A Concise Companion to Contemporary British and Irish Drama

Edited by Nadine Holdsworth and Mary Luckhurst
A Concise Companion to
Contemporary British and
Irish Drama
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A Concise Companion to
Contemporary British
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Edited by Nadine Holdsworth
and Mary Luckhurst
In memory of Clive Barker,

innovative practitioner
wonderful story-teller
cricket enthusiast
and devotee of detective fiction

a man committed to the exploration and promotion of
the playful, creative, social and political potential of local,
national and international theatres.
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Acknowledgements

The editors would like to thank Emma Bennett, Rosemary Bird and Karen Wilson at Blackwell for their care and attention during the process of producing this volume. Once again Fiona Sewell was an outstanding copyeditor. Chris Megson was a helpful reader and Ellie Paremain a handy researcher. We would like to thank Blast Theory, Complicite, Forced Entertainment, Stan’s Cafe, and Ken Urban and Hanna Slattne for their help with picture research. Thanks also to Victoria Coulson, who was the Nigella Lawson of York. The editors would like to extend their thanks to the F. R. Leavis Fund and the Department of English at the University of York and to the School of Theatre, Performance and Cultural Policy Studies at the University of Warwick for financial support. Greg Callus will find that his newfound expertise as a theatre historian will be invaluable when he is prime minister. Students on the MA Writing and Performance 2006/7 were especially brilliant: thank you to Tom Cantrell, Shabnam Darbar, Dot Fenwick, Chris Hogg, Doug Kern and Nik Morris. Tom was also an indexer par excellence.
This companion emerged from a realization that the historical scope of the Blackwell Companion to Modern British and Irish Drama 1880–2005 (2006) meant that it was impossible to do justice to the incredible proliferation of dramatic and theatrical practices that have emerged during the past twenty-five years. Whereas fifty years ago the term ‘contemporary British and Irish drama’ would have, largely unproblematically, referred to a group of playwrights, companies and their outputs centred on text-based plays performed in traditional theatre spaces, no such assumptions can be made about work produced in the last twenty-five years. If anything characterizes the contemporary theatre scene, it is its eclecticism – in terms of the subjects it addresses, the sites it occupies, its increasing interdisciplinarity and the forms of representation it offers. The prominence of terms such as ‘physical theatre’, ‘site-specific theatre’, ‘virtual theatre’ and ‘multimedia performance’ testify to the range of practices that have emerged in recent years. These developments have enriched the theatrical domain as they have challenged the primacy of text, promoted the blurring of disciplinary borders and harnessed the potential of new technologies. Several chapters in this volume debate some of the philosophical, thematic and aesthetic questions posed by these practices.

Whilst recognizing the importance of formal diversification, we do not wish to suggest that the traditional play is not alive and well – it certainly is. Indeed, leading and emerging playwrights have been embarking on their own experiments to uncover the forms, language
and aesthetic strategies that can best respond to the concerns of the contemporary age. In this volume such creative engagement is represented through discussions of verbatim theatre, aesthetics of ‘radical dissonance’, Kane’s ‘ethics of catastrophe’, hybrid forms, disrupted narratives and the role of the story-teller and story-telling.

A persistent narrative in this companion is a deliberate shift of focus away from the metropolitan centre and the dominant centrality of work produced at the Royal Court, the National Theatre and the Royal Shakespeare Company that has preoccupied so much of the historiography of recent British theatre. Whilst these production companies are important and represented, chapters in this collection also address work that has been created in Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Exeter, Sheffield, Stoke-on-Trent, Birmingham, Liverpool and Ulverston. In fact some of the most exciting and innovative work explored in this collection finds a source of creative energy and invention from its origins in and engagement with urban and rural geographical sites, cultural idioms, local histories and heritage that exist way beyond London.

This volume works from the premise that British and Irish playwrights and theatre-makers have an important role to play as ethical witnesses and cultural commentators. Many national and international events of the recent past have produced seismic shifts in the political, economic, social and cultural landscape. These include the demise of the Cold War, symbolically manifest in the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and the resurgence of ethnic nationalism in Europe that resulted in the devastating Balkan conflict and the international reverberations caused by the first and second Iraq Wars. These world-changing events sit alongside national developments such as Scottish and Welsh devolution and the Northern Ireland peace process, all of which raise questions of political legitimacy, national identity and cultural representation. Other concerns preoccupying contemporary dramatists and theatre-makers include the legacy of imperialism and the struggle to interrogate histories, memories and identities; the mounting presence of migration, economic refugees and those seeking asylum; the persistence of atrocious humanitarian abuses; lack of faith in official political processes; the insidious poverty that afflicts communities worldwide and the increasing encroachment of globalization. Discussions of the possibilities and limitations offered by theatrical treatments and interrogations of these events, themes and their consequences are woven through several chapters in this volume.
The chapters are divided into four parts in order to identify key thematic concerns and synergies. The first part, ‘National Politics and Identities’, addresses work that explores such themes as revolution, migration, the immigrant experience, cultural memory, the role of history, Black British urban identity and the forging of new identities in changed political and cultural circumstances. The second part, ‘Sites, Cities and Landscapes’, explores the various ways in which playwrights and theatre-makers have drawn on the specificities and politics of geographical locations as creative source and subject matter in order to explore ideas around place, belonging, and local, national and global identities. Part III, ‘The Body, Text and the Real’, draws together chapters that variously address questions of representation, authorship, authority, the potential veracity and political efficacy of text, and the materiality of the body in performance. The final part, ‘Science, Ethics and New Technologies’, explores how playwrights and theatre-makers have responded to the ethical and aesthetic challenges posed by the rapid advances in nuclear, medical and information technology, mass media communication and the relentless force of globalization.

We hope that this volume gives a snapshot of the political engagement, thematic complexity, theatrical energy and formal experimentation evident in much late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century theatre practice and a flavour of the debates, dialogues and provocations posed by some of Britain and Ireland’s leading and emerging playwrights and theatre practitioners.
Part I

National Politics and Identities
Chapter 1

Europe in Flux: Exploring Revolution and Migration in British Plays of the 1990s

Geoff Willcocks

There can be little doubt that 1989 was a pivotal year in European history. The revolutions of the communist Eastern bloc, the break-up of the Soviet Union and the subsequent ending of the Cold War were to confront Europe, particularly the countries of the European Union (EU), with challenges which are proving difficult to resolve. The main challenges were, and still are, concerned with security, economic and political stability, migration, and the process of enlarging the EU to incorporate newly ‘independent’ nation-states. The plays considered in this chapter provide examples of how British playwrights explored and interpreted the challenges faced by post-communist Europe during the 1990s. The focus of these plays is the events in the countries of the former Eastern bloc and the Balkans.

As this chapter is concerned with the responses of British playwrights to the events in Europe during the 1990s, brief consideration has to be given to the relationship between Britain and the rest of Europe and specifically the European Union. During the 1980s much of the political debate in Britain concerning Europe had centred upon issues relating to finance – the exchange rate mechanism (ERM), rebates, subsidies, the single currency versus sovereignty; debates driven largely by the so-called Eurosceptics in both Westminster and the business world. The popular understanding of Europe within Britain, fuelled by tabloid newspapers, had, for the most part, been concerned
with losing the pound and generating scare stories about European legislation governing minutiae like the straightness of bananas. Moreover, Britain’s history as a significant colonial power and its ‘special’ relationship with the USA have always meant that Britain has tended to see itself as apart from continental Europe, a mindset reinforced by its geographical position as an island off the coast of mainland Europe. These issues are heightened by Britain’s continuing post-imperial anxiety with regard to integration with the rest of Europe, representing within the popular and political psyche of Britain another step towards its loss of sovereignty and a diminishment of its position as an independent world leader. The idea of ‘Britain’, though, is a tricky one and a mainly political concept: generally the Scottish and Welsh tend to identify more with the continent than their old colonial power, England.

The British government’s relationship with the rest of Europe is complicated further by the problems that surround defining Europe as a cohesive entity. What are its borders – who is included in and who is excluded from Europe? Does it have shared values? Does it have homogeneous cultural imperatives? While the desire to integrate Europe economically and politically remains strong in certain quarters of the EU, the reality is that the means to achieve this are far from mutually agreed by its constituent nation-states. Moreover, it is important to note that the institution of the EU by no means represents Europe as a whole. A number of European countries still exist outside of the EU, a fact that makes drawing conclusions about pan-European ideals, needs and development based purely upon the stated aspirations of the EU extremely difficult. Although Europe has moved a long way since Henry Kissinger asked whom he should telephone if he wanted to speak to Europe (Leonard 2005: 23), questions of definition still plague the project of European integration, and this is reflected in the plays considered here. For some theatre academics, such as Janelle Reinelt, the task of those British playwrights who have tackled the subject of Europe has been undertaken with almost utopian zeal. In her article ‘Performing Europe’ Reinelt suggests that the plays which she considers represent an ‘interrogation of and intervention in the struggle to invent a New Europe’ and that ‘theatre may emerge from this early millennial period as a powerful force for democratic struggle in its own unique imaginative and aesthetic modality’ (2001: 387). However, while accepting that no playwright would wish to distance themselves from such an ambitious and noble position, this chapter argues that many of the plays produced by British
playwrights concerning Europe as it stood during the 1990s reveal a much less optimistic view. The plays that this chapter explores are David Edgar’s (b. 1948) *Shape of the Table* (1990) and Caryl Churchill’s (b. 1938) *Mad Forest* (1990), Edgar’s *Pentecost* (1994) and David Greig’s (b. 1969) *Europe* (1994), and finally Sarah Kane’s (1971–99) *Blasted* (1995) and Nicolas Kent’s (b. 1945) *Srebrenica* (1996). Collectively these plays offer an engaging and at times disturbing account of one of the most significant periods of European history.

The key events that succeeded the revolutions of 1989 and the end of the Cold War are well documented, but their significance lies in the momentous change they brought to the political structure of Europe. The demise of the ideological tensions inherent within the Cold War generated European aspirations for unity, common purpose and mutual understanding. It is significant, therefore, that one of the key political ideas of this period – the notion of a common European home – should be attributed to one of the central architects of this era’s political climate, the then Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. It was Gorbachev’s hope that the democratization of the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc would begin to unite Eastern and Western Europe.

Implicit in Gorbachev’s desire were the central concepts of unity, cooperation, tolerance, mutual respect and commonality. Unfortunately, the Europe that was to emerge over the next decade was to be one based on precepts far removed from Gorbachev’s idyll. While Gorbachev had spoken of an ideal – a Europe without borders – the reality was that borders, both geographical and political, as well as borders of history, ethnicity and identity, became the cause of conflicts the effects of which would be so far reaching that they would significantly contribute to the redefinition of Europe itself. Moreover, with these conflicts came a rapid increase in the numbers of those seeking economic migration and refugee status in Western Europe. Thus, through the changing demography of their major towns and cities, the nation-states of Western Europe were forced to confront the consequences of their promotion of rapid political and economic change.

With the demise of communism the peoples of Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe were left to answer questions not just about their system of political governance, but also about their cultural and political identity. The thawing of the permafrost of the Cold War, which for over forty years had frozen national borders and even ethnic identities and histories, led to a rapid resurgence in ethnic
nationalism. In many ways, perhaps this should not be surprising, as Vaclav Havel, a major playwright himself and the then president of Czechoslovakia, pointed out at a conference on security and cooperation in Europe held in Helsinki during the summer of 1992:

The sudden burst of freedom has not only untied the straitjacket made by communism, it has also unveiled the centuries-old, often thorny history of nations. People are remembering their past kings and emperors, the states they had formed far back in the past and the borders of those states... It is entirely understandable that such a situation becomes a breeding ground for nationalist fanaticism, xenophobia and intolerance. (see Mauthner 1992: 2)

Havel’s words proved frighteningly prescient. Throughout much of the 1990s Eastern, Central and Southeastern Europe experienced a period of instability and radical, and occasionally bloody, change. As Havel implies, the borders of these nations, having been previously defined and controlled by the necessities of the Cold War, could now be questioned. Ancient border disputes began to erupt as nascent nation-states began to assert their perceived rightful and historical claims to land and territory. This makes Reinelt’s suggestion that ‘the idea of Europe has become a liminal concept, fluid and indeterminate’ problematic (2001: 365). If the borders of contested parts of Europe were indeed being openly questioned and challenged, it is also true that these new borders were being fiercely defended in the name of ethnic nationalism. Perhaps the starkest example of the horrific confluence of ethnic nationalism and the redefinition of borders in Europe was the bloody conflict that engulfed the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia during the early 1990s. The disturbing reality is that it only took two short years for Europe to move from breaching the Berlin Wall, thoughts of a common European home and the unification of East and West Europe, to the disintegration of Yugoslavia, the destruction of Sarajevo, the massacre at Srebenica and the events described in the chilling euphemism of ‘ethnic cleansing’.

Competing with history

All of the plays considered in this chapter deal in some way with history. A concern with the theatrical representation of history was clearly uppermost in the mind of Michael Billington when he
reviewed Howard Brenton and Tariq Ali’s *Moscow Gold* (1990), a play concerned with the events of the Soviet Union from 1982 to 1990. In his review, Billington writes: ‘You start to wonder how theatre can compete with documentary reality. The short answer is it can’t. [ . . . ] Theatre cannot compete with history: what it can do is illuminate specific moments in time and the burden of decision’ (1990: 44). Billington’s words, particularly his assertion of ‘the burden of decision’, imply a specific understanding of history as the story of decision-makers and powerful elites. The reality of any given moment of the past is that it is constructed by a plurality of experiences that generate multiple, not singular, narratives. Two plays that sought, in very different ways, to reconcile the problems of theatrically depicting historical narratives, Edgar’s *The Shape of the Table* (1990) and Churchill’s *Mad Forest* (1990), concern themselves specifically with the Eastern European revolutions of 1989.

*The Shape of the Table* (National Theatre, 1990) considers the processes inherent in the political negotiations that took place in the countries of the Eastern bloc following the events of 1989. While concerning itself with the elites implied by Billington, *The Shape of the Table* does not seek to depict the story of one particular country, but rather explores the story of the revolutions in Eastern Europe holistically. As Edgar explains:

> In 1989, I felt there was enough in common between the uprisings in Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria to create a representative fictionalised narrative of the fall of Eastern European communism; the play, *The Shape of the Table*, would demonstrate a common process but also dramatise the experience of heady opportunity (on one side) and loss (on the other). (2001b: 2)

While there are undoubtedly inherent problems in extracting the generic processes that are in operation at any given moment in history – for example, the loss of the specific social and political circumstances of each particular nation and the motivations of individual players – for Edgar the task offers significant benefits:

> I think that history tells what happened, journalism tells what’s happening and what I try and do is tell what happens. My work is in the present tense, but it is more general, more generic than journalism. I’ve come round to writing plays about process as a development of an alternative to political theatre in the traditional polemical sense. I suppose a process play is a play that says there is a syndrome of things that
happen in the world and what happens in *The Shape of the Table* is that you take something that happens frequently, you draw out the essence and you fictionalise it; you make it generic.\(^6\)

As the play unfolds the fall of the communist government of Edgar’s unnamed country is shown as a fait accompli. Ultimately, representatives from both the new and old order are gathered in one room and tasked with negotiating the future governance of their country. To this end, *The Shape of the Table* revolves almost exclusively around the negotiating table. Indeed, Edgar uses the negotiating table itself, as suggested by the play’s title, as a metaphor for the developments and political changes that were occurring throughout Eastern Europe at this time. During the negotiations, the table is revealed as not one single table but many smaller tables that can be tessellated into one whole or divided into smaller or even single units. This metaphor operates on two levels. First, it not only demonstrates the development of political and cultural plurality, but also indicates the aspiration that such plurality should be based not upon mutual exclusivity but upon the ability to act cooperatively for the greater good of all. Secondly, however, the metaphor of the table also reminds the audience that an active desire on all sides is required to make such pluralistic cooperation a reality. Edgar underscores this point at the end of the play when there are reports of a gang of skinheads beating a Vietnamese boy to death and the appearance of graffiti that reads ‘Gas all Gypsies Now’ (Edgar 1990: 75), elements that prophetically point towards a growing nationalism, ethnic tensions and civil war.

In contrast to *The Shape of the Table*, Churchill’s *Mad Forest* (Central School of Speech and Drama, London, 1990), which considers events in Romania during the latter part of 1989, does not represent a single politician or political representative (though the dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu has a powerful implicit presence). Moreover, while Edgar’s play offers an examination of the political processes at work in Eastern Europe, *Mad Forest* offers an evocation of the mood and atmosphere prevalent in Romania during the early 1990s. Asked to write a play about the Romanian revolution for the students of the Central School of Speech and Drama, Churchill’s approach was to use the actors in the company to help generate the material for the play, as she had previously done for Joint Stock Theatre Company. This approach necessitated a visit to Romania, where the students interviewed a range of people about their experiences during the events of late 1989 and early 1990. As a result, as Sotto-Morettini notes, the
Europe in Flux

play focuses on the ‘small vicissitudes of family life [...] the “micro-politics” of everyday life’ (1994: 105). This process generated a play that reveals large-scale socio-political proceedings through personal, domestic and familial events, centring as it does on two unremarkable families.

Mad Forest is not a process play as typified by Edgar’s The Shape of the Table; rather it offers its audience a range of voices that speak of an historical event, an experience, which, while collective in nature, is composed of a plethora of individual contributions; and in doing so the play reveals a picture that is fractured and fragmented. This fragmentation is borne out by the play’s formal structure, which is segmented into vignettes of action. While most of these sections are realistic in their form, some scenes are surreal – a disturbing feature of the work’s construction, which unsettles and unnerves the spectator. For example, a priest is told not to think about politics by an angel, and at the start of act three a dog begs a vampire to make him ‘undead’. Even within the more realistic scenes, an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty pervades the work: a husband and wife have to turn the radio up to have an argument for fear that their house is bugged; a family can only speak openly during a power cut; and a woman arranges an illegal abortion, bribing the doctor who only appears to be refusing her request. Even at the end of the play, when the Ceauşescu regime has been removed, the change that Churchill depicts is characterized as painful and uncertain. While Edgar’s The Shape of the Table articulates the political, philosophical and conceptual processes of the transition that occurred in Eastern Europe, Churchill’s Mad Forest offers its audience an examination of the immediate consequences of this change. Ultimately, it is a change that leaves the characters of the play traumatized by the event itself, bewildered by its rapidity, fearful of its potential implications and deeply confused about the uncertainty it has generated for the future, a set of concerns that were replicated across Central and Eastern Europe at this time.

Fortress Europe

The state of uncertainty and flux that Europe experienced during the 1990s is the central concern of a number of plays written during this time and shortly after. While Timberlake Wertenbaker’s play Credible Witness (2001) and David Edgar’s work The Prisoner’s Dilemma (2001a)
consider the consequences of European instability during the 1990s, two other plays, Edgar’s *Pentecost* (1994) and Greig’s *Europe* (1994), explore how Europe has become a site of transition, particularly in terms of the migration of people. Both these plays examine issues that centre upon national identity, borders, language and the question of Europe as a politically and economically united entity.

Following the Eastern bloc revolutions of 1989, one of the significant challenges that faced the EU, which was then comprised almost exclusively of the nations of Western Europe, was that of migration. Migrants fell into two groups, which were by no means mutually exclusive: economic refugees and those displaced by war or political change. The EU’s official statistics demonstrated the scale of this challenge. Between 1989 and 1998 close to two million asylum applications were made to Western European nations by citizens of other European countries. In total, including applications from non-European countries, asylum applications made to EU countries between 1986 and 1991 rose by 481 per cent (Gregou 2005: 10). Faced with this dramatic increase in migration the response of many Western European countries, despite the implementation of the Schengen pact, was to impose stricter immigration and border controls. In addition to this, during the mid-1990s the EU was heavily engaged in discussion over the process of enlargement – explicitly which nations should and which should not be included in the EU. It is these issues that occupy central positions in the narratives of both *Europe* and *Pentecost*.

The action of *Pentecost* (Royal Shakespeare Company, Other Place, 1994) takes place in an abandoned church in a Southeastern European country, only referred to as ‘our country’. On the wall of the church is a fresco that bears a remarkable similarity to Giotto’s *Lamentation* in the Arena Chapel, Padua. Gabriella Pecs, a curator at the National Museum, enlists the help of a visiting English art historian, Professor Oliver Davenport, to help her confirm the provenance of the fresco, which she believes pre-dates Giotto’s work. In the opening exchanges of the first scene, as Pecs tells Davenport the history of the church in which the fresco is housed, she reveals to the audience the complex history and ‘ownership’ of her nation:

Gabriella: All righty, one abandoned church. As well as warehouse, church is used by heroic peasantry to store potatoes [. . .] And before potatoes, Museum of Atheism and Progressive People’s Culture. And before museum, prison [. . .] ‘Transit Centre’. German Army. [. . .] When we Hungary, it