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David Edgar and Hakan Gültekin

British Theatre from Agitprop to 'Primark Playwriting'

In this interview, which took place in Birmingham on 16 February 2023, Hakan Gültekin talks to playwright David Edgar about his theatre universe and the current state of British theatre. Edgar has long championed the social and economic rights of playwrights, and here suggests that the lack of long-term and sustained support from British theatres has created what he calls 'Primark playwrights'. His plays are characterized by a careful examination of historical events and the impact of these events on society, as evident in his epic two-part play *Destiny* (1976), which examines the roots of the British Labour movement. Other notable plays include *Excuses Excuses* (1972), *Saigon Rose* (1976), *Wreckers* (1977), and *Entertaining Strangers* (1986), commissioned by the Colway Theatre. He has also written plays for the Royal Shakespeare Company, including *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1978), *Maydays* (1983, revived in 2018), and *Pentecost* (1994). More recently, he adapted *A Christmas Carol* for the RSC (2017) and staged the one-man show *Trying It On* (2018). He founded the first playwriting degree in Britain at the University of Birmingham in 1989, and served as President of the Writers' Guild of Great Britain from 2007 to 2013.

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Key terms: political theatre, censorship, austerity, Writers' Guild of Great Britain, funding cuts.

Hakan Gültekin *How would you evaluate the current state of British theatre? What generation does David Edgar belong to in contemporary British theatre? Does he even belong to a particular generation?*

David Edgar The contemporary British theatre is deemed to have started in the late 1950s with writers like John Osborne and Arnold Wesker at the Royal Court and Shelagh Delaney at the Theatre Royal Stratford East, and I think the spirit of that has formed everything. It was insisting that theatre was not necessarily metropolitan and it certainly was not about the upper classes; it was a theatre that was going to make a serious intervention into national life, which those early plays certainly did.

I am from the second generation that emerged in the late 1960s, and the big thing that enabled us to happen was that theatre censorship, which had operated in Britain since the eighteenth century, was abolished. Suddenly theatre moved from being the most restricted storytelling medium to the least, and lots of writers who might have gone into television or writing novels decided to go to theatre, which led to an upsurge in small theatre spaces up and down the country that were very eager for product. For those of us who started writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was a huge demand for our work. It was a wonderful time to start writing and a lot of that work was political. Some of it was agitprop work that was intended to appeal to a working-class audience and was taken around the country in the backs of vans. Some of it was more mainstream, but was still intended to pack a political punch. However, my generation was almost entirely white and male. Later, in the 1970s, new women playwrights started emerging, and the domination of the theatre writing scene by white men was challenged.

The situation now is in some ways very positive and in some ways not. The big story of this century is the increasing amount of new

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X24000204 Published online by Cambridge University Press

plays being staged. Up until the turn of the millennium, the majority of plays done in the theatre were revivals of existing plays, either by living writers or by dead ones. However, a research project that I was involved with, which ran from 2013 to 2014 and was the most comprehensive study of the British theatre repertoire to date, discovered that, in the mainstream subsidized theatre, new plays had overtaken revivals.[1] Further, we discovered that, not only were the majority of productions of new writing, but that the audiences attending them were new as well. There was also a certain amount of devised work that was not new writing as such, but, even if you take that out, new writing (including new translations and adaptations) was the majority and that was a huge and significant change.

The second thing that happened was that politics came back into the foreground. You will remember the pronouncement of the end of history after the fall of the Berlin Wall; we were all going to be living in, or aspiring to be, liberal western democracies. For the West, of course, the huge change was 9/11, which demonstrated that there were other forces in the world, filling the hole that was left by the collapse of communism. Then there was the great economic crash of 2008. Together, these two events persuaded a lot of writers that there were really important things to write about beyond day-to-day culture, or family life, or romance, or all of those traditional subjects. So, as the amount of new plays increased, most of those new plays were more political than they would have been twenty or thirty years before.

There was a rise in various forms of fact-based drama – verbatim drama, interview-based drama – which was obviously journalistic and political. An emphasis on diversity also came to the fore in 2010s, with plays that had a broadly social and political bent. I am trying to avoid the word 'message', but they were about society and were calling for change. For me, as a political playwright, that was a really optimistic scenario.

At the same time, the Conservative-led coalition government was elected in 2010, and one of the many things it did was to cut back severely on funding for the arts. There was a big cut to start with, but it has continued, as a kind of salami-slicing tactic, ever since.[2] Now we have got to a point where a lot of theatres are seriously constrained in the amount of work they can do, including new work. The other thing that I think is often not understood by people who talk about these things solely from the perspective of London is that London theatre is quite well financed by the Arts Council and so only needs a small amount of its subsidy from local government. Outside London, the proportion of local authority funding was much higher, so it meant that theatres like the Birmingham Repertory Theatre – my own theatre – was hit by a double blow: its Arts Council funding was frozen, which, over time, is a cut; and its money from the City of Birmingham, which had been quite considerable, was cut to the bone. For regional theatres, that financial problem is still growing. The second problem, of course, was the pandemic, which closed theatres down for the best part of two years.

In terms of new writing, lockdown meant that theatres had a huge backlog of work. At the same time, the commissioning of new plays is quite an easy cut because it goes unnoticed for two or three years. There is also the danger of a move towards more conservative programming, with theatres wanting to programme revivals because they are safer [in terms of audience numbers]. Finally, the latest round of Arts Council changes has been bad for a number of companies who do new work.

So there are a number of problems that we can perhaps talk about, but, in general, if you look at the overall story of the British theatre on a twenty-year basis, then it has been a very good period for political theatre. If you look at it on a five- or three-year basis, however, then it is currently in a crisis.

You mentioned the period of the Conservative-led coalition government. They were the architects of the austerity programme, weren't they?

Correct. It was not that the arts and theatre were particularly singled out, but the budget for the arts was cut and also the budget for

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local authorities, that is, for local government. Those cuts were very hurtful to theatre.

You have been a prolific playwright throughout your career, and you have always been known as a political playwright. How do you react to this?

Well, I can't complain, in that 'prolific' means that you have written a lot and I have written a lot. And almost all of it has gone on. In terms of being a political playwright, I have never wanted to write plays about private life – I have always been fascinated by the processes of public life, of meetings and political campaigns, wars and diplomacy. I have written the occasional autobiographical play, but not very many. However, because I have lived a political life, when I write an autobiographical play, it is going to be as much in the political realm as in the private realm. There are a lot of brilliant playwrights who are able to write plays about love, romance, and family, and I let them get on with it and write plays about the things that I think I write well. So my response is that I am very happy to accept the label.

What is political theatre for you, or what should it be? What are your views on the tension between politics and theatre?

My view of political theatre has changed in terms of both what I want to do and what political theatre is doing, and those are not necessarily the same thing. For the last decade, there has been an upsurge of political theatre, largely inspired by identity politics: women's theatre, Black theatre, and theatre written by disabled people. A lot of those plays are very angry, very didactic, and overtly political. They remind me very much of the kind of plays that we were writing in the early 1970s. I do not write like that any more and I do not want to. But I am very admiring of, and excited by, the energy of writers in their twenties and thirties who are writing clearly, passionately, and angrily about the world as they see it.

As I said at the beginning, one of the reasons this has happened is because of events in the outside world. For instance, 9/11 provoked anguish among a lot of people on the progressive side of politics. They were obviously not sympathetic with the politics of the Taliban or Al-Qaeda, but, on the other hand, they were not happy with Americans invading Middle Eastern countries. I think one of the reasons for the move towards verbatim theatre was because it was an attractive form for writers who didn't always know what they thought about these matters, so made their plays through reportage.

There was then the upsurge of political activity that was partially caused by the crash of 2008: the Occupy Movement, the Arab Spring, and so on, and, later, the #MeToo movement and the resurgence of Black Lives Matter in 2020 following the murder of George Floyd. In other words, it wasn't just that these big, important things were happening in the world, but that the theatre was ready to take up the baton. There were young playwrights, particularly women playwrights, including a gratifying number of Black and Asian young women, who wanted to write about those subjects.

As a result, the current theatre is engaging with the world that we know very positively. There has also been an expansion in what things can happen in a theatre, which makes the theatre more able to intervene directly in political life, and an easier back-and-forth between theatre and television. The TV series *Succession*, for example, has a stable of British playwrights, and playwrights like Jack Thorne, James Graham, and Mike Bartlett all write for TV. Because television is so good at the moment, that conversation between the media is very positive.

For many years, you have been fighting for the legal and economic rights of playwrights. Could you provide a summary of that struggle?

When I started, there were no playwriting-negotiated agreements to which theatres had to adhere, and because we were all young and militant, we said this must change. As a result, in the mid-1970s a group of playwrights set up the Theatre Writers' Union, with the idea, first of all, to increase the amount of money spent on new writing by the Arts Council. However,

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the National Theatre was about to open, so we decided to try and negotiate an agreement with them, which we hoped would then filter down to all the other theatres in the country. We worked together with the Writers' Guild of Great Britain to negotiate playwriting agreements in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They are still there today, and they get revised from time to time. They were intended to give playwrights a basic set of financial terms and conditions.

Social rights and economic rights.

Yes, exactly. There were four principles: first, that playwrights should be paid something while they are writing. The traditional way that playwrights were paid – which is still partially the case [in Britain] and is certainly the case in other countries – is by royalties, where you get a percentage of the box office. Obviously that can be months and years after you have done the writing. So the first principle was that writers should get a commission fee; a sum of money to live on while they are actually writing the play.

The second principle was that there should be a royalty on top of the commission fee. In some cases, the upfront fee was set against royalties, so if you are in a big thousand-seat theatre where you are going to make a lot of money, your initial fee is taken off the royalty. However, if you are in a small theatre, you get the commission fee and then you get the royalty on top of it.

The third principle was what we called the 'Bill of Rights', which guaranteed textual integrity. This meant that the director and the actors could not change the script without your permission and consultation, and it gave writers approval of the choice of the leading actors and the designer and the director. This principle included the right to attend rehearsals and be paid for being there.

The fourth principle was to do with residuals. Before the agreement, if a theatre staged the premiere production of your play, they had a right to a percentage of your future earnings from that play. We said that we understood the principle, since it was the theatre that was taking a risk, but that it was unfair to playwrights who might earn a little money from a couple of other productions to have to pay a percentage of that to the original theatre. Perhaps a play would be staged at the National Theatre and then be done in a couple of repertory theatres or on the radio, but it was not going to earn a huge amount of money. We established a threshold figure you can earn without having to pay residuals, and then, if you earn above that money, you pay a percentage of it. Currently, this threshold is about £35,000.

Those four principles are really important. We are now working on negotiating terms for digital delivery, which started a decade or so ago when the National Theatre started streaming shows to cinemas, and then, under lockdown, other theatres began to stream archival recordings. Because everybody was feeling very generous at the time, we allowed theatres to do that for free, but now writers are being paid properly for it – we are negotiating general terms so they are paid as they would be for live performance.

In addition to all of this, I have been a campaigner for the profession of playwriting. There was a period when the idea of devising, as an alternative to traditional (what we call 'single-voice') playwriting, became both popular and highly moralized. A lot of university scholars were saying that individual playwriting was hierarchical and undemocratic, and also phallocentric, fascist, and authoritarian. I have spent quite a lot of time campaigning against that point of view. I have tried to be a defender of playwrights and have always been very active in the Writers' Guild of Great Britain, who have just been good enough to give me an Outstanding Contribution award for my work as a playwright, but also for my work for playwrights.

The UK has been through a lot in the last decade, including Brexit, austerity, the cost of living crisis, and the pandemic. In the light of these crises and political turmoil, what are the emerging needs of playwrights and theatres in the UK?

Everybody always says that it would be great if British theatre was financed to the level that German and Scandinavian theatre is, and part

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of the answer to your question is that theatre is now in danger of becoming unviable. Particularly outside London, a lot of theatre is in danger of becoming unviable financially. It seems that each generation has to refight the battle for the idea of subsidy of the arts, and particularly theatre – it would be lovely to feel that we would get a government to which we didn't need to make that argument again. As a result, there are a lot of things happening. The outgoing Director of the Watford Palace Theatre, Brigid Lamour, has suggested that the age of a theatre like Watford doing six original productions per year is over. She proposes that her successor shouldn't be an Artistic Director, but should instead oversee the Christmas pantomime with the rest of the work being made by the community. I think that is a very dangerous position to take.

Of course, it is right to listen to what the public wants. On the other hand, what the public usually wants is something that it has enjoyed before, and if the art form is to progress, it has to produce material that goes beyond what has been done before. So there has to be a balance. In the same way, there is now a proper move towards higher funding for the theatre outside London, but the most recent [Arts Council] funding round has highlighted some of the ongoing problems with this policy.[3] In a situation of consistently reduced funding, increasing funding outside London means reducing funding inside London, with all sorts of effects that you might not have intended, such as halving the amount of opera provision in the capital and closing down places like Hampstead Theatre. I hope that out of this period will come a redefinition of some aspects of theatre for the better.

You have recently used the phrase 'Primark playwrights'. Could you explain why you needed to make this intervention and clarify this development from a historical perspective?

I have a writer friend called Amanda Whittington who came up with the idea of the 'Primark play'. Primark is a company which produces cheap clothes that people often buy and only wear once. She observed that a lot of new plays were staged once and never done again, which she called a 'Primark play'. I was talking to another playwright, Barney Norris, who observed that companies like the Bush and the Royal Court used to have a stable of playwrights, who would expect their work to be considered for production in those theatres. Now, however, playwrights are finding that they are staged once and not commissioned again. Hence the phrase 'Primark playwright'.

The reason for widening the cohort of playwrights is very laudable – it is to increase diversity. If you have a fixed stable of playwrights, that is obviously closing the door on new playwrights, and if you are freezing the playwriting cohort as it has been in this country, then that means an over-proportion of white men. On the other hand, if you have no stable at all, if everybody is only staged once, then people do not have careers. Some might be lucky and write a play for the Royal Court and then have their next at the National. But that becomes less and less likely as the number of slots available for new plays narrows. What happens instead is that exciting new playwrights stop writing plays.

I was calling for a balance between the two: if it is all stable, then there is no way in for new playwrights, but if there's no stable, then there is no career for new playwrights to go on to. The other thing which is important is that we keep remembering that contemporary plays should be revived, otherwise playwrights won't be able to sustain careers.

For the last question, could you please tell us about your recent work and what you think about the future of the UK theatre?

Well, let me start with myself. I am no longer able to guarantee that the next play that I write will be staged at the National Theatre or by the Royal Shakespeare Company. It is more difficult getting plays on, and particularly difficult for old white men. While I can understand that, you would expect me to have mixed feelings about it.

At the beginning of the last decade, I was working on a couple of projects which have still not come to fruition. In the second half of

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the decade, however, I decided to do a one-man show [*Trying It On*, 2018]. It was performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Other Place theatre, and on tour, and it occupied my life for the best part of three years. It taught me a lot about playmaking.

I wrote an adaptation of Charles Dickens's *Nicholas Nickleby* for the RSC in 1980, and in 2017 they asked me to come back and write an adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*. I enjoyed doing it very much and the show has now had three runs at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford [2017, 2018, and 2022] and may have a future life. The RSC has also revived a play of mine about political defection [*Maydays*]. It was first staged in 1983 and was brought back in 2018, and from that I've written a three-part radio version of the play [broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in March 2023]. So I've had a relatively active time during lockdown and since.[4]

I also spent a lot of time on union work for the Writers' Guild because I thought it was really important to make sure that playwrights were able to survive. We negotiated guidelines for theatres regarding how they dealt with playwrights during the lockdown period. We also set up a project called the New Play Commission Scheme, partly financed by the Arts Council but largely by very generous donations from playwrights. The scheme financed theatres to issue commissions for eighteen new plays that would not have been commissioned otherwise.

And what about the future of the UK theatre?

Well, I have talked quite a lot about the problems of the theatre, so this is a bit repetitive. But I think the new generation of political playwrights is often female, often from ethnic minorities, and other minorities like disabled playwrights. The New Play Commission Scheme had a very large number of writers from one or more of those groups, by design. I just hope that playwrights can have whole-life careers. One of the many tragedies about Sarah Kane's premature death is that we'll never know what she would have written at forty or sixty. Look at how creative Caryl Churchill still is in her eighties. So, if we can find a way of making sure that the current generation is able to make a career out of it, the future is very bright. If that does not happen, then the future is less bright.

Notes and References

1. David Edgar is referring here to the 'Theatre Spectatorship and Value Attribution Project', which was carried out by the University of Warwick in 2013–14, in collaboration with Royal Holloway, University of London, Manchester Metropolitan University, and the British Theatre Consortium, and was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. For more information, see <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/scapvc/theatre/staff/professor_janelle_reinelt/spectatorship/>.
2. Arts Council England's overall budget was cut by 30 per cent in 2010. For a comprehensive overview of cuts to arts funding between 2010 and 2015, including cuts to local government spending on the arts, see Adrian Harvey, *Funding Arts and Culture in a Time of Austerity* (London: Arts Council England and New Local Government Network, 2016).
3. Arts Council England introduced its 'Levelling Up for Culture' policy in November 2022, which aligned with the UK government's 'Levelling Up' project. It signalled a major shift in how funding was distributed, with more money being invested in projects and institutions outside of London in order to spread the funds across the country.
4. Since this interview, David Edgar has had two new plays scheduled for production in 2024: *Here in America* opens at the Orange Tree Theatre in London on 14 September, and *The New Real* at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Other Place, in Stratford, on 3 October.

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