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PAUL WALTON

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Other Theatres

*The Development of Alternative
and Experimental Theatre
in Britain*

Andrew Davies

M
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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Introduction</i>	xi
1 The Great Bard and All That: Some Traditions of British Theatre	1
2 Castles, Ghosts and Chartists: Stage Melodrama in the Nineteenth Century	12
3 The Rise of the West End – and some Independent Theatres	25
4 Regional, Nationalist and Yiddish Theatre	46
5 Women in the Theatre: the Actresses' Franchise League	66
6 Between the Wars: the 'Little Theatre Movement'	79
7 Between the Wars: the Political Theatre Groups	96
8 The War Years	124
9 After 1945	138
10 Political Theatre in Britain Since the 1960s	162
11 Community Theatre Since the 1960s and 'the Majors'	175
12 Alternatives within Radio and Television Drama	195

<i>Conclusions</i>	207
<i>Guide to Further Reading</i>	210
<i>References</i>	218
<i>Index of People</i>	235
<i>Index of Theatres, Companies, Cultural Organisations and Statutes</i>	241
<i>Index of Plays (Stage, Radio and Television)</i>	246

Preface

When I mentioned to a friend that I was writing a book on the history of experimental and alternative theatre in Britain since the early nineteenth century, his reaction was ‘well, that will be a short book – and of pretty limited interest too’.

I hope that *Other Theatres* proves him wrong on both counts. Again and again alternative and experimental drama has anticipated changes and innovations which only took place later within mainstream theatre, but the very existence let alone the work of groups like the suffragettes’ Actresses’ Franchise League, Group Theatre, Unity Theatre or the ABCA Play Unit is barely known other than to specialists. And if it is ‘Big Names’ which attracts readers, then a glance through the following pages reveals figures such as William Cobbett, William Morris, George Bernard Shaw, W. B. Yeats, W. H. Auden, Joan Littlewood. . . .

But just what is ‘alternative’, ‘experimental’, ‘fringe’ or ‘other’ theatre – the variety of terms used indicating both the welter of such activity and its resistance to neat categorisation? The answer to this question should become clear during the course of the book, but as a working definition one might use the phrase ‘non-commercial’, i.e. theatre whose primary objective is something other than the making of a financial profit. This distinguishes it from the West End theatre and also from the popular theatre of circus and music hall. It also means that the boundaries of alternative and experimental theatre are not drawn in too narrow or sectarian a manner – and if it is pointed out that the dividing line is often difficult to make out, well, that is one of the book’s themes.

Little has been written about this history: the best books so

far have been Catherine Itzin's *Stages in the Revolution*, exploring developments since 1968, and Norman Marshall's pioneering *The Other Theatre*, which was published in 1947 and looked at the inter-war years. Reading Marshall's book eight years ago started me researching into this whole subject and my choice of a similar title is in part a tribute to his study.

Other Theatres is the first overall history of British alternative theatre, but I would like to stress that the book does not record a simple linear tradition in which, like a relay race with the passing on of the baton, groups handed down their accumulated experiences to the next generation. Many individuals and companies did not know anything of their forerunners or even their contemporaries. Raphael Samuel has rightly written of this history as resembling more a 'series of moments'; yet these moments, however disparate and often contradictory, remain united by their opposition towards the commercial or West End theatre.

Alternative and experimental theatre is often associated with a didactic humourlessness, an emphasis on 'the message' at the expense of 'entertainment'. Certainly this has often been the case, but to tar the whole with this brush is wrong. In 1964 Joan Littlewood issued a statement which contained the following passage:

Shakespeare's company was made up of leary misfits, anarchists, out of work soldiers and wits who worked at their ideas in pubs and performed them as throwaways to an uninhibited pre-Puritan audience. My Company works without the assistance of smart direction, fancy dress, beards and greasepaint and was prepared for the wave of opposition which we knew would come. I hope the audience will enjoy our work as much as we do.

I have tried to write *Other Theatres* in such a spirit, bringing out the humour and excitement as well as the frictions and disagreements which are inevitably involved in the process of putting together 'other theatres'. I have quoted extensively from those involved within this tradition at various times in order to convey the mood and flavour of each period or venture.

In addition I have attempted to place this history within its

social context – how, for example, can one discuss alternative theatre without at least sketching out what it is that it is meant to be alternative to? – in contrast to those historians of theatre and drama, few of whom, in Eric Bentley's words, 'seem to have noticed anything in this universe except theatre and drama'.

Two final points. Academic books nowadays are often clogged up with lengthy footnotes, so exhaustive as to rival the text itself. I have referenced all quotations from whatever source together with references for contentious or little-known 'facts'. There is also an essay on further reading at the end. I think this should enable anyone who wants to explore the subject further to do so. The footnotes contain neither additional information nor asides, queries or jokes and therefore can be safely ignored by the general reader.

If any interested reader of this book would care to enter into correspondence with me, whether to praise, damn or query a statement or reference, then please write to me c/o Macmillan Publishers, Higher and Further Education Division, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 2XS

Finally, *Other Theatres* does cover a great deal of ground, oblivious to the 'no entry' signs which separate academic disciplines from each other – 'English', 'Drama', 'Politics', 'Sociology' and so on – but then, as R. H. Tawney once wrote:

When we reach years of discretion – which I take to mean when youth shows signs of getting over its education – part of our business is to join those naturally connected interests which the demands of examinations and the exigencies of time-tables have temporarily put asunder.

Introduction

Before starting to examine one particular area of this country's theatrical history I thought it might be helpful if the reader was offered a general overview. Although this introduction is entirely self-contained, the story of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are covered more fully in the following chapters. This is the context in which 'other theatres' have existed.

English medieval drama rested upon three foundations: folk drama; the secular tradition of the wandering entertainers; and Church drama. If we know a certain amount about the last, the history of the first two comes down to us only in scattered form. The strand of folk drama acted not so much as conscious 'theatre' but rather as an expression of the local community's self-identity – demonstrated in certain activities which today would be referred to as 'dramatic'. In a static and virtually illiterate society where communication was almost non-existent and few people ever travelled outside the immediate district, the villagers' seasonal festivals and rituals confirmed their own existence by excluding outsiders.

The strolling bands of entertainers moving from village to village also sprang from an oral culture far removed from printing presses, libraries and noblemen's halls. Fragments testify to their activities, and much of it is negative in the sense that it derives from the fulminations of Church councils condemning the clerical presence at the entertainments which followed on from feasts and marriages. St Augustine in his *Confessions* owned up to a youthful love of such festivities, and the Laws of Charlemagne passed between 800 and 814 further reprimanded ecclesiastical laxity.

No doubt the acrobats, the jugglers and the mimes, poking fun at the authorities in market places, continued on their own way, more concerned with pleasing that mass of the population which paid and fed them. Edgar of England in 960 called for the reform of the monasteries, yet again berating those who should have known better than allow strolling entertainers to perform in front of them, and in the twelfth century William of Malmesbury referred to 'dramatic gestures', an indication perhaps that the mimes were acting out parts. But however slight, what little we know of these strollers points to the existence of a secular tradition that was irreverent, crude and satiric.¹

On the other hand the tradition of Church drama emerged from a desire to extend religious belief by dramatising biblical episodes, thus livening up services conducted in the sung Latin which meant nothing to the bulk of the congregation. The *Visitatio* exchanges from the later half of the tenth century, for example, sought to bring home in more visual and telling ways the significance of Christ rising from the dead, as well as ensuring that these dramatic activities took place under the watchful eye of the ecclesiastical authorities themselves. However, before long things began to get out of hand: movement around the whole interior of the church was followed by the introduction of vernacular dialogue, an innovation that threatened clerical control.

The upshot was the ejection, whether voluntary or otherwise, of the drama from the churches and its maintenance by trade guilds responsible for separate sections of the plays. These mystery cycles continued as dramatisations of stories from the Bible but found themselves intermingled with the comic secular tradition which did not take anything too seriously. There are countless examples of this: in the York version Joseph listens disbelievingly to Mary's story that her pregnancy was purely the result of divine intervention. Mrs Noah is a gossiping old shrew in the Chester, York and Towneley plays, constantly nagging her husband and holding him up for ridicule by her neighbours. Herod is invariably portrayed as a laughably ranting idiot, and linked to this is the depiction of the Devil as a comic villain, anticipating characters seen in cheap Hollywood westerns or children's Christmas

pantomimes. Even the torturers snigger and have a lot of fun in the Wakefield cycle.

The medieval plays also demonstrate a bewildering mix of forms: jugglers' tricks and a frequent use of fireworks jostle with the Last Supper and the Crucifixion. Topical criticism abounds too, as in the Second Shepherds' Play where the shepherds complain of their lords' high and mighty ways, grouching about the extortionate level of taxation. Finally, quite apart from the presentation of the plays being the collective responsibility of the whole town, the medieval audience were direct participants in the plays themselves, cast in the role of Mankind – thus in the Towneley version Christ appeals directly to them from the Cross.² The staging of the episodes on pageant wagons surrounded by a boisterous crowd could not but establish close contact between performers and spectators.

Academic specialists have noted the popular characteristics of these productions. Allardyce Nicoll argued that 'It can hardly be emphasized too much that the great cycles of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries could not have become the popular things they were had it not been for the efforts of the comic actors to make sport and the machinists to make wondrous entertaining shows.'³ Glynne Wickham has likened them to community games: 'Song, dance, wrestling, sword-play, contests between animals, disguise, spectacle, jokes, disputation and ritual all figure, separately or compounded, in the drama of the Middle Ages which was devised in celebration of leisure and for a local community.'⁴

The morality plays which superseded the earlier mysteries and miracles retained many of their characteristics, in particular their abundant exuberance; now it is the figure of Vice who banters and spars with the audience. However as the sixteenth century wore on a number of other influences increasingly began to make themselves felt. The Reformation led to the extinction of anything supposedly papal in origin, and so the mysteries and miracle plays were gradually suppressed: the Hereford plays were ended by 1548 and the last performance of the Chester cycle occurred in 1575 – but they left behind a rich dramatic legacy.

The growing professionalism of the players themselves was reflected in the spread of touring companies from the 1550s

which were primarily composed of actors rather than the more versatile entertainers of the past. Allied to this trend were the draconian laws and whipping campaigns aimed at those discontented hordes tramping the roads in the sixteenth century dispossessed by the more profitable sheep; the statute of 1572, which outlawed rogues and vagabonds unless carrying a licence from two Justices of the Peace, drove a further wedge between such authorised companies as the Earl of Leicester's Men and the rest. A more permanent location was only a matter of time and finally came with the construction of the Theatre in 1576. However important this event – the first such theatre building in this country – James Burbage and his company were only reflecting the commercial expansion and self-confidence of Elizabethan times.

Christopher Hill has written that 'The financial genius of James Burbage brought playing from a small-scale private enterprise to a big business.'⁵ From 1572 Burbage had been the head of the leading troupe of players, the Earl of Leicester's Men, and quickly realised the lucrative gains to be extracted from constructing a more permanent venue in preference to tramping the highway. Borrowing £100 from his brother-in-law he invested the money in tagging a theatre onto the back of an inn called The George in Shoreditch and, most importantly, initiated the box office, stationing gatherers at the entrance who ensured pre-payment – a marked contrast from the traditional stampede that occurred, and still does, when the busker sends round the hat after his or her performance.

Burbage's Theatre was soon imitated by the Curtain and then by the Rose, and their growth out of the inn-yard and bear-yard was illustrated by the wide variety of the entertainments presented. The plays themselves contained a fantastic mix of mood and styles, the coexistence of tragedy and comedy welcomed by an audience convinced that the spice of variety was all. Everyone knows of the gravediggers, the ghost and the strolling players in *Hamlet*, the drunken porter and the witches in *Macbeth*, the antics of Falstaff and his friends, Feste's songs in *Twelfth Night*, Prospero's role of magician throughout *The Tempest*, Juliet's Nurse and Henry V's soldiers before the Battle of Agincourt, the wrestling match in *As You Like It* – all of these ingredients counterpointed the rhetoric of other more

lofty protagonists. The thrusts and gibes of the Fool in *King Lear* often today seem rather boring, but then they would have full of topical satire and innuendo which altered from performance to performance.

The use of contrast is evident in Shakespeare's plays – for instance, there are the very different views on honour expressed by Falstaff and Hotspur in *Henry IV* – as is his relish in dealing with contemporary political issues: in Hamlet's phrase, 'the forms and pressures of the age'. With the theatre replacing the pulpit as a dominant influence, the history plays concerned not so distant events, and the subjects dramatised – questions of civil war, power, justice – remained of especial relevance in a country with an ageing Queen and no heir, beset by religious factions and a feudal system in the throes of disintegration. It is vital to remember too that although Shakespeare today is universally revered, at the time he was regarded as no more than another member of the company. The reason for this lay in the 'sharing system', a democratic means of organisation whereby the company took collective responsibility for opportunities and rewards, making their own rules and electing their own officers, thus discouraging what later emerged as the 'star system'.⁶

By 1598 friction with the landlord prompted Burbage's company to build a new playhouse, and although this building, the Globe in Southwark, was the first to be constructed as a theatre per se, the continuities were symbolised by the fact that it was the wooden timber from the Theatre which formed the seating of the new property. The Globe was soon followed by other public playhouses such as the Fortune and the Swan, and the comparative cheapness of admission – anything from a penny upwards – encouraged their enormous popularity: of London's total population of 140 000 at this time, over 20 000 went to the playhouses each week.⁷ An equivalent today would mean something like one million Londoners going to the theatre each week.

But of course the theatrical conditions of the time were forever changing, and the playhouses began to introduce a more ordered programme upon which their regular customers could depend. The role of the fool, for example, formerly occupied by Richard Tarleton with his penchant for crude

jokes and Will Kempe's singing and dancing, was now, by 1600, being more fully integrated into the play itself – as is seen in *King Lear*.⁸ Some of the more 'extraneous' entertainers were banished from the boards, and in Shakespeare's plays too a more pessimistic tone increasingly appears, a reflection of his loss of contact with the teeming mass that thronged the public playhouses.

Why was this? Alongside the tradition of the popular theatre there had always existed the very different tradition of private theatres and court masques. One of the former establishments, Blackfriars, had been opened in the same year as the Theatre, but its restricted clientele and expensive admission spawned a more literary and stylised form of theatre very different from the crude vigour of the public playhouses. When James I came to the throne in 1603 one of his first acts was to set up Burbage, Shakespeare and company as King's Men or part of his royal household. In effect this entailed their transference from one tradition of theatre to another.

It was a move from open air playhouses to the private theatres charging admission to their indoor, evening and artificially lighted performances. Of prime consideration now was just how close one sat to the monarch, and the spectators' responses were conditioned by how the King reacted to the play rather than by their own spontaneous feelings. The design of the theatres was influenced by continental Renaissance ideas of the picture-frame stage with the proscenium barrier emphasising the growing sense of distance between performers and spectators, something indicated also by the more self-conscious and elitist language and forms used by playwrights like Marston and Tourneur who worked primarily within this tradition. The court masques designed by Inigo Jones heightened this introspection and glorification of the monarch.⁹ Not surprisingly, Shakespeare's use of contrast and much else was lost, and his reputation suffered a serious decline in court circles precisely because of the popular – or, by now, vulgar – elements in his poetry and plays.¹⁰

The distinction between public playhouse and private theatre is not of course an absolute one, but within it one can already discern the seeds of the literary West End theatre and the popular, lively, all-embracing variety tradition.

The expansion in size and influence of the commercial middle classes – their worship of profit satirised by Ben Jonson in his play *Volpone* of 1606 – accelerated the growth of puritan attitudes which disapproved of the theatre as an unnecessary diversion from the virtues of hard work and industry. These forces were particularly strong in London and the outbreak of the Civil War ensured the closing down of all theatres in 1642. Scholars have traced the fragile existence of dramatic activities over the course of the next eighteen years, but it was only with the Restoration of 1660 that the theatre emerged from the twilight.

Most importantly its emergence was in a manner that reinforced the literary or West End tradition, finally ending that national drama which had flourished for the greater part of Shakespeare's career. Charles II decreed that henceforward drama was to be confined to the theatres to which he granted royal patents and which turned out to be Covent Garden and Drury Lane. In such circumstances the two theatres could be little more than royal toys, dependent totally on court patronage and with an audience of courtiers and hangers-on. The 'sharing system' was abandoned as the patents were granted personally to Messrs D'Avenant and Killigrew, who now hired the actors as paid employees and had total and untrammelled control over the productions.

In many respects the theatres were little more than reservoirs in which the male members of the aristocracy could fish for suitable mistresses, especially as actresses were now permitted to appear on stage for the first time. The differences between the Restoration theatre and the Elizabethan public playhouse should not be overemphasised – for example the apron stages at both patent theatres projected deep into the audience and so retained some of the former intimacy between performers and spectators, and a notable figure like Nell Gwyn with her repartee and mischievous wink looked back to the Shakespearean fools and forward to music hall favourites like Marie Lloyd – but the seventeenth century was crucial in British theatrical history. A truly popular form of drama based upon improvisation, variety and the absence of any rigid distinction between stage and audience was replaced by a tradition of theatre which was elitist and spoke only to and for a

few. The puppets, the performing animals, the jugglers and the acrobats who had occupied an honourable place on the Elizabethan stage found themselves banished to the fair-grounds and market squares, back again with the old pitfalls and the sharing of the stroller's life.

In the eighteenth century the key event was the passage of the Stage Licensing Act of 1737, a statute which introduced a systematic method of censorship. The consequences of this measure reverberated throughout the theatre, and this at a time when there was already taking place a gradual expansion of the audience as puritanical tenets waned amongst the middle classes and they developed more of a theatre-going habit. Instead of the often topical and provocative ballad opera which did not survive the 1737 legislation, it was productions which offered familiar settings and problems for this new middle-class audience that held sway, overlaid by a generous helping of sentimentalism.

The neutering of the drama represented by the Stage Licensing Act was also reflected in the greater ascendancy of the players themselves, especially in the cases of David Garrick and Sarah Siddons. With the plays of such a uniformly mediocre standard the focus of the spectators was more firmly on the actors, in turn hastening the advent of the 'star' syndrome which would have seemed so misplaced to Shakespeare. The tedium of the plays further encouraged an interest in the diversions of spectacle and extravagant presentation, and Garrick employed as his scene designer Philip de Loutherbourg, a man whose ingenuity showed itself in the fires, volcanoes and thunder storms regularly on show at Drury Lane. This emphasis on ostentation, together with the sumptuous costumes, had of course the effect of distancing the productions from the spectators and it is notable that, for instance, Garrick when delivering a soliloquy now spoke as if there was no audience more than but a few yards from him.¹¹

Although the growth of the theatrical performance as an illusion accelerated during the eighteenth century, still many features of the popular theatre remained. The entertainment kept its compendious flavour, beginning at 6 o'clock in the evening and ending at midnight, and the plays would be sandwiched between dancing and comical after-pieces. The

audience could still handle widely contrasting emotions and reactions; as Allardyce Nicoll has noted of this period: 'There seemed nothing extraordinary to the audience in their listening to Lear's agony at 7.30 and laughing hilariously at pantomime or farcical afterpiece at 8.'¹²

The growth of the eighteenth-century theatre-going audience was not a phenomenon exclusive to London, and provincial theatres were constructed throughout these years. Building upon the esteem and prestige built up by the more respectable troupes of strollers such as the Norwich Company of Comedians, enterprising business men began to conduct campaigns to persuade the authorities to allow them building permission. Generally they were successful: in the twenty years after 1768 patents were granted to eight provincial theatres, including those at Norwich, York, Liverpool and Manchester. In Birmingham, however, local hostility prevented the erection of a theatre until 1807.

The widespread economic and social changes at the end of the eighteenth century consequent upon the development of industrialisation resulted in migration from the countryside and the rapid growth of towns and cities. Within the theatre sheer weight of numbers reintroduced the 'popular' back into the playhouses both in London and in the provinces, infiltrating even Covent Garden, Drury Lane, and also the Haymarket which had been informally admitted to the ranks of the patents. By the 1840s melodrama and pantomime – then working-class entertainments – held sway both at these theatres as well as at the new minor (as opposed to the majors or patents) and penny theatres. The music halls and circuses were also a reversion to the undifferentiated fare characteristic of the Shakespearean era. Despite the industrialised nature of much of Victorian Britain folk drama continued in its own relatively self-enclosed fashion.

However towards the end of the nineteenth century the theatre's character changed yet again, a transformation which this time centred on the creation of 'the West End theatre' as an institution appealing predominantly to the leisured and prosperous. A rash of new playhouses was built in Charing Cross Road and Shaftesbury Avenue, whilst in the provinces too the middle classes were lured back. Not everyone was

happy with this trend and certain groups and organisations condemned the West End theatre on a variety of grounds, trying instead to set up the 'other theatres' which are the subject of this book.

Where then did the working-class audience disappear to when they left the theatres at the end of the nineteenth century? To the cinema, where spectators were provided with the old melodramas which their predecessors had once enjoyed in the theatre – today of course this popular form is more readily available within television 'soap operas'. Ironically enough it is this elusive and huge audience which the other theatres have spent so much time, often unsuccessfully, in trying to attract. The West End theatre has also rested on rather insecure foundations, appealing only to a small, albeit wealthy, minority of the population and tending to reflect that group's tastes and interests. The subsidised companies which have grown up since the Second World War have been allowed a certain freedom to experiment whilst largely protected from commercial pressures – although in recent years the reduction in public subsidy in relation to rising costs and inflation has meant that commercial criteria are beginning to dominate these companies' programmes and methods.