

In whose face?! (Angry young) theatre makers and the targets of their provocation

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Introduction

The current article offers a response to Aleks Sierz' (Sierz 2007) account of how he produced a particular narrative that revolved around a bounded network of theatre practitioners operating in Britain in the latter half of the 1990s, whose work he subsequently labeled as constituting *In-Yer-Face* theatre (Sierz 2001). I will be arguing that in order to evaluate any lasting impact that the particular selection of theatre artists have had on current theatre, a modified narrative may serve as a more relevant map through which to chart the developments in UK theatre during what have been termed the "nasty nineties", and beyond.

The alternative narrative that I am proposing may initially seem to offer these players lesser roles in what makes up the grand design of the end-of-the-century British cultural scene, diminishing them from the prime billing that they have enjoyed to date in the work of Sierz and others who have adopted the framework. That is not, however, what I set out to do here. Rather, this new narrative re-incorporates these playwrights into a larger interdisciplinary endeavour that characterized the times in which they happened to be working, an *In-Yer-Face* decade which was witness to a broader reconceptualization of the possibilities of cultural engagement across a range of forms of expression, both in the performing arts such as theatre, and in other artistic strands like visual art, television and music. Admittedly, the narrative I will suggest here will not

feature Sierz' selection of artists – represented by the likes of Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill – as some inglorious band of theatre luminaries riding in and rescuing British theatre from its almost certain demise. However attractive a plot device this is, it obscures the wider regeneration that British theatre was undergoing at the time, and necessarily suggests a band of brothers and sisters who saved the day by turning up late in one corner of a battlefield, just in time to raise a flag above the enemy's Commanding Officers Quarters (here embodied by London's West End theatre quarter).

A tale of two narratives

Of course, Sierz is presenting a history, and as Barthes suggests, an

historian is not so much a collector of facts as a collector and relater of signifiers; that is to say, he organizes them with the purpose of establishing positive meaning and filling the vacuum of pure, meaningless series. (Barthes: 16)

However, by extracting these artists from their natural habitat, placing them on a gallery plinth, and giving them a title – the *In-Yer-Facers* – Sierz, I fear, has done them a disservice: he has forcefully removed them from their family, severing the cord that connected them to a wider, more far-reaching cultural rejuvenation that was taking place in British theatre and British culture more generally, and as a consequence has denied them their place in any fuller consideration of the impact of the 1990s on the contemporary cultural landscape. At worst, this has allowed these artists to suffer critical appraisals that have invariably dubbed their work superficial, apolitical, brutalist, despondent, a shockfest of amorality, criticisms leveled at them that they carried forward in later appraisals of their work. Yet, with the work reincorporated into a larger narrative sweep, I would suggest that many of these labels show themselves to be deeply flawed. It is only by considering the scene as part of the larger play that we can appreciate how this particular set of cogs interlocked with others to move the cultural clock hands forward, and us from slumber to a new dawn. In turn, this demonstrates the characteristics of the work as displaying greater desires to engage, to

represent those whose voices were not deemed worth representing, and to explore aesthetic forms through which to do them justice. Taken in this light, epithets such as “superficial”, “apolitical”, “amoral” and “brutalist” disintegrate on touch, dropping like clothes from the backs of those cultural commentators who bore them like arms in the defense of the realm.

She who controls historical discourse, controls how events in the past are understood to have happened. As Barthes argues,

the status of historical discourse is uniformly assertive, affirmative. The historical fact is linguistically associated with a privileged ontological status: we recount what has been, not what has not been, or what has been uncertain. (Barthes: 14)

Scholars working from a range of disciplines, from Feminist Critique through Queer Theory to Critical Discourse Analysis, have successfully demonstrated that discourses are, however, contested sites, and a single narrative is never able to encapsulate the often polar opposite voices of those who experienced the same event, the same movement, or period, or debate, or discussion. The perspective I will offer here will hopefully serve as one corrective to the apparent ongoing reification of the *In-Yer-Face* narrative that appears to have taken root in critical and academic discourse surrounding 1990s UK theatre. The perspective is that of a UK theatre practitioner active throughout the 1990s, who was indeed also involved in productions labeled by critics as *In-Yer-Face*. I accept that this link, like Sierz’ background as theatre critic before me, renders my account vulnerable to an excess of subjective bias resulting from my previous professional investment, and I would caution the reader to adopt a critical attitude. Any epistemic authority I claim on the basis of my firsthand involvement is also grounds for mistrusting any claims of objectivity. I am then not “absent[ing] [my]self from the discourse” (Barthes: 11) as is common to this genre. What I do hope is that this account will at least allow for a more textured, a more holistic understanding of the 1990s scene in which Sierz’ *In-Yer-Face* group of artists were embedded, by providing another window on the topic. As such, this article should not be read as an attempted hatchet job of Sierz’

grand opus; on the contrary, I have a great deal of admiration for the work he has produced on the 1990s period. Rather, I hope this serves as an additional strand to the narrative he has spun.

In what follows, I will first offer one take on how the group of artists collected together under the rubric *In-Yer-Face* theatre practitioners came to be categorized as such, and will discuss the role of the critics and academics in the production of this categorization device and subsequent narrative. I will then, echoing Sierz (Sierz 2007), problematize the assumption that these artists exemplified, sparked even, the re-vitalization of 1990s UK theatre across the board, rather than being an instantiation of what was happening in the wider UK theatre in one geographical, socioculturally bounded domain. This domain is of course the London West End theatre establishment, with its contingent body of commentators, their investment and their target audiences. I will finish with a consideration of how trace-elements of the revitalized UK theatre scene of the “nasty nineties” are very much present, alive and kicking in contemporary theatre and elsewhere, and how Kane and her contemporaries are very much part of that influence, but that they are best served being considered as parts within a larger whole, rather than as a whole in their own right.

***In-Yer-Face* – a respondent’s category**

One entry point into investigating the processes and impact of cultural renewal in any given place is in charting the responses that such changes engender. Invariably, such responses are most easily found documented by those who have assumed the mantle of cultural arbiter, the designated arbitrators drafted in by the media companies, the social or moral gatekeepers, and representatives of movements that have previously been dominant in the field.

A recent example of this can be found in how commentators in the British establishment responded to developments in the realm of cultural activities in the 1990s. These were the “nasty nineties”, they were “laddish”, “apolitical”, “hedonistic”, “brutalist” and “vapid”, the decade saw open season declared on a range of

developments that swept through British cultural life. Politicians, arts critics, the right wing press, and national treasures of previous decades alike had no end of opportunity here to pour scorn on the grassroots movers and shakers at every turn and transgression. As the face of British culture shifted from the well-mannered *Good Morning Britain* to the raucous *The Big Breakfast* at the start of the day, and from quaint situational comedy formats such as *'Allo 'Allo!* to laddish *TFI Friday* and *The Word* in the evening, as Spandau Ballet and UB40 made way for Underworld and The Prodigy, with wine bars shunned in favour of ecstasy-flooded acid house parties, the likes of the so-called Mary Whitehouse Brigades – self-appointed guardians of public morals and taste – and similarly-oriented spokesmen and women for public decency sought any rhetorical – and legislative – means for countering this perceived corruption of all that was good and decent. The establishment reaction in such moments of societal rupture and revision has the tendency to jump to the defence of the status quo.

With regard to what was happening in theatre, Sierz (Sierz 2007) acknowledges that the term that became synonymous with a particular set of theatre practices found in 1990s British theatre, *In-Yer-Face* theatre (citing Sierz 2001), was drawn not from the theatre practitioners themselves, but from how designated theatre critics wrote about their work. *In-Yer-Face* theatre was, according to Sierz, not so much a movement, or a self-categorization performed by particular theatre practitioners, but rather a category generated on grounds of response, and delimited by description produced by those tasked to evaluate theatre performances in the writing up of their reviews. In a way, this framed the narrative to be as much *some* people's reactions to the work, than about the artists and their audiences. It foregrounds the theatre critics, who are the ones in the position to “name” the phenomenon on the basis of their response to it.

Narratives consist of a number of structural components, for example plots (the sequence of events following the premiere of *Blasted*); or what Barthes refers to as “existent” and “occurrents” – characters/groups/places (like James MacDonald; the Out of Joint

Company; The Royal Court Theatre) and actions (the staging of *Blasted*; the writing of a review); a setting (Britain, London), causes and effects (performance and tabloid censure), problems and their resolution, shifts in understanding (critical mauling to re-evaluation and canonisation), and Roman Jakobson's "protagonists", consisting of the sender (the artists) and the receiver (the audience; the critics; artists elsewhere). Many of these components are then present in the *In-Yer-Face* narrative developed by Sierz and his colleagues.

Narratives also include bounded time frames, and the unit of time that has been optioned for the narrative sweep of the *In-Yer-Face* storyline starts at the decade's halfway mark. Ken Urban identifies zero hour for the In-Yer-Faceness of 1990s British theatre, when he states:

On 18 January 1995, the British theatre world got what it least expected: a kick up the arse, a jab in the eyeball and a punch in the gut. It came not a moment too soon. That night, Jack Tinker and his fellow critics took their seats in the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs for a performance of Sarah Kane's *Blasted*, a play featuring scenes of cannibalism, eye-gouging and anal rape, a play so disturbing one critic thought he would part with his supper.
(Urban: 38)

This is, as we learn later, the birth of the *In-Yer-Face* theatre phenomenon, "any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it till they get the message" (Sierz 2001: 4). A brief scan of theatre reviews culled from the arts pages in the 90s does seem to confirm a period of increased vitality, explicitness, narrative experimentation and vigour, with performance spaces being reinvented as arenas where experiential, sensory, emotional dynamism could be found, rather than the previous, more considered, intellectual exercises as represented by the state-of-the-nation theatre generation of preceding decades. Included in a selection could be:

- [...] in solitary confinement, so deprived of stimulation that they literally climb the walls... And then the maniacs take over. They control, torture, kill. And when that's over, they party. It's all in a day's work. (*The Independent on Sunday* 28 February 1993)

- [...] the expressive range of people exchanging non-stop torrents of abuse. [...] Inspired, perhaps, by the current nasty vogue for killer videos, it takes on murder, torture, alienation and sex – in no particular order. (*The Independent* 27 February 1993)

- drawing dangerously on their own experience – stripping themselves naked, both in their pleasure and pain. This is a piece that dares to address intense and gruelling areas, of our spiritual and emotional life..., it ranks as one of the richest and most unsparing theatrical experiences I've had in a long time.

(*The Independent* 01 August 1992)

- From the tender to the obscene, from the erotic to the crude, the triangle stroke, kick and kiss and convince us that love hurts.

(*The Guardian* 16 April 1993)

“Unsparing” performances featuring torture, snuff videos, fucking and partying, pain and taboo, where “the inhumanity is chilling” (*The Stage* 11 March 1993). A cursory glance across these critics' responses to what supper had been served may lead one to conclude that this is all very “so far, so very post-1995 Royal Court”. What, however, sets these reviews apart from those included in the various discussions and overviews of what was to become known as *In-Yer-Face* theatre, is that they all *pre*-date 1995's zero hour, in some cases by years, rather than by months. It would appear then that at the moment “the British theatre world got what it least expected” (Urban: 38), *British theatre* had been getting it for quite some time already. What then could Urban and Co mean by opting for January 1995 as the start of some assault on the establishment? Is there a particular understanding of what constitutes British theatre that differs from that found elsewhere? Is there perhaps in their eyes a *real* British theatre? The British theatre of Jack Tinker and his fellow critics?

A number of suggestions present themselves:

- The British theatre of Jack Tinker refers to the West End circuit.
- The British theatre of Jack Tinker refers to a particular tradition.
- The British theatre of Jack Tinker was that produced for the audiences for whom he wrote.

Let us take each of these possibilities in turn.

British theatre – or, What’s on at Her Majesty’s?

Sierz allows that his *In-Yer-Face* category of artist that features in his narrative is necessarily selective. For example, he acknowledges that it is heavily biased to the London circuit that he frequented as a theatre critic, and excluded a range of potentially equally relevant work done elsewhere. Yet, the category is still employed to represent 1990s *British theatre*, and the implicit assumption here is that what was happening on the West End stage can be understood to be more or less representative of the theatre of the United Kingdom as a whole. If, however, the work of the artists in Sierz’ fractal is conceptualized as what was going on in British theatre in general, then it follows that we should be seeing the work of the likes of *Blasted* and *Shopping and F***ing* showing up in theatre programmes around the country at the same time as being staged at the Royal Court. We do not. The 1000 or so people who saw *Blasted*’s first run, saw it at the Royal Court Theatre in London, not at the Library Theatre in Manchester, the Taliesin in Swansea, or the Northampton Roadmender.

What follows on from this way of conceptualizing British theatre is that the audiences that frequent the West End are considered similarly representative of audiences elsewhere in Dundee, Aberystwyth and the East End of Newcastle; that the moneyed, middle-aged, middle class, London metropolitan audiences so characteristic of the West End-going public, with their healthy dose of tourists, can be seen to be in essence representative of the British theatre going public found in the regions that lie beyond the asphalt ring road that coughs and fumes its way around the capital’s perimeter. This is of course a falsity, but one which is firmly embedded in a discourse that treats the London cultural scene, as well as its political, consumer and social scene, as representing the beating heart of the nation. It reinforces the image of the twinkling crown of the M25, with the regional plebeians beyond waiting in anticipation for the cosmopolitan heartland of theatre to pronounce on the next direction to take. By implication, theatre artists are assumed to want to access these types of audience, rather than for example “achieving [their] goal [of] attracting a

generation more at home in clubs back to the theatre” (*The Scotsman* 27 August 1996).

For many, the perceived reactionary, parochial arrogance of the West End citadel, its community of critics and its dwindling, ailing audiences also rendered it an unsexy irrelevancy in the eyes of any young theatre makers seeking to move the stage back into a more central position in the battlefield of public consciousness. What the 1990s West End more typically offered audiences and theatre makers for whom London was at best a weekend break away, or more commonly the backdrop to some television news broadcast, was the latest Lloyd-Webber musical, a bit of celebrity pixie dust from an Alan Bates or Placido Domingo, or yet another Chekov revival. In terms of the wares the West End razzle-dazzle had to contribute to the beating pulse of the wider British theatre scene, it might not have been less, but it was certainly not much more than could be found elsewhere in the country.

In contrast, as is common with capitals, the London theatre scene did continue to suck up the discursive oxygen, occupying the national newspaper inches and media arts programmes, as if the wider public remained perpetually on tenterhooks as to what Dame Judy was going to do next, whether the latest state-of-the-nation behemoth was really capturing the spirit of the age, or whether some playwright could be relied on to produce some or other shocking soundbite to serve as viagra for the right wing press. At the start of the 1990s, there were still, of course, worthy people doing worthy theatre work in the West End, but on the whole they were doing so in an idiom that smelled musty when hung out between the Quentin Tarantinos and the 808 State on offer elsewhere on the cultural spectrum, a Harris Tweed suit next to an outfit by Calvin Klein or Ann Demeulemeester, a Wham! next to Portishead or Björk. In addition, with London’s streets paved with gold lame like a cheap pantomime dame past her prime, the particular make-up of the moneyed production companies and the associated financial overheads of staging a show in the West End theatre district, this really did appear to be the “capital of safe”, a large cruise liner full of aging lovelies puffing ahead along the straight and narrow.

That Sierz sets the scene in London town is not only selective in its restricted locality, it is also fundamental to making the proposed narrative possible. Whatever else was happening elsewhere in the theatre landscape, or had happened prior to January 1995, it was that it was now being staged within the castle keep, in the polite society of the ladies and gentry, in the presence of the scribes, courtiers and patronized former glories, with the associated deeply rigid traditions of etiquette and taste (hell, even the venue at the heart of the narrative is called the Royal Court). In this setting, and with this audience demographic, the shockwaves were obviously palpable, and these resulted in the rearguard action of publicly flogging the artists involved. How could the State be subsidizing this filth? How could this corruption ever be allowed to be staged? What has happened to the youth of today?

In accordance with the dominant discourses, proclaiming zero hour as the moment that the establishment fortifications were breached further re-enforces the idea of the West End, its audiences and arbiters, as being representative of the British theatre institution as a whole, with the theatre critics such as Sierz himself being afforded the right to speak for the nation as a whole. In assuming this role, London theatre critics are not only in the position of staking out some socio-geographic territory such as London's "Theatreland" and proclaiming it to be some aesthetic Mecca, but also, and perhaps even more insidiously, in delimiting what the term *British theatre* actually denotes. Again, by considering what is named as comprising the *In-Yer-Face* theatre category, and perhaps what is left out, we can perhaps get further traction on the Sierz' narrative.

Great Britain – a whiskey-swilling nation of cigar smokers

A simple scan of theatre productions discussed in the literature on the *In-Yer-Face* phenomenon gives an immediate visual cue as to what "theatre" in this context refers to. The productions are almost entirely catalogued in the following way:

PLAY TITLE by *SCRIPTWRITER'S NAME*,

or alternatively,

SCRIPTWRITER'S NAME's *PLAY TITLE*

As such, theatrical events are represented in these discourses as connoting occasions where a scriptwriter's contribution to a collective theatrical endeavour is presented and received. It is not The English Stage Company's *Blasted* that is discussed; or James MacDonald's; or Pip Donaghy, Kate Ashfield and Dermot Kerrigan's; most definitely not Franziska Wilken's; or Jon Linstrum and Paul Arditti's *Blasted*.¹ It is Sarah Kane's. It is Joe Penhall's *Love and Understanding*. It's Jez Butterworth's *Mojo*.² This discursive trick transmutes the experiential event of the theatre into literary smoke and mirrors, the "true" work (the script) mediated through the bare mechanics of staging, with a company's "collaborative aims transform[ed] into traditionally hierarchical structures with artists such as musicians, performers and choreographers at the bottom" (Smith). Here, she who provides the script is the queen bee, and the casts – or castes – of drones and workers that make up the hive are organized exclusively around her. It is the promise of an audience with the queen, or at least the religious texts and icons that she has passed to her representatives, that is employed as the honey trap, enticing the public to swarm to this production and not another.

Theatre and script writing is thus conflated to denote one and the same thing. Again, British theatre *sui generis* is that of the script writer: it's the theatre of studying the literary works of Shakespeare. As Paul Davies of Volcano Theatre (and colleague of Fern Smith cited above) muses:

School and sometimes more general audiences seem to confuse a discussion of the literary merits of a particular Shakespearean text with the experience, practice and form of theatre. In this culture of inherited conservatism we desperately need risk, not hollow demonstrations of supposedly shared values. (Davies)

These "supposedly shared values" are implicit also in the discourses surrounding the scholars of *In-Yer-Face* theatre. Here, it is assumed that there is theatre (no modifier required), and then there are alternative genres of performance, which carry labels such as Live Art, physical theatre, puppeteering, and director's theatre. The conceit is effective: by referring to one subsection of theatre practice as "theatre" and using modifiers to denote other subsections, the

authors generate a default indexical centre. In much the same way London comes to stand for Britain, it locates “new writing focused theatre” as standing for theatre, or at least British theatre. Sierz describes “the great British tradition of new writing – which puts the writer at the centre of the theatrical process” (Sierz 2002: 20), and appears unable to distance himself from his role as a theatre critic when he talks of director’s theatre and the “self-regarding physical theatre” (Sierz 2001) – “usually pale imitations of what continental theatre is so good at” (Sierz 2002: 20). Although he claims the “the idea of ‘in-yer-face theatre’ emphasized the fact that his was a book about performance and not about literature” (Sierz 2007: 27), and takes exception to Harvie’s claim that it was a book about “plays and playwrights”, he goes on to state that:

In-Yer-Face Theatre is written from the point of view of the consumer: it sympathizes with the *writer as producer* but tends to downplay the role of theatres as institutions.

(Sierz 2007: 28, 2nd italics added).

One is *In-Yer-Face* if one “takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it till they get the message”, but only if you stick to the overall rules of tradition. If you write a narrative drama (*Trainspotting*), not if you shift the goalposts (*Headstate* or *You’ll Have Had your Hole*).

Although Sierz himself offers that the initial book was a “personal and polemical account”, his passion for “the great British tradition of new writing”, plays by playwrights for the consumption of the rep theatre audience, bleeds into every occasion where he characterizes the British theatre scene as mirroring his own predilections and theatre-going habits. Again, this should not go uncontested, especially in a consideration of the theatre landscape of a particular period. A brief exercise in applying the descriptor to other areas in the same period throws up some interesting comparisons. *In-Yer-Face* popular music would probably include traditional bands such as Oasis and Sleeper (real songs and real instruments), but not outfits such as The Chemical Brothers or Underworld (too rave-y); *In-Yer-Face* visual art would presumably include the canvas-based art of Gilbert and George and Peter Doig

as defining the vitality of visual art in 90s Britain, but not the conceptual art of the Young British Artists (the so-called YBAs) such as Tracey Emin and Damien Hirst; and *In-Yer-Face* cinema Peter Greenaway or Derek Jarman, but perhaps not Danny Boyle. Indeed, one might as well characterize the substance use habits of 1990s UK as that of a country of cigar-smoking lovers of single malt whisky, on the basis of the critics' favourite private members' clubs. Admittedly, there is both a long British tradition of smoking Hamlet cigars and of reading Hamlet soliloquies. But again, this does not characterize a nation's consumption habits.

So if Sierz, or perhaps also Jack Tinker and his fellow critics "write from the point of view of the consumer", and their consumption is predicated on their socio-geographical location ("Theatreland") and their personal predisposition for some traditional strand of theatre where it is still the *writers* who are considered the *producers*, then we may in turn ask whether any response they have to theatre that is not aiming to appeal to them is contaminated by their own investment in maintaining a - for them favourable - status quo.

Grandpa in da house

Sierz (Sierz 2007: 24) argues that "in-yer-face theatre describes not just the content of a play but the relationship between the writer and the public, or (more accurately) the relationship between the stage and the audience." This is, of course, as crucial to any discussion of theatre in action, as the very contact between theatre practitioners and audience is to the theatre event itself. It highlights both the relationship between those who generate the work and those who receive it, as well as the distributed, co-constructed nature of any communicative event, of which art is but one. What it does however obscure, is the way a "public" and an "audience" consist of individual members, subgroups, intended recipients as well as those who are perhaps less in the artists' sights, or those who the artists have trained their sights on.

It may be assumed that had *The Daily Mail's* Jack Tinker (or any of his equally dismissive colleagues) not chosen to gate-crash MacDonald and his company's *Blasted*, but instead had happened upon a cage fight, or stumbled into an S&M swingers' club, or had been forced to spend a sweaty Friday all-nighter at the Ministry of Sound, or a death metal gig, or any other form of sociocultural outing that was not intended for him in the first place, that he may have experienced a similar reaction to what he was subjected to at the Royal Court that evening. Tinker assumed the role of filter, a cultural arbiter for his readership, and with his readership representing only a slice of what made up the UK population at that time, the relationship between this writer and "his" intended public, the journalist and the *Daily Mail* readers, was equally as important to the *content* of *his* piece, as the *content* of *Blasted* was to the *artists'* intended public. The sad result was that Tinker's – and a number of his fellow critics' – objections to the show were so theatrical in their own right, that the show and, pinned in the role of queen bee, Sarah Kane especially, suffered what amounted to critical double jeopardy, as the critics' responses themselves became newsworthy. Both by on the one hand treating a thin slice of the public, e.g. one's own newspaper readership, as representing the public in general (the British public), without taking into account that the general public is a multivalent body of humours who are equally as likely to be at odds with a position you adopt as to align with it, and on the other hand failing to recognize that not all work within a genre is probably intended to speak to or for you – however much a designated cultural arbiter you are –, the two misconceptions worked up a perfect storm.

If we are then to be able to consider faithfully the qualities of productions such as *Blasted* and their impact on the theatre landscape, then it would seem prescient to at least attempt to excise from the picture the secondary narrative line, that of the ordained theatre critics and their invested readings, an arc moving from critical excommunication through later redemption and ultimate canonisation of particular works and artists. If the story of *In-Yer-Face* theatre starts, as Urban suggests, the night Jack Tinker and his

colleagues took their pews at the altar of Osborne, Wesker and Arden, then it is a story of “writer and the public” and “stage and the audience”, but it is one in which the protagonist of “the public” and “audience” is played out by the theatre critic. Consequently, it is a story of the London theatre critics as audience members in this strange new world, rather than of how these works spoke to and for those sections of the public whose voice had perhaps for sometime been sidelined on British stages, and indeed, whose very language may rarely have been heard on stage before.

To take an example, one discourse feature of *In-Yer-Faceness* that is highlighted by various commentators is the use of certain (shocking) lexical items that had not previously been common to the stage. In delineating *In-Yer-Face* theatre from other types, Sierz (Sierz 2007: 29) offers: “Do the characters use words like ‘cunt’, ‘fuck’ and ‘shit’ insistently?” If yes, then this is another box ticked in the ingredients that make up this type of theatre, the use of “taboo” words, again as an auditory assault on the senses of the audience. What this reading appears to miss, is that words like “cunt”, “fuck” and “shit” were in no way taboo words among the people being represented in the shows, or among members of the audiences that artists may have been interested in appealing to. If a company such as Edinburgh’s Boilerhouse Theatre Company has a “target audience of young, non-regular theatre attending audiences - the ‘club generation’ of 18 to 24 year olds who attend live music, clubs and cinemas” (Scottish Arts Council, 2000), then one strategy for being able to claim to represent this group, is to adopt the linguistic norms of said community in the work produced. In this case, the language of the 90s generation of 20-somethings was commandeered in order to index the work as speaking to and for this particular community, and not another. For example, in a discussion of romantic love in Boilerhouse’s promenade exploration of reality entertainment, *Seizure* (Hazel), actor Denise Evans holds forth on the inability to use predominant established discourses to express her experiences, as these have been co-opted by the hegemonic classes for their own entertainments.

DENISE All we're left with now are the words that are to remain unspoken.

Cunt and cancer. Cunt and cancer still fucking mean something, don't they?

There's nothing missing from those words.

The rest, though, the rest is the hollow of your head echoing the same ol' tunes over and over. (Hazel)

Although the text here employs what some may regard socially taboo words, "fucking", "cunt" and "cancer" (the "c" words), the language is both that of the artists themselves and their proclaimed target audiences, as well as being a meditation on the constraints and dynamics of language use in finding suitable resources through which to express one's experience. Implicit in this is a critique of the establishment generally, where particular expressions are impermissible, but also more broadly a critique of the theatre establishment, where forms of expression have been so done to death in the service of improbable role models one can never live up to, that all that is left is to start mining what dregs remain.

DENISE We can never be Burton and Taylor. We're George and Mildred. We get slaughtered and spew up on our pillow. We get the shits and belch and think it's funny. We have cunts and get cancer. And you don't bring me flowers any more than the last bastard sang me love songs. (Hazel)

In rejecting the likes of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor along with Barbara Streisand ballads as being irrelevant to a community, the artists are also staking out sections of the audience. They speak here *for* some sections, speak out *against* some sections, and speak *of* some sections also. Whichever sub-group you as an audience member identify with will ultimately condition your response, from perhaps feeling empowered, to feeling outraged, to feeling uncomfortable, to feeling completely lost. It may also contextualize differently how the aesthetics of the show are occasioned, or what the scenes are attempting to achieve. In one of the final sequences in *Seizer*, one performer is wheeled out, gagged, with his arms and legs taped to a hospital wheelchair. He subsequently has a plastic bag gaffer-taped over his head, and is left in the proximity of the audience, while over the next few minutes the Seizer regales the

audience with a number of humiliating facts about the performer. As the performer starts to asphyxiate, and becomes increasingly, and visibly and audibly, distressed, the ringmaster taunts the audience to step in to save the performer from further suffering or worse.

SEIZER Aw, bring the cunt here. Come on, bring him here. (*To audience*) Aye, one o' yours. I'm no' fuckin' comin' over there, so if you want the poor cunt to live, you're gonna have to do somethin'. Christ! (Hazel)

Whether one's response is to take the scene as being purely provocative, or attempting to shock, or as morally corrupt, or revolting, or brutalist, or any other response, the scene invites a reaction. It is constructed to make the audience members question the relationship between stage and audience, and their relationship to other "reality" formats served up as entertainment elsewhere. But it is only gratuitous if you actively seek to see it as such. It is not simply an aesthetic, a stylistic ruse to introduce some *In-Yer-Face* cruelty to a show, unless you choose to interpret it this way.

Jack Tinker did not make it all the way to Scotland to see *Seizer*. Nor did his fellow critic Charles Spencer, who had described Boilerhouse's previous work *Headstate*, as "an altogether hateful show: mindlessly trendy, pretentious and mean-spirited" (*Daily Telegraph* 19 July 1997), recalling his response to *Blasted*: "a work entirely devoid of intellectual or artistic merit". Reviewed in *The Guardian* newspaper, however, *Seizer* was said to "sate[] a generation's demand for visceral, angry, intelligent theatre" (*The Guardian* 12 August 1997). Which generation this refers to remains undetermined here, but there is a suggestion that a. there is an age group for which this is especially relevant, rather than the entire public; b. that this particular sector of the public were craving something they were not getting elsewhere; and c. that what those represented in this generation were demanding was visceral, angry and thought-through. It could be suggested that the generation in question is not that made up of those who characterize the West End theatre going public, or the *Daily Mail* readers, or the cigar-smoking whisky lovers poring over their copies of David Hare's *Plenty*. This theatre is not for them. It was never intended to be.

The title of this article asks a question: In whose face? In Sierz' reading, the "face" in question is that of the generic audience member, though one mediated through experience of the theatre critic. The provocation implied by the term is that directed at this audience by (and usually exclusively) the script writer. I suggest that we reconceptualize this framework to consider that the practices of provocation described in discussing the work of those traditionally associated with the term *In-Yer-Face* theatre represent an aesthetic orientation that can be studied diachronically as an on-going characteristic of political re-assertion within the sociocultural march of time. Far from the provocation being directed at the audience members as a generic group, theatre practitioners in the "nasty nineties" were exploring ways to strengthen their audiences' engagement in the ideas represented in the work, and the challenges these ideas posed to society at large. By extension, this naturally raises the question of whether those press arbiters who employed the *In-Yer-Face* term to invoke *their* theatre experience could ultimately claim to be representative of the newer audiences that this renewed vitality attracted to the theatres.

Conclusion

This article aimed to offer an alternative take to the narrative that Sierz suggests he set out in describing British theatre of the 1990s. Sierz' narrative tells the story of how:

In-yer-face theatre saved British theatre. Perhaps my most contentious argument is this one: if it had not been for a small avant-garde of young writers in the 'nineties, I can imagine that new writing in Britain would be in a state of terminal decline.

(Sierz 2002: 20)

In his reading, a small group of theatre artists operating deep within London's Theatreland, and considered to be producing transgressive work, rescued the national theatre scene from an untimely end. It suggests that theatre practitioners around the country, inspired by the repeated public maulings that were meted out by the old guard in response to these radically new naturalistic pieces of drama, took

up arms and transformed the theatre landscape into a vibrant, rejuvenated industry. In their wake, theatre artists far and wide turned to make pulsating, experiential, theatre work. The alternative narrative offered here is that this “new wave of young writers” (Sierz 2002) such as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill, were in fact part of an already rising tide of dynamic, “brash, confident, shove it in your face” theatre (*The Guardian* 31 August 1996), “not only strikingly original, but forc[ing] serious aesthetic and social issues out into the open” (*The Stage* 11 March 1996). In sum, they were part of an aesthetic surge bursting banks across the country, sweeping aside the Canute Jack Tinkers of the cultural establishment, and flooding every crack, nook and cranny of the old order.

Provocative ideas in 1990s theatre practice were not confined to the British capital city, and a broader consideration of the British theatre scene of the 1990s allows for a more nuanced understanding of how the controversial work at the likes of The Royal Court and Soho Theatre Company was situated much more closely within a renewed vitality of the larger British theatre community across the board, where practitioners had equally set their sights on shaking audiences out of their theatrical somnambulism. Indeed, rather than singling out a small club of London-based playwrights and constructing a narrative of this small band of brothers and sisters, we should allow these playwrights’ work to be considered within a broader cultural movement within the British theatre community, the cumulative effects of which are to be found throughout the theatre scene today.

And what of these effects? What remains of the “nasty nineties?” Where are the trace elements to be found in contemporary cultural aesthetics - and more specifically in the contemporary theatre scene? If the laddish, druggy, brash generation of British artists – in theatre as well as other forms – offered an adrenaline shot to the arm, re-engaging a wider public, dragging the ailing beast of the theatre and music and literature and fashion and visual art into the public consciousness, did they just dissipate at the turn of the century, go out of fashion after 9/11, succumb to the

stronger pull of the internet? Sierz' assertion is that the *In-Yer-Face* era was over and done even by the time his influential book came out, the writers at the heart of his tale having written a few *In-Yer-Face* shows had "moved on" to other pastures. Sarah Kane had taken her life. Sierz' version of the *In-Yer-Face* era had come to an end; and the turns had left the stage.

A different take would be that the artists did not simply "move on", they *continued on*. Writers such as Mark Ravenhill and Bryony Lavery went off to work with the likes of Frantic Assembly, one of what were assumed to be "self-regarding physical" theatre companies, who turned out to just be making theatre, full stop. Underworld and The Chemical Brothers could be found rocking the UK Olympics opening ceremony, with *Trainspotting* director Danny Boyle bringing his sense of momentum to the occasion; elsewhere Boyle could be found picking up Oscars for work in the cinema, but also at the National and the Old Vic. A different year, a different ceremony, and 1990s VTOL Dance Company's Mark Murphy's staging opened the 2014 Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, with him producing huge spectacles elsewhere, such as the outdoor *Land of Giants* in Belfast. At the time of writing, Tom Morris, instrumental in supporting new theatre work in the 1990s is creating waves with his New York Met's staging of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, still with opera, Improbable Theatre's Phelim McDermott recently premiered a new Philip Glass piece *The Perfect American*, and Frantic Assembly's more physically nuanced brand of theatre can be found at Blur frontman Damon Albarn's English National Opera's *Dr Dee*. Frantic's work is also found on Broadway, at each of the National Theatres in the various capital cities around the United Kingdom, and even in DreamWorks animated movies. Artistic Director Scott Graham muses, "Audiences aren't as afraid of movement telling them the story as they once were, but you look around and realise, 'Hold on there's an awful lot of this around'. It's perilously close to being the norm" (*The Stage* 10 April 2014). In sum, the generation of artists that rang in the changes in the 1990s has pushed through the agenda to redefine and shape the cultural landscape, both in the UK as well as elsewhere.

In much the same way Mark Ravenhill, Quentin Tarentino and Irving Welsh have become household names, and TV dramas are expected to turn the screen blue post-watershed; the way the airwaves and soundtracks are filled to the brim with “music [that] includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats” (as defined by the UK Government’s Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, 1994); where nobody bats an eyelid anymore if a theatre performance is performed in a warehouse, a car park or a dilapidated hotel, rather than in the musty-yet-plush haunted house of a theatre; the way dance companies now commission scripts from writers and theatre companies employ choreographers and VJs. The norms have shifted from what they were at the start of the 1990. During this vibrant decade and beyond, a whole range of artists – including those feted in Aleks Sierz’ category – from across the British Isles took the staid post-1980s conventions by the scruff of their necks and shook them until they got the message: that they were no longer fit for purpose. True, this did invariably upset those whose place depended on the maintaining of some status quo, as the acid house ravers, the Sarah Kane’s and the YBAs found out, often to their detriment. But this story should not be about the critics. They are but commentators, and rarely representative of those producers and consumers who meet and negotiate where the artistic creations take them. Ultimately, the works that were so vehemently objected to still managed to loosen the moorings just enough for British cultural life to undergo its necessary regeneration.

And that, I believe, is a relevant story to share.

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¹ Some of the principal collaborators on *Blasted*, with in order the director, the performers and the design team.

² Kane, Penhall and Butterworth are the script-writers for these productions.