Discovering Utopia: Drama on drama in contemporary British theatre

Johan CALLENS
Free University of Brussels (VUB)

NICOLE BOIREAU, ed. *Drama on Drama. Dimensions of Theatricality on the Contemporary British Stage*. London: Macmillan; New York: St.Martin's Press, 1997. ISBN 0-333-66972-X (GB), 0-312-16541-2 (USA).

Nicole Boireau's *Drama on Drama* is the first collection of essays on reflexive theatre to come out in many years. The phenomenon's implied marginality, though, is one of the first misconceptions cleared away. I hesitate to call it a genre, because, as Patrice Pavis clarifies in the most recent edition of his *Dictionnaire du Théâtre* (1996), "metatheatricality is a fundamental characteristic of any theatrical communication" (204; my transl.). It is therefore slightly misleading that the critic includes "metatheatre" in his thematic index as an entry under the heading of "genres and forms" as well as of "semiology." Insofar as theatre always is a metacommunication —the communication to a public of a communication between performers (Osolsobe)— it may indeed at any time shift that public's attention from the signified to the theatrical signification process and its means (performers, set, text,...; the creators' attitudes and perspective or approach, their preparation,...). The metatheatrical moment, then, is constituted by combining the representation with a simultaneous auto- or self-reflexion on that representation, a running commentary organically fusing staging with self-staging.

This metatheatrical practice is anything but marginal, though its theorization unfortunately still is. All too often, critical discussions limit themselves to

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thematic studies of the theatricality of everyday life (Goffman), staying clear of any serious structural description or discourse analysis.

The first option, Pavis claims, only elaborates on the signification of the baroque play-within-the-play, a systematic but quite specific (if not limited) metatheatrical technique. This form has been amply documented (e.g. by Georges Forestier) though its implications can still be muddled. Thus Pavis presents the baroque theatre's framing or doubling of the illusion as a self-cancelling pseudo-mathematical operation, causing the external level to gain in reality, as if the illusion of an illusion equals reality (365). Lionel Abel, who seems to have coined the term «metatheatre» (1963), puts things again into perspective by reminding us that any insistence upon the reality of the illusion amounts to an assertion about the illusoriness of reality, whether the baroque frame or the world at large. Abel's paradoxical formulation explains away the apparent contradiction between Pavis's correct enough deduction that the play-within-the-play is "a form of antitheatre," doing away with, "denegating" theatrical illusion in favour of a theatricalized reality, while also being "un jeu de surillusion," stepping up that illusion.

The second critical option Pavis recommends more heartily —a full-blown analysis of the discursive means of theatrical self-represenation— opens up largely unexplored territory, which the present volume maps only sketchily, though scholars like Manfred Schmeling (1982) and Richard Hornby (1986) have made significant incursions into it. Arguing that metatheatrical reflexion transforms plays into a kind of dramatized critical history or reception (of specific texts, larger traditions or the very principle of theatre itself), the first has provided a survey of metatheatre's changing functions and meanings from the Renaissance onwards. Drawing more on phenomenology, the second has complemented Schmeling's survey with a more extended taxonomy of metadramatic devices, all of them fulfilling with a vengeance, so to speak, what Hornby considers drama's aesthetic essence as an historically and culturally determined means of perceiving, i.e. interpreting and understanding reality.

Given the complexity and dissemination of her subject it is no wonder that Boireau has tried to limit the field to the contemporary era and the British stage. For all practical purposes this delineation has proved difficult to maintain. In "Greeks in Drama: Four Contemporary Issues" Nicole Vigouroux-Frey combines Wole Soyinka with Edward Bond, Steven Berkoff, and Seamus Heaney. Soyinka's *Bacchae of Euripides* (1973) may have been commissioned by the National Theatre at the Old Vic but reasserts his Yoruba cultural roots. *The Cure at Troy* (1990) was first performed at the Guildhall in Derry, and Heaney, who then headed the Field Day Theatre Company, increasingly has insisted upon his Irishness, notably in response to literary historians indiscriminately enlisting him among British writers. Vigouroux-Frey herself admits that in his adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* every

occurrence of the word "Greek" could easily be replaced by Irish (10). The case of Beckett, whom Ruby Cohn focusses on in "Now Converging, Now Diverging: Beckett's Metatheatre" (since he was excluded from her chapter on British "Theatre framing theatre" in *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama*), is further complicated by his self-imposed exile in France and adoption of French as a language of creative expression. As a way of enlarging the context Lizbeth Goodman discusses the American Joan Lipkin's *Small Domestic Acts* (1995 or 1996 since two dates are provided in the badly proofread essay), a play which originated at St.Marcus Theatre in St.Louis, Missouri but was transferred to audio tape primarily for a British audience. In a similar way John Elsom's "Les Enfants de Parodie: The Enlightened Incest of Anglo-American Musicals" is excused by their trans-Atlantic traffic. One of his major examples, *City of Angels* (1990), a parody of film noir, forties big band jazz, and close harmony singing, opened in the Virginia Theatre, NY, and had a two-year run before transferring to the West End, where it closed after less than a year.

Elsom traces the origins of the musical to John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1727). Such historicizing, however, is purposeful (like the essay as a whole, lean and swiftly moving), since Gay's creation is a low-life parody of Italian opera, a kind of revenge of popular art, the urban middle-classes, and Englishness against its counterparts, as embodied by the works of Haendel, Master of the Orchestra at the Royal Academy of Music. (Gay's popularity among early North American settlers further challenges the often-heard argument that the musical is the only "original" American genre.) Historicizing is also endemic to the collection's first batch of papers, concerned with reappropriations of the past, such as classical Greek (Vigouroux-Frey), medieval (Elisabeth Angel-Perez), and Jacobean drama (Klaus Peter Müller, Michel Morel), as well as older Japanese forms (Monique Prunet). The other two parts of the collection deal with performance and with «stretchings» of the realist mould. In fact, historicizing should be considered one of the central features of the plays and performances discussed, whether as a result of the intertextual reflection upon earlier models or as a goal of the (post-)Brechtian distancing, so prominent in British theatre. One could argue about the section papers have been assigned to, like Christine Dymkovski's "'The Play's the Thing': The Metatheatre of Timberlake Wertenbaker," now presented in the middle section, though the first play analyzed, *Our Country's Good* (1988), is based on George Farquhar's *The Recruiting Officer* (1706), and the second, *The Love of the Nightingale* (1988), retells the myth of Philomele, while also relying on Euripides' *Hippolytus* as inset.

The contributors to this collection are English, American and continental, a mixture of widely published established names and figures less known beyond the confines of their home countries. Most of them are academics,

some straddle the fence. Elsom has extensively reviewed shows for the papers (notably *The Listener*) and written several plays. Goodman has a solid background in the feminist theatre, apart from being involved in the Shakespeare Multi-Media Research Project in association with the BBC. Jean-Pierre Simard has combined teaching and research with playwriting, acting, and directing his own company in Saint-Etienne. Aleks Sierz is primarily a theatre critic and magazine editor. This assembly has made for a varied approach to the subject, a combination of theory and practice, textual treatment and performance analysis. All the same, most essays take specific plays as points of departure and the theoretical implications sometimes have to be gleaned by the reader. Perhaps this is to be expected in discussions of metatheatre, which outstrips other drama as "a form of philosophising, not in abstract but in concrete terms" (Esslin, qtd. 4), as the work of Beckett and Stoppard amply proves, beyond its pervasive self-allusiveness.

Some essays tackle a few examples in depth, others possess a more encyclopaedic scope. None come close to thoroughly theorizing the issue, not even Goodman's essay, "Representing Gender / Representing Self: A Reflection on Role-Playing in Performance Theory and Practice," which also fails to capture the gender-specific implications of the change from one medium to another, her chosen subject. The loss of "bite" (205) in the 1992 television production of Caryl Churchill's 1982 *Top Girls*, based on Max Stafford-Clark's revival, is largely due to the medium's two-dimensionality. The compensatory interviews and seminar accompanying the video of the play may bear resemblance to the peripheral metatheatrical forms of prologue and epilogue, rehabilitated by British political theatre despite the growing absence of clear-cut morals to introduce or return to. Even so, they remain extraneous to the drama proper, much like live pre- and post-production discussions between the cast and the audience. The updated interpretation of the New Woman —in 1992 no longer an ideal vigorously believed in but an illusion, a role sceptically played in the absence of alternatives— results merely from the changed social and historical circumstances in Britain over the period considered.

What Goodman's essay does convey is the range of *Drama on Drama*, from original plays, to adaptations within the same medium, cross-genre and cross-media transferrals, and translations. Artists such as Christopher Hampton, whose work is explored by Albert-Reiner Glaap in "Translating, Adapting, Re-writing: Three Facets of Christopher Hampton's Work as a Playwright," have demonstrated their proficiency in all categories. *White Chameleon* (1991), though not mentioned by Glaap, based as it is on Hampton's childhood stay in Alexandria until the 1956 Suez crisis, illustrates still another kind of reflexivity, that extending to the playwright's life. It is a category touched upon by Cohn, Maria Ghilardi-Santacatterina & Aleks Sierz, and Simard with regard respectively to Beckett, Pinter, and McGrath,

who directed his wife, Elizabeth MacLennan, in the part of activist turned Bed and Breakfast owner in *Watching for Dolphins*. This kind of reflexivity should be distinguished from Stoppard's truth-undermining dramatic play with historical and fictional biographies in *Arcadia* and *Indian Ink*, dealt with by Boireau in "Tom Stoppard's Metadrama: The Haunting Repetition." Max Stafford-Clark's 1988 staging of Wertenbaker's *Our Country's Good* provides a fascinating fusion of textual and real-life referentiality (moving beyond satire or topicality). The play, as Dymkowski reminds us, is based on Thomas Keneally's historical novel *The Playmaker* and reconstructs the first Australian theatrical performance, by prison convicts, of Farquahar's *The Recruiting Officer*, which ran concurrently at the Royal Court with the same cast.

Given metadrama's range and sophistication, as well as its inadequate theoretical foundation in the present collection, some terminological and conceptual confusion arises, though often it is only a matter of relative emphasis. The confusion is already intimated in the title's intermingling of the dramatic and the theatrical, references to the writing and the performance (whether textually inscribed or added by the director, mise-en-scène, performers, etc.). Some solace may be found in the general but "Select Bibliography" closing the volume and complementing the more specialized lists occasionally appended to individual essays. Unfortunately, most of the works are not explicitly taken issue with.

Neglecting the existing secondary literature meant foregoing the opportunity for an enriching dialogue, a notion integral to the very idea of drama on drama, whether it is an internal dialogue with texts, traditions, and performance modes or with the audience. In fact, one of the terms most frequently resorted to, intertextuality, as Ghilardi-Santacatterina & Sierz recall in their reception analysis of *Moonlight*, "Pinter and the Pinteresque: An Author Trapped by His Own Image?", was developed by Julia Kristeva from her translation of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and refined by critics like Eco and Genette. Boireau takes her clue from Deleuze's *Différence et répétition* and Stoppard's innumerable embeddings (far exceeding simple doublings or mirrorings), distinguishing ultimately between three kinds of repetition: that of literary history, of reality, and of the play itself (in rehearsal and production, as *répétition* and *représentation*). (In Morel's "*Women Beware Women* by Howard Barker (with Thomas Middleton): The 'Terrible Consistency'" the latter French term is also preferred to the alternative *imitation* as a translation of Aristotle's mimesis, in an attempt to move away from realism's exclusive dependence on its source to a more balanced approach giving equal due to the two realities involved.)

If intertextuality and repetition sound neutral, the notion of (self-)parody frequently foregrounded in the essays and explicitly adhered to by Ghilardi-

Santacatterina & Sierz but also by Elsom, adds a further qualification. It is the requirement that the relationship or interaction be governed by a certain tone or attitude, slightly deprecating or ironic, to the point of subverting the metatheatrical stance itself as well as the humorously re-established "Einverständnis" with the spectators. A similar slant is conveyed by Vigouroux-Frey's concept of "distortion," which is often a matter of recontextualization and contradiction and need not be restricted to classical adaptations (her subject), though it derives in part from Barthes's reinterpretation of myth as a metalanguage and "a view of illusion or theatrical metaphor" (4).

Self-parody and distortion shift the concept to postmodern playfulness, even if drama on drama is assigned to the larger category of defamiliarization or distancing devices, practised by Brecht and Shklovsky but going all the way back to Euripides and Aristophanes. Depending on the critic and the art works selected this playfulness is variously evaluated (as equivocalness, as deconstruction), but when its presumed ahistoricity and disengagement are insufficiently problematized, their infectiousness is preserved.

In "The Revival of Medieval Forms in Recent Political Drama" Angel-Perez considers the infusion into contemporary British drama of techniques and forms from the Middle Ages —the double source of vernacular theatre and a pre-capitalist economy— as a postmodern way of historicizing the present, paradoxically abutting on ahistoricity, somewhat like T.S.Eliot's essentialist "simultaneous order" of past and present. Morel arrives at the same conclusion for Barker's reverse, "anachronistic" appropriation of Middleton's *Women Beware Women* (59). Vigouroux-Frey, while asserting the political subversiveness of *Greek* (1980) running counter to the Oedipus myth's universalist appeal, discerns in that play an "urgent need for Nature," "the origin," for "man degree zero" (13), as if Berkoff in the tricky process of remythification, the only way to defeat myth according to Barthes, indeed fell victim to its insidious power. Less up against myth than attuned to scientific discourses (induction, iteration, quantum physics,...), Stoppard is believed by Boireau to create "a fictional ideology-free zone" (148-9). She burdens her assembled researchers with a "hidden agenda" and regiments "[a]cademics from all over the world" by their "desire for a permanence beyond shifting ideologies, or for a unity of vision beyond postmodern fragmentation" (xv). Equally conscious of the ideological implications of form —*in casu* realism's collusion with patriarchy and capitalism, its pretense at a total mastery of reality through the supposed correspondence with it, and the realist narrative's maintenance of a progressive notion of history— Ann Wilson in "Hauntings: Ghosts and the Limits of Realism in *Cloud Nine* and *Fen* by Caryl Churchill" at least acknowledges the repressions or misrecognitions of Churchill's plays *and* the "ghosts" of her own critical writing.

The same ambivalent response towards the ideological biases of form can be found in this collection's use of Aristotle's catharsis. Some critics (like Boireau with regard to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's participation in Hamlet's tragedy or Thomasina's death at the end of *Arcadia*) skirt the issue. Others (like Simard or Morel, who agrees in this with Barker, while granting the violence of contemporary British theatre also exemplified by Bond), take offense at the notion's voyeuristic immorality and repressive tolerance precluding social change, flaws theorized by Bert O.States in *The Pleasure of the Play* and Augusto Boal in *Theatre of the Oppressed.*

Going by Churchill's *Fen* (1983), Wilson has her doubts about the reformist potential of theatre, and the question of postmodern playfulness, like that of the effect of catharsis, inscribes itself in the debate about reflexive drama's relative autonomy and engagement with society. The assertion of autonomy in this case is double: from reality and from the textual models. That the debate is an on-going one is illustrated, amongst others, in the apparent inconsistency between Boireau's preface, defending self-conscious art against the common enough allegation of narcissism (xv), and her essay, insisting upon the autonomy of Stoppard's drama and narrowing its "effectiveness" to the comedy and metatheatricality. To her, Stoppard indeed comes close to dissolving the distinction between reality and illusion, self and role, and to destroying the referentiality of language. But this need not be a reason for despair, as it is in Manfred Schmeling's nihilistic interpretation of the playwright and the metadramatic tradition to which he belongs. (Schmeling's name, incidentally is misspelled whenever it is used [xii, 247].) The freedom from a fixed referentiality Boireau considers a "privileged state of grace" and "[l]inguistic playfulness demonstrates the power of dramatic language as an autonomous system" (142).

Stoppard is of course a unique and extreme case. By contrast, choosing British theatre to document drama on drama looks almost like a premeditated move to demonstrate its impingement on reality, since so much of contemporary British theatre is of left-wing political signature. For this reason it needs to be emphasized that the fifteen essays do not exclude other traditions, as mention of Hampton and Stoppard but also of the musical has demonstrated. Insofar as the latter is a pre-eminent product of economics, often having self-conscious recourse to show business as a metaphor for human survival, it may well be the Trojan horse within the confines of this book. On the other hand, the musical's necessary popular appeal gives it the edge over regular drama, which in its self-conscious variants often tends towards elitism. One exception confirming the rule is Stephen Sondheim, whose half-hearted success Elsom ascribes precisely to his intellectualism and respectfulness, his bent towards ever so expert pastiche, regardless of whether the traditions recycled are low-brow (Victorian melodrama and music hall in *Sweeney Todd* [1979], 1930s vaudeville in *Follies* [1971]) or high-brow

(Seurat's pointillism in *Sunday in the Park with George* [1984]). (*A Funny Thing Happened to Me on the Way to the Forum* [1962] and *Into the Woods* [1987] are hybrid cases, the one spoofing the comedies of Plautus, the other entering into the Freudian dimension of fairy tales.)

Among the political playwrights featured in this collection, Howard Barker is probably one of the few provocatively to have proclaimed his disbelief in any worthwhile popular culture (e.g. in his 1986 interview with Finlay Donesky and his 1989 *Arguments for a Theatre*). This revalorizes Anne Fuchs's "Devising Drama on Drama: The Community and Theatre Traditions." Devised drama, much like medieval theatre, is made *by* the community and *for* a communal cause, if usually in collaboration with a writer, often an already established playwright. Fuchs quotes David Edgar's plea in *The Second Time as Farce: Reflections on the Drama of Mean Times* (1988) for a synthesis between the visually exciting performance theatre and the intellectually rigorous political theatre of the 60s and 70s to appeal to audiences at a time when radical ideas are deeply resented (191-2). Presumably things will change now that Labour has ascended to power, but the point is well taken. In certain circles political theatre still triggers a frisson at visions of didacticism, dogmatism, and drama reduced to the point of incredibility and unlikelihood. But as John McGrath has pointed out in "Some Uses of Stereotype" and his intimate yet polyphonic, epic monologue *Watching for Dolphins* (1991) substantiates, attempts are being made to move beyond cliché answers and fossilized expectations, making room for questions and open-endedness, human complexity and contradiction. The reflexivity of so much contemporary drama in fact attests to an in-built critical perspective, on itself and society, which is the key to its current honorific status and one means to oppose the denigrating accusation of narcissism. In the words of Theodore Leinwand, quoted in Müller's "Cultural Transformations of Subversive Jacobean Drama: Contemporary Sub-Versions of Tragedy, Comedy and Tragicomedy," theater and reality are both culturally determined matrices of "organized perception" (54-5).

Metadrama's reformist power may not exceed an empowerment of the audience through a changed perception, moral reconstruction (Barker), or a desire for change (Peter Brook). It should not for that reason be neglected, just as the immutability of human nature need not be cause for pessimism in the light of the possibility to improve society. Hence McGrath's *Watching for Dolphins* can easily be, in the eyes of Simard, an optimist myth about shattered socialist myths, in keeping with his paper's subtitle "The Single Voicing of a Multiple Voice Performance." This capacity to balance opposites is what Hornby has called metatheatre's bifocal vision. It explains the paradoxicality of drama on drama and in the final analysis warrants the holistic impulse Boireau has announced in her preface.

Metatheatre's doubleness or multiplicity gets reflected in its affinity with

tragicomedy, both of which thrive on an alternation between empathy and distance. The affinity is acknowledged by Angel-Perez (22), and before her by Schmeling, but ruled out by Lionel Abel in his apparently slight but still pathbreaking 1963 collection of essays (no matter Pavis's cursory dismissal of it). Abel's generically exclusive approach to the phenomenon has nevertheless proved flawed in that he radically sets apart metatheatre (with its scepticism and conviction that the world can be made and remade) from tragedy (with its fatalistic belief in implacable values) and even questions the very existence of tragicomedy. Müller's comparative examination of the contemporary transformations of Jacobean tragedy (Barker's 1986 *Women Beware Women*, after Middleton), comedy (Keeffe's 1977 *A Mad World, My Masters*, again after Middleton) and tragicomedy (Brenton's 1972 *Measure for Measure*) confirms that reflexiveness can enliven any play and performance. The frequent reliance on narrators and narration as distancing devices indicates that drama on drama is not even limited to dialogue as a generic denominator. From Schmeling's intertextual perspective, metatheatre can indeed be dubbed the intrusion of a narrative (meta-)discourse within the dramatic one.

Apart from the techniques used (insets, framing, inner role-playing, doubling, direct address, stylization, citation, theatre vocabulary,...), the audience's theatrical competence, and the degree of disruption felt (making for weak or strong forms), metatheatre should then be considered as a specific heightening of the theatre's inherent doubleness, as fiction and reality, showing and telling, as a mind-broadening confrontation of the self with its Other, serving public and private interests. Hence the usefulness of Cohn's "theatereality," a term coined in *Just Play* and here re-introduced to designate "a distinctive form of metadrama" (104n3), emerging in those moments when the enacted stage reality —whether visual image or verbal narration— synchronizes with the fiction (99), or to put it differently, when the fiction is literalized (101). Cohn glosses over the irony that traditionally such "convergence" has made for boring illustrative theatre, a threat which artists like Merce Cunningham and Robert Wilson, to take just two examples, in their collaborations with John Cage and Hans-Peter Kühn have always fought. She nevertheless realizes that theatereality, like the aim of Pirandello's dramatic experiments or the more social one of integrating theatre and everyday life pursued by the American alternative theatre of the sixties, remains a *virtual* realm: "always in theatereality the actual and the fictional only nearly converge" (103). (A tricky test case for this virtuality is the actual audience's echoing the prerecorded applause at the end of Beckett's *Catastrophe* [1982].) Contemporary British drama on drama, perhaps more than any other drama, imaginatively "speculate[s] about life as it is lived" and "as it might be lived," to quote Barker's *Arguments for a Theatre*. As such it partakes of art's utopia, necessary refuge and sanctuary, not an ideology-free

zone but one from which to confront reality all the better, an opening into and out of reality preventing its closure and predetermination.

Johan Callens
Free University of Brussels (VUB)
English Department
Pleinlaan 2
B-1050 Brussels, Belgium

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