

## ***The Rise of In-Yer-Face Theatre***

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### **Abstract**

In 1995, Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) caused a commotion. The play includes scenes of violence and uses shock tactics. Critic Aleks Sierz makes the claim that 21st Century theatre is interspersed with provocation, only to implode in the 90s. He defines the 90s wave as "Most in-yer-face theatre challenges the distinctions we use to define who we are: human/animal; clean/dirty; healthy/unhealthy; normal/abnormal; good/evil; true/untrue; real/unreal; right/wrong; just/unjust; art/life. These binary oppositions are central to our world-view; questioning them can be unsettling," (*In-Yer-Face Theatre* 6).

In-yer-face theatre included nudity, vile language and deliberately broke down the taboos of swearwords. Moreover, one of the most contentious features of the theatre is its use of violence. For example, Anthony Neilson's *Normal* (1991) is about a serial killer and includes an extended scene in which he kills one of his victims using an oversize knife .

The subject-matter of in-yer-face theatre is bold and shocking. It presents taboos such as parricide, incest and sexuality. Sierz studies provocative theatre in his book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2000), where he traces controversial plays and playwrights as early as George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912). He believes the most remarkable event to be John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956). The angry tone of the play and Jimmy Porter's ranting caused some uneasiness among middle-class theatregoers. Shock came in many forms and playwrights including Joe Orton, Howard Barker and Edward Bond wrote plays notorious for scenes of gratuitous violence. Nonetheless, in-yer-face theatre violence became unprecedentedly unbearable to watch.

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## نشأة مسرح المواجهة

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ملخص

أحدثت مسرحية "انفجار" (1995) للكاتبة الإنجليزية سارة كين (1971-1999) جدلاً في أوساط المسرح الإنجليزي بما تخللته من مشاهد دموية واعتمادها على عنصر الصدمة لتوصيل معنى المسرحية الذي يربط بين العنف على المستوى الشخصي والمستوى السياسي. إلا أن سارة كين لم تكن أول كاتبة تتخطى جميع "التابوهات" وتغامر بعرض موضوعات شائكة مثل الاغتصاب والعنصرية، بل يؤكد الناقد الإنجليزي أليكس سيرز أن المسرحيات الصادمة قد ظهرت على استحياء منذ بدايات القرن العشرين وما لبثت أن "تفجرت" في التسعينات، لينشأ لون جديد من المسرح تميز بالعنف اللغوي والجسدي الشديدين والتحرر من المدارس المسرحية المألوفة، وأسماه سيرز مسرح "المواجهة" *in-her-face theatre*. يعرف أليكس سيرز مسرح المواجهة بأنه "يتحدى الاختلافات التي نستخدمها لنصف أنفسنا: إنسان/حيوان؛ نظيف/قذر؛ سوي/غير سوي؛ طبيعي/غير طبيعي؛ طيب/شرير ... هذه التعارضات الثنائية مسألة أساسية في وجهة نظرنا للحياة، والتشكيك فيها يززع استقرارنا."

In-her-face theatre took Britain by surprise. British audiences and the media alike were awoken to a new sensibility pushing all possible boundaries during the 90s. The new playwrights, or New Brutalists as they were often called, were not, however the first to cause this furor. Controversial plays are recurrent in British Drama even as back as the early 20th Century .

Though Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995) has been particularly referred to as the first representative of this new wave of confrontational plays, Aleks Sierz chronicles what he calls a "history of provocation" throughout the 20th Century and contemporary British drama. As far back as George Bernard Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1912), Eliza Doolittle's language amused audiences but angered reviewers, to the extent where some bishops urged that the play should be banned.

The rise of violent plays may also have its roots in Antonin Artaud's (1896-1948) views on theatre. In his book *The Theater and Its Double* (1938), Artaud expressed his beliefs that theatre should alert the senses and summon attention. His views can be summed up in what he calls "the theatre of cruelty". "Artaudian tactics such as assaulting the senses with painful stimuli, deconstructing language, and decontextualizing familiar images play an important role in contemporary political theatre," Amelia Howe Kritzer explains (18). He makes a striking resemblance between the plague and what theatre should be like. Just like the bodily fluids of a plague victim is troubled and blackened, the theatre should concern itself with conflicts and struggles. The theatre should show the evil and dark side of human nature just like the thick bodily fluids emanating from the corpse of a plague victim.

Artaud criticised the didactic and psychological forms of theatre and the theatre which is driven by language only. Instead, he states his admiration for a theatre which is animated by gestures and movement. He insists that cruelty does not – necessarily – mean blood and violent visual images. Rather the theatre of cruelty needs to "wake(s) us up: nerves and heart" as he put it (84). This awakening will come to fruition by both form and content. The theatre should rely on intonation, gestures and expression in its form. Content-wise, the theatre must portray the inner struggles and fears of the spectators, the

subject of the precipitates of their dreams, and hence should occupy itself with savagery, fear and crime .

At this point, censorship was still imposed on the theatre. However, both playwrights and theatre producers continuously came up with methods to get round the Lord Chamberlain's strict rules, which included banning of swearwords, nudity, religious blasphemy or unfavourable references to the royal family. As a reaction to the Lord Chamberlain's inhibitions, some theatres were turned to private clubs where tickets were only sold to a select audience. Playwrights also tended to probe into forbidden fields and tackle the very same topics which censorship unintentionally drew them to .

According to the Licensing Act of 1737, all plays should be reviewed by the Lord Chamberlain before being performed. British Theatre was therefore under censorship throughout the first half of the 20th Century. Nevertheless, this period witnessed the production of political plays written by social critics and activists including George Bernard Shaw, John Galsworthy and J.M. Synge. When the censorship was lifted in 1968, British theatre witnessed a gust of freedom .

Amongst the playwrights who were at odds with censorship was Samuel Beckett. He was already a respectable playwright when his play *Endgame* (1958) was slammed on accounts of blasphemy. The Lord Chamberlain was also often suspicious of Continental plays, but Sierz asserts that writers wanted to challenge this; "when the Lord Chamberlain considered Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer* in 1958, he was more worried about its references to homosexuality than about its account of cannibalism," (ibid. 15) .

Back in England though, John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* which debuted in 1956 was one of the last plays to cause disquiet before censorship was lifted. Throughout the play, the spectators had to endure the ranting of Jimmy Porter, the play's main character. Osborne's play set off what has been termed the "angry young men" of British drama, referring to a group of young men from working-class backgrounds and demanded a status and voice among the middle class. According to Sierz, the play caused disquiet simply because of the change in sensibility and tone. In other words, it is not only taboo

subjects that provoke criticism. In the sixties, some audiences found offence in the social status of the actors and setting of the play. Audiences were not used to working class characters and street gangs with which the theatre during the fifties and sixties was occupied .

The sixties brought on more freedom for the theatre, and therefore more plays stirring controversy. Alex Sierz refers to a period of “dirty plays” (In-Yer-Face Theatre 18). Some of these plays were the practical embodiment of Antonin Artaud’s views on the necessity of a theatre of cruelty. Commenting on Peter Weiss’ play *The Marat/Sade* (1963), playwright Peter Brook proclaimed that the play intends to “crack the spectator on the jaw, then douse him with ice-cold water, then force him to assess intelligently what has happened to him, then give him a kick...then bring him back to his senses again,” (ibid).

As an example, the violence in the plays of Howard Barker has been described as standard (Innes 510). Barker put forward the conception of a “Theatre of Catastrophe”. He propounds that (political) theatre should confront society using extreme forms of violence and cruelty. He urges playwrights to resort not to didacticism but to their own imagination to “illuminate the blind,” (Arguments for a Theatre 49). Therefore the aim of a theatre of catastrophe is to push the boundaries of tolerance and resistance to pain so that audiences are enlightened about their innermost pain. Only then, can they be able to stir their conscience.

More and more playwrights broached taboos and sparked controversy. Edward Bond’s *Saved* (1965) caused unease when it showed a group of youths throwing rocks at a pram. The audiences were dismayed not only by the violence but by the sheer indifference of the attackers, as if violence is commonplace or natural. Joe Orton also faced similar criticisms. His plays as Sierz describes them have “swirling currents of sex, incest, violence and death, his plays mix anarchic morality with manic frivolity,” (In-Yer-Face Theatre 20). Gradually, however, the British public relaxed to explicit language and violence. Censorship was finally abolished in 1968, and a plethora of provocative works ensued .

Women playwrights have also had a considerable contribution. The rise of radical feminism in the 60s resonated in the theatre.

Playwrights Jane Arden and Maureen Duffy touched on frank subjects such as sex and other intimate details in their plays *Vagina Rex* and *the Gas Oven* (1969) and *Rites* (1969) .(

Controversies continued well into the 70s and 80s. Playwrights including Steven Berkoff deliberately used excessive taboo words to acclimatise the audience to shock in his 1975 play *East*. Audiences remained ill at ease with sexual violence, however. Hence Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* (1980) caused a scandal when it presented attempted homosexual rape in the context of war. The scandal this scene provoked overshadowed the play's main theme of Imperialism, much like most of controversial plays .

During the nineties, British theatre literally exploded with provocative works. The new wave of playwrights did away with any form of social constraints, broke the taboos and presented harsh, abrasive plays. The plays were shocking as they presented another Britain which theatre-goers were loath to admit that it exists. It was a world of unimaginable violence, chaos, pain and social antagonism. The plays were dark and desperate both in subject-matter and language. Theatre critic Aleks Sierz coined the term "in-yer-face theatre" to describe this new wave .

"The widest definition of in-yer-face theatre is any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message," explains Sierz (*In-Yer-Face Theatre* 4). He proceeds to describe the new theatre as a theatre in which spectators are forced to watch their own basic desires and animal instincts rather than sit back and enjoy an entertaining topic. The language is vile, emotions explosive, actions often gratuitously violent and subjects taboo. "Most in-yer-face theatre challenges the distinctions we use to define who we are: human/animal; clean/dirty; healthy/unhealthy; normal/abnormal; good/evil; true/untrue; real/unreal; right/wrong; just/unjust; art/life. These binary oppositions are central to our world-view; questioning them can be unsettling," (*In-Yer-Face Theatre* 6).

The nineties plays have differed from their previous confrontational ones in some respects. The kind of language which shocked audiences was no longer religious profanity for example but rather sexually explicit language. Racial slurs, however, displeased audiences the most .

Furthermore, whereas playwrights ventured with nude actors on stage following the abolition of censorship as a sign of liberation, being nude has become associated with victimisation. Nudity is hence used not for sensationalism, defiance or glamour but to reveal a character in a moment of weakness and humiliation. In the same way, sex on stage often caused discomfort among audiences. They were unsettled to see their private matters being not only discussed but actually played out in public .

Remarkable political events as well as cultural changes have been cited as the reasons why exceptionally the nineties witnessed a plethora of provocative plays. According to Sierz, it was a decade of opportunities and freedom after years of iron-fist Thatcherism ‘

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the exit of Margaret Thatcher showed those under twenty-five that, despite the evidence of political ossification, change was possible; the end of Cold War ideological partisanship freed young imaginations...(youth) could be skeptical of male power without being dogmatically feminist; it could express outrage without being politically correct (In-Yer-Face Theatre 36.)

Globally, Graham Saunders further explains possible events that inspired the dramatists to celebrate their new-found freedom. In 1991, the Russian Soviet Union collapsed and the affiliated countries gained independence. However, the declaration of independence has not been as peaceful in Europe. Civil war broke out in former Yugoslavia and systematic ethnic cleansing was committed by the Serbian army. The atrocities of the Bosnian genocide are an inspiration for Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*, (*Love Me or Kill Me* 52-53).

As far as cultural changes were concerned, a group of directors emerged who were willing to support young writers. Among the directors who helped formulate the in-yer-face sensibility were Dominic Dromgoole and Stephen Daldry. By the nineties, according to Dromgoole, there were no traditional rules on theatre and writers were free to follow their imaginations in any form they found adequate. Stephen Daldry also led the new cultural zeitgeist in the Royal Court Theatre where many of the new plays were staged. He provided the opportunity for novice writers to showcase their work and shortened the runs to make room for more productions .

Some critics placed the new plays among the 1990s cultural phase known as Cool Britannia. It was a celebratory phase of new and innovative figures in pop music and art. Cultural historian Robert Hewison describes this period as follows: “We have the making of a cultural renaissance, based on a new generation of young talent...there is a renewed sense of creative vigour and excitement,” (qtd. in D’Monté et al. 10). Political change also gave momentum to this brief cultural renaissance when Labour won the majority of the parliamentary elections in 1997. However, the Tony Blair years proved to be as stagnant as before the elections and the playwrights were witnessing atrocities broadcast live from Bosnia .

As a result, instead of associating themselves with the Cool Britannia cultural zeitgeist, playwrights of the period were either critical of it, such as Mark Ravenhill in *Shopping and \*\*\*\*ing* (1996), or simply did not wish to be categorised as its contributors. Both the Britpop artists and in-yer-face playwrights deliberately provoked their listeners, fans or audiences. Nonetheless, “the new voices in theatre differed markedly from their contemporaries in the art world through their modes of representation and the reactions they wished to incite,” (Saunders, *About Kane* 14). Whereas the new pop scene was gleeful, in-yer-face drama was bleak. The new pop resorted to shock for marketing and/or sensationalism purposes, but at least most of in-yer-face playwrights used shock only as a means to contemplate on the darker themes of humiliation, torture and cruelty. This difference is the reason why critic Dan Rebellato dubbed the playwrights as part of a “Cruel Britannia” (D’Monté 38 .(

The new work also resonated across the borders in Scotland. Artistic director Ian Brown took over the Traverse theatre and offered provocative plays. He was especially dedicated to directing plays for Scottish playwrights including Simon Donald and Brad Fraser. A most celebrated example of Scottish drama during this decade is Harry Gibson’s *Trainspotting* (1995), typically depicting an underground culture of drug addiction, the theatrical adaptation of Irvine Welsh’s 1993 novel of the same name .

Besides tracing the previous controversial plays before and after the abolishment of censorship, Aleks Sierz’ seminal work *In-Yer-Face*



Theatre provides a comprehensive overview of in-yer-face playwrights. He places the works of the 90s most prominent writers in the context of this new sensibility. He sheds the light on Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Anthony Neilson, Judy Upton and others. He provides a context for their plays, a firsthand review of their works performed, the political and cultural factors that come to play with the performances. Given that the book is about a new and daring form of theatre, he also explains the often astounded reactions of the audience and the press to the controversies .

Another playwright who contributed to this theatrical wave is Anthony Neilson. He is a defender of a theatre which awakens the senses and shocks to a certain degree. His first play *Normal* (1991) about German serial killer Peter Kurten displeased audiences with a prolonged gruelling murder scene and oversize killing tools. His other major two plays are *Penetrator* (1993) and *The Censor* (1997). Neilson aims to make his audience emotionally respond to theatre, not merely think or analyse and believes in-yer-face drama is necessary to reinvigorate the mainstream.

Re-viewing in-yer-face theatre in 2008, Sierz notes that, just like a lad, it was born, “rapidly grew to maturity, misbehaved himself a bit during his adolescence, and then died young. Stylish but doomed, in-yer-face theatre was James Dean of 1990s drama” (D’Monté et al. 33). The 9/11 attacks formed a major shift from the 90s drama to the new writing. Political drama has been revived and issues of national identity have been at the forefront .

Due to the demands of a changing world, the playwrights also returned to naturalism and realism as their preferred aesthetic (*Rewriting the Nation* 59), unlike in-yer-face theatre whose milieu was often surreal. They became preoccupied with national concerns and issues. It follows that verbatim drama has had a place on the stages of Britain, to feed the audience’s hunger for the truth (ibid. 58). In any case, the shock techniques that had overshadowed the drama of the 90s had phased out .

The in-yer-face theatre was a remarkable avant-garde wave that receded as quickly as it came to prominence. It was young British playwrights’ answer to the political as well as cultural ossification. It

was also a nod to the underground world of drug abuse and violence which permeated British society. Exaggeration and taking the images and emotions to an extreme were the unique techniques employed to awaken not only the audience but also the masses.

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