CHAPTER I

The state of the British Theatre and Arnold Wesker

I

The years of the Second World War were culturally very active. There was a general enthusiasm for the performing arts—music, ballet and theatre—despite every type of material difficulty. Major British artists established themselves before a wide and appreciative audience. Although it was not a distinguished period for literature, there was a widespread interest in contemporary writing. Literary periodicals like John Lehmann's Penguin New Writing were widely read. But when the war ended this interest in literature declined. The late forties and early fifties seemed a dead period for literature.

In 1940 Hitler contrived to do what even the Puritans had failed to achieve by closing the London theatres. Only the little Windmill Theatre with a programme of non-stop variety remained open. By 1941, particularly after Germany's attack on the Soviet Union, London had some relief and managements commenced considering new plays, but the break in tradition had been formidable. By 1942, the London Theatre productions were approaching normal, but the public venturing out in the black-out preferred revivals to new plays. The major theatrical adventure of the post-war years was the establishment of a company viz. Vedrenne's old theatre where Bernard Shaw had made his early successes. Here the London theatre group under George Devine's
courageous direction found new English authors and also produced plays in translation. Another independent and lively direction came from Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, which functioned at the Theatre Royal, Stratford, in East London.

The death of Bernard Shaw at the end of 1950 created a vacuum in the English theatre which no playwright then practically appeared qualified to fill. Coward, Priestley, Eliot and Fry had no new surprises to spring, and during the first half of the decade (1950-60) there was nothing that roused more than routine interest. The theatre had the usual succession of long-run popular successes and short-run interesting failures. It remained as true as in Dr. Johnson's time that 'the drama's laws the drama's patrons give.' While Shaw had not accepted that dictum wholeheartedly, he had allowed that if the drama's patrons were to accept what he thought it good for them to have, he must on his side observe the law that the primary purpose of the theatre is to entertain, and that what else it may be qualified to provide must come through the medium of entertainment. The result of his case is that from among the two dozen or so full-length plays he wrote it is probably safe to guess that at least a dozen will survive to become an accepted part of the main body of English drama.

Looking dispassionately from the angle of the early 1960s at the plays of the 1950s only a venturesome observer would prophesy that any one has a surviving value. Those whose observation is not critically dispassionate will incline to the
opposing view that in the 1950s an important revolution was affected in English drama and was productive of more than evanescent masterpieces. The revolution — important or not — can be said to have begun with the London production of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting For Godot* in 1955. Beckett had been James Joyce's secretary; he lived mainly in Paris, writing as fluently in French as in English, and was obviously much influenced by Joyce though he did not adopt Joyce's verbal style. It would be vain to attempt to say what Beckett's plays are about or what they mean, for they belong to what has been labelled "the theatre of the absurd." What happens in *Waiting For Godot* does not constitute a story or plot, but an image of Beckett's intuition that nothing really ever happens in man's existence.

The play seems to have been written fluently. Beckett said, "I didn't have too much trouble with it." On an empty stage representing a country road bare but for a single sickly tree, two men, dressed in tattered clothes and ancient bowler hats are trying to keep an appointment. They are not so sure whether they really have an appointment, nor whether this is the place or the time that has been agreed. They are not so sure with whom the appointment is to be and what its purpose is. In each of the two acts Vladimir and Estragon meet another pair of characters: Pozzo and Lucky. Pozzo is big, fat and opulent; Lucky is thin, bedraggled and old, is Pozzo's slave driven by him with a whip and with a halter round his neck. The only development is that in the second act Pozzo is sticke...
halter serves as the blind man's lead. The two pairs of characters in each act, try to communicate, fail and part. Vladimir and Estragon keep waiting, Fozzo and Lucky resume their wanderings. At the end of each act a little boy appears; he brings a message from Godot — Godot cannot come today, but he will come without fail tomorrow. "The most obvious structural quality of the play is that it is composed of two carefully balanced acts. The plot of each act has much in common."

Martin Esslin in his *Theatre of the Absurd* records that when *Godot* was staged before the convicts at the San Quentin penitentiary, captivated the imagination of the social outsiders. The comments of the convicts were revealing: "Godot is society," "He's the outsider", "We're still waiting for Godot, and shall continue to wait." And with Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* the reign of the "do-it-yourself" drama commenced. Scores of amateur writers, finding that a spate of words about anything might win approbation in the theatre, tried their hand. Construction was out, characterization was out, style and decency of language were out. Commitment was in. The conflicting strains of "commitment" and "the absured" made it often difficult to comprehend what it was that playwrights of the 1950s were committed to; while the decay of craftsmanship coupled with the state of affairs in which a "directors' theatre", usurped the place formerly taken by an "authors' theatre" tended to remove plays from the scope of literature.
Shelagh Delaney claims that she is the antithesis of London's "angry youn men." Her play *A Taste of Honey* (1958) was accepted at once by Theatre Workshop. Somewhat revised in production by Joan Littlewood and the cast, it was first staged in 1958 at Stratford, East London and later transferred successfully to the West End. Her next play *The Lion in Love* was first presented at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry in 1960. It gives us a mosaic of sub-plots, centring round the unhappy marriage of Frank and Kit. It was less successful than *A Taste of Honey*.

To the Royal Court Theatre in 1956, came John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, which caught the imagination of a generation. Osborne should be given credit for initiating the new drama on the commercial stage. His particular contribution has been to bring to the British theatre-goers in mid-fifties, a feeling of freshness and an attitude of defiance. He demonstrated a remarkable capacity for dramatising the dilemma and a sense of inadequacy felt by the younger generation in the fifties. Osborne is the first of the new playwrights to use creatively the language of anger and frustration in current speech habits, and to project the new spirit before the theatre going public. The anger of Osborne questions the moral and spiritual viability of the British Welfare State in the fifties and his criticism is, really directed towards a society, which in the name of economic progress, has developed a kind of moral callousness and approved questionable values and practices.
Osborne does not project directly his dream of a great friendly society, but builds an infra-structure of frustration, misery and anger in his theatre, making desirable the values of an alternative society. Osborne does not offer anything positive in his work and the profession of an iconoclast loses some of its validity and strength and becomes tiring when he goes on demolishing institutions and practices without offering any substitute for them. Shaw was also an iconoclast but he offered the dream of a socialist society as a panacea for the ills of society. Osborne's attacks are directed against that undefined section of society called Establishment which professedly upholds traditional values and throttles individual's spiritual development. But he does not clearly point out for whom he is carrying his holy crusade. In this regard Kenneth Allsop says: "When you ... try to specify who exactly of the population of Great Britain have the standards of decency and honesty which Osborne finds sickeningly lacking in the sections of society he has thrashed so often, difficulties arise."5

No doubt, Osborne does not impress one as a particularly thoughtful playwright, but he has been eminently successful in arousing anti-establishment passion. The episodic form of his plays is really a defect of construction, but fits in well with the peculiar genius of Osborne who is content "to fling down a few statements", as he says, and lets the audience feel the passion. His ego-centric heroes are always sure of their right of criticism, and their defeat, certainly for Osborne, signifies
the deficiency of the world. They are good rebels but not revolutionaries, who have the clear vision of a brave new world. Osborne's drama is significant as an authentic theatrical expression of the chaotic state of culture and is important, historically, not so much for visualising a fresh set of values as for presenting the peculiar strength of the protesting population. In this sense, Osborne is certainly a spokesman of the negative, nihilistic side of the new voice. His heroes never endeavour to amplify their vision of the alternative culture, exhaustive though they are in criticising contemporary cant and hypocrisy. A positive side of the new voice has been expounded by Arnold Wesker in his depiction of the working-class life and his advocacy for a working-class culture. But Osborne did not bring the working-class on the British stage, as the claim is sometimes made wrongly. James Porter in Look Back in Anger is always called Jimmy, a symptom of a curious form of inverted snobbery, rooted in the habit of the period. So John Russell Taylor is justified in calling him "an enormous cultural snob," enjoying only classics, traditional jazz, good books and the Observer. He voices the strength of protest of the educated post-war generation, not necessarily of the working-class, against the climate of insecurity and perplexity. Therefore, Osborne's theatre is an assertion of the right of protest, and indicates deep marks of fissure in the cultural structure of the country.

Osborne's Look Back in Anger is generally regarded as
a milestone in the post-war English theatre. Osborne broke into the theatre with what seemed an authentic picture of a post-war society. Here was really a turning point in the modern English theatre. In Jimmy Porter, the angry, almost hysterical, often self-pitying young man who finds society cruel and unjust and his own world a chaos, many of Osborne’s contemporaries seemed to find an image of their own lives. Jimmy is not merely an orphan of the upheaval of war, he is, or at least sees himself, as a victim of the change in English society. The understanding of the play operates on two levels — the anger and the protest which is the real unifying thread and life of the play, and the development of the story itself. At first glance, Jimmy’s pronouncements and vituperation seem purposeless, incoherent and even irrelevant, but slowly his outbursts take shape and life, and we comprehend them as the symptoms of a positive character in search of identity. The question that Look Back in Anger poses is whether Jimmy is wasting his energy, haranguing only Cliff, Alison, and Helena, who are not going to be stimulated into action. But since the stage is a platform, Jimmy is haranguing the audience. Osborne himself says in this regard, "I want to make people feel, to give them lessons in feeling." 7

Osborne’s Inadmissible Evidence (1964) is better than anything he has written since. Though it does not endeavour to break out of the proscenium convention, it does incorporate several stylistic experiments. It opens with a dream sequence which is almost expressionistic, but it reverts to naturalism for
a long scene set in a solicitor's office. It is a moving study of the failure of a man to make his mark either in his profession or in his personal relationship. Frederic Lumley's suggestion that Maitland's failure is not merely an individual one, but "it represents the failure of his generation, the failure of the Welfare state, the final collapse of his ideals not to accept, not to take over, the conventions of the present generation," is apt only as an understatement. Maitland is more a representative of the isolated soul in modern society than a citizen of the Welfare State. In Luther Osborne portrays a sense of physical and spiritual uncertainty, of self-torment, of debasement, the challenge to imperial authority, with an underhand admiration for it, and at the end the break-down into sentiment. A Portrait For Me is a quasi-historical study of a homosexual officer belonging to Austria. His Epitaph For George Dillon is brilliant play on a realistic contemporary theme, once again set in the shabbiest lower-middle-class setting. Thus, we can unhesitatingly remark that the theatre of John Osborne is not only defiant, it's core is inspired by a spirit of love, although the playwright takes every care to hide it even from himself. And Osborne's England is "a landscape of the imagination rather than of historical reality."

Arnold Wesker's special contribution to the British theatre lies in dramatising the working-class participation in the socialist movement of Britain, and in demonstrating a deep insight into the pathos of a political movement. The working-
class people had never appeared before the British play-goers, never talked politics, never preached social revolution. Wesker came closer than any other English dramatist to demonstrating that socialist realism which was not dogmatic formula but a uniquely powerful means of conveying sane theatrical emotion. Wesker's vision of a happy human brotherhood sharply contradicts the contemporary situation, and his is a drama of protest. But, however, Wesker does not put the blame on society, as does Osborne, for the disintegration, failure and loss of faith of the characters. And unlike Osborne, Wesker has the strength of positive conviction and that really imparts vigour and cohesion to his creative energy. Disarmingly simple in the treatment of themes and characters, his somewhat flat one dimensional world betrays an ignorance of the subtlety and complexity of human personality.

In the late fifties, the social realism of The Wesker Trilogy was widely admired. He deals earnestly with some important themes — Jewish working-class life, the nature of socialism and the cultural poverty of masses — but in retrospect his work looks naive and theatrically limited, however fresh its impact when it was first performed. Wesker is very much different from the Orthodox Marxist in his approach to the working-class problems, and, perhaps has something of the Fabian brand of socialism in him. A socialist writer generally calls for a proletarian revolution for doing away with the economic disparity in society. But Wesker takes an original approach to
the problem and calls for a proletarian cultural revolution among the working-class people.

The Wesker Trilogy is a significant exploration of the impact of the communist movement in Britain on a working-class family in the East London through two generations, from 1936-59. The first part of the trilogy, Chicken Soup With Barley was first performed at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, July 7, 1958. In this play Wesker concerns himself with the changing orientation of his characters towards communism over a period of twenty years. Roots (first presented at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, May 25, 1959) is an attempt to depict the self-realization of a Norfolk girl viz. Beatie Bryant. I Am Talking About Jerusalem (first performed at the Belgrade Theatre, Coventry, April 4, 1960) traces the failure of an experiment in craft socialism of a vaguely William Morris type in a rural setting and moves in time to the defeat of Labour Government in 1956.

Wesker's The Kitchen is about man and his relationship to his work. Their Very Own and Golden City grew out of, and is coloured by Wesker's failure with Centre 42 movement. The play is constructed out of a series of flash-forward scenes. Ronald Hayaman asked Wesker whether he regarded the flash-forwards as fantasy or reality, and Wesker replied, "We can't be uncertain about that. The flash-forwards are not fantasy. We recognise them, don't we?" But to me Wesker's flash-forwards appear to be confusing, and we can recognise and comprehend them up to the year we are in. It has aptly been observed that in Chips With
Everything Wesker is "beginning to tentatively and bashfully
grope his way towards deeper wells of emotion." The play deals
primarily with the social relationship between the ruler and the
ruled. In this play Wesker is not, as he himself says, "concerned
with scenery. In fact, I am working towards a reduction not only
of scenery, but of dialogue as well". The Friends, The Old Ones
and Love Letters on Blue Papers depend heavily on the drama of
approaching death — a fear that has been a source of incessant
trouble to humanity since the very commencement.

Wesker's most experimental play The Four Seasons is the
least political of his plays and the least conventionally
plotted. It illustrates the fact that individual anguish cannot
necessarily be avoided or cured by social adjustment. The
Journalists is about the poisonous human need to cut better men
down to our size. The Merchant is an attack on anti-semitism.
Critas shows the spiritual anguish of a 14th century nun who is
walled up in a cell by a village church. After three years she
begs to be released, but in vain. And as a consequence she goes
mad. Therefore, we can say that "without having much interest
either in style or in challenging the limitations of the medium,
Wesker has been important as a theatrical reformer."

John Arden is a major British playwright who is conscious of
the tragic tensions of the times, yet refusing to accept man's
defeat either as a political animal or as a citizen of the
universe. One of the decisive experiences for Arden, as he
himself tells in To Present the Pretence, was the 1950
Edinburgh festival production of Ben Jonson's *Fartholomew Fair* under George Devine's direction. Arden says, "the main impression I retain is of having actually been at a fair (rather than having seen a play about some fictional people at a fair)...." In 1960 Arden said:

> What I am deeply concerned with is the problem of translating the concrete life of today into terms of poetry that shall at the one time both illustrate that life and set it within the historical and legendary tradition of our culture.

In *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* and *Armstrong's Last Goodnight*, Arden was quite successful in making connections between historical event and contemporary life, and in both the plays his desire of writing in "terms of poetry" was satisfied.

The peculiar contribution of John Arden seems to be bringing on the British stage, with considerable success, the spacious, tolerant climate of the comedies to interpret the essentially tragic spirit of the modern world. Arden may be said to be the creator of a theatre—a theatre in which juxtaposition of opposite entities is as vital as the visualization of an historical continuity. The theatre of Arden does not, certainly, present a happy world, but there is a strong plea for accepting the world as it is and yet by implication other values are suggested. In most of his plays, forces of disorder and chaos are conquered by those of order and stability, but at the same time the playwright's secret compassion for the
agents of anarchy, harbingers as they are of the inevitable changes in the social structure, is a criticism of the status quo. *The Waters of Babylon, Live Like Pigs, The Happy Heaven* are his important plays first presented at the Royal Court Theatre.

Joe Orton is one of the most skilled practitioners of that particular type of comedy which is sometimes a little complacently categorised as "black comedy". His *Loot* (1965) is a tasteless but highly ingenious comedy arising out of the endless delays in disposing of a corpse. With *Loot*, Orton "opened a most unlikely vein for comedy and exploited it hilariously." I think that in *Loot*, Orton succeeds in finding his own voice and his own style, something he unsuccessfully endeavoured to achieve in his television play *The Good and Faithful Servant* (1964). His play *Entertaining Mr. Sloane* was produced in 1964 and *What the Butler Saw* in 1969. His preoccupation with incest and sexual ambiguity are evident in *Head to Toe* and in the film script *Up Against It*.

Tom Stoppard is fascinated by the nature of theatricality. He has proved to be more of an innovator in his radio plays and his one act plays for the stage than in his full length plays. Like Pinter he owes a lot to Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*. But whereas Beckett's originality as a dramatist depends partly on his ability to mint a vocabulary of theatrical images to express his poetic vision, Stoppard is less of a poet and less immune to the appeal of spectacular visual effects. Stoppard first made a name with *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) and further established his reputation with *Jumpers*. 
Edward Bond is undoubtedly a significant figure of an inventive period in modern British theatre. It is to be noted that the bulk of Bond's plays are historically or geographically distanced from present-day English life. Bond thinks that a dramatist need not always deal directly with present. In his view, "The past is also an institution owned by society."

Another aspect of Bond's theatre, which distinguishes him from writers like Wesker, is his facility with language. Katherine Worth refers to Bond's facility with language when she claims he has created a colloquial theatre that is also "visionary and poetic". Bond was considerably influenced by Brecht. Lear (1971) shifts the focus away from personal issues towards social and political issues, as did Brecht in Coriolanus. In A Man For All Seasons of Bond, the style is again Brechtian. However, Bond's first two plays, The Pope's Wedding and Saved cannot be called Brechtian in their unrealistic use of oriental history to make Marxist points, presenting familiar problems in an unfamiliar perspective.

Robert Bolt has also been stylistically influenced by Brecht, though the preoccupation, unlike bond's, is with personal relationship. Gentle Jack (produced 1963) is Bolt's most original play, not only in structure and style, but also in substance. The Critic and the Heart (produced 1957) was conventionally straightforward in its story-telling. In Flowering Cherry, which was later produced in 1957, Bolt endeavoured to escape from naturalism by changing some of the speeches with poetic prose and
by introducing unnatural effects. *A Man for All Seasons* was first presented at the Globe Theatre in 1960.

Like Robert Bolt, John Mortimer and Peter Shaffer have repeatedly endeavoured to move away from naturalism, and for both of them it has been like a woman they could neither marry nor abandon. John Mortimer has concentrated almost entirely on comedy. His first full length play, *The Wrong Side of the Park* (produced 1960) is most naturalistic than his pieces for radio and television, though it resembles them in depending on the elaboration of fantasies which do not appear to grow organically out of the characterization. In *Two Stars For Comfort* (produced 1962) and *The Judge* (produced 1967) representativeness is associated with the law. Peter Shaffer is a traditional playwright in the best sense of the term. His technique and plot are irremediably conventional, and his plays do not in any way attempt to interpret tension areas in the Welfare State, nor is he attracted by experimental techniques. Yet his claims to our consideration are undeniable for he has an instinctive sense of the theatre and ability to throw light on the infinite variety of human relationship. His play *Five Finger Exercise* was presented at the Comedy Theatre in 1958. His next venture is two one-act plays, *The Private Ear* and *The Private Eve* (first presented in a double paybill at the Globe Theatre, 1962). *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* was first presented by the National Theatre at Chichester in 1964.

Like few other English playwrights, David Storey regards
himself primarily as a novelist, and some of his plays are by-products of the novels. The Contrator (produced 1969) grew out of Radcliffe (published 1963). The play Life Class (produced 1974) is a variation on an incident in A Temporary Life (published 1973). The first two plays A Restoration of Arnold Middleton (produced 1967) and In Celebration (produced 1969), are straightforward in their story-telling. His next play Home (produced 1970), moves further away from realism and he uses avoidance of confrontation not as technique but as a theme. Arnold P. Hinchliffe points out that The Contractor can be "characterised as a light comedy with suggestions of a not quite realised drift beneath." The play seems to give working activities prominence over individuality and allows the substance of the plot be determined by the place.

Undoubtedly, Harold Pinter is the most original theatre talent of the new crop, although his vision has been considerably influenced by that of Beckett. Some thing of Beckett’s passion to probe the modern human situation has gone into Pinter and he might well be called a British Beckett. Pinter’s distinctive achievement in modern British theatre has been the domestication of the continental passion of existential attitude tailoring and acclimatizing the philosophy to the empirical, if not pragmatic, climate of the British Isles. It goes to the credit of Pinter that he has composed plays embodying the anxious search of identity of the modern man which had been exclusively the continental dramatic forte in the post-war period. Whereas other
dramatists are inclined to elaboration, drawing on all kinds of theatrical devices, Pinter remains austerely concentrated on problems of communication — how far a small group of people can convey anything to each other, by words or pregnant silences or gestures. His reputation was established by *The Caretaker* in 1950. *The Home Coming* was presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1965. *The Birthday Party* was presented at the Arts Theatre in 1958. *The Room* was first presented by the Drama Department of British University in 1957. It has been argued that Pinter "constantly violates the theatrical convention which makes us assume that characters are telling the truth unless clear indications are given that they are not." By doing so, I think, Pinter is providing us with the oblique tools to come to terms with our own inadequacy, accept our moral and spiritual cowardice, comprehend our misunderstanding.

Henry Livings's dramatic vision is clearly individual in the sense that he views human activities and behaviour as basically erratic when considered in isolation, but having purpose and meaning when they are visualised as a whole. Stupidity, human weakness, moral callousness and degradation form the substance of hilarious scenes in his plays. Nevertheless, a sense of moral seriousness impresses us as the total outcome. He is sharply critical of the Establishment and the authority, equally amused by the inadequacy of the little man, and in a series of episodic scenes focuses our attention on the farcical and the funny in life. His *Nil Carborundun* was presented at the Arts Theatre in
1962. **Stop it. Whoever You Are** was first presented at the Arts Theatre Club in 1961. His *Kelly's Eye* was first presented at the Royal Court Theatre in 1963.

David Mercer, unlike David Storey, has been more of an innovator on television than in the theatre. In fact, both Storey and Mercer got training at an arts school. However, Mercer is like Storey in being concerned simultaneously with psychological and social issues, but he focuses more tightly on individual behaviour. His *Duck Song*, which was produced in 1974 was stylistically adventurous. His two other plays, *Flint* and *After Haggerty*, were both premiered in 1970. *Belchard's Luck* was produced in 1966. Like Mercer, Peter Nicholas established his reputation as a television playwright before he had any success in the theatre, but unlike Mercer, his early stage plays are more experimental than his television plays. *A Day in the Death of Jeo Egg* was produced in 1967. *Forget-Me Not-Lane* was produced in 1971. *Cres Nous* was produced in 1974 and *Privates on Parade* was produced in 1977.

Charles Wood who is linguistically more alert and more inventive than most of his contemporaries, gives substance to his dramatic metaphors by fleshing out action with speech that always seems authentic. *Dingo* is by no means realistic. There is no coherent plot, characterization is minimal, identity unstable. *Prisoner and Escort* was the first in Cockade, a triple bill staged in 1963. Alan Ayckbourn cannot be ranked as an innovative playwright, though he has made some interesting experiments in
some of his comedies. His *Mr. Whatnot* was produced in 1969 and *Norman Conquests* in 1973.

II

It has aptly been argued that in many respects the contemporary English drama is about language. Words have in many ways become the focus. For Osborne and Wesker they remain a link at a time when social cohesiveness is in a state of collapse. To Wesker words are "bridges" to get safely from one place to another. Osborne feels that words are our last link with "God". Stoppard's approach is a different one. An antinomian world, a relativistic linguistic world, such as that proposed in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, consists only of opposing fictions, leaves little space for moral value. Stoppard acknowledges the link between language and power. Unlike Edward Bond, Stoppard confesses the coercive power even of his own work. The language evoked by William Howard Gass is "... the use of a language like a lover ... not the language of love, but the love of language, not matter but meaning, not what the tongue touches, but what it forms, not lips and nipples, but nouns and verbs." For Orton, language is hopelessly plastic, the source of a nerve-ending series of misunderstandings and deceptions. He detaches words from their context, allows them to collapse as their meaning fragments. With Pinter, expression is no longer the specular reflection of an emotion, nor the work of a thing: the mirror is slanted, and the expression, therefore, does not reflect the opposite and suitable emotion but the adjacent one,
Beckett expresses a sense of cultural paradox, a paradox implicit in the disjunction between language and action. In 1937 Beckett was proposing "literature of the un-word."

Writers like Pinter, Orton and Beckett suggest that language is exhausted and that words have been drained of meaning, but Sartre says, "If words are sick, it is up to us to cure them."

Caryl Churchill expresses an opinion quite different from that of Pinter, Orton and Beckett, which becomes quite clear from Light Shining in Buckinghamshire (1976), set in seventeenth-century England. In this play Churchill makes her characters sensitive to the language of power — the Norman language is shown being consciously employed to reinforce class division by linguistic means. Her interest in language goes beyond its social utility or its availability as an agent of power. In Traps (1977), Churchill creates a Mobius strip of language which has no reality outside of the theatre.

III

It is noteworthy that in the 1950s, the main significance attached to the theatre of Osborne, Wesker, Delaney and others was that it was political, a theatre of anger and revolt. This theatre has invigorated both mainstream and fringe theatre, film and television. Political playwrights tend to ignore subjects like sexual jealousy, the frustration of marriage, the agonies of divorce, ugliness, friendship, betrayal. They, on the other hand, concentrate on problems that might be remedied by social
reform or revolution. The rise of the socialist theatre was the most important development in Britain in the decade 1968-78. While some of the writers followed socialist principles; others like Caryl Churchill, John McGrath, John Arden, Trevor Griffiths and Edward Bond regard themselves as socialists. As a matter of fact, the growth of the socialist theatre in Britain corresponded with the revival of the left which was the product of the early 1970s. The number of socialist theatre groups increased from one in 1967 to eighteen in 1978. By 1978 David Edgar was lamenting the failure of the socialist theatre. Though the work of the socialist theatre has been impressive, it "remained at a remove from revolutionary organizations."

In the 1950s the working-class appeared in more dignified form — they had at least penetrated the English theatre as subject and artist. In 1920s this class had been excluded from theatre. The change seemed quite important. It was felt that the long-looked for consequences of 1944 Education Act had arrived. New writers like Wesker, Pinter and Osborne whose experience was new and whose subjects and methods were equally naive, had emerged. The first half of 1950s was a period of great acting. Stars like Edith Evans, Ashcroft, Olivier, Redgrave, Thorndike, Gielgud and Richardson selected suitable roles for themselves and created heroic and memorable moments. Thus in 1950 Gielgud could be seen at Stratford in Measure for Measure, and as Thomas Mandip in The Lady's Not For Burning. Ashcroft could be seen playing Viola in Twelfth Night at the Old
Vic, whilst Redgrave played Hamlet at Elsinore. These actors replaced a generation known for its sophisticated acting in comedies without serious intellectual comment.

It is to be noted that the year 1956 is seen as a landmark in the history of modern British theatre. In April 1956, the English Stage Company was opened at the Royal Court Theatre with George Devine as its artistic director and Tony Richardson as his associate. It was not only the year of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, it was also the year in which Brendan Behan's first play, *The Quare Fellow*, was produced at Stratford East by Joan Littlewood. Other productions by Joan Littlewood at Stratford East included Marlowe's *Edward II* and an adaptation of Hasek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*. In the same year Berliner Ensemble visited Britain. And in August, when the Berliner Ensemble commenced its session at the Palace Theatre, Brecht's *Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis* was seen in his own production, together with *Mutter Courage*, which he had co-directed with Erich Engel.

But the change which came about in the British theatre in the late 1950s do not, however, seem to have extended to the emergence of women writers. To be sure, Ann Jellicoe and Shelagh Delaney attracted some attention but neither have really sustained their early promise, and the latter owed a great deal to the admittedly female-dominated theatre Workshop at Stratford East. And it was in the 1970s that women writers of the calibre of Caryl Churchill, Pam Gems, Micheline Wander, Mary O’ Malley finally emerged. Of all the new women playwrights, Caryl
Churchill seems to be the most powerful and original, and she represents a clear change in European drama. Her plays are generally centred on a single image which provides the basic theme. This becomes quite clear from her radio play _Ants_, where the small insects provide a powerful image for human relations, human insignificance and cold-blooded cruelty. In _Light Shining in Buckinghamshire_, Chuchill uses an historical situation to illustrate current issues about human rights and democracy. In _Light Shining in Buckinghamshire_ and _Vinegar Tom_, we find in her a mature socialist writer with a personal style and deep interest in history and problems pertaining to women. Pam Gems is interested in examining the nature of the feminine sensibility, in a world in which public and private roles are in a state of flux and the reassuring of constricting boundaries which shape experience are in a state of collapse. Her characters in _Dusa, Fish, Stas and Vi_ (1976) appears to cover the whole range of possibilities which she feels are available to women — mother, sweetheart, prostitute, intellectual and neurotic. Mary O’ Malley’s _Once a Catholic_ (1977) is a satirical portrait of life in a convent in the early fifties.

IV

New dramatists appearing from time to time need new theatres and new shapes. A wider variety of theatre building might attract a wider and more varied type of audience. In the period 1910-1957 hardly any new theatres were constructed. No doubt, a site was purchased in 1937 for the construction of the National
Theatre. In 1946, both Houses of Parliament passed the National Theatre Bill allowing the Government to contribute up to one million pounds. The foundation stone was laid in 1951, but unluckily in 1952 it was decided that the National Theatre should occupy another and better place. The existing theatres, too, needed changes in theatrical conditions. Social relevance was hardly appropriate in buildings which stood as architectural reminders of an older, irrelevant kind of theatre. It is appreciable that since 1957, millions of pounds have been spent on new buildings, where production is no longer cramped by the shapes and rigidities that were dictated, during the Victorian and Edwardian periods by the relationship needed then between acting area and auditorium. Stephen Joseph argued that in building new theatres we should avoid proscenium arch stage. For him theatre-in-the-round was the most radical solution.

It is interesting to note that several new theatres were started from time to time. Many fringe groups were also formed. In April, 1956, the English Stage Company was opened at the Royal Court Theatre. Sunday-night productions without décor commenced at the Royal Court Theatre in 1957. The Chichester Festival Theatre, the first large theatre to be built in Britain with a thrust stage, was opened in July 1962, with Laurence Olivier as artistic director. The Mermaid, London's first large postwar theatre was opened in May 1959. The National Theatre was opened at the Old Vic in October 1963. Jim Haynes opened the Traverse Theatre Club in Edinburgh, and in 1968 he opened his Arts Lab in
Drury Lane. The Open Space Theatre in Tottenham Court Road opened under Charles Marowitz's direction in July 1968. And by the end of the year many new fringe groups had been formed, including Portable Theatre, Inter-Action, the Brighton Combination and Incubus. Inter-Action (together with Theatrescope) opened the Ambiance Lunch Hour Theatre Club. Theatres opened in 1970 included The Young Vic Theatre and Soho Theatre. In 1972, Half Moon Theatre was opened in the East End and Almost Free Theatre in Rupert Street, London. In the same year John McGrath founded 7:84 Theatre Company, its aim being to raise the consciousness of the working-class. Other groups formed in this year included the Hull Truck Company, the Common Stock Theatre Company, the Wakefield Tricycle Company, and Foco Novo. The Theatre at the Institute of Contemporary Arts was opened in the 1973, and in 1978, the Riverside Studio was opened in Hammersmith, with Peter Gill as artistic director.

V

Many influences from abroad — both Continental and American — affected the contemporary British theatre, and of these the influence of the plays and theories of the German Bertolt Brecht was strongly evident. John Arden, in particular has been heavily influenced by Brecht, not only in theatrical technique, but also in his sense of historical change. Arden's *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* (1950) owes something to Brecht's *Mutter Courage* (1938). Arden's *The Workhouse Donkey* (1964), is an elaborate, often very funny play about corrupt local politics in contemporary
England, using songs and dances in Brechtian manner. Brecht's 
Galileo (1955) may not improbably be considered the forerunner of 
Robert Bolt's A Man for All Seasons (1960), and of John Osborne's 
Luther (1961). Even Arnold Wesker in Chips With Everything 
successfully applies the Brechtian technique of division of action 
into short independent scenes. The director, Joan Littlewood too 
had been influenced by Brecht, and in 1955, at the Devon 
Festival, she had played the title role in the first English 
production of Mutter Courage, which she directed herself. In his 
original production of Bond's Lear at the Royal Court, Gaskill 
followed Brecht's Berliner Ensemble by creating locate through 
foreground object rather than background decor, and in the style 
of the groupings, lighting, costumes and overall visual economy. 
The influence of Brecht has proved to be greater than Beckett: 
not because of the slogans _ Epic Theatre, 
Alienation, Commitment _ but because the tendency over 
these last twenty years has been to shift the emphasis 
from actor to writer and finally to producer and Brecht 
has more to offer the producer than Beckett. 

The influence of the French theatre theoretian Antonin 
Artaud can be seen on Brook, Joan Littlewood and Barrault. Artaud 
wanted the director to become the true author of the dramatic 
event, taking responsibility both for all the non-verbal elements 
in the production and for the way text was spoken. He reminds us 
that theatre makes use of everything _ gestures, sounds, words, 
screams, light, darkness and that to limit drama to one medium,
language, is its ruin. Artaud said that the new theatre must:
Use human nervous magnetism to transcend the ordinary limits of art and language to realize actively — that is to say magically, in real terms — a sort of total creation, where man has only to resume his position between dreams and reality.

In *The Theatre and its Double* Artaud observed, "The theatre, an independent and autonomous art, must, in order to revive or simply to live, realize what differentiates it from text, pure speech, literature, and all other fixed and written means." Like Artaud, Brook has come to believe that all thought is physical, that an actor should be able to eliminate any gap between impulse and expression. Like Artaud, who used the Elizabethan theatre as a point of reference, Brook argues that words can no longer perform a central function as they did four hundred years ago. Thus during rehearsals for the Theatre of Cruelty season, actors were encouraged to make sounds that had nothing to do with words, and to use words for expression of something quite irrelevant to their normal meaning. Artaud's techniques have been applied in England to the theatre of ideas. Such a theatre was given impetus and respectability by the success of Joan Littlewood in *Oh, What a Lovely War* (1963). The role of the director prescribed by Artaud was performed by Joan Littlewood in *Oh, What a Lovely War*, which represents a turning point in the history of the British theatre. The influence of Artaud can be seen in the career of another producer like
Barrault. After four years with Dullin, Barrault emerged with *A utour d'une Mere* (1935) which concentrated on the power of the physical gesture.

But the British theatre in 1960s was more open to outside influence than it had been in the past. British directors travelled to and worked in Europe and America more frequently. The World Theatre season at the Aldwych brought major companies to London. Joseph Chaiken’s Open Theatre Company visited Britain in 1967, staging the American *Hurrah!* at the Royal Court Theatre. But it is to be noted that generally the English fringe groups have profited little from discoveries made by such American groups as Joseph Chaiken’s Open Theatre. Though Edward Albee has borrowed from T.S. Eliot and Harold Pinter, the British playwrights have taken little notice of the American example. On the fringe, though, we have had one-way traffic in the opposite direction. Off-Broadway is much older than its English counterpart. As an attempt to launch Off-Broadway type of theatre in London, Charles Marowitz in 1957, started a group called In-Stage. Ed Berman in 1968 started Inter-Action with the purpose of making drama more relevant to urban community. The contribution of Ed Berman and Jim Haynes in the development of the English fringe groups has been significant. They invited foreign companies which served as models for the English fringe groups. It was Jim Haynes who arranged for the 1967 visit of the company from the most influential Off-Broadway theatre, Ellen Steward’s Café La Mama. Soon there was a London La Mama running
workshop in what it called La Mama techniques. The Wherehouse Company was started by two Americans who had acted at the Café La Mama. During the very first year of the establishment of the Wherehouse Company, some of the actors left to form a separate group called the Freehold, under Nancy Meckler's direction. The techniques used by this group were very similar to those of New York directors. The company achieved its greatest success with its 1969-70 reworking of Sophocle's Antigone, doing particularly well with choruses.

VI

For a clear understanding of the state of the British theatre, the role of directors — their attitude towards particular writers, their handling of text — is to be taken into account. Joan Littlewood's contribution to the British Theatre has been as a splendid organiser and discoverer of new writers. She made a most strenuous and serious endeavour to create a theatre for the people. She was working-class by birth and anti-intellectual by disposition. In 1945 she formed her Theatre Workshop and in 1953 she moved it into the Theatre Royal, Stratford East. Her spirited and dedicated work made Theatre Workshop a nursery of young dramatists. Writers like Shelagh Delaney and Brendan Behan got their first foothold in the theatre due to her sure instinct. Her pioneering work, before the subsidised theatres was one of the first indications of the new sensibility in the British theatre. Many of the plays staged by her at Theatre Workshop's Theatre Royal, Stratford, have been
transferred to the West End with great success.

In 1956, two weeks after *Look Back in Anger*, Joan Littlewood and her Theatre Workshop produced Brendan Behen's *The Quare Fellow*. In 1957, she staged Henry Chapman's *You Won't Always Be on Top*. In 1958, she produced Brendan's *The Hostage* and Delaney's *A Taste of Honey*. In 1960, she directed Stephen Lewis's *Sparrers Can't Sing*. In 1973, she directed Peter Rankin's *So You Want to Be in Pictures*. Littlewood had already premiered *Mutter Courage* in 1955 in England, taking the leading role herself. She believed in the principle of collaboration and allowed actors to contribute creatively to a text. As she said:

> I do not believe in the supremacy of the director, designer, actor or even the writer. It is through collaboration that this knockout art of theatre survives and kicks... No one mind or imagination can foresee what a play will become until all the physical and intellectual stimuli which are crystallized in the poetry of the author, have been understood by a company, and then tried out in terms of mime, discussion and the precise music of grammar; words and movement allied and integrated.

She was always inviting the actors to rise up and take over the theatre. She put these principles of collaboration into practice with her production of *Oh, What a Lovely War* (1963). She avoided dogmatism and too much social preaching, producing a picture of folly, greed, heroism and stupidity which stressed the insanity
of war and the need for brotherhood.

It was Charles Marowitz who carried the germs of discontinuity from Joan Littlewood to Peter Brook. Brook is an outstanding producer poised uncertainly between interpreter and creator. At an early stage he achieved a reputation for being 'clever'. He knows too well that the credit of success of a play goes to the actors. His work is known for invention and visual excitement. He could turn a poor play into a wonder, but sometimes a good play interferes with his intentions, as in the case of Joan Littlewood. Such things could not happen when Lord Chamberlain ruled the theatre. In 1962, Brook was invited to become director of the Royal Shakespeare company. He accepted the offer on the condition that the company should subsidise experimental work to be carried on separately from the Stratford and Aldwych seasons. During the experimental season at the Arts Theatre in 1962, the company produced plays by Henry Livings, Rudkin, Giles Cooper, Boris Vian and Middleton. In 1964, the RSC's Theatre of Cruelty season was at the LAMDA Theatre, directed by Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz. In 1964, Brook's production of Peter Weiss's *Marat-Sade* was considered to be brilliant and exciting. In 1966, at the Aldwych the RSC's repertorie included Brook's play *U.S.* Brook produced Seneca's *Oedipus* at the National Theatre in 1968. He also founded the International Centre for Theatre Research in Paris in 1968.

George Devine (who died in February 1966) was one of the leading directors of England, associated with the Royal Court
Theatre. Right from the very commencement, the intention of George Devine was to make the Royal Court a theatre for writers, in sharp contrast to the theatre of commerce. As Devine says, "Ours is not to be a producer's theatre or an actor's theatre; it is a writer's theatre." Davine's original idea had been that there must be many writers in their forties willing to write for the stage, thus he worked to discover and help new writers. Nevertheless, under George Devine, the Royal Court supported three dramatists of stature — Osborne, Arden and Wesker. Devine always stressed the need for repairing the relationships between writers and theatre. In 1950, he produced Ben Jonson's Bartholomew Fair at the Edinburgh festival. In 1958 Ann Jellicoe co-directed with George Devine her play The Sport of My Mad Mother. In the same year Arden's Live Like Pigs was co-directed by George Devine and Anthony Page. In 1961, Devine directed Nigel Dennis's August for the People. When he retired from the Court, he summed up his tenure by saying that he had fought the commercial theatre and won.

John Dexter's way of working with writers is quite different. He at least agreed with the 'sit back and shut up' role of the author. During the American production of Wesker's The Merchant, Dexter made many unauthorised cuts in the text which made Wesker feel ashamed and angry. But Dexter's production of The Royal Hunt of the Sun on the thrust stage at Chichester, his use of sound effects, masks and mime, his spectacular realization of the Inca rituals, his stylization of
the massacre becomes inseparable from Peter Shaffer's scripting of the sequences. He directed most of the plays of Arnold Wesker, including the entire Wesker trilogy in 1960 at the Royal Court. In 1962, Osborne's *The Blood of the Bambergs* was directed by him. Dexter, along with William Gaskill, directed Armstrong's *Last Goodnight* in 1965. In 1966, Dexter directed Osborne's *A Bond Honoured* at the Old Vic, Peter Shaffer's *Equus* and Trevor Griffiths's *The Party* at the National Theatre.

Lindsay Anderson seems to be impressed by George Devine in so far as he believes in working partnership between the writer and the director. It was Anderson who brought David Storey to the Royal Court and later on directed most of his plays there. It is quite difficult to access the exact contribution of Anderson in a long and fruitful working partnership with David Storey. But the fact of the partnership itself is very significant both to an understanding of the workshop process in action at the Court and to an appreciation of George Devine's philosophy of production as an ensemble activity, where the writer is not ignored. In 1969, Anderson directed David Storey's *In Celebration* and *The Contractor*, and in 1971 *The Changing Room*. In *Home* Anderson-Storey partnership reached its peak because the play had optimum performance conditions. In 1959 Anderson directed Willis Hall's *The Long and the Short and the Tall.*

A working partnership (like that of Anderson with David Storey) existed between William Gaskill and Edward Bond. In 1957, Bond was invited to join the Writer's Group at the Royal
Court Theatre, then under the direction of William Gaskill. Bond's plays *Early Morning* and *Saved* were censored by the Lord Chamberlain, and when his powers were rescinded in 1968, Gaskill responded with the 'Edward Bond Season' at the Royal Court. The season opened in February and Jane Howell directed Bond's *Narrow Road to the Deep North* while William Gaskill directed *Early Morning* and *Saved*. In April, 1958, N.F. Simpson's *A Resounding Tinkle* was presented in a double bill with his *The Hole*, both directed by Gaskill. In September 1960, *The Happy Heaven* by John Arden and Margaretta D'Arcy was directed by Gaskill. In June 1970, Gaskill directed Howard Brenton's *Cheek* at the Theatre Upstairs.

Max Stafford-Clark, the artistic director of the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, was in favour of having long period of preparation with playwright, actors and musicians before presenting a play in public. In 1970, he resigned feeling that the three-weekly changeover system did not allow much time for preparation and formed a subsidiary company, the Traverse Theatre Workshop. In 1974, he founded the Joint Stock Company with William Gaskill and David Aukin. Clark and Gaskill have involved writers like David Hare, Berrie Keeffe, Heathcote Williams and Caryl Churchill in collaborative preparatory work with the actors. David Hare's *Fenshen* was produced in 1975 by the Joint Stock Company.

In the end, it can be safely said that both the English drama and theatre are in a healthy condition at present. But a
great many people who do not have convenient access to the London theatres, or to provincial repertories, may never or rarely have the opportunity of seeing the work of contemporary dramatists performed. The most widely available, and at the same time most transient, form of theatrical experience is provided by television drama. Some very able and admired dramatists have worked mostly in television, such as Dennis Potter, David Mercer and John Hopkins, and the scripts of their plays have been published. But in a television play the role of language is even more subsidiary than in much contemporary stage drama. Thus if the more creative energy goes into meeting the challenge of the television plays, as opposed to writing for the stage, drama will become still further removed from literature.
Notes


10. Arnold Wesker, "Second Interview" with Ronald Hayman in the latter's *Arnold Wesker*. Contemporary


