The Writer's Theatre? Critical Responses to the Theatre Text at the Royal Court, 2007-2013

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Introduction

In theatre, as in politics, a change of regime is a time to assess, reflect upon and often to reaffirm core beliefs. In May 2012, when Vicky Featherstone was named as the next artistic director of the Royal Court, both her artistic priorities and those of the theatre were made clear in her initial statement:

> In its tireless championing of the playwright as the centre of the creative process the Royal Court has created the environment for some of our greatest and bravest thinkers and talents to emerge. My entire understanding of and belief in theatre is predicated on the playwright. It is the playwrights who find story, form and structure in the most unlikely yet inspiring places and who breathe the life into ideas, thus demanding their urgent work be realised for an audience.[1]

It is a statement containing all the key outlines of the Royal Court's philosophy, chief among them its commitment to the playwright. For the Royal Court, the self-identifying 'writer's theatre', it is the playwright who sits at the heart of the theatre-making process and who is the primary source of the ideas, narratives and arguments that appear on its stage. Also implicit in Featherstone's words, and integral to the Royal Court's identity, is a belief in the political importance of the worlds these playwrights imagine; they are the 'bravest thinkers', creating 'urgent work' that demands to be seen. The assessment of that work and its celebrated urgency, meanwhile, falls to the critics, whose verdicts complete the theatre's ongoing cycle of production and reception.

This thesis explores the relationship between those two institutions – the Royal Court and popular criticism – during the tenure of Featherstone's predecessor, Dominic Cooke. It does so not merely to observe the interaction between one theatre building and the critical establishment, but to open an investigation into the particular status of the theatre text in contemporary British theatre and the institutional structures which influence understandings of the relationship between text and performance – a relationship which is complex and often fraught. W. B. Worthen identifies the

[1] Vicky Featherstone, 'Press Release: Royal Court Announces Vicky Featherstone as Next Artistic Director', 11th May 2012 <http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/news/articles/royal-court-theatre-announces-vicky-featherstone-a/> [accessed 27th June 2014].

troublesome paradox of the theatre text: 'On the one hand the text of the play appears as a single fabric, to have a specific shape, size, and texture, a kind of organic wholeness', but on the other, 'in performance the text becomes material for use, used and used up, eventually put aside in the process of making the play'.[2] In other words, the theatre text is both a whole object in its own right and a fragment that is completed in performance. For this reason, its role, its use and its authority in any given production have frequently been the subject of debate.

Mainstream British theatre culture has had a tendency to favour the text and the playwright, typically understanding this relationship between text and performance as one of realisation; a director, a creative team and a group of actors stage the vision of the playwright as outlined on the page. This is far from the logic of all British theatre, much of which explores more explicitly collaborative and experimental forms of creation, but it is a logic that drives many of its major institutions and that is largely preserved in the discourse of popular theatre criticism. This has been further exacerbated in recent years by the rise of 'new writing', a sub-genre of British playwriting. Partly driven by increases in arts funding under New Labour, much of which was directed towards developing new plays, throughout the 1990s and 2000s 'new writing' became an increasingly dominant force in British theatre – so much so that Andrew Haydon, looking back at the years 2000-2009, writes that the division between 'new writing' and 'new work' 'almost became the defining theatrical schism of the decade'.[3] 'New writing', in this context, typically refers to work that takes a pre-existing playtext as its starting point, while 'new work' acts as a vague umbrella term for everything else. Although the boundary between these two categories is by no means clearly defined, it is a schism which repeatedly appears in literature discussing this period.

Writing from a position of experience on the front line of literary management, the West

[2] W.B. Worthen, *Drama: Between Poetry and Performance* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), xiii.
[3] Andrew Haydon, 'Theatre in the 2000s', in Dan Rebellato, ed., *Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama: 2013), p.61.

Yorkshire Playhouse's Alex Chisholm offers a valuable insight into some of the problems created by the growth of new writing. She suggests that 'the "New Writing" play, like the "Well Made Play" before it, exists as some sort of ideal to which new writers are supposed to aspire', therefore limiting the imagination of theatre-makers, while the development processes that have been constructed around the new writing industry mean that 'everything is made explicit in the text'.[4] Her experiences shed light on the potential dangers of a narrowly defined set of aesthetic choices and development routes for playwrights and other theatre-makers alike. The continued dominance of new writing frameworks and the enshrining of the writer's authority threaten both to restrict the creativity and experimentation of artists and to place emphasis on individual genius in a way that fails to recognise, reward and thus encourage collaborative endeavour.

Investigating the new writing phenomenon and the central positioning of playwright and text requires, as Chisholm's article suggests, a consideration of the material conditions of production and reception. As Jen Harvie points out, 'the intrinsic literariness of British theatre is taken for granted not only as a result of the theatre itself but also, importantly, because of the critical and material structures surrounding it and the ideological biases they manifest and produce'.[5] In order to challenge this assumption of 'intrinsic literariness', one must also challenge the structures that support its perpetuation. That is one of the central purposes of this thesis, which sets out with a deliberate focus on one of the most fertile sites for opening such a challenge. The Royal Court's proud lineage as 'the writer's theatre' and its historical association with social realism seats it at the nexus of the tensions I have begun to describe above. While its mythology enshrines the writer and the notion of 'serving the text', over the years it has also been home to productions which challenge a simplistic understanding of the theatre text as blueprint. Cooke's time as artistic director, meanwhile, includes a range of work that

[4] Alex Chisholm, 'The End of "New Writing"?', Exeunt Magazine, 11th May 2012 <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/the-end-of-new-writing/> [accessed 9th July 2014].
[5] Jen Harvie, *Staging the UK* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p.114.

interestingly reinforces and problematises a view of the text as the prescriptive heart of a piece of theatre.

The theatre criticism that spans this era also straddles an intriguing set of positions in relation to the theatre text. While the responses of much mainstream newspaper criticism reinforce a limited understanding of the relationship between text and performance, the years 2007-2013 also witness the flowering of a diverse range of online criticism, much of which challenges the tastes and assumptions of traditional critics and perhaps even begins to offer a new vocabulary for discussing the interface between writing and performance and the different types of theatre-making at work in contemporary British theatre. It is this under-examined critical context, which wields considerable influence within the institutional structures of British theatre, that I will give particular attention to. This is also a context of which I am a part, writing for both online and print publications and therefore having access to a privileged – if not distanced – vantage point on theatre criticism in the UK.[6]

Before examining the very recent past, it is necessary to understand the genealogy of both the Royal Court's attitude to the theatre text and the critics' attitude to the Royal Court. My first chapter will briefly chart the Royal Court's emergence as a theatre dedicated to the voice of the playwright and how this purpose has been framed in subsequent accounts. It will then go on to consider the continuing impact of this history as the Royal Court has come to occupy a key position in Britain's new writing industry, examining ideas around the centrality of the playwright and the 'Royal Court play', and closing with a brief look at Cooke's time at the Court. In my second chapter, I will address the role of the critic, investigating the history of theatre criticism in this country and the current state of the critical institution. This chapter will also include a discussion of theatre's role as an arena for public debate and how the purpose of the critic may intersect with that role. Finally, I will turn to a number of case studies from Cooke's tenure to illustrate and develop my discussion, before concluding – as I began – with an

[6] I have written for traditional print outlets such as the *Guardian* and *The Stage*, as well as editing and regularly contributing to online publication *Exeunt Magazine* and maintaining my own personal blog.

eye to the future.

The Royal Court: The 'Writer's Theatre'

> 'Ours is not to be a producer's theatre, nor an actor's theatre,' Mr Devine announces, 'it is to be a writer's theatre'.
>
> *The Times,* 31 March 1956[7]

This chapter opens at the point at which another chapter closes. In April 2013, Dominic Cooke stepped down as artistic director of the Royal Court, which he had led since 2007. It was, unsurprisingly, the occasion for much retrospection. Assessing Cooke's seven-year tenure in an article for the *Observer*, Kate Kellaway describes his departure as marking 'the end of a remarkable chapter in the theatre's history'. This assertion is followed by a familiar critical move, one that places Cooke in a long line-up of artistic directors who have 'held fast' to founder George Devine's commitment to a 'writer's theatre'. Kellaway tells us how the Royal Court 'has prided itself on being a home for new writing from the beginning', qualifying her approval of Cooke on the basis of his adherence to this tradition.[8] In this account, Cooke is just the latest in a direct line from Devine, whose legacy at the theatre is made synonymous with the 1956 premiere of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and the widely accepted 'revolution' that tore through post-war British theatre. We all know where we are.

Devine's famous statement about the purpose of the Royal Court, which looms at the top of this chapter in much the same way as it hangs over the theatre, has become an ideal against which to measure subsequent artistic directors. The supposedly revolutionary premiere of *Look Back in Anger* and the wave of 'angry young men' that flooded the Court with social realist drama in its wake, meanwhile, have set the bar for the playwrights who have followed. Accounts of modern British drama typically depart from this point, situating *Look Back in Anger* and the Royal Court as the crucial turning

[7] Cited in Ruth Little & Emily McLaughlin, *The Royal Court Theatre Inside Out* (London: Oberon Books, 2007), p.16.
[8] Kate Kellaway, 'Royal Court theatre prepares to bid farewell to King Dominic', *Observer*, 10th March 2013 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2013/mar/10/royal-court-dominic-cooke-bids-farewell> [accessed 18th February 2014].

point. While there are deviations from this narrative, the familiar myth of violent rupture and subsequent theatrical revolution is one that persists. What is significant for the purposes of this study is not so much the disputed accuracy of this genealogy, but its influence on 21st-century perceptions of the Royal Court, its purpose, and the theatre it produces. The Royal Court is, arguably more so than most theatres, in a constant dialogue with its own history. This extends into the discourse surrounding it, which – as we shall we – cannot resist pointing back to the supposedly fateful night of 8th May 1956 and the Royal Court's confirmation as 'the writer's theatre' with the decisive arrival of *Look Back in Anger*. My intention in this chapter is not to painstakingly retell this well-known narrative, nor is it to significantly challenge it. While the ways in which our cultural myths are formed and reiterated deserve ongoing interrogation, in this context I am more interested in the effects of the myth than in its formation. An understanding of recent critical responses demands an awareness of the culturally inherited assumptions that inform them, which is what will direct my investigation.

'Nothing could ever be the same again': The History of the Royal Court

By now it seems obligatory that any consideration of the Royal Court begin with its famous myth of origin. This is not, however, usually pinned to the English Stage Company's founding. Instead, from reading theatre histories and newspaper articles alike, one might be led to believe that the Royal Court – and indeed modern British theatre – was born on 8th May 1956. The story goes a little like this:

> At the Royal Court, *Look Back in Anger*, John Osborne's fiery blast against the establishment burst onto the stage, radicalising British theatre overnight [...] on 8 May 1956, everything changed. New, youthful audiences flocked to the Royal Court to hear Jimmy Porter express their own hopes and fears [...] A new wave of dramatists sprang up in Osborne's wake; planting their colours on British stages, speaking for a generation who had so long been silent, they forged a living, adult, vital theatre.[9]

[9] Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp.1-2.

This summary comes not from one of the many texts assessing the impact of the Royal Court and its 'angry young men', but from the introduction of Dan Rebellato's challenge to the narrative surrounding this 'revolution'. This 'trite little account', as Rebellato describes it, is a helpful guide to how this particular moment in British theatre history is typically framed; 'the broader outlines are there, and all accounts use some of its figures, its images, its tone and its metaphors'.[10] Again and again, *Look Back in Anger* is positioned as the decisive moment in post-war British theatre, and Devine and his stable of social realist playwrights become the touchstone for the writer-centric values of the Royal Court. Ruth Little and Emily McLaughlin's chronicle of the theatre, for example, insists that after *Look Back in Anger*, 'nothing could ever be the same again', pinpointing it as the moment when new plays began to flood the Court and even claiming that Osborne 'came to define' the theatre.[11] While it is not quite this straightforward – as Philip Roberts warns, 'it should not be supposed that attempting to define even recent theatrical history is anything other than an approximation to what actually happened'[12] – the history aped by Rebellato undoubtedly contains an element of truth, and it is one that has proved remarkably durable. Whatever its finer points, debate about which lies beyond the scope of this thesis, the narrative of the Royal Court's early years and its dedication to writers has largely determined the building's identity up to the present day.

The most significant consequence of these developments in the Court's early history, at least for the purposes of the present study, is how they reconfigured the role of writer and text, both within the theatre and throughout the popular discourse surrounding it. As Rebellato argues, the changes brought about in British theatre following *Look Back in Anger* constitute 'a reconstruction of the writer's role, and a reorganisation of the working relationships in which it functioned', facilitating a 'change in the

[10] Rebellato, p.2.
[11] Little & McLaughlin, pp.26-28.
[12] Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre 1965-1972* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul plc, 1986), p.1.

writer's professional status'.[13] Following the theatre's commitment to Osborne, the 'angry young men' and the centrality of the (social realist) playwright, its guiding ethos became anchored to the notion of serving the writer and her authorial vision. This is attested to in a number of testimonies from those at the heart of the Royal Court, both in this early period and in the decades following it. Discussing the role of design in the theatre, Jocelyn Herbert explains that 'what we were there to do was to present the play as close as possible to what the author intended';[14] William Gaskill insists that 'the history of the Court is the history of those writers';[15] Chris Campbell claims that 'the stones of this theatre affirm you as a writer';[16] and Graham Whybrow concludes that 'it will always return to that core identity, that it is a writers' theatre'.[17] Representing the writer's perspective, David Hare concurs: 'You get the feeling that the play is being put on in the way you want it done'.[18] There is, clearly, an ideological aspect to the choice of plays and the hierarchy of creative individuals involved, as implied by Little and McLaughlin's statement that 'the Court is a theatre, but it is also an argument'.[19] This notion of the Royal Court and its plays as somehow embodying an argument, which is central to this discussion, is one that I will return to in later chapters.

The Royal Court's famous, frequently documented history and the ideological fashion of its telling has had a marked effect on how the theatre continues to be perceived, particularly in the press. The language used by Andrew Dickson in an interview with Cooke, for instance, is telling. The words of Devine's manifesto for the theatre 'still haunt British drama', we are told, and 'history has sometimes weighed heavy'.[20] Suggestions of ghosts and hauntings abound in such articles, while the burden of the

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[13] Rebellato, p.82.
[14] Quoted in Little & McLaughlin, p.41.
[15] Quoted in Little & McLaughlin, p.451.
[16] Chris Campbell, unpublished interview with the author, 27th June 2013.
[17] Quoted in Little & McLaughlin, p.449.
[18] Quoted in Gresdna A. Doty and Billy J. Harbin, eds, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre, 1956-1981: Artists Talk* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), p.151.
[19] Little & McLaughlin, p.9.
[20] Andrew Dickson, 'Dominic Cooke: a life in theatre', *Guardian*, 29th January 2011 <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/jan/31/dominic-cooke-a-life-in-theatre> [accessed 27 February

Court's reputation is flung like an albatross around the shoulders of each new artistic director. Even Little and McLaughlin are alert – if only as something of an afterthought – to the possibility that history and mythology might congeal around the building and its supposedly revolutionary purpose. In the final pages of their study, they ask: 'Does the mythologising of the past to which the Court is prone risk diverting or stemming altogether new streams of energy, new and unexpected forms of cultural exploration?'[21] It is a question that Little and McLaughlin avoid fully answering, but it is vital for this present investigation. To their reservations, we might add the troubling tendency of the press to fall victim to this same mythologising, with the further possibility that any 'stemming' of 'cultural exploration' at the Court could have inhibiting implications elsewhere in the British theatre ecology.

One potentially inhibiting factor of the mythology that has emerged out of the Royal Court's history is the disputed notion of the 'Royal Court play'. It is a phrase that is often informally deployed within the industry, including by critics, but any attempt to define it is fraught. It has been vaguely but repeatedly linked to social realism, as embodied by the work of playwrights such as Osborne. Mary Luckhurst persuasively argues that 'since Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 a certain kind of social realism has been understood as quintessentially English and promoted as the national drama – a campaign so successful that practically everyone has come to believe it'.[22] She suggests that this variety of social realism has been actively 'promoted and endorsed by the Royal Court', placing the Court at the centre of British theatre's realist tradition.[23] While I am inclined to agree with Luckhurst, it must be recognised that realism itself is a problematically slippery term. Despite its ubiquity, Stephen Lacey warns that 'realism is deployed in frequently ambiguous and confusing ways, concealing a complex

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[21] Little & McLaughlin, p.452

[22] Mary Luckhurst, 'Contemporary English Theatre: Why Realism?', *Contemporary Drama in English*, 9 (2002), 73-84 (p.73).

[23] Ibid., p.73.

history and a set of often contradictory positions'.[24] While the Royal Court's brand of social realism is something that we think we all understand – typically connecting it with the similarly familiar but uninterrogated 'kitchen sink drama' – the very fluidity and ambiguity of this category might act as a further yoke for theatre-makers approaching this tradition, chaining them to a standard that is itself undefined.

Surveying the Royal Court's output over the last few decades, it is arguably more difficult to identify a distinct type of play associated with the theatre than it was in the 1950s and 1960s. This is the argument of current literary manager Chris Campbell, who insists that the idea of a Royal Court play is misguided: 'I know what people mean by a Royal Court play, but a) it's completely outdated and b) it wasn't really that anyway'.[25] Despite the common insistence of those working in the building that there is no such thing as the 'Royal Court play', however, there are telling suggestions of unspoken criteria for work that makes its way onto the programme. Leo Butler, for example, who teaches on the theatre's Young Writers' Programme, contradicts his own desire to open up the programme by later adding: 'If somebody's got an idea for a play and I really don't think it stands a chance getting anywhere in this theatre then I might ask them to reconsider and think of another play'.[26] There is certainly some quality, however indistinct, that defines a 'Royal Court play', but its exact nature remains difficult to determine.

At the turn of the millennium, in the years immediately prior to the period that is central to this study, the Royal Court was positioned firmly at the centre of Britain's new writing industry, where it remains. A pair of reports commissioned by the Arts Council at the end of the 2000s offer an illuminating and occasionally contradictory snapshot of the binary created in this period between new writing and new work. In order to assess the impact of increased funding on the new writing industry in England, the research involved was split into two strands: the British Theatre Consortium's *Writ Large* report, looking

[24] Stephen Lacey, *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave in its Context 1956-1965* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), p.63.
[25] Chris Campbell, unpublished interview with the author, 27th June 2013.
[26] Leo Butler, unpublished interview with the author, 23rd July 2013.

at new writing in large, regularly funded institutions, and *New Writing in Theatre 2003-2008*, which addressed new writing theatre at grassroots level. According to *Writ Large*, assembled using data from 65 respondents together with a range of in-depth interviews, new plays represented 42% of all shows produced by the theatres and companies surveyed between 2003 and 2009.[27] The same report discovered that of the respondents it interviewed, which included major theatres and companies such as the National Theatre, the Royal Shakespeare Company and the Royal Court, all agreed that 'new writing was a core part of their work'.[28] Its conclusion, articulated with the use of a decisive metaphor, is that 'New writing is now written into the DNA of English theatre at all levels'.[29]

Concerning the health of new writing in 2009, the second report is in agreement. It finds that new writing has 'undergone a period of renaissance' following the injection of £25 million into English theatre in 2003, emphasising the variety of work that this funding uplift has facilitated.[30] Where both reports express reservations, however, is in their attitude to the other forms of work that have sprung up alongside new writing in these years. The words 'concern', 'threat' and 'challenge' appear with startling frequency; Dunton, Nelson and Shand note the 'concern from some participants that traditional play-writing could be threatened by the increase in the seed-bedding of "new work" and it could be undermining the value of developing a straightforward play'.[31] *Writ Large*, meanwhile, repeatedly issues defensive claims that audiences still prefer scripted drama over its devised counterpart. The fault lines between new writing and new work are increasingly visible.

So, to return to one of the issues raised in my introduction, what exactly is new writing? Even the reports commissioned to investigate it seem uncertain on this point, with Dunton et al admitting

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[27] British Theatre Consortium, *Writ Large: New Writing on the British Stage 2003-2009* (Arts Council England, 2009), p.53.
[28] Ibid., p.9.
[29] Ibid., p.79.
[30] Emma Dunton, Roger Nelson & Hetty Shand, *New Writing in Theatre 2003-2008: An Assessment of New Writing Within Smaller Scale Theatre in England* (Arts Council England, 2009), p.3.
[31] Dunton, Nelson and Shand, p.9.

that 'there was not one definition of new writing that would satisfy everyone'.[32] Aleks Sierz's *Rewriting the Nation*, though problematic in its partial historicising of the era's theatre, has quickly become one of the key texts on this subject at the opening of the 21st century, offering a very particular answer to my question. Defining the genre as distinctly British, Sierz states that 'New Writing Pure is work which is often difficult, sometimes intractable, but it usually has something urgent to say about Britain today'.[33] New writing is, according to Sierz, 'text-based',[34] presented in a 'clear, linear and naturalistic way',[35] and it 'bears the stamp of the contemporary'.[36] There are numerous limitations to this description, not least the vagueness of its terms, but it is nonetheless reflected in much of the work, artistic policy and discourse of this period. I concur with Haydon that 'While partial, Sierz's definition is sadly not just a work of imagination'.[37] As we approach the start of Cooke's tenure, new writing has gained a firm grip on a certain sector of British theatre – of which the Royal Court is part – bringing with it a focus on novelty and youth.

Unleashing the New: Dominic Cooke at the Royal Court

Writing in 2011, four years into Cooke's tenure at the Royal Court, Sierz approvingly asserts that the British theatre industry is experiencing a 'deluge of the new'.[38] The same might be said for Cooke's theatre, which for many commentators was defined by its commitment to the new and the young. When the new artistic director took over, much was made of his intention to stage more plays depicting the middle classes, but equally central to this initial statement of intent was his 'commitment to first-

[32] Ibid., p.7.
[33] Aleks Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today* (London: Methuen Drama, 2011), p.5.
[34] Ibid., p.5.
[35] Ibid., p.8.
[36] Ibid., p.15.
[37] Haydon, 'Theatre in the 2000s', p.72.
[38] Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, p.15.

time writers'.[39] Looking back at Cooke's artistic directorship in 2013, Kellaway concludes that he has delivered on this commitment; according to her account, 'what makes Cooke's reign unique is that he has used the Royal Court's young writers programme as a way of finding and cultivating new talent, often by precariously young writers'. This is confirmed by Cooke, who 'describes himself as driven by the need to "stay ahead of the game – and find work that is fresh, because that is the theatre's USP"'.[40] Confirmation of this viewpoint is found yet again in Haydon's overview of the decade: 'More exciting than the surprise change of milieu was the sudden blast of fresh air that blew through the programming. All the writers in that first season were making their British professional debuts.'[41]

The seeds for this sudden flowering of novelty were sown during predecessor Ian Rickson's reign, as the Young Writers' Programme built up momentum first under Simon Stephens and then Leo Butler. This group for playwrights aged 18 to 25 was established in 1998, when Rickson renamed the Young People's Theatre the Young Writers' Programme, demonstrating a commitment to the nurturing of writing talent. It was not until Cooke took over, however, that the programme became a direct development stream for the theatre, drawing on the writers and plays that had been discovered over the preceding years. As former associate director Ramin Gray recalls, 'it was all there in the larder, Dominic just unleashed it'.[42]

This move can be seen to simultaneously reinvigorate and consolidate. Programming work by young, untested writers was a risk and one that quickly cast Cooke as an artistic director who was unafraid to experiment. However, this can equally be interpreted as a decisive reinforcement of the centrality of the writer, keeping Cooke within the tradition established by Devine. By placing emphasis on a development programme dedicated solely to writers, and then vindicating that programme by

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[39] Louise Jury, 'Royal Court discovers the middle class hero'*, The Independent*, 7th February 2007 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/news/royal-court-discovers-the-middleclass-hero-435336.html> [accessed 27th February 2014].
[40] Kellaway.
[41] Haydon, 'Theatre in the 2000s' p.74.
[42] Quoted in Haydon, 'Theatre in the 2000s', p.77.

showcasing its fruits on the Royal Court's stages, Cooke's policy enshrined writers as the Court's key creative artists. His focus on youth and novelty is also in line with the emerging trends of new writing as a genre. Sierz asserts that 'the idea of new writing is almost always associated with youth',[43] while *New Writing in Theatre 2003-2008* finds strong anecdotal evidence for an increase in development opportunities for young writers.[44] One side effect of this emphasis, particularly in the media, is to increase individual attention on young playwrights, reaffirming the idea of sole authorship. This can be seen in the spread of articles and popular criticism fastening on the youth of writers such as Polly Stenham and Anya Reiss and thus eliding the contribution of other creative roles.

The case of young writers is a useful example for beginning to unpick Cooke's approach to programming. When he took over as artistic director, he made it clear that he intended to shake things up at the Royal Court, stating his aim to 'push the argument forward about what can be talked about in the theatre, and about what a play can be'.[45] Note, again, the emphasis on argument. This questioning of what a play can be, however, was still overwhelmingly organised around writers and a commitment to the vision of the text. Cooke himself confirms this commitment at the time of taking up the reins: 'If you really believe the writer is the primary artist of the theatre then whatever you do you must offer support and stimulation, and you must listen and be astute about where the energy is, and give space to that energy'.[46] There is a tension between, on the one hand, embracing experimentation and challenging the expectations that exist around the Royal Court – for instance by shifting focus to the middle classes and commissioning a brace of young writers – and on the other remaining faithful to its history and its prioritising of the writer.

One exchange is particularly instructive in revealing some of the tensions surrounding the writer

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[43] Sierz, *Rewriting the Nation*, p.47.
[44] Dunton, Nelson & Shand, p.13.
[45] Nick Curtis, 'Courting Controversy', *Evening Standard*, 6th February 2007 <http://www.standard.co.uk/arts/theatre/courting-controversy-7195936.html> [accessed 27th February 2014].
[46] Quoted in Little & McLaughlin, p.450.

and the text during this period, as well as gesturing towards the shifts in the critical landscape that will be explored later in this study. Interviewing Cooke in November 2007, the *Guardian*'s Michael Billington quizzes the artistic director on his use of space, prompting a brief discussion of immersive and site-specific theatre by companies such as Punchdrunk and Shunt. Cooke stresses the need to marry theatrical exploration with 'rich content', insisting that 'To get those two things working together, you need a writer'. Billington whole-heartedly agrees, writing: 'there has to be some way of combining the kind of interactive experience that young audiences crave with the emotional resonance of a writer's vision: otherwise, all you get is sensory titillation'.[47]

Theatre-maker Chris Goode contests this assertion at length on his blog, taking issue with the binary that Billington establishes between the formal invention of Punchdrunk and Shunt and the 'emotional resonance' offered by the writer, and with his distortion or elision of a huge range of 'non-literary theatre work'. Goode goes on to ask a series of questions, many of which are highly pertinent for this investigation:

> What in what "a writer" does is the essence of it? Is it about producing a printed script? About there being some authored dialogue spoken by characters on stage? Is it about craft, about literary merit? Is it about the location of a specifically *singular* authority out of whose "vision" [that peculiarly hallucinatory term to which Billington so often has recourse] the actions of the piece are generated? Does the term "a writer" stand in here for the idea of the original playtext? Could we perhaps extend the designation as far as the idea of a "writerly consciousness", wherein the argument of a piece, as it may be expressed through narrative or dialogue or image or gesture or metaphor or interrelation or *formal conceit*, is originated, organized and distributed? In which case, might many people whose collective relationships are practised and attentive not share that consciousness?[48]

One of the central points at stake here is what Billington means by 'a writer's vision'. His implication is that devising and writing are mutually exclusive categories; the former may offer 'sensory titillation',

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[47] Michael Billington, 'You can sniff the best plays after half a page', *Guardian*, 7th November 2007 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2007/nov/07/theatre2> [accessed 18th February 2014].

[48] Chris Goode, 'All you get is sensory titillation', *Thompson's Bank of Communicable Desire*, 8th November 2007 <http://beescope.blogspot.co.uk/2007/11/all-you-get-is-sensory-titillation.html> [accessed 18th February 2014] (original emphases).

while in his mind only the latter can promise 'emotional resonance'. But as Goode points out, the individual playwright is 'only a subset' of writing, let alone theatre as a whole. The construction is, essentially, a false one, making invisible the writing that is done by theatre-makers labelled as 'non-text-based' under the terms of Billington's binary. As well as revealing tensions around the idea of the writer, this dialogue enacts another divide: between the mainstream newspaper critics and the growing wealth of online criticism.

As this brief discussion begins to demonstrate, the role of criticism in the reception and mediation of the Royal Court's work plays a crucial role in how its relationship with playwrights and texts is understood and communicated. Although the theatre has had an ambivalent and occasionally antagonistic history with theatre critics, they remain a significant lens through which its output is seen. Speaking to Cooke in 2010, Rachel Cooke asks about the position of critics in relation to the Royal Court and whether they still have a role in 'moulding perceptions'. Cooke is unequivocal in his response: 'Yes. I think they're really important. For me, they fill the space between artists and audiences.'[49] It is this space, those who occupy it, and the nature of that occupation that form the content of the next chapter.

[49] Rachel Cooke, 'Behind the scenes at the Royal Court: Dominic Cooke's year of living dangerously', Observer, 3rd January 2010 <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/jan/03/dominic-cooke-royal-court-interview> [accessed 18th February 2014].

Words, Words, Words: Theatre Criticism and the Text

> 'Critics have been on the scene for longer than directors; but we lead a marginal life, at home neither in theatres nor newspaper offices. Would anyone notice if we disappeared?'
>
> Irving Wardle, *Theatre Criticism*[50]

From the very beginning, it is hard to separate the Royal Court from the critics – both positive and negative. The myth of 1956 is at least partly a product of the newspaper and magazine coverage that appeared both at the time and over the subsequent years; Stephen Lacey even goes as far as to argue that 'the Angry Young Men were essentially the first literary/dramatic phenomenon to become a major media "event"'.[51] While Kenneth Tynan was famously a great supporter of the 'new wave' of social realist theatre initiated by *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court, the theatre has just as frequently been at odds with the critics. According to Philip Roberts, 'the problematic relationship between the Court and the press runs consistently through the Court's history and was always extremely sensitive'.[52] Despite this occasional antagonism, however, popular theatre criticism was and remains one of the key mediators between the Royal Court, its audiences, and the rest of the British theatre industry.[53]

It is also criticism that provides a record of the Royal Court's output and forms one of the foundations of future historicising, therefore playing a crucial role in how the theatre is perceived going forward. For Tynan, the critic's 'real rendezvous is with posterity. His review is a letter addressed to the future.'[54] If this is the case – and given the regularity with which academics turn to reviews of past productions in search of evidence about their form and reception, we may reasonably conclude that it is – then the judgements of the theatre critic have a potentially substantial impact on the theatre

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[50] Irving Wardle, *Theatre Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.134.
[51] Lacey, p.17.
[52] Roberts, p.49.
[53] This is, it should be noted, partly due to the prominence of the Royal Court within the British theatre industry, which ensures that its productions are regularly reviewed by the national newspapers.
[54] Kenneth Tynan, *Theatre Writings*, selected and edited by Dominic Shellard (London: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2007), p.119.

scholarship and production of the future. Before exploring the ambivalent relationship between theatre and critics during Dominic Cooke's tenure, however, it is necessary to briefly interrogate theatre criticism's history, its purposes and, crucially for this study, its attitude towards the theatre text.

The Divided Man: A Brief History of Theatre Criticism

Irving Wardle's *Theatre Criticism*, one of few existing texts to address the unique discipline of its title, unapologetically describes the reviewer as a 'thief'. According to Wardle, 'the author steals from life, the theatre steals from the writer making the work its own, and finally – if he is up to it – the critic steals from the theatre'.[55] This cycle captures how the critic has traditionally been positioned in relation to her subject: with no artistic practice of her own, she can only steal from others. It also nods towards one of the driving assumptions of much theatre criticism, which is that theatre is principally the domain of the author, whose genius is borrowed or stolen by those who render it for the stage and with whom the critic is chiefly concerned. In the cycle sketched by Wardle, theatre is returned again to words, the form in which it was first snatched from life.

There are historical and structural reasons for this preoccupation with written language. In Britain, theatre criticism has its roots firmly in journalism and public discourse. Criticism in its many forms was the child of the journal or periodical, which emerged around the turn of the 18th century out of the cultural discussion that circulated in bourgeois coffee houses – or, as Jürgen Habermas would describe it, the 'public sphere'. Criticism, though not yet exactly defined as such, found a home in titles such as the *Tatler* (1709-1711), the *Spectator* (1711-1712) and the *Guardian* (1713). It was not until the 19th century that theatre reviewing started to become a more regular and formalised practice in its own right, however, when critics such as William Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt began publishing reviews of theatrical productions soon after seeing them. By the early 20th century, popular theatre criticism – as

[55] Wardle, p.3.

distinct from academic criticism – was an established feature of British journalism, as illustrated by the foundation of the Critics' Circle in 1913, which was first established as an organisation for drama critics.[56] Throughout the 20th and into the 21st century, newspapers and a select few magazines have remained the dominant public platform for theatre criticism, attaching the activity to a journalistic agenda.

As this potted history begins to suggest, theatre criticism – at least as it exists in national newspapers – is an inherently paradoxical activity. It is, as Wardle puts it, 'a quasi-academic activity conducted in journalistic conditions'; a task carried out with one eye on the art form and one on the editorial policy of the newspaper.[57] The critic is also torn between immediacy and posterity – or, in Wardle's words, 'the critic is a divided man, writing simultaneously for today's theatregoer and tomorrow's theatre historian'.[58] This is not to mention the restrictions of shrinking word limits, economic pressures, and the conflicting duties of the contemporary critic, which I will go on to discuss below.

The greatest recent challenge to the established model of theatre criticism has been the growth of the internet, and with it the rise of theatre blogging. In the space of a few short years, newspapers shifted from being almost the only media outlet for theatre reviews to becoming one among many, vying for attention amid the virtual din. Such was the pace of evolution that, discussing the year 2007, Andrew Haydon is able to claim that just between May and September 'the landscape of theatre criticism in Britain had changed irrevocably'.[59] Haydon identifies 2007, the year in which Cooke took up

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[56] See Wardle, *Theatre Criticism*; Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (London: Verso, 1984); and Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. by Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992). There is also a useful overview of British theatre reviewing history in Kate Wilkinson, 'Theatre Reviewing: Performance Versus Criticism', *Style*, 43.1 (Spring 2009) <http://www.style.niu.edu/ojs/index.php/style/article/viewFile/11/9> [accessed 3rd July 2014], 109-123.
[57] Wardle, p.127.
[58] Ibid., p.13.
[59] Haydon, 'Theatre in the 2000s', p.96.

the reins at the Royal Court, as a 'crisis point' for British theatre criticism.[60] This crisis was perhaps best encapsulated in National Theatre artistic director Nick Hytner's famous description of Britain's newspaper critics as 'dead white men'.[61] As Hytner's statement suggests, the first string newspaper critics at this time were predominantly white, middle-class, middle-aged or older men with arguably, in Haydon's words, 'conservative tastes in theatre'.[62] However, as Haydon goes on to note, 'the crucial difference from earlier spats between critics and a theatre or company was that in 2007 there was now an alternative'.[63]

Many have also pinpointed 2007 as the year when online criticism became a viable, thriving counterpoint to the reviews that continued to appear in print. This criticism was published both on personal blogs and curated websites and took a variety of forms, from newspaper-style reviews to diary entries to long-form essays. Haydon characterises this proliferation of online writing as an 'explosion', insisting that 'the game had suddenly changed'.[64] It is worth noting that Haydon himself was part of this 'explosion' of online critics and may therefore be susceptible to hyperbole on this point, but the picture he paints is a familiar one. His claim is also supported by the alternately curious and defensive attitude suddenly afforded to blogs by the mainstream media, which often placed critics and bloggers on opposite sides of an antagonistic divide – usually with a 'versus' in between. Within the space of a few days in September 2007, for example, the *Guardian* devoted three separate articles to the rise of the

[60] Haydon, 'Theatre in the 2000s' p.93.
[61] Ben Hoyle, 'Dead white men in the critic's chair scorning work of women directors', *The Times*, 14th May 2007 <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/stage/article1692399.ece> [accessed 7th May 2014]. For more details of Hytner's remarks and the reaction they provoked, see also Michael Billington, 'I might be a white male, but I'm not dead yet, Mr Hytner', *Guardian*, 14th May 2007 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/may/14/imightbeawhitemalebutim> [accessed 7th May 2014]; Terri Paddock, 'NT'S Hytner Rounds on "Dead White Male" Critics', *WhatsOnStage.com* <http://www.whatsonstage.com/west-end-theatre/news/05-2007/nts-hytner-rounds-on-dead-white-male-critics_21073.html> [accessed 7th May 2014]; 'Are the critics strangling theatre?', *Guardian*, 15th May 2007 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2007/may/15/theatre3> [accessed 7th May 2014].
[62] Haydon, 'Theatre in the 2000s', p.93.
[63] Ibid., p.94.
[64] Ibid., p.95.

online critic – all published, tellingly, on the *Guardian*'s own newly instituted 'Theatre Blog'.[65] If you can't beat them, join them.

While an extended discussion of the division between print and online criticism and the state of theatre reviewing in the 21st century lies beyond the scope of this thesis, the growing influence of online criticism is significant for the period under investigation. In its quantity, its variety and its freedom from the restrictions and prescriptions of print, including word limits, deadlines and editorial agendas, this new form of criticism suggests alternative models for responding to theatre in the public sphere and perhaps even a reconfigured set of priorities for critics.

Theatre as Argument: The Critics and the Theatre Text

So what are the role, purposes and priorities of the 21st-century theatre critic? To fully address this question would require a thesis of its own, but Billington offers one answer that holds particular relevance for this investigation. In one of the many 'critics versus bloggers' articles alluded to above, Billington defends the critic's corner with the assertion that 'The critic, unlike the blogger [...] has a duty to set any play or performance in its historical context'.[66] The word 'duty' here carries weight, suggesting a serious obligation on the part of critics to perform this service of situating any production in its temporal, social and political location. It also implies the ascribing of a particular role to theatre, which presumably speaks to the context in which it is located. Of course, any piece of theatre is engaged in an implicit dialogue with its immediate surroundings, but in more multiple and complex ways than Billington's narrow definition allows. Billington confirms this opinion in *State of the Nation*, his personal

[65] See Michael Billington, 'Who Needs Reviews?', *Guardian*, 17th September 2007 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/sep/17/whoneedsreviews> [accessed 7th May 2014], Lyn Gardner, 'Blogging saved critics from extinction', *Guardian*, 18th September 2007 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/sep/18/bloggingsavedcritics> [accessed 7th May 2014] and Natasha Tripney, 'Blogs and reviews should be best friends', *Guardian*, 20th September 2007 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2007/sep/20/blogsandreviewsshouldbebe> [accessed 7th May 2014]. The *Guardian*'s Theatre Blog was first created in October 2006.

[66] Billington, 'Who Needs Reviews?'.

overview of post-war British theatre. The title alone makes a clear statement about how its author understands the purpose of theatre, a statement that is reiterated in the book's introduction: 'I began with an insatiable curiosity about the extent to which modern theatre was influenced by the political temper of the times and about the way in which it may even have propelled social change'.[67] Theatre is seen to have a close relationship with the 'state of the nation' and the responsibility of critics, according to Billington, is to mediate this relationship.

Finding its roots in Friedrich von Schiller's pronouncements on 'the moral influence of the stage', there has long been a connection drawn between the health of the stage and the moral and intellectual health of the nation.[68] The theatre in this formulation becomes a civic arena, with even greater historical precedent to be found in Athens. For Schiller, it is not the content of theatre that is important so much as its function in bringing together a community of spectators in a public space, allowing them to form their identities as subjects of a nation state. Also central to Schiller's vision for the stage is his understanding of theatre as 'the common channel through which the light of wisdom streams down from the exceptional, thinking segment of the population; and from there it diffuses in milder rays through the entire state'.[69] As well as being ideologically problematic in its concentration of intellectual power and authority with an 'exceptional' few, this is a model which favours the idea of an individual genius – or author – whose wisdom is filtered down through society via the civic space of the stage.

Schiller's manifesto for the stage, written in 1784, coincides with – and perhaps even offers an exemplar of – the flourishing of the 'public sphere' as outlined by Jürgen Habermas. According to Habermas' definition, the bourgeois public sphere

> may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing

[67] Michael Billington, *State of the Nation: British Theatre since 1945* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2007), p.3.
[68] Friedrich von Schiller, 'The Stage Considered as a Moral Institution', in Michael J. Sidnell, ed., *Sources of Dramatic Theory 2: Voltaire to Hugo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp.155-162 (p.156).
[69] Schiller, p.160.

> relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour.[70]

Habermas' thesis argues that this public sphere emerged alongside the development of capitalism in the 17th century and reached its height in the 18th and 19th centuries, before transforming and declining in the face of mass media and the mutual infiltration of the public and private spheres. As already noted, it was out of the public sphere that criticism was born, closely binding its purpose to this notion of an enlightened, discursive and politically regulating public realm. This can be married, as David Lloyd and Paul Thomas do, to the idea of the nation state and its theatre that is modelled by Schiller, in which 'the spectator has historically been the exemplary, even heroic, type of political subjectivity', giving rise to 'the moral or social as well as aesthetic critic'.[71] Historically there was, in other words, something at stake both culturally and politically in the role of criticism within society, a role that stretched beyond pure aesthetic judgement.

As Terry Eagleton discusses in *The Function of Criticism*, there has always been a contradictory edge to this role. 'Criticism is a reformative apparatus,' he writes, 'scourging deviation and repressing the transgressive; yet this juridicial technology is deployed in the name of a certain historical emancipation'.[72] There is something at once progressive and inhibitory about the role of criticism, which assumes responsibility for the culture but in practice tends to police that culture as much as it emancipates it. Eagleton also addresses the predicament of the critic in an ailing or defunct public sphere, stating that a critic 'may write with assurance as long as the critical institution itself is thought to be unproblematical'; once the critical institution and the public sphere it is part of begin to fracture, the critic's authority is threatened and criticism finds itself in crisis.[73] This is the plight of the 21st-century critic, who writes from a position of anxiety both about her professional and economic position in an

[70] Habermas, p.27.
[71] David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, *Culture and the State* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), p.31.
[72] Eagleton, p.12.
[73] Eagleton, p.7.

industry precariously adapting to the rise of digital publishing, and about her political and cultural relevance.

In the context of the Royal Court and its self-consciously oppositional project, there is even more at stake in the role of the critic within this shaky realm of public discourse. Assessing the mythology that surrounds the 'new wave', Lacey writes that 'Criticism of *Look Back in Anger* – and what followed it – has a strong smell of the barricades about it'.[74] The barricade is a useful image to accompany the remainder of this chapter. Wardle, reflecting on the same period, deploys a similarly adversarial metaphor when he states that 'critics found themselves on the front line',[75] while Tynan justifies his infamous critical aggression with the argument that he 'had rather be a war correspondent than a necrologist'.[76] The implication of all this violence is that there is some crucial intellectual battle to be fought; something to both champion and defend. Or, perhaps, an argument to be upheld.

In addressing the idea of theatre as argument, I was tempted to title this section 'the case of Michael Billington'. The *Guardian*'s chief theatre critic embodies a caricatured but nonetheless persistent view of theatre's purpose: drama as thesis. This viewpoint and Billington's beliefs about the duties of the theatre critic must also be seen in the context of the *Guardian*, for which Billington has written since 1971. The broadsheet and its readership are, broadly speaking, liberal, politically left-leaning and middle-class – bearing great resemblance to the bourgeois public sphere as outlined by Habermas. It may even be argued that the *Guardian* occupies a similar critical space within the public sphere as the Royal Court. Before going on to explore the model of theatre criticism represented by Billington, however, I want to return briefly to Little and McLaughlin's use of the phrase that gives this section its heading. The idea is framed in the statement: 'The Court is a theatre, but it is also an

[74] Lacey, p.1.
[75] Wardle, p.88.
[76] Tynan, p.37.

argument'.[77] Precisely what Little and McLaughlin mean by this is under-developed. Situated as it is in their introduction, with no further elaboration, it could refer to the Royal Court's frequently oppositional stance, particularly in its early years when it stood for the wave of 'angry young men' spearheaded by John Osborne; it could be interpreted as alluding to an argument for the centrality of the playwright, as articulated in Devine's initial commitment to being a 'writer's theatre'; or, alternatively, it might hint at a certain model of theatre with which the Royal Court has often been associated. This latter 'theatre as argument' typically takes the form of a production firmly focused on realising the playwright's intention, in which that intention is to stage a series of explicit arguments or statements; this is what tends to be implied when people refer to the 'Royal Court play'. In this model, the playwright becomes the critic within the public sphere and it is text and content that matter, marginalising the many other elements involved in a piece of live performance.

It is my suggestion that this model of theatre might interestingly intersect with – and, subsequently, be perpetuated by – a comparable model of British theatre criticism. At least in conventional newspaper reviews, there is a generally accepted model of writing about new plays, in which the playtext itself is the principal focus of attention and the success of the production rests on the perceived effectiveness of the play's central 'argument'. Wardle summarises the typical attitude: 'The play's the thing, if it is a new play, so we can let it devour most of the space'.[78] This is epitomised in the stance of Billington, for whom the playwright is 'the key creative figure in the theatre'. In *State of the Nation*, he reaches the conclusion that 'the future of the theatre rests with its playwrights'.[79] This brings to a succinct head the argument he has traced throughout, wilfully sidelining other forms of theatre in favour of the individual genius of the dramatist. For Billington, 'playwright' is understood in the most restricted of definitions, establishing a false but pervasive binary between plays and what he sees as

[77] Little & McLaughlin, p.9.
[78] Wardle, p.123.
[79] Billington, *State of the Nation*, p.411.

alternative forms of theatre, variously grouped under the terms 'physical', 'visual' and 'devised'. Although Billington may essentially dismiss all of this non-playwright led theatre in two pages of his 400-page tome, the content of this dismissal is surprisingly dense with reasoning. In order to unpick his claims, it is therefore necessary to focus on that reasoning in detail, identifying the unacknowledged assumptions and prejudices on which it sits.

Let us first address what Billington describes as the 'most basic' reason for his scepticism about the theatre he goes on to undermine. Starting with the perfectly reasonable assertion that 'all good theatre [...] depends on a fusion of text and image', both of which are 'read' by spectators, he then suggests that theatre that is understood as 'visual' shuts itself off in a 'meaningless ghetto', able to offer nothing more than 'a mildly titillatory sensory experience'.[80] First of all, at no point is it clear what Billington means by 'visual' theatre, a category that is lazily referred to without any attempt at definition. Are we to assume that visual theatre has no text whatsoever? This is certainly not the case with many of the examples that Billington later identifies. And even if this nebulous genre does rely on a purely visual language, Billington's argument and his conclusion do not marry up. If we are able, as he suggests, to read a play 'semiotically through its visual signifiers', then surely there is no reason why a heavily visual show should not carry just as much content, emotion or political agency as one that is driven by dialogue. Yet, Billington inexplicably decides, this work 'rarely does anything to change the situation, stir one's conscience or alert one to the injustices of the wider world'.[81]

His next point addresses theatre's intellectual credentials. 'For me,' he writes, 'the glory of theatre lies in the prospect of an encounter with a visionary intelligence or an inquiring mind'.[82] Again, this is a reasonable starting point. Its implication, however, is that this 'visionary intelligence' must be singular, arising from the mind of the playwright. Why this has to be the case is never explained, nor is

[80] Billington, *State of the Nation*, p.396.
[81] Ibid., p.396.
[82] Ibid., p.397.

the subsequent suggestion that only the playwright is able to 'investigate, explore and even to influence the society we actually inhabit'.[83] Apparently, as soon as a group of creative minds collaborate, they lose both their intelligence and their grasp on reality. I am, of course, being a little facetious, but this is not a gross exaggeration of the position implied by Billington's argument. There are echoes here of Schiller's arguments about the purpose of theatre, while Billington appears to understand his role as operating within the kind of public sphere outlined by Habermas and Eagleton, but this investment in theatre's political purpose as a vehicle for argument has become restricted to text-led articulations of an individually authored thesis. This position can also be seen throughout Billington's reviews for the *Guardian*, which often berate a play for lacking clarity in its thesis while failing to consider that ideas and critique may be lodged elsewhere than the text. This attitude is not isolated; the same assumption can also be found lurking in the criticism of many of Billington's colleagues, as will be seen in the next chapter.

There is, perhaps, a simple explanation for this default approach to new plays. It may be that the text, as a written object, offers the critic a subject with which she has instinctive sympathy and understanding. Words invite analysis in kind, while abstract images or sounds are less yielding to language. As Wardle puts it, 'the shared condition of living by the written word gives [critics] a basic foothold in the playwright's world'.[84] For W. B. Worthen, though, this characterises one of the weaknesses of criticism:

> Although many *texts* are variously used and discarded in a range of different kinds of performance, the habitual recourse to *the text* when attempting to characterize the meaning and purpose of dramatic performance dramatizes our critical poverty when it comes to the analysis of the work and working of drama onstage.[85]

In order to assess and challenge this 'critical poverty', my third chapter looks at examples from across Cooke's tenure. In what ways have critics responded to the theatre text and its relationship with

[83] Billington, *State of the Nation*, p.397.
[84] Wardle, p.96.
[85] Worthen, *Drama: Between Poetry and Peformance*, p.xiii. (original emphases)

performance in the context of the Royal Court? How do these responses structure popular understandings of the text's position within contemporary British theatre and theatre's relationship with the wider world? And what might an alternative critical approach look like?

Critical Narratives: Reviewers and the Royal Court

> But I don't want to change anything. I'm not saying I object. I was just asking some questions wasn't I?
>
> Andrew Haydon, 'Love and Information'[86]

Andrew Haydon closes his survey of theatre in the 2000s with a series of 'Postcards from the end of the decade'. Included in this snapshot of autumn 2009, which Haydon implies is representative of the 'progressive spirit of inquiry and confident uncertainty' that he sees as increasingly characterising the work on British stages, are three productions from the Royal Court.[87] Alongside the provocatively titled Mike Bartlett play *Cock*, Haydon cites *ENRON*, Lucy Prebble's dramatisation of the Enron scandal that transferred in from Chichester Theatre, and *The Author*, Tim Crouch's meta-theatrical look at the Royal Court's own history. At the start of this chapter, it is worth considering why the Royal Court's output should be considered so prominently at the turn of the decade, particularly in a narrative of 'underlying shifts' and 'ever-increasing plurality'.[88] Might the Royal Court – surprisingly given its history – actually point towards different ways of working that displace the focus on playwright, text and social realism? And if so, how has this experimentation been received by the critics?

Discussing the first of those Royal Court productions, Haydon describes *Cock* thus: 'audiences sat gathered close up to the action in a small wooden amphitheatre as the performers in James Macdonald's production turn in perfect, realistic performances, while resolutely not undressing where the script said they were undressed, and totally removing any pretence at naturalism.'[89] This choice of staging drew a range of different responses from the critics. Michael Billington bemoans the spare production's lack of 'social detail',[90] while Charles Spencer laments that 'the staging is marred by

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[86] Andrew Haydon, 'Love and Information', 17th September 2012 <http://postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2012/09/love-and-information-royal-court.html> [accessed 30th May 2014]
[87] Haydon, 'Theatre in the 2000s', p.98.
[88] Ibid., p.40
[89] Ibid., p.98.
[90] Michael Billington, 'Cock', *Guardian*, 19th November 2009, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXIX Issue 23, p.1231.

gimmickry'.[91] For others, there is a synthesis between Macdonald's minimal production and Bartlett's text. Henry Hitchings notes that 'James Macdonald's direction accentuates the awkwardness of events',[92] while for Claire Allfree it 'is all about the emptiness around the characters rather than their closeness'.[93] Both Susannah Clapp and Paul Taylor praise the staging for elevating the quality of the text;[94] other critics, such as Lucy Powell and Aleks Sierz, give most of the credit for the production's concept to Bartlett rather than his collaborators.[95]

What this debate about the tension or synthesis between text and staging nods towards is a limited understanding of how both theatrical production and spectatorship work. It is helpful to refer here to Dan Rebellato's definition of theatre as metaphor. Considering how we watch theatre, Rebellato concludes that we understand it as metaphor:

> We know the two objects are quite separate, but we think of one in terms of the other. My suggestion is that this is precisely (not metaphorically) what happens in theatrical representation: when we see a piece of theatre we are invited to think of the fictional world through this particular representation. Theatrical representation is metaphorical.[96]

This is also valuable for thinking about the relationship between text and production. Rebellato suggests that 'metaphors work precisely because we know the two objects are not the same thing'.[97] In the same way, we know when we watch a show in the theatre that that particular performance on that particular night is not the same thing as the text of that play. The text is rendered theatrically through metaphor; the minimal staging of Macdonald's production could be a metaphorical representation of any number of ideas in Bartlett's text. What can often be seen in critical responses to new writing, however, is a

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[91] Charles Spencer, 'Cock', *Daily Telegraph*, 19th November 2009, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXIX Issue 23, p.1231.
[92] Henry Hitchings, 'Cock', *Evening Standard*, 19th November 2009, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXIX Issue 23, p.1232.
[93] Claire Allfree, 'Cock', *Metro*, 20th November 2009, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXIX Issue 23, p.1232.
[94] Susannah Clapp, 'Cock', *Observer*, 22nd November 2009, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXIX Issue 23, p.1233; Paul Taylor, 'Cock', *Independent*, 23rd November 2009, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXIX Issue 23, p.1233.
[95] Lucy Powell, 'Cock', *Time Out London*, 26th November 2009, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXIX Issue 23, p.1234; Aleks Sierz, 'Cock', *The Stage*, 20th November 2009 <http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/26282/cock> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[96] Dan Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses, Or, What do we see when we see a play?', *Performance Research* 14:1 (2009), 17-28 (p.25).
[97] Ibid., p.26.

desire to fuse the two into an indivisible whole, whereby a specific production thus becomes the definitive realisation of that text. It is this tendency that has been blamed for the fetishising of youth and novelty to which the new writing culture is prone, and which can be seen in the focus on new, young writers – including Bartlett – during Cooke's tenure.[98]

However, Cooke's time at the theatre also included a range of work that challenged the Royal Court's own dearly held mythology, work that is often overlooked or underplayed by the media in favour of constructing a narrative that holds Cooke to his initial statement of intent. Another of the productions named by Haydon, *The Author*, is a prime example. Crouch's play, in which the performers are seated amongst the audience, questions – among other things – the ethics of the onstage violence that was a common feature of 1990s 'in-yer-face' plays, many of which famously premiered at the Royal Court.[99] In taking this self-referential approach to the site of the performance and its history and by complicating the play's 'message', Crouch and his collaborators preempt to an extent the strategies of critics, several of whom are mildly baffled. Dominic Maxwell, for instance, finds himself asking: 'Are the metatheatrics just foliage?'[100] Frequently, productions at the Royal Court are assessed by critics with reference to both the writer and the theatre, in some instances making the work presented there problematic in a way that it might not be elsewhere. This has often been the case for the two theatre-makers whose work at the Royal Court in this period I will be examining in greater depth: Anthony Neilson and Katie Mitchell. Both have interesting and occasionally fraught relationships with the Royal Court and the critics alike, as well as producing work that challenges, subverts and transforms the central idea of 'theatre as argument'.

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[98] It is worth noting here that new plays produced at the Royal Court and other new writing plays rarely receive second productions, meaning that their first production often is seen as definitive.

[99] See Tim Crouch, *The Author* (London: Oberon Books, 2012) and Aleks Sierz, *In Yer Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber, 2001).

[100] Dominic Maxwell, 'The Author', *The Times*, 1st October 2009 <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/arts/stage/theatre/article1869619.ece> [accessed 27th June 2014].

A 'dark, dissenting thread': Anthony Neilson

'As it was in the beginning, so shall it be at the end.'[101] Given the narratives that have formed around Dominic Cooke's tenure at the Royal Court – narratives of youth and middle-class introspection – it is perhaps surprising to reflect that his time at the theatre was bookended by two Anthony Neilson plays. *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, first produced for the Edinburgh International Festival in 2004, was part of Cooke's inaugural season, while *Narrative* joined his final line-up in the first half of 2013. In between, Neilson's work made two further appearances: *Relocated* in 2008 and Christmas show *Get Santa!* at the end of 2010. His approach, however, can be seen to needle at the priorities at the heart of the Royal Court's project at the same time as it reinforces the playwright's individual authority as the driving vision behind the work. Rather than starting with a pre-written script that is then produced by a creative team, Neilson's plays typically begin with nothing but a rehearsal room and a group of actors. The writing process then takes place at the same time as working with the cast in rehearsals; Neilson writes overnight and brings new drafts in each day, which he then explores with the actors. Improvisation plays an important role in the process and changes are often made right up to and even during the run.[102]

However, as *Guardian* critic Brian Logan points out, 'major British theatre institutions aren't structured to allow playwrights this freedom'.[103] Before the Royal Court's revival of *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* in Cooke's first season, Neilson had not worked at the theatre since a falling out over the production of his play *The Lying Kind* (2002), for which it was demanded that a script be produced

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[101] Aleks Sierz, 'Narrative', *The Stage*, 11th April 2013 <http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/38423/narrative> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[102] For more details, see Matt Trueman, 'The uncertain stage', *Financial Times*, 5th April 2013 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/11f68a64-9ad0-11e2-97ad-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2Pbw40VVq> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[103] Brian Logan, 'Everyday madness', *Guardian*, 14th August 2006 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/aug/14/theatre.edinburgh20062> [accessed 30th May 2014].

before the start of rehearsals. New writing theatres such as the Royal Court are not built to accommodate the sort of process that Neilson prefers, highlighting just one of the ways in which rigid institutional structures can limit the creativity of artists. At the same time as challenging these structures, however, Neilson's process places the writer at its heart in a way that resonates with the aims of the Royal Court. I witnessed this firsthand in July 2013, when I was invited by Neilson to spend two weeks in the rehearsal room with him and a group of actors and other playwrights. The two-week workshop was part of Vicky Featherstone's Open Court festival and was designed to introduce other writers to Neilson's way of working.[104] During this process, as I recorded at the time, Neilson explained to me that his approach is 'deeply rooted in a belief in the centrality of the playwright' and that 'the playwright always retains authorship'. As Neilson understands it, his process allows the playwright a direct connection with actors and designers, without the intermediary of a director, thus 'forging a tighter unity between the vision of the work and its individual parts'.[105]

Throughout his career, Neilson has been notably forthright in discussing his work, his process and his views on British theatre. In one of his characteristically outspoken statements, he touches on some of the concerns of this thesis. In a widely referenced article for the *Guardian* in 2007 provocatively titled 'Don't be so boring', Neilson attacks the idea – shared by many critics, as discussed in the previous chapter – that theatre 'has a quasi-educational/political role; that a play posits an argument that the playwright then proves or disproves'. He even suggests, in a way that almost echoes Worthen, that this philosophy of theatre 'makes criticism easier'. According to Neilson, this view 'has infected playwriting root and branch', producing boring, reductively issue-based theatre. He positions his own surreal brand of theatre as one alternative, establishing a challenge to critics that has coloured much of the

[104] The Big Idea: Collaboration <http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/collaboration> [accessed 11th July 2014].
[105] Catherine Love, 'Embrace the Shame', *Exeunt Magazine,* 11th July 2013 <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/embrace-the-shame/> [accessed 30th May 2014].

subsequent reception of his work.[106]

As a result, criticism of Neilson's plays often focuses on the figure of the playwright, his unusual working process and his well publicised opinions as much as on the work itself. Reviewing *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, Sarah Hemming writes: 'Neilson has said he hopes not just to describe the experiences, from the outside, but also to use the power of drama to help the audience live through them. Certainly the extreme contrasts in the play achieve this brilliantly'.[107] The production is measured against the intentions of the playwright, leaving readers in no doubt about whose vision matters and where the lines of success are drawn. Nicholas de Jongh uses a similar emphasis on the writer's aims as a tool for criticising the production, suggesting that 'Neilson succumbs to fantasy himself by claiming *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* virtually defines a new theatrical form of "psycho absurdism"'. De Jongh then goes on to suggest how the play might 'have made a better argument', judging the work on the very terms that Neilson unequivocally rejects.[108]

Reviews of *Narrative*, meanwhile, are preoccupied with Neilson's process and its relationship to Cooke's wider project at the Royal Court. Given that this production came right at the end of Cooke's tenure, this focus is unsurprising, but it is nonetheless revealing about how the legacy and purpose of the theatre is figured by critics. Andrew Dickson notes that 'You couldn't accuse Dominic Cooke of playing it safe during his final days at the Royal Court', immediately situating *Narrative* as a creative risk and a departure from the Court's usual fare, before drawing attention to Neilson's creative process and concluding that 'this material bears too obviously the mark of the rehearsal room'.[109] Clapp identifies Neilson's plays as 'a dark, dissenting thread through the repertoire of Cooke's Court', challenging to an

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[106] Anthony Neilson, 'Don't be so boring', *Guardian*, 21st March 2007 <http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2007/mar/21/features11.g2> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[107] Sarah Hemming, 'The Wonderful World of Dissocia', *Financial Times*, 3rd April 2007 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/afdf531c-e205-11db-af9e-000b5df10621.html#axzz33Baa15YU> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[108] Nicholas de Jongh, 'The Wonderful World of Dissocia', *Evening Standard*, 2nd April 2007 <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/theatre/surreality-check-7394081.html> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[109] Andrew Dickson, 'Narrative', *Guardian*, 11th April 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/apr/11/narrative-review> [accessed 30th May 2014].

extent the popular narrative of the artistic director's tenure,[110] while Fiona Mountford forcefully describes *Narrative* as 'a two-finger salute to those who foolishly accused him of playing it too safe'.[111] In a similar vein to their colleagues, Sierz and Spencer both expend a significant proportion of their words on Neilson's process, which they frame as a risk and they worry obscures the content.[112]

In the critical responses to *Narrative* we can also begin to witness the difference between mainstream media reviews and those of online critics, both in the detail of the analysis and in the way in which Neilson's process is presented within the discussion. Matt Trueman, for example, engages closely with Neilson's use and abuse of theatrical and narrative conventions, although he still navigates the play with reference to the writer's process and intentions.[113] Dan Hutton's review includes a lengthy discussion of Neilson's rehearsal process, but in the interests of interrogating it rather than merely highlighting it. He considers that this way of working might 'inhabit a space between writers' theatre and directors' theatre (though, being produced at the Royal Court, it surely errs on the side of the former)' and 'throws into light questions of what we class as "written" text'.[114] Neilson might still be the central figure of analysis, but the nature of his text and his working practices is questioned. Haydon, meanwhile, issues an outright challenge to the majority of the reviews with his claim that 'there wasn't much either unfamiliar or experimental about *Narrative*', suggesting that 'Only the deepest reactionary could find *Narrative*'s polite prodding at a sequence of events even remotely troubling'.[115]

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[110] Susannah Clapp, 'Narrative; Cannibals; Once', *Observer*, 14th April 2013 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/apr/14/narrative-cannibals-once-review> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[111] Fiona Mountford, 'Narrative', *Evening Standard*, 11th April 2013 <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/theatre/narrative-royal-court-upstairs--theatre-review-8568172.html> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[112] Aleks Sierz, 'Narrative', *The Arts Desk*, 11th April 2013 <http://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/narrative-royal-court-theatre> [accessed 30th May 2014]; Charles Spencer, 'Narrative', *Daily Telegraph*, 11th April 2013 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/9987382/Narrative-Royal-Court-Theatre-Upstairs-review.html> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[113] Matt Trueman, 'Narrative', 4th May 2013 <http://matttrueman.co.uk/2013/05/review-narrative-royal-court-theatre.html> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[114] Dan Hutton, 'Narrative', 21st April 2013 < http://dan-hutton.co.uk/2013/04/21/narrative-by-anthony-neilson/> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[115] Andrew Haydon, 'narrative about Narrative', 26th April 2013

In my own review of *Narrative*, I suggested that 'there's rarely – if ever – a complete break; there's just playful, subverting, disrupting reinvention of what has come before. Making mischief from within.'[116] This image of making mischief from within is perhaps the best way to think of Neilson's productions at the Royal Court during Cooke's tenure; shaking things up while leaving the core reverence for the playwright untouched. More than that, Neilson's prominent personality and the central role he occupies in his rehearsal process strengthens the authority of the writer at the same time as his close collaboration with actors and his rejection of the 'theatre as argument' model might seem to challenge it. In the critical responses to this work, meanwhile, the preoccupation with Neilson's process betrays many of the assumptions that have formed around new writing and the conventions of developing and staging a script. That in the context of the Royal Court and the mainstream press Neilson's work can be seen as radically experimental says much about those two institutions, as does the response to fellow supposed provocateur Katie Mitchell.

'Director or destroyer?' Katie Mitchell

In an article for the Guardian Theatre Blog in July 2008, which asked the very question that prefaces this section, Natasha Tripney succinctly captured the divided British response to the work of director Katie Mitchell: 'Every new production begins with a version of the same debate: is she a true theatrical visionary or is her style one that is hostile to both audience and text?'[117] Few other directors working in this country have prompted such heated debate in response to their work. Theatre critic Jane Edwardes

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<http://postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/narrative-about-narrative-royal-court.html> [accessed 30th May 2014].

[116] Catherine Love, 'Narrative', 24th April 2013 <http://catherinelove.co.uk/2013/04/24/narrative-royal-court/> [accessed 30th May 2014].

[117] Natasha Tripney, 'Katie Mitchell - director or destroyer?', *Guardian*, 30th July 2008 <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2008/jul/30/katiemitchelldirectorordes> [accessed 30th May 2014].

characterises Mitchell as 'the Marmite director par excellence',[118] while her work was singled out prominently among the female directors Hytner named in his attack on 'dead white males'.[119] The word most frequently attached to the director in British newspaper reviews and interviews is 'auteur', with typically pejorative connotations. According to various critics, Mitchell is an 'agent provocateur of the stage',[120] 'a director who polarises audiences like no other',[121] 'an avant-garde auteurish director'.[122] The implication of these descriptions is that, by taking on certain attributes of authorship as a director, Mitchell is in some way displacing the text and its writer from their usual place at the heart of the theatre-making process. Thus, although Mitchell is a director rather than a playwright, her work at the Royal Court illustrates many of the tensions that this thesis explores.

While Mitchell is frequently understood as an auteur director, Haydon suggests that 'we should also understand her work as the product of a collaboration not only with the writer, but with her team of set, costume, sound, light and video designers'.[123] One of Mitchell's most frequent collaborators is playwright Martin Crimp, whose play *The City* she directed at the Royal Court in May 2008. Interestingly, the reviews of this production – whether praising or damning – tend to focus on the relationship between form, content and Mitchell's treatment of this elusive text. De Jongh, for example, writes that 'Katie Mitchell's fine production, exuding anxiety and tension, cannot disguise the fact that the inventive form of Crimp's play is more interesting than its loquacious content'.[124] What emerges from many of these reviews and their focus on the theatrical realisation of Crimp's text is a latent desire to attribute

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[118] Jane Edwardes, 'Katie Mitchell: Interview', *Time Out London*, 12th November 2007 < http://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/katie-mitchell-interview> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[119] Hoyle.
[120] Claire Allfree, 'Katie Mitchell: I try to write about real people in real time in real places', *Metro*, 13th July 2011 <http://metro.co.uk/2011/07/13/katie-mitchell-i-try-to-write-about-real-people-in-real-time-in-real-places-75790/> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[121] Alice Jones, 'Katie Mitchell: "I'd hate to hang around making theatre when they're tired of it"', *The Independent*, 17th April 2008 <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/katie-mitchell-id-hate-to-hang-around-making-theatre-when-theyre-tired-of-it-810224.html> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[122] Libby Purves, 'Wastwater', *The Times*, 7th April 2011, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXXI Issue 07, p.358.
[123] Haydon, 'Theatre in the 2000s' p.82.
[124] Nicholas de Jongh, 'The City', *Evening Standard*, 30th April 2008, *Theatre Record*, Vol.XXVIII Issue 09, p.483.

artistic control, either to Crimp or his director. Billington approvingly notes 'a writer in full control of his talent';[125] Spencer, on the other hand, describes the cast as 'being trapped in the straitjacket of Crimp's icy-hearted artistic control', while Mitchell 'directs with a feeling of awed reverence'.[126] For other critics, Mitchell's role in this artistic power matrix is to illuminate Crimp's genius. Allfree, for instance, applauds the way in which Mitchell's production 'wrings every note of feeling from Crimp's blank dialogue',[127] while according to Kate Bassett it is Mitchell's 'taut production' which allows Crimp's writing to shine.[128] In these accounts, collaboration would appear to be less a matter of collective artistic endeavour and more a case of working in aid of a singular artistic vision – or perhaps scrapping over whose artistic vision is really being served.

Three years later, Mitchell was back at the Royal Court to direct *Wastwater* by Simon Stephens, a piece that received mixed reviews. But it is her production of *Ten Billion* in July 2012 that brings tensions around text, direction and argument sharply back into focus. Challenging conventional, writer-led understandings of what theatre is, *Ten Billion* was not a solo-authored play but a scientific lecture on population growth and climate change, delivered by scientist Stephen Emmott in what audiences were told was an exact replica of his office. Alongside *Ten Billion*'s urgent, pessimistic view of the planet's future, it was the framing of this event as theatre that drew the majority of critical attention. The same doubts about its theatrical credentials are repeatedly raised in reviews. Maxwell wonders whether 'you would call it great theatre',[129] while Mountford is more assertive in her statement that 'it's not theatre in any real sense'.[130] For some, this departure from theatrical convention is problematic. Hemming considers that the show 'would benefit from dramatic conflict',[131] and Cavendish asks: 'couldn't the

[125] Michael Billington, 'The City', *Guardian*, 30th April 2008, *Theatre Record*, Vol.XXVIII Issue 09, p.483.
[126] Charles Spencer, 'The City', *Daily Telegraph*, 1st May 2008, *Theatre Record*, Vol.XXVIII Issue 09, p.484.
[127] Claire Allfree, 'The City', *Metro*, 1st May 2008, *Theatre Record*, Vol.XXVIII Issue 09, p.483.
[128] Kate Bassett, 'The City', *Independent on Sunday*, 4th May 2008, *Theatre Record*, Vol.XXVIII Issue 09, p.483.
[129] Dominic Maxwell, 'Ten Billion', *The Times*, 20th July 2012, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXXII Issue 15, p.812.
[130] Fiona Mountford, 'Ten Billion', *Evening Standard*, 19th July 2012, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXXII Issue 15, p.812.
[131] Sarah Hemming, 'Ten Billion', *Financial Times*, 21st July 2012, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXXII Issue 15, p.815.

Royal Court have lent [Emmott's] doomy expertise to a few playwrights before they vanish along with the rest of their species?'[132] Billington contends, however, that the distinction between theatre and lecture is 'nonsensical', arguing that 'Theatre is whatever we want it to be and gains immeasurably from engaging with momentous political, social or scientific issues'.[133]

Online critics found more to interrogate in this ambivalent theatricality. Trueman, for instance, discusses in depth the 'extraordinary tension' between performance and lecture, exploring the different modes of watching that these two forms encourage and suggesting that Mitchell has used this duality to ask implicit questions about truth, belief and scepticism.[134] Jake Orr suggests, contrary to a number of the print critics, that *Ten Billion* 'holds all the ingredients' of theatre as we know it,[135] while Miriam Gillinson makes similar points to Trueman but concludes that the questioning provoked by Mitchell's production is more distracting than it is interesting. 'Time and again,' Gillinson writes, 'it seems that directors and writers are turning to lectures or journalistic rants in order to discuss the most important issues of our times. Why aren't they looking towards the theatre?'[136]

There are two key questions at stake in this critical response. The first is concerned with the theatrical legitimacy and authority of Mitchell's approach; 'is this really theatre?' the critics repeatedly ask. The second, which revolves around the power of Mitchell's production to debate and persuade, returns us once again to the notion of 'theatre as argument'. The prevalence of that first question reveals the often prescriptive nature of British theatre – at least according to the critics. We might also speculate that this question about the theatrical credentials of a piece without a conventional dramatic script is of more importance at the Royal Court, the theatre dedicated to the playwright, than it might

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[132] Dominic Cavendish, 'Ten Billion', *Daily Telegraph*, 19th July 2012, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXXII Issue 15, p.812.
[133] Michael Billington, 'Ten Billion', *Guardian*, 20th July 2012, *Theatre Record*, Vol. XXXII Issue 15, p.815.
[134] Matt Trueman, 'Ten Billion', 1st August 2012 <http://matttrueman.co.uk/2012/08/review-ten-billion-royal-court.html> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[135] Jake Orr, 'Ten Billion', *A Younger Theatre*, 19th July 2012 <http://www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-ten-billion-stephen-emmott-katie-mitchell-royal-court-theatre/> [accessed 30th May 2014].
[136] Miriam Gillinson, 'Ten Billion', 20th July 2012 <http://sketchesontheatre.blogspot.co.uk/2012/07/ten-billion-review-or-which-way-to.html> [accessed 30th May 2014].

be elsewhere. There is then a fraught relationship between this first question and the second. Does a piece of theatre need to be theatrical in order to impress its argument upon an audience, or does theatricality just get in the way of the thesis?

In the differing opinions seen above, something of the inherent paradox of thinking about theatre as a species of argument is uncovered. By putting an actual, minimally adorned argument on the stage, Mitchell throws into relief the unstable foundations of much critical thought around text, theatricality and the public role of the stage. Is it the theatre that makes the argument, or the argument that makes the theatre? If theatre – rather than any other public forum – is a uniquely powerful civic space, then surely there must be something it offers in its gathering of bodies that cannot be found in text alone; something in its very theatricality which challenges a critical interpretation of it as the straightforward thesis of the playwright.

Conclusion

At the end of June 2014, just over a year after taking over as artistic director of the Royal Court, Vicky Featherstone unveiled the theatre's 2014-2015 season. Interestingly it includes, among a decidedly political line-up of work, a new piece from Katie Mitchell in the same mould as *Ten Billion* – although this time with a playwright on board. In the season announcement, Featherstone explains that the plays she has programmed for this season are all 'about revolutions – big and small acts of resistance', and that they are all stories of 'not only imagining change but making it happen'. She elaborates:

> The time for apathy is over, the writers want to see and make change, to ask questions about our democracy. We didn't set out to create a season of work with a theme but could not ignore the message coming from our playwrights. Individually they are asking the necessary questions of humanity, government and society and collectively they have made their response to the moment we are in very clear.[137]

What is particularly striking about this announcement is the force with which its stakes are articulated. 'The time for apathy is over,' we are told unequivocally; the message of the playwrights is one that the Royal Court 'could not ignore' and the questions they are asking are 'necessary'. Furthermore, not only do these plays explore the possibility of change, they are boldly setting out to initiate it. The link between theatre and the political health of the nation is made explicit, in terms that are unabashedly decisive. As I write, there appears to be a strengthened consensus at the Royal Court, one that believes fervently in theatre's role as a public forum and its ability to provoke change at a time of political unease and disillusionment.

Featherstone and the playwrights she has commissioned are not alone in feeling this way. Responding to criticisms of Britain's new writing culture, playwright Fin Kennedy laments a lost time when theatre participated in 'an ongoing narrative of ideas'. Recalling Habermas and Schiller, he claims that 'Playwrights were important once; theatre an acknowledged arena in which original thought took

[137] Vicky Featherstone, 'Press Release: 2014-2015 New Season Announced', 26th June 2014 <http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/news/articles/2014-2015-new-season-announced/> [accessed 9th July 2014].

place, to which people flocked to take time out to consider who we are, who we were, and where we're all headed'. Later in the same article, he goes on to suggest that 'In an age of austerity, and with the whole notion of public funding of the arts under attack as never before, it is all the more urgent that we have an answer for the question about what taxpayers are getting for their money', proposing that theatre needs to demonstrate its 'importance to a society's health'.[138] A similar perspective is expressed by Ben Walters in a recent guide to criticism that was commissioned and published, tellingly, by the *Guardian*. 'In a new age of austerity,' Walters writes, 'the critic can be an articulate and impassioned champion of culture [...] at a time when culture's role and value are increasingly under question'.[139]

We do live in an age of austerity, in which theatre and the criticism written in response to it could once again have a central role to play in airing political thought and providing an arena for us to consider the health of not just the nation, but the world. To limit this, however, to drama which is designed to convey – ideally with the minimum of theatrical fuss – an individual thesis, is to impoverish theatre as an art form. If the public wants pure, undiluted, unembellished argument, it can turn to public debates or newspaper articles. There has to be something else in theatre – and, by extension, in criticism – which makes it a valuable civic space.

Here I wish to return to a question raised via Chris Goode at the end of my first chapter. In his response to Michael Billington's demand for a writer's vision at the heart of a piece of theatre, Goode asks if it might be possible to extend the designation of writer 'as far as the idea of a "writerly consciousness", wherein the argument of a piece, as it may be expressed through narrative or dialogue or image or gesture or metaphor or interrelation or *formal conceit*, is originated, organized and distributed'. He goes on to add, 'might many people whose collective relationships are practised and

[138] Fin Kennedy, 'The Start of Something Else?', *Exeunt Magazine* <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/the-start-of-something-else/> [accessed 9th July 2014].
[139] Ben Walters, *Critical Writing: A 60-Minute Masterclass* (London: Guardian Books, 2014), p.2.

attentive not share that consciousness?'.[140] It is significant, first of all, that Goode uses the word 'argument'. In this he shares the vocabulary of Billington, just as the two men share a belief – albeit in different ways – in the importance of theatre as a public space.[141] What Goode posits, however, is the possibility firstly of an argument located in places other than the script – in 'image or gesture or metaphor or interrelation or *formal conceit*' – and secondly of a collective 'writerly consciousness'. Here, I would suggest, lies the real potential of 'theatre as argument': in an approach that does not deny the theatre in favour of the argument, and that understands arguments themselves as complex, multiple and articulated by more than just one, singular authority.

Before concluding, I want to look at one final and notably different example of the relationship between text and criticism in the context of the Royal Court. One of the final productions of Cooke's tenure at the theatre was *Love and Information*, a new play by Caryl Churchill. This piece took the form of a series of short, seemingly unconnected scenes, laid out in the playtext without any indication of who should be speaking the lines. Critical responses to James Macdonald's production were varied, but one in particular is striking in its approach. Writing about the show for his blog, Andrew Haydon adopts the same formal logic as Churchill, responding to the play in a way that mimics it, deconstructing the show through its form as much as its content.[142] If critics are drawn to the text as a consequence of their affinity with its substance – that is, with words – then Haydon's review of *Love and Information* raises this affinity to a new level by self-consciously framing his response in a form that directly mirrors Churchill's. In doing so, Haydon implicitly highlights the partial nature of both the theatre text, an object that becomes complete through a process of transformation, and of the review itself. The review performs its own limitations; its splintered structure brilliantly demonstrates Irving Wardle's insight that 'in one way or another, the reviewer will be presenting a judgement on the whole event on the basis of

[140] Goode, 'All you get is sensory titillation'. (original emphasis)
[141] Goode's show *The Forest and the Field* (2013), which was originally written in essay form, discusses at length the relationship between theatre and the world.
[142] Haydon, 'Love and Information'.

fragmentary evidence'.[143] The 'argument' of the review, if it can even be described as such, is as contingent as the 'argument' of the play.

This is not to suggest that the form experimented with by Haydon in response to *Love and Information* should be a blueprint for future theatre criticism, but rather to demonstrate the multiple possibilities available to critics as well as to theatre-makers. There is nothing inherently wrong with theatre that takes as its basis an argument articulated by the playwright, any more than other forms of theatre are essentially wrong in their basic artistic premise. Individual examples may be unsuccessful or politically problematic for any number of reasons, and the nature of the process and the material conditions of production are important to consider, but the starting point itself is not necessarily to blame. Similarly, there is successful and unsuccessful criticism in the Billington mould as much as there is in the new forms of theatre criticism that continue to emerge online. The danger, however, is a self-perpetuating structure which works to limit the artists, arguments and articulations that make it to our stages. For the health of the country's theatre and the discussions it sustains, it is vital to be constantly questioning, exploring, and challenging the 'ideological biases' – to borrow Jen Harvie's words once again – which large institutions such as the Royal Court may be consciously or unconsciously reproducing. By telling the same stories and making the same arguments, we fail to move the discussion forwards.

It feels appropriate to close, therefore, by looking ahead and anticipating some of the questions that may be at stake in the future. The Royal Court, a year into Featherstone's tenure, is still in a period of transition, during which central tenets are reaffirmed but other assumptions are being challenged. Last summer's Open Court festival, although firmly organised around writers, explicitly questioned the processes by which the theatre usually makes work, while Featherstone has presented shows by a number of theatre-makers – including Goode – who might usually be classified on the 'new work' side of

[143] Wardle, p.34.

the false but persistent schism in British theatre. What remains to be seen is how these different forms of theatre will sit alongside one another in the programme and whether they will complicate or reinforce existing binaries. Theatre criticism, meanwhile, continues to undergo a transition of its own, its destination similarly uncertain, but the potential for a more complex and nuanced attitude to both text and argument is undoubtedly available. Finally it is my intention, as I discussed in my introduction, that this investigation should create an opening for further research into the status of the theatre text in Britain, the contested relationship between text and performance, and the conditions of production which shape this relationship, some of which I plan to explore through doctoral study.

Or, to put it another way, this thesis has ultimately been an argument for more, different and varied arguments, both on and around our stages.

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