

What Ever Happened to in-yer-face theatre?

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“I have one ambition – to write a book that will hold good for
ten years afterwards.”

Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise*

- Tuesday, 23 February 1999; Brixton, south London; morning. A Victorian terraced house in a road with no trees. Inside, a cloud of acrid dust rises from the ground floor. Two workmen are demolishing the wall that separates the dining room from the living room. They sweat; they curse; they sing; they laugh. The floor is covered in plaster, wooden slats, torn paper and lots of dust. Dust hangs in the air. Upstairs, Aleks is hiding from the disruption. He is sitting at his desk. His partner Lia is on a train, travelling across the city to deliver a lecture at the University of East London. Suddenly, the phone rings. It's her. And she tells him that Sarah Kane is dead. She's just seen the playwright's photograph in the newspaper and read the story, straining to see over someone's shoulder. Aleks immediately runs out, buys a newspaper, then phones playwright Mark Ravenhill, a friend of Kane's. He gets in touch with Mel Kenyon, her agent. Yes, it's true: Kane, who suffered from depression for much of her life, has committed suicide. She is just twenty-eight years old. Her celebrity status, her central role in the history of contemporary British theatre, is attested by the obituaries published by all the major newspapers.

Aleks returns to his desk. He is completing a chapter on Kane for his first book, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*. It will be another year before he finishes the book, delivering the manuscript to Faber and Faber in March 2000, and yet another year before it is published in March 2001. In these two years, the brash phenomenon of in-yer-face theatre, which is a style and sensibility rather than a movement, loses

not only much of its intensity, but also becomes less central to the British New Writing scene. So Aleks's book, like much contemporary history, is inevitably something of a backward glance. In fact, as he acknowledges in the book, 1999 is the year in which the initial flash of this new drama first burnt out. As well as Kane's suicide, two other signs are indicative: Conor McPherson's *The Weir* transfers to the West End in October 1998 and runs for nearly two years at the Duke of York's Theatre. Its immense success suggests that the public's taste for shock has been superseded by a desire for a calmer aesthetic. By contrast, a rather nasty in-yer-face play, Irvine Welsh's *You'll Have Had Your Hole*, received deservedly terrible reviews when it opened at the West Yorkshire Playhouse in 1998 and on its arrival in London in early February 1999. So this month is a turning point. But the spirit of Kane remains alive.

By the time that Aleks gives a paper on Kane and in-yer-face theatre at the *In Yer Face: Sarah Kane and the New British Dramaturgy* conference in Grenoble, on 11 May 2001, it is clear that Kane has had a similar effect on British culture as John Osborne had in an earlier era.¹ Her debut play, *Blasted*, has had the same kind of cultural impact, although of course in social conditions where theatre is much less central to British culture, as *Look Back in Anger* had in 1956. Likewise, his central argument is that although New Writing has developed in a huge variety of ways, it has been led by a small avant-garde group of in-yer-face writers. This avant-garde takes a classic form: innovation, scandal and then retrenchment. But although by 2001 the new wave has broken, one of the reasons for this is that in-yer-face theatre has done its job – it has kicked down the door of complacency in the theatre, and, where it led, others have followed. In-yer-face writers give theatre the oxygen of publicity, and help inspire the diverse New Writing culture that has emerged since. For example, in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 12 October 2001, Michael Caines's review of Gregory Burke's debut ends like this: "*Gagarin Way* owes something to Pinter, in its combination of the existential and the absurd, and something to the in-yer-face theatre of the 1990s." Aleks makes a note. By 2002, New Writing – once a pariah – is sexy again.

- Saturday, 24 June 2000; Sloane Square, west London; evening. At the Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court, Aleks is at the special commemorative performance of Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. The audience includes family, colleagues and invited guests. As they file in, there's a tense air of reverence and expectation: will the play be any good? The Court has advertised it by using a minimalist black square for a poster, while Simon Kane, Sarah's brother and the man in charge of her literary estate, has in the media defended the piece as more than a thinly veiled suicide note. The performance begins with a long, agonising silence – broken as a mobile phone goes off. As its embarrassed owner struggles to silence it, Vince O'Connell – Kane's mentor and friend since her teenage years – lets out a long growl: "Arseholes." After this intervention, the performance continues. The emotional effect of the play is of a long conversation with a deeply disturbed person which culminates in a blaze of dark glory: "Remember the light and believe the light." At the end of the show, a window is opened and sounds from the summer street float into the theatre, a reminder that whatever happens inside your head, life carries on regardless.

Following this production, Ian Rickson, artistic director of the Royal Court, celebrates Kane's achievements by programming a season of her work in March-April 2001, a unique tribute to such a young writer. As the 2000s advance, the initial hostility that greeted Kane's work gradually turns into widespread critical appreciation not only of her achievement, but also of a whole host of new playwrights. And, although her plays are not put on in the UK as often as they are, for example, in Germany, France and the rest of Continental Europe, some significant productions are staged in her homeland. The effect of this exploration of her work means that Kane – who had once seemed to be a quintessential in-her-face playwright of the mid-1990s – is gradually beginning to look less like a typical British young writer, and more like an anomaly. As time passes, her work looks increasingly different from that of her 1990s contemporaries. She can now be seen as the exception to the rule that British playwrights are wedded to naturalism and social realism, and her work is best appreciated as part of an ongoing conversation

between two distinct traditions: English naturalism and Continental modernism. Because of her desire to ceaselessly experiment in form, Kane's work represents the incursion of Continental modernism into the normally placid world of British naturalism. Her contemporaries are thus older playwrights such as Edward Bond, Howard Barker, Caryl Churchill and Martin Crimp, as well as newer talents such as David Greig and David Harrower. The ever-inventive Phyllis Nagy is a true contemporary. In the long run, in-yer-face theatre merely reinforces elements of the British tradition; the innovators who break with this tradition are those writers who drink most deeply of Continental influences.

But there is little doubt about Kane's influence. She soon becomes a poster girl for any style of powerful playwriting that contains explicit sex and violence. For example, in September 2000, Aleks looks at a press release about Holly Baxter Baine – whose *Good-bye Roy* is part of the Royal Court's *Exposure* season of young writers – and she says that her favourite playwrights are Bertolt Brecht and Sarah Kane. Baine is just fifteen years old. Soon, British stages are spattered with images derived from Kane: in February 2003, the final stage image of debbie tucker green's *Dirty Butterfly* – a damaged young woman with blood running down her legs – is a powerful echo of Cate's last appearance in *Blasted*. More obscurely, the opening scene of Kevin Elyot's *Forty Winks* (2004) features a hotel room with a closed bathroom that conceals a secret visitor, surely another reference to the bathroom in *Blasted*. A typical example of Kane's influence is Kaite O'Reilly's *Peeling* (2002). It's about three female actors in a postmodernist production of Euripides's *The Trojan Women*. At one point, there's a litany of horrors: each of the three says, "Fire"; "Smoke"; "Pestilence" – then they all declare: "Men". The characteristics of war are: "Woman's body as battlefield"; "Rape as a war tactic"; "Mutilation as a reminder". As he watches this production at the Soho theatre, Aleks is struck by these echoes of *Blasted*, which are also evidence of the way that the experience of the Bosnian (Muslim) wars haunts the European imagination.

• Saturday, 7 September 2002; Bristol; afternoon. In a lecture hall at the University of the West of England, Aleks is giving a keynote speech, “In-Yer-Face and After: Reflections on New Writing in the 1990s” at the *In-Yer-Face? British Drama in the 1990s* conference.² Eighteen months after the book’s publication, in-yer-face is flavour of the month among academics. In the Q&A session after the keynote, the academic Steve Barfield stands up and remarks that it is odd that so far in this conference no one has mentioned race (a staple subject at most academic conferences). Yes, he has a point. One of the blind spots of *In-Yer-Face Theatre* is race: the book is overwhelmingly paleface. Aleks feels that he has missed a trick by not including Roy Williams, a black British playwright who began by exploring the heritage of his mother’s Caribbean background in plays such as *The No-Boys Cricket Club* (1996), but who then wrote some very strong plays about race in contemporary Britain: *Lift Off* (1999) and then *Clubland* (2001). Staged by the Royal Court, they drank deep of the in-yer-face aesthetic. By 2002, when Williams’s play *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* is staged in a temporary studio space at the National Theatre, it is clear that a major new playwright has arrived. And he is not alone.

During the 1990s black and Asian companies such as Talawa, Tara and Tamasha did good work in developing writers, and thus prepared the ground for the explosion of black and Asian plays in the 2000s: beneficiaries include not only Roy Williams but also Tanika Gupta, who begins by writing about her Bengali background and then turns her attention to contemporary Britain. Her work, from *Sanctuary* and *Inside Out* (both 2002) to *Sugar Mummies* (2006) and *White Boy* (2007) has moments of emotional ferocity that are recognisably in-yer-face. But she writes in a variety of styles. Her *Gladiator Games* (2005), for example, mixes verbatim theatre techniques with imaginative reconstructions of real events. Elsewhere, the huge success of actor-turned-playwright Ayub Khan Din’s debut, *East Is East* (1996), which is made into a film, is a potent reminder of the popularity of stories about British-Asian culture. Aleks also remembers getting an email from Parv Bancil soon after his book was published: what about Asian writers, he

asks, and brings his play *Crazy Horse* (1997) to the critic's attention. Increasingly, the fact that *In-Yer-Face Theatre* only makes passing references to new writers such as Williams and Gupta looks like a freak spasm of myopia.

In the 2000s, several new black and Asian playwrights enter the stage. New Labour is clearly good news for ethnic diversity in the arts. At the National, and promoted by this flagship's artistic director Nick Hytner, Kwame Kwei-Armagh writes a trilogy of plays about the black British experience, starting with *Elmina's Kitchen* in 2003. At the Royal Court, young playwrights Bola Agbaje, Alia Bano and Rachel De-lahay have a strong impact. Elsewhere, Oladipo Agoluaje, Michael Bhim, Shan Khan, Ash Kotak, Cosh Omar, Levi David Addai, Ishy Din, Hassan Abdulrazzak, Atiha Sen Gupta and Lolita Chakrabarti all make their mark. It would be easy to name another twenty. Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's play, *Behzti* (2004) – about sexual abuse in a Sikh temple – is arguably the most controversial play of the new decade. A lot of the work produced by these writers is set in gritty urban locations and its frankness about sex and violence, and the emotional costs of neglect, abuse and poverty, owes something to the tradition of in-yer-face theatre. But this theatre sensibility is only one aspect of their work.

- Wednesday, 5 May 2004; Deptford, south London; evening. At Goldsmiths College, University of London, playwright Mark Ravenhill is giving the *Marjorie Francis Lecture*.³ His title is “A Tear in the Fabric: the James Bulger Murder and New Theatre Writing in the 1990s”, and, hunching slightly over the lectern in the darkened hall, he offers a compelling account of his gradual understanding of how his own work, and that of his peers, was affected by a brutal tragedy. The case is that of toddler Jamie Bulger, who was abducted and killed by two ten-year-old boys, Robert Thompson and Jon Venables, in Bootle, Merseyside, in February 1993. At the time, media images of the CCTV footage of the boys taking the toddler from a shopping mall imprinted themselves on the national consciousness. But Ravenhill says that he forgot about the case until he met another writer, who mentioned it. Then:

“A penny drops. I made my first attempt at writing a play shortly after the murder of Jamie Bulger. And it was a very direct – too direct – attempt to write about the murder. In the play – a one-act play which I directed for a few performances at the pub theatre the Man in the Moon – a young girl snatches a child from a shopping centre and murders it.” As Aleks listens, Ravenhill’s words drift through his mind: “It was the winter of 1993 that I took my first faltering step as a playwright. It was the time of the trial of Venables and Thompson. And suddenly I see my own personal narrative very clearly, in a way that I never did before.” Ravenhill asks himself: “How could I have never spotted before that I was someone who had never written a play until the murder of James? And it was the Bulger murder that prompted me to write? And that I’ve been writing ever since the murder. This now seems textbook clear and yet it’s never struck me in nearly 10 years.”

Perhaps the most interesting passage is the one beginning: “This fascinates me. The way we often fail to spot even the most obvious links in our own narratives until way after the event. And presumably there are plenty that we miss altogether – stuff that’s obvious to anyone else piecing together our story. And now here I was almost ten years later spotting a very obvious link: before the murder of James Bulger I was someone who thought about writing, who liked the idea of writing, who always meant to get around to writing something – but who never actually wrote. And it was feeling the need to write about the murder – not the actual murder event, but the child who takes a child, the mother who loses a child – that finally made me sit down and write. And since I was dissatisfied with that piece then I had to keep on writing – circling around a prey that I couldn’t quite identify. A prey that wasn’t quite the murder of James Bulger but more like the feeling inside me – and the people around me – that the murder engendered.”

Fascinating as this is for the insight it gives into Ravenhill’s practice, it has wider ramifications: “I wonder if I was alone? I doubt it. I wonder how many other people there were who started to write with that CCTV picture of the boy led away somewhere in their head?” Finally, he widens his view: “How many of the young

British playwrights of the 1990s – the so-called in-yer-face playwrights – were driven, consciously or unconsciously, by that moment? I can see now, it was the murder of James Bulger pushed me into writing. Somehow now I felt that the existing plays just weren't right, that they wouldn't *do* any more. Not so much that they weren't any good – there were plenty of older writers' work that I admired. But that something had shifted, that a tear in the fabric had happened when Venables and Thompson took hold of Bulger's hand. It wasn't that I suddenly felt that I could write better than a previous generation. It was that I wanted to, suddenly felt the need to, try to write differently, write within the fracture that happened to me – and I think to the society around me – in 1993. And I would guess – having learnt that none of my experiences in life are unique – that this must be something that previous generations of writers have experienced. There's a kind of continuum of great plays that you love, that you wish you'd written, that you know you can never write – and then something happens, you hear a tear – and suddenly it seems necessary to write new plays – and find out later how good or bad they are."

Listening to this lecture, Aleks realises not only how images of threatened children abound in Ravenhill's work, but also how they have become a commonplace in many other new plays in the 1990s. He also remembers another aspect of the case: when in November 1993 the judge in the trial of the perpetrators attempted to explain the reasons for the murder he speculated that the boys had been exposed to a violent video, *Child's Play 3*. This then created a media storm which is the cultural context for British theatre in the mid-1990s. The Bulger murder resulted in calls for the censorship of films, of television and of art works, and this lasted long enough to be the immediate background to the media uproar over *Blasted*. It was part of the same phenomenon. So Aleks concludes that without this killing, there might have been no fuss about *Blasted* and maybe no *Shopping and F***ing*. Without this unpredictable murder, the theatre history of the 1990s might have been very different.

- Friday, 8 July 2005; Covent Garden, central London; afternoon. In a small, airless room at the Theatre Museum, Aleks is interviewing playwright Dennis Kelly about his new play *Osama the Hero*. It is the day after the 7/7 London Underground bombings, and they discuss the atmosphere of terror and the culture of fear in the city. The compressed fury of Kelly's work feels like it's coming from the same emotional place as the plays of Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson and Mark Ravenhill. His debut, *Debris*, was staged in 2003, and for Aleks this play, with its bizarre Crucicide opening, is a stunning mixture of in-yer-face extremity with an added twist of surrealism. Now, five years into the millennium, the spirit of in-yer-face theatre lives on but it marches hand-in-hand with other sensibilities. There is another playwright whose work is fuelled by a similar fiery passion – Debbie Tucker Green. Aleks interviews her in April 2003 for an article in the *Independent* and although she is hostile to journalists, she does talk about her influences: black writers and singers such as Ntozake Shange, Louise Bennett, Bob Marley and Beverley Knight. With their gut-felt intensity, both Kelly and Tucker Green are the inheritors of the in-yer-face mantle. But neither is completely constrained by this style.

The combined shock waves from 9/11 and 7/7 change not only the political world, but the cultural one too. Very soon into the new millennium, images of anal rape, drug taking and random violence are less interesting than political plays, verbatim accounts of social injustice and satire. The regular fare of 1990s plays about “me and my mates”, highly emotional flatshare dramas about middle-class twentysomethings or working-class crims, are replaced by a variety of other styles as playwrights rediscover not only public politics, but also the family, the history play and the adaptation of popular novels. In-yer-face theatre soon becomes marginalised as just one sensibility among many others. As New Labour begins to fund theatres all over the country more generously than ever before, hundreds of new plays are staged. And this profusion of dramas is both varied and explicitly political. Here the galvanising force is war, especially the War in Iraq. Examples include David Hare's *Stuff Happens* (2004), the Tricycle Theatre's *Justifying War* (2003), which

dramatises the Hutton Inquiry before it has even finished, and its *Guantanamo: Honor Bound to Defend Freedom* (2004), by Gillian Slovo and Victoria Brittain, which transfers to London's West End. During the attack on Iraq in 2003, Justin Butcher's *The Madness of George Dubya* transfers from the fringe to the Arts Theatre. All through the hot summer of 2003, the Royal Court and the National, by staging readings and other events, raise their voices in protest against war. Inevitably, the experience of war and terror creates a plethora of artistic responses.

- Tuesday, 11 April 2006; Victoria, central London; evening. Sitting in a Victoria Line underground train on the way to the opening night of Scottish playwright Simon Farquhar's *Rainbow Kiss* at the Royal Court, Aleks is reading Ian McEwan's 2003 novel *Saturday*. In this book, Henry, the brain-surgeon hero, finds himself with his family after an unpleasant incident: "There's an air of unnatural festivity around the table, of wild release which reminds Henry of a family outing to the theatre the previous year – an evening of bloody and startling atrocities at the Royal Court." Good news for the Court's public image: the home of British New Writing appears as a thrilling venue that generates cultural excitement. But however true this might have been in the glory years of in-yer-face theatre in the mid-1990s, by 2006 it feels a bit outdated. That evening, Aleks is amused to read in the playtext of *Rainbow Kiss* that the story was originally called *Fuck Off*, but that its title was changed because it "was in danger of causing the play to be misperceived". Yeah, right. It is hard to resist raising a sceptical eyebrow: this venue is no stranger to expletive-rich titles, a fact so obvious that it is even parodied in Nicholas Craig's *I, An Actor*, a spoof memoir in which the protagonist talks of "wading through a sea of syringes and crème fraiche as I did in *Fist F***ing* at the Royal Court". The asterisks are a nice touch.

When playwright Simon Stephens meets Aleks later in the month, on 27 April, the day after his *Motortown* opens at the Royal Court – "an evening of bloody and startling atrocities" indeed – to do an interview about the play, he comments that many of the

emerging young generation of 2000s playwrights are consciously writing against the influence of Sarah Kane. He should know: he has been tutor of the Royal Court Young Writers group from 2001 to 2005 so he's seen many examples of their work. Already it is clear that playwriting has moved away from the extremism of in-yer-face shockers and now explores a much more varied landscape: a couple of weeks previously, David Grieg's RSC production *The American Pilot* visits London and Enda Walsh's *Chatroom* is at the National a bit before that. From Scotland and Ireland, there's a real pull to make more theatrically exciting plays. Despite the fact that whenever he travels abroad, Aleks sees posters for the work of Kane and Mark Ravenhill everywhere on city walls, the New Writing scene in Britain has greatly diversified.

And so have its audiences. The witnesses of the first examples of in-yer-face theatre experienced this theatrical sensibility in small studio spaces where physical intimacy magnified the intensity of events on stage. Typically, an in-yer-face play was 90 minutes long, fast in tempo as well as hot in temperature. Although the shock of the first performances is well attested, audiences soon became habituated to this kind of extreme theatre. Rapidly, jokes about it became commonplace: if a show had no anal rape, no physical mutilation and no bad language, patrons were advised to ask for their money back! But although the core audiences for in-yer-face theatre were unshockable, the more mainstream audiences in the West End sometimes reacted differently. Tom Stoppard's *Rock 'N' Roll* (2006), for example, includes a speech from Eleanor, who's terminally ill, which floors her younger rival: "And, Lenka, don't try to shag my husband till I'm dead, or I'll stick the art of motor-cycle maintenance up your rancid cunt." At the Royal Court, such lines are mutely accepted. During the play's West End transfer, the line provokes a gasp, quickly followed by a palpable wave of sympathy for Eleanor. Similar differences apply to racial attitudes: in Tanika Gupta's *Sugar Mummies* (2006), a play about female sex tourism set in the West Indies, the scene in which a privileged white woman whips an impoverished black man is experienced by a white audience as slightly uncomfortable, but by a black audience as absolutely

outrageous. As Gupta remembers, the “predominantly black audience changed the meaning of the play”. Watching Debbie Tucker Green’s *Random* (2008), about an unprovoked knife attack, Aleks is struck by the black youth in the audience: at first, they take every opportunity to whoop and shout, but by the end of this 50-minute piece they are quiet with sadness. By the late 2000s, representations of sex and violence are less disturbing to many audiences than images of segregated communities. *Behzti* is the most obvious example, but there are others: in David Edgar’s state-of-the-nation drama *Playing with Fire* (2005), the strongest moment is wordless – the Muslim Fazal’s blunt denial of the outstretched hands of two women, signaling a rejection of compromise. And if audiences might seem to be unshockable, they can still be disturbed: another good example is Dennis Kelly’s *Taking Care of Baby* (2007), a parody of verbatim drama, after which many spectators couldn’t believe that the playwright had fooled them. Fiction retains the power to confuse as well as enlighten.

- 11 February 2009; South Bank, central London; evening. Aleks is at the press night of Richard Bean’s *England People Very Nice* with his partner Lia. It’s a panoramic epic about migration and its images of various ethnic groups play a dangerous game with racial and cultural stereotypes in a way that is both humorous and repellent. Despite the controversy about its bad taste, and voluble public protests about its racism, the play is immensely successful and its run on the largest stage of the National Theatre is extended. And Bean’s success on this stage, like that of David Eldridge’s *Market Boy* (2006), also represents the success of the Monsterists, a group of playwrights (including both Bean and Eldridge) who have campaigned for access to the largest stages of the land. For a while these plays seem to symbolize the new confidence and ambition of British playwrights. Yes, the contours of New Writing are very different.

For a start, new women playwrights are now both commercially successful as well as more numerous than ever before. If they are reluctant to experiment with form – a clear difference

from their sisters in the 1980s – the 2000s are full of their successes: Charlotte Jones's *Humble Boy* (2001) is frequently revived and so is Bryony Lavery's *Frozen* (1998); Moira Buffini's *Dinner* (2002), with Harriet Walter, has a West End transfer, then Laura Wade's *Posh* (2010) follows suit and is made into a film. Polly Stenham's *That Face* (2007), April de Angelis's *Jumpy* (2011) and Moira Buffini's *Handbagged* (2013) all get successful commercial transfers. In 2008, Rebecca Lenkiewicz becomes the first living female playwright to have a drama, *Her Naked Skin*, on the main stage at the National. Five years later, Lucy Kirkwood's *Chimerica* (2013) wins many awards. Other notable names include Anya Reiss, Lucy Prebble, Stella Feehily and Nina Raine. It would be easy to list another thirty.

As Harold Pinter falls silent, the old guard of New Writing is led by Caryl Churchill (from *Far Away* to *Love and Information*), David Hare (from *My Zinc Bed* to *South Downs*), David Edgar (from *The Prisoner's Dilemma* to *If Only*) and Howard Brenton (a whole series of history plays including the popular *Anne Boleyn*). Alan Bennett pens *The History Boys* (2004), which successfully transfers to the West End and is then filmed. Michael Frayn gets plaudits for *Democracy* (2003). Tom Stoppard keeps writing. Crip continues to experiment with form (*Fewer Emergencies* to *In the Republic of Happiness*). The list could be lengthened indefinitely. New boys are led by prolific playwrights such as Richard Bean and Simon Stephens, who achieve their biggest successes with adaptations: *One Man, Two Guvnors* from Goldoni and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* from Mark Haddon (both are West End hits). *War Horse* (2007), another great National Theatre transfer, is scripted by Nick Stafford. Cutting-edge playwrights also turn to writing musicals: *Matilda the Musical* (2010) by Dennis Kelly, *Once* (2011) by Enda Walsh and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2013) by David Grieg. The most original is Alecky Blythe's *London Road* (2011), a verbatim musical about the street in Ipswich where a serial killer lived. These phenomena go hand in hand with a new wave of writers such as Mike Bartlett, Nick Payne, Alexi Kaye Campbell, James Graham, Steve Waters, Duncan Macmillan and Jack Thorne. Once again,

many are missing from this list. It's an exciting and prolific time and they write in a huge variety of styles.

By now, Aleks is working on *Rewriting the Nation*, which opens with the observation that New Writing is everywhere. Everywhere, you can watch plays that are examples of New Writing; everywhere, you can meet New Writers; everywhere there are New Writing festivals. Every year, more than a million tickets are sold for new plays. In fact, there is a deluge of the new. And the new bears the stamp of the contemporary. Everyone, from playwrights to artistic directors, wants to be of the moment. Towards the end of that first decade of the new millennium, Aleks makes a quick calculation and concludes that 3000 new plays have been staged in the past decade. He arrives at this figure by multiplying the number of weeks in a year (50) by the number of new plays he sees in London every week (2), then by the number of fringe plays he doesn't see (2), and then by the number of new plays staged outside of London (2). Fifty times six equals three hundred. This times ten is 3000 for the decade. This is the age of abundant New Writing. In-yer-face theatre is becoming a distant memory.

- Friday, 10 June 2011; Brixton, south London; morning. At his desk Aleks is working on the final draft of an "Afterword" to his book on *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s; Voices, Documents, New Interpretations*. Much of "Chapter One" has already given some new interpretations of British New Writing in the 1990s. What new perspectives can he now offer in the book's final pages? Three points suggest themselves:

- 1) Older creatives. Most accounts of New Writing in the 1990s stress the cult of youth. In many reviews, the age of new playwrights is given and their precocity is stressed. And this is typical of a wider culture in which youth is valued more than age. In reality the most influential playwrights of the 1990s were older hands: Harold Pinter, Edward Bond, Caryl Churchill, Steven Berkoff and Martin Crimp. Doug Lucie and Terry Johnson produced better work than most of the highly-hyped Royal Court brat pack. Crimp's 1993 play *The Treatment* anticipated and influenced the work of the in-yer-face

generation. Older writers might be less news-worthy, but they often produce better plays. In the 2000s, two of the most important playwrights are Richard Bean and Simon Stephens, who came to playwriting comparatively late in life.

2) Gentler intensities. Many successful 1990s plays, such as Diane Samuels's *Kindertransport* (1993), did not fit the in-yer-face brand. Among other things, the exclusion of such works, which were often written by women, tends to emphasize the laddishness of in-yer-face playwriting and its central theme of the crisis of masculinity. Some highly significant plays – such as Jonathan Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* (1993) and Kevin Elyot's *My Night with Reg* (1994) – had little to do with overt fury. Similarly, writers such as Billy Roche and Robert Holman were as important in the long run as Anthony Neilson and Philip Ridley. At its worst, a concept such as in-yer-face theatre downgrades those writers who have worked in a variety of styles or whose work is only partly touched by this sensibility. Finally, it prefers women writers – led by Sarah Kane – who don't accept being labelled as feminists to those who do.

3) Scottish migrants. The story of New Writing in the 1990s is frequently told as a London tale. You can plot it all on a tube map: There's Sloane Square, there's Shepherd's Bush, there's Swiss Cottage, and there's Waterloo and Oxford Circus. Okay, let's take a trip to Stratford, or Kilburn, or Highbury and Islington; oh, don't forget to pop down to Hammersmith or Earl's Court. But you could just as easily upend this cultural perspective and tell the story from the point of view of Edinburgh. From the north, looking south, the key figure is Ian Brown at the Traverse Theatre: he seeks out and finds new writers from Canada and the USA, namely Brad Fraser and Tracy Letts in the late 1980s. He supports Anthony Neilson, who pioneers experiential theatre. But the Scottish influence runs deeper still. *Trainspotting* is an Edinburgh story. Sarah Kane was crucially influenced by Jeremy Weller, whose work she saw at the Edinburgh Festival. The New Writing boom of the 1990s began in Scotland, and continued to develop there: just think of David Greig and David Harrower. You could easily name a dozen more Scottish playwrights. As far as London is concerned, the 1990s revival of New Writing was the result of a Scottish invasion.

• Wednesday, 12 October 2011; Ashford, Kent; morning. On the Eurostar train from London to Paris, on the way to Rennes, Aleks is looking forward to the *Processus mémoriels et geste créateur dans les arts du spectacle* conference at Rennes 2 University. His keynote is an overview titled “From Disney to Enron: British New Writing for the Theatre in the 1990s and 2000s”. He brings a copy of his book – which has just been translated into French by Nicolas Boileau and Delphine Lemmonier-TeXier – with him, and to pass the time he idly flicks through its pages.⁴ The train rushes through the autumn countryside.

The journey is long and leisurely so it’s a good moment to think about all those in-yer-face playwrights that Aleks wrote about in 2000. What happened to the Class of 1999? Of the Big Three – Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson and Mark Ravenhill – there is no doubt about their continuing presence on the British theatre scene. In academia, the writing of articles about Kane gradually becomes a cottage industry and there are some good revivals of her work. Her friend Anthony Neilson continues to write and direct experiential drama, such as the shocking *Stitching* (2002), which portrayed the psychological hell of one young couple, whose child is killed in an accident, by means of a fragmented theatre form and taboo-breaking content. This play is recognisably an example of experiential theatre. But, in the mid-2000s, this playwright takes a new direction, a turn towards more surrealistic, anti-realist or absurdist ways of staging subjective reality. Two superb plays, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2004) and *Realism* (2006) show his characteristic interest in subjective, sometimes extreme, states of mind. With the Royal Shakespeare Company he also becomes more of a theatre-maker than a simple playwright, directing and devising rather than just writing texts.

In 2000, photographer Lisa Fleming takes some portraits of writers at the Royal Court, focusing on their hands rather than their faces. Neilson’s photograph shows a hand crushing a raw egg, which drips through his fingers. When it comes to Ravenhill’s turn, he empties his pockets and the picture shows him holding a petty cash voucher and some medication (he’s HIV Positive). It’s a

characteristically wry image for a writer whose career developed with enormous success in the 2000s. After arriving at the National, where *Mother Clap's Molly House* is directed by the flagship's newly appointed artistic director Nicholas Hytner in 2001, he soon becomes an associate of the theatre and an outspoken advocate of New Writing, penning provocative journalistic pieces as well as helping younger writers. For the National's *Connections* festival of youth theatre, Ravenhill writes *Totally Over You* (2003) and *Citizenship* (2005), two plays which engage with teenage concerns. He makes his acting debut in his own *Product* (2005), a satirical monologue about how Hollywood movies create images of an alien Other, and works with Frantic Assembly on *pool (no water)* in 2006, where the text, as in Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* and Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*, has no character names. His most impressive play is *The Cut* (2006), whose Donmar production stars Sir Ian McKellen. He writes pantomimes (*Dick Whittington and His Cat*), an epic play cycle (*Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat*), collaborates with seventy-year-old drag icon Bette Bourne, and adapts Terry Pratchett's novel *Nation* for the National. Then he becomes an Associate of the Royal Shakespeare Company. Of all the 1990s playwrights his is the most varied journey.

By contrast with this variety, Philip Ridley remains something of an outsider, a polymath who is as much a visual artist as a poet of the theatre. *Vincent River* (2000) is followed by a trilogy of plays on the subject of brotherly love: *Mercury Fur* (2005), *Leaves of Glass* (2007) and *Piranah Heights* (2008). Likewise, his youth play *Moonfleece* (2004) revisits the relationship between two brothers. But his masterpiece is *Mercury Fur*, an in-yer-face shocker which shows that his ability to provoke remains undiminished – it's a dystopic sci-fi story about a future in which the government controls the population by feeding them hallucinogenic butterflies, bombing cities, and where rich men buy perverted sex acts from impoverished child gangs. The shock reactions that greet *Mercury Fur* are reminiscent of the uproar over *Blasted*. Ridley's publisher, Faber, refuses to publish the playtext because of its explicit language, and some critics are vitriolic in their condemnation of the playwright.

Ridley also creates the *Storyteller Sequence* for the National's *Connections* festival of youth theatre: *Sparkleshark* (1997), *Fairytaleheart* (1998), *Brokenville* (2003), *Moonfleece* (2004) and *Karamazoo* (2004). His latest plays, *Tender Napalm* (2011) and *Dark Vanilla Jungle* (2013), explore new territories both theatrically and psychologically. He is still shocking after all these years.

In the 2000s, 1990s playwrights such as Joe Penhall and David Eldridge become major figures, moving on quickly from their shocking debuts. Penhall confidently steps into the mainstream with *Blue/Orange* (2000), one of the most revived plays of the decade. Without abandoning theatre, he then writes television and movie adaptations, most notably *The Road* (2009) from Cormac McCarthy's novel. Meanwhile, Eldridge becomes one of the most careful and delicate of naturalistic writers, whose subject is everyday relationships and everyday emotions. He also moves confidently across the theatrical territory, from writing a version of the non-naturalistic *Festen* (2004) to adapting Ibsen's *Wild Duck* (2005). He collaborates with Robert Holman and Simon Stephens on *A Thousand Stars Explode in the Sky* (2010). As well as his play for the National, *Market Boy* (2006), he writes *In Basildon* (2012) for the Royal Court, and he continues to agitate for better conditions for playwrights.

Other Heavy Hitters include Jez Butterworth, who writes a handful of plays culminating in the phenomenal *Jerusalem* (2009), praised by many as the best new play of the decade. Likewise Martin McDonagh writes the flamboyantly violent *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* (2001) and *The Pillowman* (2003), which are both already modern classics. Although Butterworth flirts with film, McDonagh increasingly becomes involved with this medium (from *In Bruges* to *Seven Psychopaths*) at the expense of his stage work. Likewise, Patrick Marber abandons the stage to work in film (from *Closer* to *Notes on a Scandal*). Similarly, the Americans such as Phyllis Nagy and Tracy Letts move on. Letts, who writes *August: Osage County* (2007), wins the Pulitzer Prize and has this play filmed. Nagy moves to the United States and works in film (*Mrs Harris*). More parochially, the stage version of Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting* is followed by stage

versions, and films, of his other books, most notably *Filth*, but the public soon tire of endless repetitions of his sordid vision of the world.

Several of the playwrights who showed promise in the 1990s must now be numbered in the ranks of the Disappeared. Rebecca Prichard and Judy Upton are now lost to view. Naomi Wallace disappears from the London stage. Che Walker has focused on working as a director, and didn't make a playwriting comeback until 2003, when his *Flesh Wound* was at the Royal Court, followed by *The Frontline* and *Been So Long* – rewritten as a musical show – both at Shakespeare's Globe at the end of the decade. In both plays, the in-yer-face spirit is diluted. Similarly, Nick Grosso makes brief comebacks with *Kosher Harry* (2002) and *Ingredient X* (2010), but although both have elements of 1990s sensibility, neither is successful with audiences. Simon Block pens a couple of forgettable plays and then develops his career in television, while Richard Zajdlic abandons theatre completely, once again for film and television. So the careers of the Class of 1999 have turned out to be highly individual. No one pattern fits all of them.

- Tuesday, 8 May 2012; Hammersmith, west London; evening. Aleks is at the press night of Simon Stephens's *Three Kingdoms*, created by German director Sebastian Nübling and Estonian designer Ene-Liis Semper, at the Lyric Hammersmith. Although the play is an epic co-production between three different countries and has a story that sprawls across Europe, Aleks finds himself delighting more in some incidental elements of its confident theatricality, for example its use of animal masks and pop music, than in the self-indulgence of its directing and its acting. But he appreciates that this production is something of a turning point. Up to now, most examples of New Writing in Britain have been held back by the hegemony of naturalism and social realism. Often, this results in bland literal-minded shows which all look the same. Rarely have the resources of theatre as a visual and aural art form been fully utilized. But *Three Kingdoms*, however muddled, does do that – it is a long-needed injection of a Continental sensibility into the tired veins

of English naturalism. And there are other signs of similar breakthroughs two years later, during 2014: the production of Stephens's *Birdland*, directed by Carrie Cracknell, at the Royal Court; Paines Plough's production of Mike Bartlett's *An Intervention*; and Frantic Assembly's production of Bryony Lavery's *The Believers* — all suggest a new and more confident sense of *mise-en-scène*. Perhaps the greatest gift that European theatre can bestow on post-in-yer-face theatre is the boost of a more thrilling and flamboyant theatricality.

Ends.

¹ See *Coup de Théâtre 18: 'In-Yer-Face': Sarah Kane et la nouvelle dramaturgie britannique*, Susan Blattès and Jean-Pierre Simard (eds.), Grenoble : Stendhal University, 2002.

² Proceedings published as Rebecca D'Monté and Graham Saunders (eds.), *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

³ Published as Mark Ravenhill, "A Tear in the Fabric: the James Bulger Murder and New Theatre Writing in the 'Nineties", *New Theatre Quarterly* 20.4 (2004): 305-14.

⁴ Aleks Sierz, *In-Yer-Face ! : Le théâtre britannique des années 1990*, Nicolas Boileau and Delphine Lemmonier-Textier (trans.), Rennes : Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011.