

# How did we get here

And where are we going?

James Hudson MA Core Module

# *A Short History of English Drama* (B. Ifor Evans, 1948)

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‘of the English theatre in the twentieth century, this at least can be said, that it is better than the English theatre of the nineteenth century’

‘Let us invent a character, a nice respectable, middle-class, middle-aged, maiden lady, with time on her hands and the money to help her pass it. She enjoys pictures, books, music, and the theatre and though to none of these arts (or rather, for consistency's sake, to none of these three arts and the one craft) does she bring much knowledge or discernment, at least, as she is apt to tell her cronies, she "does know what she likes". Let us call her Aunt Edna.’ Terence Rattigan, *Collected Plays: Volume Two*, p. xii.

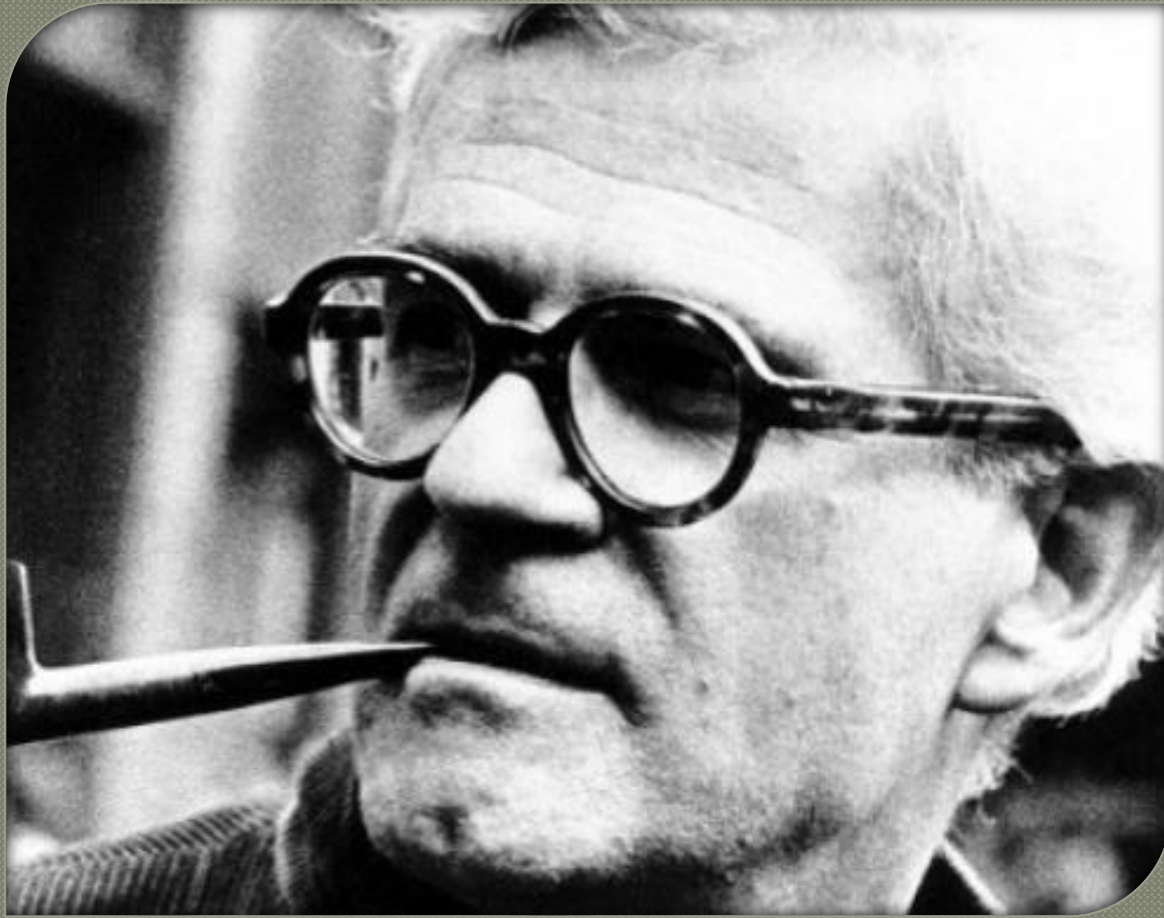
# Kenneth Tynan

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## Tynan's 'Loamshire Play'

"If you seek a tombstone, look about you; survey the peculiar nullity of our drama's prevalent genre, the Loamshire play. Its setting is a country house in what used to be called Loamshire but is now, as a heroic tribute to realism, sometimes called Berkshire. Except when someone must sneeze, or be murdered, the sun invariably shines. The inhabitants belong to a social class derived partly from romantic novels and partly from the playwright's vision of the leisured life he will lead after the play is a success - this being the only effort of imagination he is called on to make. Joys and sorrows are giggles and whimpers: the crash of denunciation dwindles into 'Oh, stuff, Mummy!' and 'Oh, really, Daddy!' And so grim is the continuity of these things that the foregoing paragraph might have been written at any time during the last thirty years." Kenneth Tynan, *A View of the English Stage*.



## George Devine

Artistic Director of the **English Stage Company**  
1956-1965: ' [to] present exciting, provocative and  
stimulating plays... [and] attract young people'

# The Royal Court's Artistic Policy

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**‘The right to fail’ –**

Commonly attributed to Tony Richardson



# Other Key moments and influences

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- ◉ Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop
- ◉ The Berliner Ensemble visit London 1956
- ◉ *Waiting for Godot* 1955
- ◉ Edward Bond brings down the Theatre Censor 1965-68
- ◉ The RSC founded 1960 by Peter Hall
- ◉ The National Theatre opens with *Hamlet* in 1963

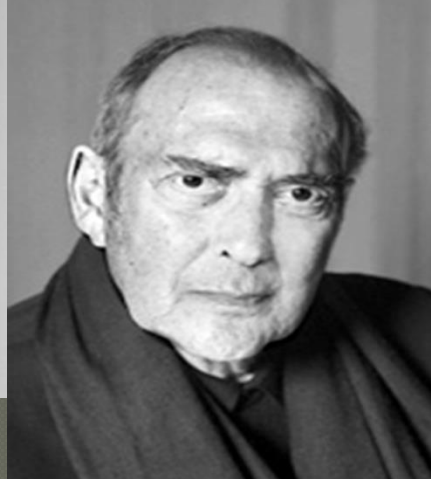
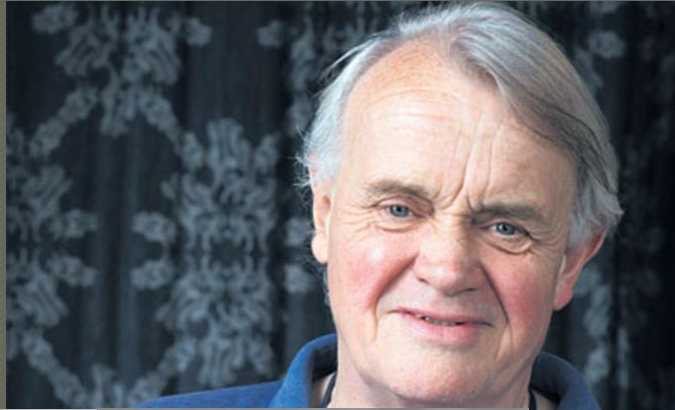
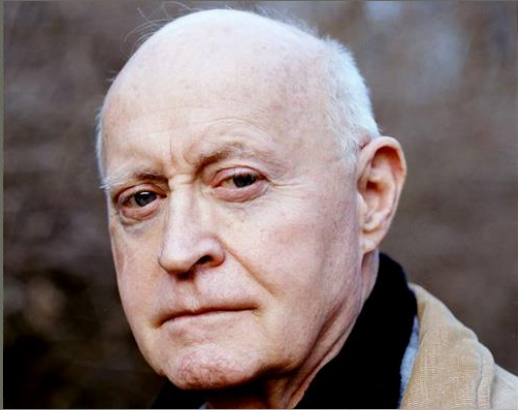


**But the decade's key legacy, aside from two national companies and a host of regional theatres, was the idea that theatre was an oppositional force - something that questioned both government policies and society's underlying values.**

**Michael Billington**

the *Guardian's* chief theatre critic  
on the 1960s

# Playwrights 60s, 70s, 80s and beyond



# 'in yer face' and New Writing

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- Sarah Kane's *Blasted* premieres at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 1995
- Critic Aleks Sierz coins the phrase 'in yer face' and identifies a tendency in mid-late 90s theatre
- The 'New Writing' boom takes off.
- 'there appeared to be a disengagement and dismantlement from recognisable forms of political engagement by the new generation of young dramatists'. Graham Saunders, *Cool Britannia*, p.3

# In-yer-face?

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- ◉ A critical category assigned retrospectively to the theatre of the nineties
- ◉ Not used by anyone working in the theatre at the time
- ◉ A Procrustean Bed...?

# New Writing

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- 'the distinctiveness of the author's individual voice, the contemporary flavour of their language and themes, and sometimes by the provocative nature of its content'.

Sierz, Aleks, *Modern British Playwriting: The 1990s*, p.54.

- 'New Writing' becoming the prevalent determinant of play development processes designed to turn youth, rawness, and up-to-the-minute social relevance into marketable commodities.



# New Writing

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- The mid-to-late 1990s and early 2000s distinguished by the wholesale repivoting of the British theatrical ecology upon new play development and the discovery of new, specifically young, writers.

# New Writing

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- 'Arts Council statistics show that, at the end of the 1980s, new plays formed less than ten per cent of staged work in subsidised theatres; by 1994-96 the figure was twenty per cent. Even more important has been box office success. In the late 1980s, new writing regularly attracted audiences of less than fifty per cent; by 1994, this figure was fifty-three percent; and by 1997, it was fifty-seven per cent, which means that new plays were outperforming adaptations, postwar revivals, translations, classics, and even Shakespeare'.



# Where are we going...?

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- ◉ New Writing
- ◉ The verbatim play
- ◉ Site-specific theatre
- ◉ Bloggers vs broadsheet critics
- ◉ Devised and postdramatic theatre become more central