



ESSE-8: LONDON 2006

29 August – 2 September 2006

S10. Contemporary British Drama and the Question of Genre

Friday 1 September: 5.00-7.00pm

Convenor: Stefani Brusberg-Kiermeier (University of Potsdam)

Email: brusberg@rz.uni-potsdam.de

Co-convenor: Graham Saunders (University of Reading)

Email: graham@saun73.freeserve.co.uk

Aleks Sierz's book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2000) provided both a term and a definition for a specific genre that he identified during the 1990s. However, one can argue that the term "in-yer-face," like Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), is a reductive one in that it fails to appreciate the diversity of voices in contemporary writing within British theatre. Obviously, dramatists still consider genre as crucial for their writing and directors likewise for choosing and staging plays. We will discuss the importance of generic features as a way forward to understanding contemporary British drama.

Hysteria, Trauma, Melancholia: the Drama of Performative Malady

Christina Wald (University of Cologne)

Increasingly, contemporary culture defines its own moment through hysteria, trauma, and melancholia. The cultural eminence and the wealth of contemporary plays on hysteria, trauma, and melancholia suggest that the time has come to group these plays and to consider them as dramatic genres in their own right. I will discuss exemplary plays which belong to "The Drama of Hysteria", "Trauma Drama", and "The Drama of Melancholia", paying particular attention to the ways in which they stage hysteria, trauma, and melancholia as "performative maladies", as complex yet concrete tropes that allow the theatrical exploration of gender performativity.

Tragedy and the Posthuman in Contemporary Drama

Laurens De Vos (University of Ghent)

Mark Ravenhill's *Faust* (*Faust is dead*, 1997) seems to reflect on the future of tragedy. Is tragedy dead indeed, as Steiner proclaimed forty years ago? Has our increasing disbelief in man's implacable values made the genre impossible? In 1996, Sarah Kane wrote *Phaedra's Love*, a contemporary play breathing today's societal concerns. *Phaedra's Love* may be read as a comment on tragedy too, and, despite both being written in the same period in the London circle of Cool Britannia, Kane and Ravenhill couldn't differ more in their views on the genre.

David Hare's Post-Political Plays

Beatrix Hesse (Otto-Friedrich-University, Bamberg)

Among contemporary British dramatists, David Hare has been particularly outspoken in his criticism of in-yer-face theatre. However, this theatrical style was not the main challenge that Hare confronted during the 1990s. Like other political playwrights, Hare had to find new directions for his work after the collapse of Eastern-block Communism. Hare's reaction was a withdrawal from public to private themes. As he pointed out in *Via Dolorosa* (1998), his more recent plays are all concerned in some way with a crisis of faith. In my paper, I will examine the various meanings of faith and betrayal in Hare's "post-political" plays.

Utopia and Dystopia in Contemporary Irish Feminist Drama: Christina Reid and Marina Carr

Michał Lachman (University of Łódź)

Dystopian novels testify to the futility of creating fictionalised images to better society and convey pessimistic speculations about the future of Western civilisation. Such novels are full of irony, satire, parody, and caricature, which assess the extent of the intellectual, social, and aesthetic corruption of modern man. I will analyse two plays by Irish women which provide challenging examples of late 20th-century dystopian literature. Marina Carr's *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and Christina Reid's *The Belle of the Belfast City* (1989) propose complex visions in which the dystopian threat and utopian nostalgia are represented with the schematic intensity of a morality play.

Political Drama and Modern Tragedy: the Case of Harold Pinter

Radmila Nastic (University of Kragujevac, Serbia)

The Nobel Prize award to Harold Pinter and his Nobel lecture renewed interest in the debate on political drama in Britain. Pinter himself has spoken openly about the political theatre as a reality today, as a weapon against ignorance and a means to achieve truth. The paper deals with Pinter's political plays of the 1980s and 1990s. They are also viewed as instances of modern tragedy in the sense promoted by some theorists, e.g. Terry Eagleton.

Caryl Churchill's Post-absurdist Theatre of the 1990s and Beyond

Merle Tönnies (University of Paderborn)

Through countless remakes, absurdist writing had turned into a relatively fixed repertoire of techniques by the 1990s upon which dramatists could draw at will. At this point, Churchill began to explore that genre and endow it with a new potential. Her 1997 double bill *Blue Heart* mixes devices used by the early Theatre of the Absurd (especially by Ionesco and Beckett) rather randomly, so that they are cut loose from their original contexts. Afterwards, *Far Away* (2000) and *A Number* (2002) give new meanings to key

absurdist techniques and thereby extrapolate hauntingly dystopian scenarios from current social and political developments.