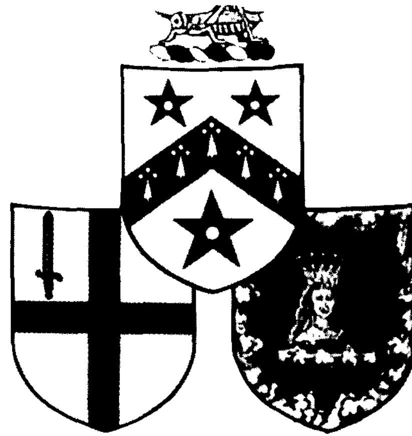
GRESHAM

COLLEGE



SEX, POLITICS (AND RELIGION?):

Contemporary Plays and Classic Revivals in British Theatre

A Lecture by

PROFESSOR LYNETTE HUNTER MA PhD
Gresham Professor of Rhetoric
with PETER LICHTENFELS

14 October 1998

GRESHAM COLLEGE

Policy & Objectives

An independently funded educational institution, Gresham College exists

- to continue the free public lectures which have been given for 400 years, and to reinterpret the 'new learning' of Sir Thomas Gresham's day in contemporary terms;
- to engage in study, teaching and research, particularly in those disciplines represented by the Gresham Professors;
- to foster academic consideration of contemporary problems;
- to challenge those who live or work in the City of London to engage in intellectual debate on those subjects in which the City has a proper concern; and to provide a window on the City for learned societies, both national and international.

Gresham College, Barnard's Inn Hall, Holborn, London EC1N 2HH
Tel: 0171 831 0575 Fax: 0171 831 5208
e-mail: enquiries@gresham.ac.uk

Sex, Politics (and Religion?)

Professor Lynette Hunter, with Peter Lichtenfels

I should preface this lecture with a disclaimer: unlike the other lectures that I have given, and will give, at Gresham, today's lecture and that of next week are coming from my experience as a fairly ordinary theatre-goer over the past 15 years. Once upon a time I had a lot to do with the stage, directing, stage managing, makeup, and acting, even a little professional acting, and for many years I wrote reviews for newspapers and magazines. But for the past few years I have gone to the theatre much as anyone else with a particular interest might, and from that experience I have gathered an increasingly long list of questions. Most pressing is the question: why do I find so much current theatre in England without challenge or enjoyment.

Unlike the other lectures, the current duo do not attempt to offer leading-edge research. Instead, I must thank all the directors, actors, writers and designers who have offered observations, comments and analyses in response to some of my questions – the list not including stage managers, for which I apologise, nor dramaturges, that significant absence from the British theatre scene. In particular I want to thank theatre director Peter Lichtenfels for all his help, and Maria Delgado for useful and informative suggestions.

What I would like to do is turn to two waves of British theatre over the past 30 years, that of new writing and of classic revivals, to build a background for some of my questions – I'll be talking about other areas next week. Both areas under discussion this week are concerned with political authority, and more and more with the regulation of sexuality. Possibly the only thesis I think I would like to advance is that increasingly sexuality is being used as the site for examining political authority. Further I would also like to pay some attention to the growth of artistic conservatism that grew up under the Thatcher government in the 80s, especially alongside the government's attempt to reign in the theatre during that period, which had enormous impact on the development of theatre for today.

If we look back on the 70s, it's clear that there was an extraordinary amount of immediate, in-your-face political theatre going on. This is the decade of David Hare, David Edgar, Howard Barker, Howard Brenton and Caryl Churchill. Because the repertory companies did not produce new work, and had not begun to organise the studio spaces, many of their shows were initially put on by the Royal Court or by small touring companies such as Foco Novo, Joint Stock, Freehold, 7.84, or David Hare's Portable Theatre. These companies were almost by definition groups of people committed to something political or social or aesthetic – the post WWII equivalent of the early 20th century manifesto movements, although only Barker and Churchill could be said to follow the emphasis of those earlier movements on the questioning of established formal and dramatic structures and their ideological implications. Yet by the early 80s far less of this work was around, and my first question asks 'why'?

WHY THE DEARTH OF SMALL COMPANIES

WHY THE DEARTH OF TOURING COMPANIES

One reason concerns the touring groups, which suffered systematic destruction during the 80s, at the hands of local councils squeezed by the new government cuts. Not only did overtly critical political companies such as 7.84 (7% of the population own 84% of the wealth) come to an end during this period, but also companies such as Gay Sweatshop. The demise of the GLC, which had an admirable record of funding small group projects, meant that many London companies and, importantly, London venues for small productions such as the Half Moon Theatre or the Open Space, were forced to close. Not that this is conspiratorial. Local government cuts are easiest to make on what appear to be 'leisure' facilities, but the net effect was that committed individuals lost an important structure within which to work. This outcome may or may not have been predicted. At roughly the same time, early to mid 80s, the Literature section of the Arts Council voted itself out of existence (an occurrence now happily rectified). Even before they did so, their policy, according to their chief officer at the time, was not to fund writers unless they were well-established, because, after all, one would not know if they were any good if they were brand new to the job.

More interesting, the funding did not disappear entirely. Much of it was reinvested in buildings, central civic monuments to culture, with the civic council committee structure. Theatre boards found themselves becoming much more powerful, as they became responsible for the large capital investment in what were often city centre buildings and land, and ultimately answerable to a government with a much more hands-on approach to policy implementation that involved 5-year inspections and assessments.

This kind of institutional theatre, as I will discuss next week, can work in many different ways, but the primary drive of English theatre boards has been to producing a commercially viable building. Again, this is not necessarily conspiratorial or intended, but with boards of some larger theatres being made up of as many as 27 people, the artistic and fiscal conservatism of policy was almost inevitable. In fact what happened was directly parallel to what happened to printing in the 16th century when control of the press was effected largely through control over the printing houses: if you control these capital-intensive locations, you don't have to worry about controlling the writer, the actor, the director. Indeed, the post of Artistic Director, which usually ran in parallel with an Administrator but with the weighting toward the Artistic Director, at the end of the 80s changed into the now common role of an Executive Director appointed by a board, with the Executive Director in turn appointing a director for a season or a production, or indeed working at longer term with them but still remaining the primary contact with the board.

Some of the freedom of the productions in the 70s resulted from the aura generated from the end to theatre censorship in 1968. But as the case of Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain*, testifies, the mood was quite different in the early 80s. As Richard Boon, points out in his excellent study of Brenton's work, the media response to the play was 'verging on the hysterical'. To refresh our memories, Brenton's play uses a scene of explicit homosexual rape as part of its exploration of the brutalities human beings are capable of in the name of greed, power and colonisation. Having being tipped off by journalists from the *Daily Mail*, Sir Horace Cutler, conservative leader of the then GLC and member of the National Theatre Board, went to attend the last preview of the play. He and colleagues staged a walkout shortly before the first interval, and the following day Cutler sent a telegram to Peter Hall calling the play a disgrace to the National Theatre, and threatening the theatre's funding. In the event the GLC did then decide against increasing its grant to the theatre, effectively creating a 15% cut in subsidy. In the aftermath, the play became a focus for a number of right-wing pressure groups, and notoriously, the object of Mary Whitehouse's prosecution of the director Michael Bogdanov. A loophole in the 1968 Theatres Act on censorship allowed the prosecution a case, but they unexpectedly withdrew it, leaving the judge having delivered a ruling that is still in place, a ruling as Richard Boon puts it, 'in conflict with the spirit and substance' of the Act. I offer the detail of this case to indicate how effectively the shift toward buildings and away from people, can affect the kind of theatre that occurs in our society, not the least because the theatre building becomes a site for big 'P' politics: Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* lists a board membership of the National Theatre as a prerequisite to political credibility. *The Romans* still has not had any other professional production.

IS THERE STILL CENSORSHIP ON THEATRE. IF SO WHAT DOES IT TELL US ABOUT OUR SOCIETY?

At the same time that smaller companies were going to the wall, and theatres were becoming buildings, many of the high profile men in the theatre world, actors, directors, writers, were moving into opera, film and television. Again, I would like to ask 'why'? The theatre is a distinct medium. Opera does not work the same way, and film and television are quite different media. So why do we have this consistent shift sometimes into two-track careers, but certainly away from the theatre alone? Was it because these men were approaching, if not well in to middle age, and looking for a more substantial income, thinking about their pensions (we must not forget that these people are self-employed)? Was it because the theatre was gradually losing status? After all, it was also during this period that women began to move into the theatre as directors, writers and designers. This may have been a result of several years of hard won equal opportunities lobbying from the women's movement, or it may be that women are simply more willing to take poorly paid, unstable and part time jobs. And we know from many examples in other places such as computing or medicine, that a sure sign of the downgrading of any profession is the ease with which it will allow women entry.

WHERE DO WOMEN FIT IN BRITISH THEATRE? WHY SO FEW DIRECTORS AND DESIGNERS? (AND WRITERS?)

Perhaps a number of the men shifting their careers saw film and television at least as a way of getting into contact with a much larger audience? It may be significant that much political drama of the 80s happened on television: Alan Bleasdale's *Boys from the Blackstuff* or his *GBH*, the series *A Very British Coup*, or Bob Peck's record of acting in television drama concerned with the anti-nuclear movement, ecology and so on. But apart from Bleasdale's phrase 'Gizza job', the keynote of actor Bernard Hill's desperate attempt to keep his family together, which became for a while a signal criticism of a government that had also just said 'get on yer bike', the television productions of political drama were often double-edged. Yes, they could be immediate, challenging millions of people to reassessments, but at the same time they existed in a medium that was contained inside a box in people's living rooms, could be turned down, turned off, taped, and taped over when the excitement had died away, in other words, it could be controlled.

IS TELEVISION REALLY REACHING A MASS AUDIENCE WITH A POLITICAL MESSAGE, OR IS IT SIMPLY GETTING DILUTED?

The one thing that you cannot do with theatre is control its physicality. The actor is there, in front of you, in person, with her/his body mediating all the social, spiritual and sexual crises of the moment. From the earliest records of theatre activity like the Dionysian movements that inspired the classical Greek theatre, through to the Renaissance with its continual anxieties over the body of the actor -- the labourer's body that might impersonate a king! the man's body that might behave like a woman! and then be a woman behaving like a man! -- the theatre has consistently celebrated the potential of human beings for change, even radical change, by putting the human body in interaction on stage and worrying about and rejoicing in its ambivalence. Television does other important things as a medium, but the audience is in a very different relation to the performances it mediates. What it does allow for is a scope that modern dramatists do not seem to have been able to imagine for the contemporary stage.

Coincident with the shift in career structure and the change in the approach to theatre funding in the 80s, came an exponential increase in the production of classic revivals, especially of Shakespearean drama. One of the first theatres to make the breakthrough in the 70s into large scale classic drama was the Glasgow Citizen's Theatre, where Philip Prowse, Giles Havergal and Robert David MacDonald, began staging a series of mainly Jacobean tragedies. Prowse's radically experimental design, was to produce visually spectacular shows – parading frocks, as it has been called. This did not happen overnight, but after a period of disastrous audience attendance. The theatre decided, in response, to see what would happen if Prowse was given a free imaginative hand, and if the tickets were reduced to 50p. Audiences began to come, learned to love it, and gradually (and reluctantly) ticket prices were increased to £3 over an 8 year period. If we think for just a moment of the distinction made by Robert LePage, when he was speaking here in Gresham two years ago, between the English word 'audience' and the word used in nearly every other European country, 'spectator', it may just be that for the first time a British audience was being asked to think in terms of the visual as the most important conveyor of meaning. By 1981 Théâtre de Complicité had arrived with its combination of mime and words, significantly, as I shall suggest next week, coming from training in a European context with Jacques Lecoq, Phillipe Gaulier and Monica Pagnaux. Complicité, along with Cheek by Jowl have, arguably, had the most profound influence on new directions in British theatre over the past 15 to 20 years. And, as Maria Delgado pointed out to me, Michael Billington reported last December that both companies have talked of leaving Britain, with Declan Donnellan being offered the directorship of the Moscow Arts Theatre.

WHY DOES BRITISH THEATRE LACK THE VISUAL?

The Cits' use of the visual drew on religious spectacle, of which there is much, but also on the then recent experience of 10 to 15 years' of rock concerts, and slightly longer of television. For those of us who taught through from the 70s to the 80s, the sudden sophistication of students in the area of visual narrative, a sophistication that seemed just to 'arrive' in the 80s, was startling. Of course it was related to the visual education that this generation had received for the previous 20 years in television and film, gained inexorably by watching these media nearly every day of their lives, and often for several hours a day. Yet parallel with this intense visual education, the 80s saw huge cutbacks in the Theatre in Education programme, and I would suggest that many young people were as a result learning not how

Education programme, and I would suggest that many young people were as a result learning not how to become theatre spectators, but theatre voyeurs. An informative parallel here would be with theatre in Europe, especially eastern European countries, where there are extensive theatre companies for young children, children, young teenagers and youths, which instill a habit of going to the theatre, as well as offering an education in a wide variety of theatre techniques and skills. Audience skills are learned, not natural.

But spectacle alone cannot explain the upsurge in classic revivals of the 80s. Classics provide both audience and theatre company with the possibility of exploring cultural traditions at a time when traditions are radically changing and under threat. They offer a clear modernist analogue for the stage, in that they convey a structure that can then be dismantled or deconstructed to whatever extent is desired, yet their relatively stable text always insists on some predictable form. And the 80s were intensely uncertain times, particularly uncertain economic times, framed by a growing awareness of the global implications of British interests, and a profoundly authoritarian government. One point made by Maria Delgado, is that the production of classics allows the director and others working on a production, to work with no playwright looking over their shoulders. While this can be liberating, it also removes one of the primary tensions that links a play with immediate social issues, with the result that the production can also move toward the banal and the making palatable. On the other hand, the large casts and often large landscapes of classic drama allow for a breadth of inquiry that contemporary drama, curtailed by finances to very small casts and short rehearsal periods, does not encourage. The use of classic drama, implicitly conservative, can become subversive. It permits people to criticise in oblique ways that cannot immediately be dismissed, and may even make possible the saying of something that otherwise could not be spoken. In a sense the classics offer an allegorical ground for sorting out contemporary problems – allegory always being the genre for responding to political authoritarianism and control. Writers such as David Pownall, Caryl Churchill or Claire Luckham, tapped directly into allegory in their new plays, as did writers such as John Byrne with his curious hyperreality of the surreal domestic drama, a combination of Beckett and Pinter. These 80s writers are quite different from the 70s realism of say Tom McGrath and Jimmy Boyle's play *The Hard Man*, although they draw immediately from the one dramatist whose work continues to inform current writing, Edward Bond.

CAN THERE BE POLITICAL PLAYS FOR THE 90S?

In pragmatic terms, classic revivals were also better suited to the theatre as a 'building'. They needed larger casts, and more money, which could only be earned by bigger theatres. Furthermore, these large scale dramas often covered the extra costs by working through co-productions. For various reasons that I would like to expand on in the next lecture, co-productions are often more conservative in approach, and frequently aim to glorify the 'production' rather than the play. But more immediately, a classic drama is much easier to put before a board: it is traditionally tried and tested, safe, recognised by the audience. This was so especially in the case of Shakespearean drama. A number of factors have lead to the predominance of Shakespeare productions in the UK, one being simply the long history of the tradition which has given it an authority. As Gary Taylor has argued in Shakespeare Re- ..... the playwright's work has, over the last four centuries become a repository of national pride, and the little-England nationalism of the 80s could call on this identification.

After WWII the English education system began the policy of having a play by Shakespeare in the final years of mandatory education to the age of 16: 'O' level or the current GCSE. This means that since 1950 the one cultural denominator for the entire English population is Shakespeare; every child in the country has been exposed to the printed drama of this playwright, even if some of them haven't actually read it. By the 80s, the generation that had first been experimented on in this way was into its 30s, and was well-placed to pay the higher price of tickets to the larger theatres that were emerging. Shakespeare was now so much part of English culture that even touring companies could find finance to exist if they focused on his plays. Of course, once in the programme of a 'building' or a touring company, the actors, directors and designers can do what they want with it, and many productions from the early 80s were radically exciting. Nowadays they seem produced for tourism – more on that next week. But whether exciting or not, these productions are implicitly compromised by traditional structure. Just like television they are caught in a doublehanded rhetoric of conservatism and exploration.

A key feature of the classic revivals has been the exploration of sexuality. Most of the classic revivals have been taken from the English renaissance, restoration and eighteenth century canon, in other words they come from the 'modern' period, and have some points in common with our own and some not. They offer a titillating combination of something 'other' than ourselves yet part of ourselves: Les Liaisons Dangereuses would be a case in point, or the substantial discussion about homosexuality that has been generated by productions of Shakespeare. In common with a number of new plays from the 90s, it appears that sexuality has become the new ground of interest for contemporary audiences. Yes, *The Romans in Britain* used a sexual act to metaphorise the rape and destruction of colonialism, but these plays from the 90s focus on the regulation of sexuality itself, from which we may deduce ideas about political authority. From political plays in which sexuality is a subplot to illuminate or extend the political, the focus has shifted to plays about sexuality, in which politics is a subplot to illuminate or extend our understanding of the regulation of sexuality.

Two points: first, the regulation of sexuality is of course political. Yet, second, the structure of the 90s' plays implies that the political is a stable, unchanging set of topoi underlying sexuality. It is not 'natural' but its rules, conventions, understandings, are *naturalised*, inescapable even if man-made. This structure does not imply the big political question of the early 20th century -- how an individual comes to terms with the state, the anarchy/totalitarianism divide of philosophy, literature, art and politics until well after WWII. Instead, it takes state control and regulation as a given and asks how we can survive, move and possibly change within it. I see a problem with this and would like to take a glancing look at three productions that caused outcry in their time. Edward Bond's *Saved* outraged audiences in the early 1970s because it showed the torture and stoning to death of a baby in a pram. However, it was not the death of the baby that was so appalling about the play, but the lack of individual action. The characters appear to have bound themselves to a place where they can take no moral action, and Bond's message was clearly that they should not have done so and that we have got a choice to do things differently. During the early 80s, *The Romans*, which I have already spoken of, is a play of enormous despair. The individuals are overwhelmed by actions dictated by convention, and cope by joking about their inability to do anything else. In fact, Bond told Brenton that the outrage the play caused was due to the jokes. Without them, the play would have offered some tragic catharsis, with them, and the self-consciousness they introduce, there is nothing but a desert of inaction.

The play from the 90s that has caused similar response is Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and F***ing*, which disgusted many theatregoers with its depiction of greed and sadomasochistic rape. Yet the underlying politics of *Shopping and F***ing* are directly parallel to Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*, depicting as they do the games people play to survive within a manipulative and seemingly inescapable set of controls. The play also works with Orwell's tension of 'at a distance' manipulation and its distinction from 'real life' manipulation, and the moral and ethical questions raised by that difference. The sexual focus of Ravenhill's work, which many other writers from the 90s such as Sarah Kane or Kevin Elyot use, certainly responds to a cultural and social anxiety, and inextricably involves the audience – often in ways that individuals within it do not appreciate. But at least there is involvement. Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money*, which also makes an attack on greed and money, was simply co-opted by the very people it criticised. City traders took their champagne to the Royal Court in order to celebrate this satire on themselves. Similarly, David Hare's early 90s trilogy, particularly *The Absence of War* which satirised the Labour party, has resulted, according to Hare himself, in a knighthood from those at the heart of his analysis. Audience responses to Ravenhill's work have not been quite so co-opting, but the sexuality topos does permit people to evade the political undercurrents. One theatregoer reported on an audience response to the touring production, in which the play's reputation preceded it, and said that there was a small but vocal part of the audience clearly there only to raucously encourage the sexual violence.

WHAT IS GOING ON WITH THIS USE OF THE SEXUAL? DOES IT JUST TITILLATE?

The difference between the political and the sexual as central topics may be that we still expect our politicians to have some connection with truth and pragmatic change, whereas we increasingly view sexuality as a type of social display. We know that how we engage our sexuality is socially constructed, but we like to think of politicians as people who can construct society. I'll return to this theme in the final two lectures of this year, but I'd like to conclude with a question: **where has the direct political theatre gone?**

Perhaps the best way of answering this question is to reverse the questions I have already asked. Rather than 'Why the Dearth of Small Companies' or 'Why the Dearth of Touring Companies', both of which have brought so much vitality into British theatre, we should ask, 'Why were there so many in the 70s?'. The 70s saw a flowering of cultural confidence that was ironic, given that it followed the birth of widespread political cynicism after 1968. The decade saw vigourous attempts on cultural traditions, even if in an awareness of the limitations of those attempts. The country itself was engulfed in a sentimental national confidence which, again ironically, encouraged it to allow itself to support the arts quite widely. In parallel with that confidence was the tacit permission for a political landscape in which people felt they could be effective rather than merely observers – the women's movement would be a good example of such activism.

But today, English culture at any rate is indecisive, as if our tentativeness about Europe has left us betwixt and between. The ridiculous shows of military strength in the 80s, a toytown version of the 50s fiascos, harked back, didn't look forward. And art with energy is art that looks forward, has something to say and wants to find expression for it. The art encouraged in the 80s was art for profit, therefore necessarily predictable, a known risk, as if the riskiness of the surrounding social unrest and unease made 'safe art' a necessity. Today there is a growing sense of 'difficulty' in face of an increasingly diverse population. The gradual realisation that one group cannot speak for all, has had an effect on political theatre not just on politics. And not only have the public begun to claim more diversity, but those in power have changed: who are they in the 90s? has political theatre disappeared simply because nations are no longer the policy making power sources they were, but subject to international and global structures? have we lost our nerve in face of such vast structures? do we know too much about them, so they render us ineffective? or do we know too little?

The next lecture will move on to looking precisely at some of the ways in which British theatre has responded to the new global consciousness.

© Lynette Hunter and Peter Lichtenfels

Texts referred to or mentioned:

Michael Billington, the *Guardian*, 5 December, 1997.
Edward Bond, *Saved*, in *Plays: One*, London: Methuen, 1977.
Richard Boon, *Brenton The Playwright*, London: Methuen, 1991.
Howard Brenton, *The Romans in Britain*, London: Methuen, 1980.
Caryl Churchill, *Serious Money*, in *Plays:2*, London: Methuen, 1996.
Kevin Elyot, *My Night with Reg*, London: Nick Hern Books, 1994.
David Hare, *The Absence of War*, London: Faber, 1993.
'Why I Knelt to Blair', the *Guardian* Review, 4 September, 1998.
Sarah Kane, *Blasted & Phaedra's Love*, London : Methuen, 1996.
Mark Ravenhill, *Shopping and F***ing*, London: Methuen, 1996.