Chris Megson. *Modern British Playwriting: The 1970s*. London: Methuen Drama, 2012, xii + 299 pp., $90.00 (hardback), $27.95 (paperback), $26.99 (PDF ebook).
Jane Milling. *Modern British Playwriting: The 1980s*. London: Methuen Drama, 2012, xii + 313 pp., $90.00 (hardback), $27.95 (paperback), $26.99 (PDF ebook).
Aleks Sierz. *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s*. London: Methuen Drama, 2012. X + 277 pp., $90.00 (hardback), $27.95 (paperback), $26.99 (PDF ebook).

The three volumes reviewed here, *Modern British Playwriting: The 1970s* edited by Chris Megson, *Modern British Playwriting: The 1980s* edited by Jane Milling and *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s* edited by Aleks Sierz, are part of a series of books published by Methuen Drama, which, as the series editors, Richard Boon and Philip Roberts, assure in their "General Preface," "seek to characterize the nature of modern British playwriting from the 1950s to the end of the first decade of this new century" (Megson ix). The volumes on the 50s by David Pattie, the 60s by Steve Nicholson and the years 2000–2009 by Dan Rebellato (forthcoming) are not part of this review.

Following the same formal make-up, each volume consists of six main parts: 1) "Introduction," where the social, political and cultural context of each decade is presented; 2) "Theatre in the 70s [80s and 90s, respectively]" introducing the developments in theatre during the given decade; 3) "Introducing the Playwrights" (this part is omitted in Sierz' volume), which provides some background information about the authors, whose work is then described in the next part, 4) "Playwrights and Plays." The last two parts are 5) "Documents, which consists of various materials concerning the playwrights, such as interviews with them, recollections, or short texts written by the artists and 6) "Afterword," in which the decade is given one last overview and linked to the next decade.

The internal organization of each part is also comparable, although here there are more variations between the volumes, particularly in the chapter concerning the playwrights and their plays. In the following I will review the volumes collectively, chapter by chapter.

"Introduction"

What is definitely worth highlighting with regard to the introduction part is its unusual form, written in a fast-paced style, often in the form of lists that chronicle the most relevant facts, dates, names and various other items related to the period. The individual sections often have telling titles, such as "Things we bought," "Things we said," "Words we made up," "What things cost," or "Things we ate and drank," to name a few examples. By listing concrete objects

the sections give a very tangible, almost material feel to the introduction. And so in the first section, "Things we bought," which illustrates everyday life in the 1990s, Sierz, who seems to be very fond of the format and uses the listing device much more frequently than Megson or Milling do, itemizes the following objects:

> Braun alarm clock, Dyson hoover, IKEA furniture, Bondi Blue iMac personal computer, red AIDS ribbon, Sony Playstation, bottle of Evian water, thong, combat trousers, Cazal sunglasses, paperback of Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights*, Aeron office chair, Ecstasy pills, Jimmy Choo shoes, Wonder bra, Nokia mobile phone, poppers, Nintendo Gameboy, Big Issue magazine, cyclist anti-smog mask, Poundland bargain, Agent Provocateur lingerie, ethical knitted hat, Reebok pumps, plastic cartoon lunchbox, rollerblades. (Sierz, *Modern British* 4)

Jane Milling, in turn, includes a very extensive, two-page-long catalogue of song titles, subdividing them into sections such as "Big-hair rock," "Black hip-hop," "Songs of protest," "British post-punk/new wave/electronic/synthpop" or "Songs that you couldn't avoid in the 1980s." Under the latter heading, for example, she lists:

> Michel Jackson 'Thriller' (1983), 'Billie Jean' (1983), 'Bad' (1987); Phil Collins 'In the Air Tonight' (1981), 'Take a Look at Me Now' (1984); Stevie Wonder 'I Just Called to Say I Love You' (1984); Prince 'Purple Rain' (1984), 'Kiss' (1986); Talking Heads 'Once in a Lifetime' (1981); Rick Astley 'Never Gonna Give You Up' (1987); Belinda Carlisle 'Heaven is a Place on Earth' (1989); Eddy Grant 'I Don't Want to Dance' (1982), 'Electric Avenue' (1982); Elton John 'I Guess That's Why They Call It the Blues' (1983), 'I'm Still Standing' (1983); Sade 'Smooth Operator' (1985). (Milling 9–10)

This collagist characterization of the decades, consisting of countless examples, quotations, and diverse items, grouped around different themes but frequently largely uncommented on (and in this respect Sierz' account seems to be the least annotated and Megson's the most), is not only an extremely rich depiction but also surprises the reader with the refreshing concreteness of the picture painted. Bearing the significance of the material aspect of theatrical performances in mind, lists like these may prove not only helpful in understanding the vocabulary and the mind-set of the decades considered but also the particular aesthetics of the plays and their productions. Also, instead of theorizing about the different phenomena, such as the procurement of E pills that Sierz puts on his list of things that people would buy in the 90s (see Sierz 4), that is, instead of making assumptions about such phenomena, or viewing them as symptoms of particular changes in society and culture, simply putting the items out there with little commentary leaves the task of assigning the objects' meaning and place within the broader context with the readers. As such this form of introduction leaves room for the re-interpretation of the phenomena and also for adding more items to the lists. On the occasions when more commentary is provided, it is usually

done for the purpose of explanation. For instance, elucidating rather than evaluating or judging, Megson's explanations prove extremely helpful when writing about the first flight of the Concorde in 1976, "the supersonic, transatlantic passenger airliner," where he helpfully adds that "Flying on Concorde becomes the status symbol of the decade" (Megson 15). This type of information is particularly important with regard to students of drama for whom the 70s, 80s and even 90s are beyond their immediate experience, allowing them to better understand and recognize the cultural references and the cultural frame of plays from the given period.

"Theatre in the …"

Having filled the background with the items from the social, cultural and political contexts of the decades, the authors move on to introduce the theatrical landscape of the respective periods. In spite of the differences in focus, each account is extremely detailed and reveals the authors' expert knowledge.

Megson begins his chapter by discussing the theatrical response to the particular socio-political context of the 70s, namely the general situation of crisis, considering events "from Bloody Sunday to Watergate, the three-day week to the Winter of Discontent, Jonestown to Soweto" (Megson 34). Drawing the parallel to the global financial crises at the time the book was written (summer 2011), Megson sees the 70s in "close proximity with the present" (Megson 34–35) and mentions this correspondence many times throughout the chapter, by referring to numerous revivals of 70s' plays in 2011 (see Megson 35).

His main focus, however, is clearly on alternative theatre, the impact of the 60s counterculture on it and the numerous theatrical companies, venues and initiatives that came into being or were active at that time, such as the Brighton Combination, Inter-Action, or the socialist groups the General Will, 7:84, North West Spanner or Foco Novo. In this context, Megson also defines and characterizes the main aesthetic mode of the socialist alternative theatre, that is, the so-called "agitprop" (Megson 44).

Dividing the alternative theatre into various groups, that is, the socialist groups, physical theatre and performance groups, feminist theatre, gay and lesbian theatre, black and Asian theatre, Megson introduces the main playwrights, directors and other theatre professionals associated with each theatre and group. This, of course, also gives him the opportunity to discuss the main productions and performances, as well as the main agendas and issues that were presented on alternative stages, which were mostly political. He devotes the most space to talking about feminist groups, arguing that the decade belonged

to women's theatre. Quoting Gillian Hanna, Megson agrees with her that "in the late seventies, feminism was the most exciting thing going, especially for people interested in politics. It was the air, the most radical thing that had hit anybody since 1968, and for some of us since a long time before that" (Megson 53). For Megson, the 70s were definitely *the* decade of feminist theatre.

Referring to speeches by three key playwrights of that time (David Edgar, John McGrath and David Hare) given at a conference in Cambridge in 1978, in the next section Megson describes the major conflict which dominated the alternative socialist scene at that time. The key issue and the bone of contention concerned the professionalization of alternative theatre and socialist companies. Some alternative artists, such as Edgar, Hare and Howard Brenton, began to work with established stages like the National Theatre, a betrayal of socialist values in the eyes of some socialist artists. John McGrath, being one of them, accused Edgar of "indifference to the development of working-class culture" (McGrath in Megson 61). Bruce Birchall, the playwright and Artistic Director of the West London Theatre Workshop, in turn, described the problem as a matter of whether you saw yourself as a "left-wing artist" or rather as a "socialist who used artforms for political ends" (Megson 59). Edgar, who defended the shifting focus of socialist theatre, claimed that it had to change because it had to respond to the new realities so that it could account for "not only [...] the fact of exploitation in class society but also [...] the sense of alienation in the consumer cornucopia" (Megson 60). Instead of the working classes, Edgar therefore proposed addressing the middle classes in order to change their consumer behaviour and increase their awareness (Megson 60).

It is in this context that Megson sees the emergence of the state-of-the-nation as being symptomatic of the crisis within the socialist camp in alternative theatre. "State of the nation dramaturgy," Megson argues, "arbitrates the sense of alienation and disillusionment, especially with (and from within) the left" and marks an aesthetic change from the "broad-stroke caricature" of agitprop towards social realist drama (Megson 63). Although mainly focusing on the conflict, Megson does not fail to mention that "aside from social realism on an 'epic' scale, playwrights throughout the 1970s conjured a broad range of styles and image repertoires to negotiate contemporary concerns" (63) though he does so only in passing, as a list of relevant plays.

In the remaining sections of the chapter Megson focuses on the funding in the 70s, where he discusses, among other things, the heated debate among theatre practitioners over whether the sudden increase in subsidies for alternative theatre was 'hush money' (65) and whether alternative theatre was not slowly but surely being "absorbed into the Establishment" (65). Other issues discussed here include the uneven distribution of the subsidies, the accountabil-

ity of the Arts Council, and the link between funding and censorship. He then provides a relatively brief description of the flagship theatres, followed by an even briefer account of "National and international contexts." The chapter ends with a glimpse of the future and Thatcherism, thus establishing a link between the volumes.

In her chapter on theatre in the 80s, Milling unsurprisingly mainly focuses on the influence of Thatcherism on the theatrical landscape, and discusses the complex issue of funding, state and/or corporate, subsidy policies, and the role of the relevant institutions in the process, such as that of the Arts Council, in view of the growing commercialization of theatre reality. It is in this context that she outlines the history of the success of the West End theatres, which, as she argues, "became the model for 'success' in politicians' eyes, as an obvious demonstration of the 'industrial' elements of the cultural industries" (Milling 43).

Her discussion then moves on to contest the popular view that the theatre of the 80s was in a major crisis, which mostly concerned the so-called new writing (see Milling 57). According to Milling such a view "is, of course, dependent upon your definition of 'new writing' and upon your perspective" (Milling 58). And what is Milling's perspective on the issue? Without diminishing the detrimental impact of the cuts in subsidies, leading to a reduction in the number of large-scale productions, Milling insists that it was "less obvious that the imaginative invention or ambition of playwrights was vitiated" than commonly seems to be believed about the theatre in the 80s. Importantly, she points out that at the beginning of that decade, what was usually understood as 'new writing' was "an individual playwright crafting a playscript for traditional theatrical production, in a process modelled by the Royal Court Theatre since the 1950s" (Milling 58). This accepted definition of 'new writing' did not, clearly, include more diverse experimental theatre but exclusively focused on the state-of-the-nation plays "employing realism, from leftist political perspective, and addressed to a middle-class liberal audience" (Milling 58). Drawing on other voices that also question the notion of the crisis, such as that of Timberlake Wertenbaker, Milling insists that "live and performance art, physical theatre and dance theatre, all of which used text or what might now be called 'performance writing'" (Milling 59) actually grew considerably in significance during that period. Consequently, Milling sees the reason for "the elegiac tone" (Milling 59) in so many critics' voices bemoaning the crisis in new writing in their restrictive definition of the term. Having thus undermined the received definition, she then goes on to describe the theatrical landscape of the new writing in the 80s, including productions that go beyond the idea of the state-of-the-nation play, such as Forced Entertainment's *200% and Bloody Thirsty* (1987) or *Some Confusions in the Law about the Love* (1989).

Milling devotes the remainder of the chapter to discussing the main political issues that were negotiated on stages during the 80s ("Unemployment," "Women's rights," "Racism," "Gay rights," "Cold War and arms race," "Financial deregulation" and "Northern Ireland"), along with the question that was most urgent for theatre practitioners at the time, that is, whether it was possible for oppositional theatre to "remain transgressive 'political theatre' from within the theatrical estate" (Milling 68). She then closes the chapter with yet another appeal for a more alternative history of the 80s than the version that considers "leftist male-authored drama as the marker of true political art" (Milling 89).

Sierz' account begins with a brief reference to the political background of the 90s, mentioning the main conflicts in the world at that time, such as the Cold War or the Bosnian Civil War, and British theatre's response to them. Picking up the history of the British theatre where Milling left off, Sierz continues the description of the growing commercialization and the constantly increasing pressure for theatre and companies in the 90s "to be successful businesses" (Sierz, *Modern British* 34). He then moves on to present the major theatrical productions and developments at the flagship theatres: the West End, National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company, categorizing them according to the commercial and the subsidized sector. Continuing with his characterization of the theatrical scene of the 90s with the account of Off-West End theatres and companies, this part not only gives the reader a sound overview of the most important plays performed during that period but also offers valuable insights into the intricacies of the British theatrical system and introduces many important names connected with that system, such as the key artistic directors, theatre critics, actors etc. Writing from an insider perspective, Sierz' presentation is reliable and expertly done, though the overwhelming amount of detailed factual information might be slightly daunting for beginning students.

In his discussion of 'new writing' Sierz positions himself somewhere between Milling's view and the "elegiac" (Milling 59) voices. Though essentially agreeing with Milling that the definition of 'new writing' needs to include experimental theatre as well (see Sierz 54), he nevertheless also subscribes to the perception of the 80s as a time of theatre in crisis. This allows him to see the 90s, as he does, as the Renaissance of new writing, an opinion which he also voiced in his well-known book, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2001). In this seminal account, Sierz announced the arrival of new writing characterized by a very specific new sensibility, which he described famously then as in-yer-face theatre. Still insisting on the accuracy of the label, Sierz takes the opportunity to reassess the term, also taking into account more critical opinions. And so, for example, he points out that some "critics of the concept of in-yer-

face theatre argue that foregrounding the much-hyped geezer-chic Royal Court plays, such as Butterworth's *Mojo*, with its motormouthing gangsters and casual viciousness, neglects quieter talents. Lauding the loud and violent boy eclipses many of the female playwrights of the era" (Sierz, *Modern British* 58–59). Admitting the label's recognizable weaknesses, Sierz seeks to make up for them by including in his present account of the 90s another "influential playwriting style that was distinctly different from the in-yer-face brashness of many UK metropolitan playwrights [and which] came from Ireland" (59). In this part, he focuses on playwrights such as Conor McPherson, Sebastian Barry, Marina Carr, Enda Walsh, Martin McDonagh, and later also writes about non-Irish playwrights, for example, David Greig and David Harrower, who also were not immediately associated with the term in-yer-face and were therefore rather marginalized in his former account, yet produced important work in the 90s. In the next part of the chapter he concentrates on experimental, fringe and live art and at the very end, briefly, considers theatre outside London (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

"Playwrights and Plays"

Introducing representative playwrights from the respective theatrical decades, these chapters usually focus on four selected authors and their work. The volume on the 70s focuses on Caryl Churchill, David Hare, Howard Brenton and David Edgar. Howard Barker, Jim Cartwright, Sarah Daniels and Timberlake Wertenbaker are chosen to represent the 80s, whereas the 90s are characterized by discussing works of Philip Ridley, Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson and Mark Ravenhill. Unlike the remaining chapters, this part consists of contributions by various critics, which has the welcome result of presenting a variety of approaches to the task of outlining the playwrights' oeuvre. Some contributors, such as Paola Botham, who wrote about Caryl Churchill's *Owners, Vinegar Tom* and *Cloud Nine* (the 70s volume), focus on a few, usually three, plays and analyse them in greater detail. Others, such as Richard Boon's introduction to Howard Brenton (also the 70s volume), take a more personal, more emotional approach to the playwright's work. Some contributions are written from an academic, some from a practitioner's perspective, such as David Lane's section on Jim Cartwright (the 80s volume). All chapters offer a wealth of new insights and stimulating interpretations. Interesting as those contributions are, due to space restrictions, I will only describe more thoroughly the most recent volume on the 90s, focusing on what turns out to still be a contested and problematic issue within the academic world, namely the term in-yer-face theatre.

In spite of Sierz' laudable attempt at writing a more inclusive version of the history of British theatre in the 90s than that proposed in his *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, the presentation still puts London theatre and what he classified as in-yer-face playwrights centre stage. That this is the case is especially visible in the selection of playwrights chosen as representative of the 90s, which are all the usual 'in-yer-face' suspects also discussed by Sierz in his *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, namely Philip Ridley, Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson and Mark Ravenhill.

As a consequence, even though all other critics contributing to this chapter attempt to distance themselves from Sierz' label in-yer-face theatre, they cannot ignore it, and in the end all presentations of the playwrights are influenced by the term, though in various degrees. Trying to demonstrate how their respective playwright does not fit in with the label, which in itself would not have been anything inappropriate or incorrect, they quickly run into the same problem, that of the label itself. Or more precisely, of its 'spacious' nature, its 'gracious' inclusiveness, its overly permeable conceptual frames. As Roger Lüdeke complains in his article, "In-Yer-Face or Post-Political Theatre? Sarah Kane's *Blasted* and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*": "This definition amasses too many features that are situated on entirely heterogeneous levels of description: aesthetic rules, moral norms, the empirical recipients' emotions, anthropological constants ('primitive feelings'), and so on. [...] First and foremost, however, the definition of in-yer-face is far too general" (382). As a result, the authors seem to be working with different understandings of in-yer-face theatre and sometimes even end up contradicting each other in the process. Playwrights are contrasted with other allegedly typical in-yer-face playwrights, who are, however, also discussed in the same chapter as not fitting particularly comfortably within the category of in-yer-face theatre – the result being a definitional mess. Whereas this may only be a source of slight irritation for experts in the field, it may be rather confusing for students and those who are not very familiar with the subject matter.

Catherine Rees, for example, suggests in her contribution on Sarah Kane's work that "[i]t is time to reassess Kane's role as an in-yer-face playwright by discussing other ways of theorizing her work, using the concepts of postdramatic theatre, trauma theory and theories of bodies, power, violence and institutions" (Sierz, *Modern British* 113). Drawing on Laurence de Vos and Graham Saunders' definition of in-yer-face theatre as belonging to the "territory of social realism" (De Vos, Saunders, *Kane in Context* 1), Rees considers the label to be unsuitable for Kane's work. Whereas Vos and Saunders' understanding of the category may be true with respect to many in-yer-face plays, Sierz' original definition of in-yer-face theatre does not exclude experimental forms. To see that quite the opposite

is the case, it suffices to have a quick glance at the following passage from Sierz' *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, where he argues:

> A play's content can be provocative because it is expressed in blatant or confrontational language or stage images, but its power as drama also depends greatly on its form. *The further a play departs from the conventions of naturalism, especially those of the well-made three-act drama, the more difficult it is for many audiences to accept*. On the other hand, some shocking emotional material may be made more acceptable by being placed within a theatrical frame that is traditional, either in its tone or form. Naturalistic representations of disturbing subjects are usually much easier to handle than emotionally fraught situations that are presented in an unfamiliar theatrical style (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 6; emphasis mine).

Thus, Rees' argument that the high degree of experimentation in Kane's work does not fit in with Sierz' label is hardly defensible in view of Sierz' original definition of in-yer-face theatre. Much as that definition can and probably should be criticized for being too inclusive and too blurry at times, reducing it to the "territory of social realism" simply does not do Sierz' term justice.

Operating with her tailored category of in-yer-face theatre, Rees concedes that the first part of *Blasted*, which she imprecisely refers to as "the first act" (there are no acts as such in the play, only scenes), does fit in with the label, presenting this part as "conventional [...] in which characters exist in recognizable social situations, have conventional conversations and talk about everyday things such as football matches, room service and newspapers" (Sierz, *Modern British* 113). The second "act," however, challenges the naturalism of the first part "with more shocking, unusual and difficult images" (113). As Rees further argues, "[t]his break with naturalism compromises the categorization of *Blasted* as an in-yer-face play" (116).

She continues her argument against the in-yer-face label further in her section on *Cleansed*, where she suggests that Lehmann's term 'postdramatic theatre' might "be more relevant to discussing this work" (Sierz, *Modern British* 128). She observes that "for Lehmann and for Kane theatre must be more than an intellectual discussion of shocking images or historical events – it must also be physically and emotionally shocking in itself, so that the act of watching the play must be challenging and disorientating for an audience" (127). Again, as accurate as this observation is, it also essentially rephrases Sierz' description of in-yer-face sensibility where he continuously emphasizes the importance of "disturbing the spectator's gaze" (*In-Yer-Face* 5) and making the audience challenge their own responses and perceptions.

Rees' contribution seems to be most problematic with regard to the in-yer-face label, yet other contributors also run into similar difficulties with the term. Though undeniably more balanced and true to Sierz' original term than Rees' account, Trish Reid's evaluation of the in-yer-face elements in Anthony Neilson's

work also has its share of problems. It is more balanced because Reid is well aware of the fact that "the term in-yer-face has been refracted through so many critical lenses since its first appearance that its meaning has become somewhat obscured" (Sierz, *Modern British* 139). Further, she is willing to admit that the label is indeed representative of some aspects of Neilson's oeuvre, such as its experiential quality or the employment of "'shock tactics, or [that it] is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder and more experimental than audiences are used to'" (138). According to Reid, "[e]ach of Neilson's major 1990s plays can meaningfully be described as shocking, taboo breaking and bold [...] and as such they fit rather neatly into Sierz's definition" (138).

Admitting that Neilson's work overlaps with certain aspects of in-yer-face theatre, Reid still argues that this association also downplays the playwright's individual style and misrepresents his art in the end, as Sierz' term "overemphasize[s] similarities between writers and consequently [...] efface[s] important differences" (Sierz, *Modern British* 140). The latter, for Reid, lie in Neilson's case at the level of content, as "he articulates a consistent thematic preoccupation, one that is more personal than political, more concerned with subjective than social experience, and as such not straightforwardly relatable to the politics of its day" (140). What distinguishes Neilson from "his contemporaries" such as Kane and Ravenhill is, as Reid argues, his preoccupation with the subject of "identity under pressure" and the instability of subjectivity itself, which she further sees as "one indicator of Neilson's Scottishness" (140–141). In-yer-face authors, as Reid sees them, are in turn more preoccupied with the spirit of the age. Indeed, this ties in with Sierz' definition yet again: "As a sensibility, it [in-yer-face theatre] involved an acuteness of feeling and a keen intellectual perception of the spirit of the age" (qtd. in Sierz 139). However, it is also possible to argue that unstable identities are very much a symptom of the spirit of the age. The negotiation of one's own subjectivity in the form of a "battle between inner and outer realities" (Sierz, *Modern British* 140), which Reid identifies as being typical of Neilson's own individual voice and denies in-yer-face plays (see 142), is actually one of the characteristics that goes straight to the heart of in-yer-face theatre as Sierz defines it. According to Sierz, "challenging the distinctions we use to define who we are: human/animal; clean/dirty; healthy/unhealthy; normal/abnormal; good/evil" (Sierz, *In-Yer-Face* 6) is one of the main tasks of the theatre. The struggle between binary opposites, whether to assert one's own subjectivity against society, to negotiate one's gender or for other reasons, is also typical of in-yer-face sensibility.

Convincing as Reid's criticism about the blurring of the differences between individual "in-yer-face" authors is, her insisting that Neilson's preoccupation

with unstable identities is "an obsession not necessarily shared by his London-based in-yer-face contemporaries" is not justifiable. This becomes especially clear when considering the work of Sarah Kane, whom Reid names as in-yer-face author and who yet presented the topic of unstable identities in her work frequently.

In spite of the problems caused by the in-yer-face label, it is important to emphasize that Reid's contribution on Neilson's early plays is extremely valuable, not only in light of the dearth of critical work on this period in his career, but also because of her many interesting insights into the playwright's work and the new perspectives that she offers.

Graham Saunders, author of the article on Mark Ravenhill, also voices his dissatisfaction with Sierz' term and the association of Ravenhill's work with it, though his criticism is even more cautiously articulated than that of his predecessors. Saunders' criticism is basically limited to the observation that "while there is much in Sierz's assessment [of Ravenhill's work] that still holds true, his interpretation does downplay one central part of the playwright's work – his treatment of gay sexuality" (Sierz, *Modern British* 164). It is, therefore, the latter aspect that Saunders explores in his study of *Shopping and Fucking, Some Explicit Polaroids* and *Mother Clap's Molly House*, with a particular focus on "the transition from what had formerly been understood as gay drama to one which can more properly be termed queer theatre" (Sierz, *Modern British* 164), thus reading the plays as "an AIDS trilogy" (185). Discussing Ravenhill's work also in terms of a new type of political theatre, Saunders points to its "secretarial functions" as a chronicle of the zeitgeist which "demonstrate[s] its effects by using Brechtian-inspired *gestus*" (165–166).

Ironically, Sierz is the only one who does not explicitly refer to the term in his discussion of Philip Ridley's work. And since he had already done so in his *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, his present effort to introduce the playwright's work from yet another perspective is particularly appreciated, though not entirely without 'hiccups.' After acknowledging the surprising scarcity of existing criticism on Ridley's work, Sierz briefly discusses the few contributions that do try to account for it, namely those of David Ian Rabey, Ken Urban or Dan Rebellato. He then proceeds to analyse Ridley's three plays, *The Pitchfork Disney, The Fastest Clock in the Universe* and *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, "by using the elements of theory derived from the study of the gothic, the grotesque and the apocalyptic" (Sierz, *Modern British* 91).

While the suggestion to explore Ridley's work through the prism of these particular concepts is interesting and, on the whole, convincing, the theoretical aspect of Sierz' account is regrettably wanting with respect to the terms used. They are rarely elaborated on in any detail, which sometimes makes references

to them unsatisfying, as the implications of their individual use in the plays are seldom explained, only identified. Questions such as what Ridley actually accomplishes by resorting to the particular aesthetic or genre or what its function in the plays is, are rarely analysed. For example, Sierz' description of the gothic elements in the story of Haley, a character from *The Pitchfork Disney*, ends with the following comment: "With its rabid dogs, wasteland cityscape, sexual suggestiveness, flirtation with blasphemy, mix of Protestant and Roman Catholic symbols, and final surrender to the feminine in her repeated refrain of 'Hysterical. Hysterical' (19), this fantasy is a litany of the gothic and apocalyptic" (Sierz, *Modern British* 93). Only at the end of the section on *The Pitchfork Disney* does Sierz consider the possible functions of the use of the gothic elements in the play as a whole, quoting a critic's opinion that "the gothic [...] 'is always linked to the desire of contemporary readers. At once escapist and conformist, the gothic speaks to the dark side of domestic fiction: erotic, violent, perverse, bizarre and occasionally connected with contemporary fears'" (Sierz, *Modern British* 97).

On those occasions, however, where Sierz does comment more on the particular use of the terms in concrete dramatic situations, his account of Ridley's play immediately becomes very engaging. For instance, in his discussion of the connection between childhood and sci-fi elements with regard to one of the characters' childhood fantasy to become an astronaut ("floating out of gravity, longing for the 'oblivion' of space") Sierz points out the possible meaning of this connection by quoting the science-fiction writer Robert Bloch. The latter claimed that "[t]hose of us who direct our storytelling into darker channels do so because we were perhaps a bit more mindful than most regarding our childhood confusions of identity, our conflicts with unpleasant realities and our traumatic encounters with imaginative terrors" (qtd in Sierz, *Modern British* 95).

In his presentation of the other two plays, Sierz continues to trace the elements of the gothic, science fiction, grotesque and apocalyptic, helpfully exploring the recurring motifs and continuities with the first play. He observes, for instance, the many similarities between Cosmo, a character from *The Pitchfork Disney*, and Coughar from *The Fastest Clock in the Universe*. Another parallel that Sierz points out, this time with respect to *Ghost from a Perfect Place*, is the recurring "theme of dangerous nostalgia" (Sierz, *Modern British* 105). The references to the gothic are further commented on in the conclusion to the chapter, where Sierz finally explains their use in the plays in more detail. Sierz suggests that one such explanation of the use of gothic elements is its thematizing of "basic gothic fears: the fear of the other, the fear of nature and the fear of psychic invasion" (Sierz, *Modern British* 109); another function is to evoke tabooed desires (110).

Without any doubt, the four contributions to this chapter make for a very interesting read. However, both the problems resulting from the capaciousness

of the term in-yer-face theatre, and the critics' imprecise use of it produce a terminological chaos, undermining the quality of the accounts. Also, it would have been more profitable for the volume if others playwrights, such as Enda Walsh, Conor McPherson or David Harrower had been added into the mix, instead of focusing, yet again, on the authors typically associated with Sierz' label and London theatre scene.

"Documents"

In Megson's words, this part represents each decade "in the words of those who created it" (Megson 205), finally allowing the artists to speak for themselves. Whereas the previous chapters were usually of more or less the same length, here the differences between the volumes are more prominent, with the volume on the 70s devoting more than fifty pages to this particular section and the volumes on the 80s and 90s only roughly twenty pages each. The types of documents presented also vary. Megson includes in his volume recollections of fourteen theatre artists who participated in the productions of the major plays discussed. The "Documents" in Milling's volume consist of interviews with the four playwrights whose work the book introduced. Sierz' selection of the documents relating to the 90s, in turn, is most varied in terms of form, as it includes a dramatic monologue, Philip Ridley's *Vesper*, an interview with Sarah Kane and Dan Rebellato, a number of quotations from Anthony Neilson commenting on his own work, and Mark Ravenhill's lecture "A Tear in the Fabric." Each volume is rounded off with an "Afterword" or, in the case of the volume on the 70s, with "A final word …" in which the playwrights' oeuvre discussed in Chapter 3 is given a final evaluation.

In spite of some imperfections, the series offers a very good introduction into the theatre scene of the respective decades and is highly recommendable for all who want to get some insight into the workings of British theatre system or need a relatively brief and yet thorough overview of a decade. Expertly done and well-researched, the volumes are reliable sources of information and also have useful sections on further reading. Their accessible language and comprehensible form make them excellent background reading for any serious student of British theatre. And academics and critics, in turn, will certainly appreciate the useful evaluation of existing criticism on the playwrights presented in the volumes as well as the re-assessments of the decades considered.

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