

THE CLIMATE IN THE BRITISH THEATRE

Part I The Post-War

Part II The 'New Wave' so-called in the '60s

Part III The last two decades.

In the years immediately after World War Two had ended, British Theatre resumed its unblack-out career on broadly the same lines as it had followed in the thirties.

That's to say, the plays produced in London, whether they were serious or comic, were produced by impresarios who subsidized themselves and, therefore, in their own as well as in the public interest, offered to that public what they hoped would be a palatable fare.

Thus, playwrights wrote whatever plays they had in mind, regardless of their themes and waited for the verdict of the critics with a certain equanimity, though naturally prepared for failure always, since the theatre (like horse-racing!) is unpredictable.

This equanimity was nurtured by the knowledge among playwrights that most critics would review their offerings impartially with an unbiased mind remarking only on the merits or demerits of the play in question and the acting, but eschewing any further form of criticism, such as turned up later in the '60s.

Meanwhile, let me emphasize again, how healthy was the literary atmosphere in the late nineteen-forties and the fifties when my own plays first came into the West-End of London. One felt (or at any rate, I felt and I am certain that most of my colleagues felt the same) that all was fair (or almost!) in a fair (or almost!) world. One wrote one's play, it came on and it either failed or it succeeded - then one wrote another one - and so on.

Yet, there was - even in those days - one small cloud on the horizon in the shape of certain critics in a very small minority whose notices were sometimes slanted in a new disquieting direction. Had one been clairvoyant, one might easily have got an early warning of what was to come in later years.

These critics (one, or two at most) saw fit to add a new dimension to their criticisms and I can recall the exact moment when this new trend started, namely during 1947 when I had two plays produced in London in succession and at the same theatre.

The first called *Now Barabbas* was about the inmates of a prison, which I wrote from personal experience and in a serious vein, while the other called *The Chiltern Hundreds* concerned peers and politics and butlers and was written with a certain levity.

The first got good reviews, but when the second came on in the autumn of the same year, I observed that certain critics were complaining of my fall from grace and stating that since my first play had been near-tragedy, the second should have been the same.

I scented danger from that moment, even though they phrased their reviews tenderly. One, for example likened me when he reviewed the prison play to Galsworthy (a famous playwright early in this century, whose plays contained a lot of social comment).

But, when the comedy replaced the serious play, this same critic told me off for not continuing to fly the tragic standard at my mast-head and for running up a comic - not to say facetious - flag instead.

'O.K.' I told myself, 'if that's the way the fellow feels, let him bemoan my fall from grace, so long as he remains in a minority ! I also prayed that such a puritanical approach should not spread like a virus among critics. As I told myself again, 'A playwright is entitled to write about what he will, regardless of its tragic leaning or its levity and not be labelled serious or comic from the start of his career and told to act accordingly. This would be neither moral nor constructive,' I concluded, 'so the odds against it ever happening must be unlimited.'

In such an optimistic mood, I carried on into the sixties, alternating between serious and comic themes, according to my whim, some of these plays being successful, others not, although I noted that light comedies were rather more successful than the others.

Then the sixties came and, suddenly, the minor scent that I had picked up earlier became what one can only call a lethal gas attack. This happened when a group of critics (not just one or two) gave their support to what was called the 'New Wave' and began to criticize the type of play that certain playwrights (not excluding this one!) wrote regardless of their merit or their content, nor for any shortcomings in dialogue or plot or continuity (although, of course, they covered such shortcomings as well) but for non-artistic reasons.

This was when the British Theatre became political, perhaps for the first time since Cromwell banned it altogether, which procedure, I would guess, was a lot fairer than the method that his puritanical successors chose.

At this point (Part II) may I now explain just what the New Wave was about and how and where it first originated.

It was born in Sloane Square, London at the Royal Court Theatre and later spread its wings to Stratford East (also in London) and it soon became the fashion since the plays produced at these venues and elsewhere were often very good and sometimes excellent. Most London critics praised them to the skies and all was merry as a marriage bell for those who wrote them and performed in them and put them on.

For playwrights like myself, however, the New Wave spelt near extinction even though a handful of us went on fighting to what we assumed to be the end.

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The plot developed thus. The Royal Court Theatre and its directors (Lindsay Anderson and John Dexter being two of the most talented) produced new plays by Osborne, Storey, Wesker (to name only three). These plays were labelled 'kitchen sink' plays which was totally misleading since (apart from one by Wesker called *The Kitchen*) they were not much different from the plays that other dramatists were writing. For example, one of the first by John Osborne, called *Look Back In Anger*, although more outspoken than the normal play around in those days (less my prison play in 1947 !) had more gin drunk in it than any of my most abandoned comedies! And yet, because of its outspokenness, and what would now be termed its anti-Establishment trend, it was hailed as the first Left Wing play the British Theatre had ever given birth to. It was followed by such plays as Wesker's *Kitchen*, which I have already mentioned and which, by the very nature of its setting (with its cooks and waiters) led the superficial to assume that all was over for the so-called Right Wing plays - that is to say, plays featuring effete aristocratic people such as stockbrokers, or peers or land-owners.

The day had at last come (thus ran the argument put forward by these left-wing critics) when all new plays (since the old ones such as *Hamlet*, about kings and *Romeo and Juliet*, about well-heeled young folk, were indestructible) should be strangled at birth. No thought was in the minds of such reformers that perhaps one play about a kitchen and another about Blenheim Palace, say, might possibly provide a happy contrast in a London season for the play-goer. The long delayed birth of the Left Wing Theatre had taken place at last and so that it might grow into maturity, unchallenged by the so-called Right, its rival had to be destroyed. Thus ran the battle cry.

And what a massacre it was, with the new breed of left-wing critics in the role of happy executioners!

I have a note-book full of extracts from such criticisms (of my own plays necessarily, since they are the subject of the cuttings I receive) showing the punch packed by the new-wave critics. For a playwright like myself who often wrote a play with characters from the Establishment, like peers, or Queen Victoria (forget about her servant also being in the play!), Dames, German Colonels, Old Etonians, like Charles Rolls (never mind the fact that Henry Royce was in the lead!) life was extremely dangerous.

Here, let me quote from some of my press-cuttings since to do so is to illustrate the atmosphere of those days and will be more economical and more instructive than to write about the literary holocaust at length.

The first quote, from a London provincial paper called the *Kensington News* seems to me to paint the picture of that era to perfection.

'The waspish comments by some of my colleagues on this controversial and intelligently-written drama by William Douglas Home poses a very urgent question on the field of dramatic criticism. Have we, in British journalistic circles lost our balance of fair-play? Have those values been replaced by a new school of exhibitionists - admittedly willy-nilly - but who will destroy almost any work with a germ of thought to satisfy a perverted sense of brittle witticism.'

And Sir Harold Hobson, the *Sunday Times* drama critic for many years wrote 'It is a critical convention either to abuse Mr. Douglas Home or to condescend to him.'

However, (in spite of this critical bias) my play *The Secretary Bird* squeezed into London in the sixties, having been turned down by all the London Managers except one, ran for many years, prompting the *Times* dramatic critic to write 'The British Sporting instinct is on Mr. Home's side. Unlike the other depressed playwrights of the fifties, he has kept relentlessly plugging on.'

But this critic also held the view (and I quote) that 'it is the lot of entertainment plays to be scrutinized for social content.'

And on another occasion when I wrote a play called *The Dame of Sark*, he wrote a notice as follows:

'WDH tells the story of the war-time occupation of Sark so as to combine two escapist fantasies. For Sark itself where the crumbling class convention still flourishes. Then there is the war which by this account comes over as a well-bred affair waged according to the old code of honour. Colonel von Schnettau, portrayed as a gallant soldier of the old school, loyally carrying out the orders of a government of which he is ashamed. That, of course, raises the crucial question of German obedience. But (my italics) *Mr. Home is not the one to open that can of beans.*'

This, of course, irritated me acutely, not only because I had spent a year in prison for challenging military obedience during the war but also because what this critic called 'a can of beans' was well and truly opened, in the play - as witness the review by Sir Harold Hobson in the *Sunday Times*:

'The striking merit of the play is that, almost unconsciously, the growing realization breaks in upon us that the person who is really and most frighteningly threatened is not the Dame at all, but Colonel von Schnettau. He is one of the few tragic figures on the heroic scale to be met with in contemporary drama.'

This restored the balance. But another critic, if he had not so enraged me, would have made me laugh, when he wrote:

'Mr. Home, with his upper class background concentrates exclusively on the relationship between the Dame of Sark and the German Commander in the Channel Islands, Count von Schnettau, entirely at the expense of the relationship between the Dame and her maid.' Oh dear! Oh dear! Oh dear! One more example of this bias.

That same critic of the *Times* (who I quoted from earlier) wrote a review of a play of mine called *Rolls-Hyphen-Royce* which ran as follows:

'He (me) has been drawn to this story as a surviving relic of the old British Class structure and his treatment of the two partners (Rolls and Royce) is designed to show the democratic operation of the gentleman's club.'

Finally, what one might perhaps describe as 'non-artistic bias' prompted John Peter, now successor to Sir Harold Hobson on the *Sunday Times* to write

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'DH gets a fearful hiding from most serious critics every time his curtain rises and reveals an upper-class person, probably titled, in a personal dilemma.'

And that, of course, identifies the problem I have always had since I began to write plays, pinpointed by Kenneth Tynan the *Observer* critic when he wrote 'The Honourable William tells us in Act One.' Or, regarding a play of mine about the war, 'To judge from the views they express in conversation, not many of the officers in this play would seem to have been at Eton with Mr. Home.'

Besides the bias, there's another reason for my condemnation by the left-wing critics for which I should not be blamed - the accident of birth and schooling - neither of which I was responsible for!

And during (Part III) the last two decades, this snapping has continued though on a reduced scale, as is illustrated by what one dramatic critic (of the *Field*) wrote of my one but last play 'Hearty people do not always cut attractive figures. Nor on recent evidence do critics. In greeting WDH's new comedy about hunting which is far more comic than they conceded and probably than they even noticed, they exhibited the same sadistic characteristics normally attributed by opponents of hunting to its followers. The playwright's problem may be that he is a gentleman.'

That may be so or it may not! The fact is, though, that certain critics think that I am one and write accordingly!

And this, of course brings me right back to where I started - bias in the theatre, left-wing illusions, censorship of certain types of play on grounds of politics - all mortal sins, because the criticism of art surely ought to be confined to whether any work of art - a picture or a sculpture or a play - has been well-executed - never mind the author or the artist or the sculptor - or the message, if there is one, or the setting of the work in question.

A play in a kitchen may be just as good as one set in a palace - even better possibly - but NOT for social reasons, only for artistic ones, although a play set in a palace (what a revolutionary thought!) may be just as good or better than its less up-market colleagues for the self-same reasons.

And, of course, there is another hazard in the theatre, since subsidy became the fashion. I read yesterday, for instance, in a newspaper that there have been five productions of *The Tempest* this year in the London area (though one admittedly came from Japan!).

Well, five productions is a mighty number when it comes to just one play, however eminent its author, and the fact that there have been so many indicates as well as anything does how the theatre of subsidy is able to indulge itself in luxuries denied to its commercial colleagues for commercial reasons.

Thus, an author, like myself, who is not popular within the theatre of subsidy - by which I mean is not selected automatically by any of the state-supported theatres (less the provincial ones) is at a disadvantage, since he works in the commercial theatre alone (or hopes to!), for which reason one shop-window is closed to him, which inevitably must restrict his field of operations.

For example, in my long career, now spanning 50 years, I have had only one play which, thanks to the late Sir Ralph Richardson who wished to do it there, got near to a production at the National.

The West-End Managers, however, thought the play, called *The Kingfisher*, with three characters only, was a cut-and-dried West-End play and should not be done in a subsidized theatre. Politics again!

Indeed, so exercised were they by what they felt was an outrage, that my agent reported to me that certain articles were to be written in the *Evening Standard*, denouncing the project.

So, perhaps weakly, rather than allow my new-born play to be tossed around in this dispute I withdrew it from the National and then wrote a letter to the *Times* demanding a statement from the West-End Managers to the effect that they were not trying to dictate to playwrights (which they were!) but which they denied. I then gave the play to one of them and it ran happily in the West End with Sir Ralph and Dame Celia Johnson, directed by Lindsay Anderson, who, as I previously mentioned, was a pillar of the New Wave Theatre at the Royal Court! - which goes to show Left-Wing Right-Wing rivalry was never part of his philosophy - nor of John Dexter's who produced another play of mine last year.

Thus have my fortunes fluctuated over many years and as I write, I find myself with half-a-dozen plays available but not in great demand. Ah, well, fashions change. The day will come, no doubt, when someone, somewhere, will revive a play of mine - or do a new one - which will be (touch wood!) a great success.

And then the rest will follow with this writer fashionable once again as in the early post-war years and, who knows, worthy of a subsidy at last!

William Douglas HOME