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1 Introduction

► Using this book

The purpose of this book is to enable you to make a really good job of responding to any modern play that you might encounter as part of a course. Students are often uneasy about studying modern plays, either because they are baffled as to what the play is about or because they have either read or seen a play, enjoyed it, but simply cannot think what to say about it when it comes to analysis. So, the prospect of writing an essay or examination answer inevitably seems daunting.

I should certainly not be writing the second edition of this book to help you if I did not believe that studying modern plays *can* and *should* be one of the most rewarding experiences in the whole field of drama and literature; but I must admit that there are two reasons why this might not appear to be the case. First, some modern plays seem utterly incomprehensible when you initially encounter them, and you should never be ashamed to admit this to yourself. And don't be discouraged: plenty of sophisticated audiences and critics have at first been totally perplexed by plays that have later established themselves as classics. We must never forget that one of the many options open to a playwright *is* to mystify the audience. Second, drama now enters our homes constantly through television and we are much more likely to consume modern drama than we are novels, poetry or earlier plays. Watching so many 'real life' dramas, soaps, domestic comedies and documentaries makes it difficult for us to conceive of 'studying' an art form we take so much for granted.

How, then *do* we study modern plays, and how can this book be of help? Initially, I am going to ask you to consider five questions before going on to suggest a number of steps to follow in studying a modern play. You will need to think about the five questions very carefully because they provide the basis of our future exploration. You may wish to go on to work your way through all the parts of this book in sequence, but you will notice that at the end of each chapter there is a checklist of things you should have understood and some suggestions for *workshop activities*. Another way of using this book is to turn straight to Chapter 4 entitled 'Practical Workshops for Drama Study'

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once you have finished reading this introduction and then apply what you have learnt there to the rest of the book. This might be particularly helpful if you are working with a group.

As you acquire new skills and insights from following the steps I suggest you should find yourself able to go deeper into a play and you will grow in confidence as you discover that you are able to make valuable judgements about the material. I am particularly keen that you should come to 'make sense' of what is really the strange and remarkable ritual that we know as 'theatre': a group of people, with you amongst them, sits in a darkened room or in some agreed space and watches another group of people perform. The first group of people, *the audience*, never invades the space of the second group of people, *the performers*. The audience does not usually shout out when they are angry, bored, mystified or can see something that the performers appear not to see. Indeed, they allow the performers to insult them, shock them, amuse them and manipulate their perception in a whole variety of ways. The audience may agree to imagine that a structure on stage is a room in someone's house or that a bare stage represents the universe, or that half an hour represents several hours. The performers may speak directly to the audience or appear to pretend that the audience does not exist. This ritual becomes stranger the more you think about it and we shall return to this description several times in our study. Modern plays are the products of what playwrights have believed to be the appropriate forms of this ritual in recent years. And this leads us to our five questions:

- What is a playtext?
- How do we 'study' modern drama?
- What *is* 'modern drama'?
- What are stage conventions?
- What about film and TV?

► **What is a playtext?**

Almost all the plays you may be required to study will have survived because they have been published in printed form: so students usually start their study by reading the playtext. It is true that, in the contemporary theatre, there are some plays in which the written text is a comparatively small element and we shall be considering this type of 'physical theatre' at a later stage. However, I am going to assume that you are expecting to gain a great deal of understanding by studying a text. When you do this you must be constantly aware that a 'play' as a play really only exists when it is performed. The text is a blueprint for action – a complex set of instructions to the per-

formers. To make this clear, modern Performance Studies tend to refer to the original text as 'the work' so that we understand that the text itself becomes open to an almost infinite number of interpretations. Because the bulk of a playtext consists of the words that the actors must speak, and because these words are chosen and shaped with great skill by the playwright, the playtext itself is often mistakenly thought to be simply another literary form like the novel or poetry. It is not surprising, therefore, that some students find plays difficult to understand, since they have not grasped that the 'meaning' of a play only emerges in the theatre.

The implication of all this is that in studying a play you must recognise that the words spoken by the characters are only one element of a play, and I shall be suggesting ways in which you can interpret the various other indications for performance contained in a playtext. It is even more important for you to remember that as you study a play you will need to construct an imaginary performance in your mind. This may cause you some problems if you have a very limited experience of the theatre, but, once again, there are suggested activities in this book that will help you to overcome this factor. Ideally, you will need to see the play you are studying performed as often as possible, but this may not be easy and you may well experience a sharp clash between the imaginary performance you have constructed in your mind and a live performance you may see. This, in fact, is part of the enjoyment of studying modern drama and you can well imagine how dull it would be if all performances were similar.

In the modern theatre the majority of successful playwrights have been and continue to be deeply involved in the performance of their plays and, as we shall see, this is a period of bold experimentation and considerable change. Playwrights convey many of their wishes and attitudes concerning the performance of their plays in the published playtexts, so when you begin reading a play (and this can be a very enjoyable activity in its own right) remember you are not studying a novel.

► **How do we study modern drama?**

We can study drama in many ways: by reading and analysis, by visiting the theatre, taking part in workshops, writing reflective journals and engaging with the text at a variety of levels. Some of our learning will be conscious and structured and some of it experiential. You have probably obtained this book because you are a student required to study plays, but remember that you are not the only kind of person who needs to do this. If plays were written for performance, then it follows that those who have to be involved in performing them – actors, directors, designers – need to study them

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with as much perception, care and imagination as students. These practitioners must ask the same crucial question as students of every playtext they encounter: 'How are the playwright's intentions to be realised in performance?'

Students can learn a great deal from the way in which actors and directors approach the study of a play and you will benefit from tackling a play *as if* the end product was a production rather than an essay. Some of the suggestions in this book might provide insights into doing this. The idea of 'study' is usually associated with reading, solitary contemplation and quiet reflection, all of which is valuable. But in the case of drama there are other dimensions. This is why I have included a chapter on workshop approaches to the study of drama and have suggested various practical activities to complement and enrich your study. There is no division between activity and thinking: on the contrary, there is a clearly established link between thought and action, so do not be surprised if you only come to understand a line of a play when you have to speak it for yourself or if you only realise the impact of the entrance of a character into a room when you have experienced it in performance.

Do not be put off by the idea of performance. The aim of this book is not to make you into an actor, and there *will* be a strong emphasis on traditional, bookish study. However, the *possibility* of performance must always be in your mind and I have included various practical activities that are helpful without demanding a high level of acting skill.

► What is modern drama?

The precise meaning of the term 'modern' varies according to its context. Rather surprisingly, perhaps, we usually describe as modern any play written since 1877! In this particular year the great Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen turned from writing verse plays to create a series of plays in everyday language dealing with important social and moral issues. It was the impact of these and similar plays on the European Theatre of the late nineteenth century and the rapid spread of their influence to Britain, Russia and the United States of America that began the era of 'modern drama'.

The style of Ibsen's plays is frequently labelled 'naturalistic', and while there have been many departures from naturalism in the modern age, it has remained the dominant mode and, for most of us, the most accessible form of theatre. Television has only strengthened the whole of naturalism. Though we shall return to the idea many times, it is important to note here that we generally *expect* a play to be naturalistic: that is, to show us believable people living credible lives and speaking like ourselves. Because naturalistic plays

are the most straightforward to deal with, most of my early examples will be drawn from this kind of play.

Before we leave the question of what is meant by 'modern drama' we must consider some of the factors which modern plays have in common. There are four in particular which are helpful for us to consider here:

First, modern plays are all in some way concerned with the predicament of human beings living in the age of science and industrialisation: an age in which technology and religious faith have increasingly come into conflict. This is your world and mine and you will find that even if modern plays are *set* in earlier periods of history, they are still inviting judgements from a modern, scientific perspective.

Second, modern plays in some way reflect the remarkable changes in production, theatre design and technology that occurred towards the end of the nineteenth century and have continued ever since. During this period, we have seen the rise of the director, a person whose job it is to have and impose an artistic concept for a production. In previous periods this responsibility lay with the leading actor but the emergence of an entirely new profession has greatly changed the face of the theatre. Directors such as Stanislavsky, Meyerhold, Brecht, Grotowski and Brook have greatly influenced the way in which playwrights have operated. Theatres too have, of course, always been subject to change, but the rapidity of change in the last hundred years or so has been unprecedented: it is a period which has seen the invention of electric light and has now reached a point where through television we can each have our own theatre. Shapes of stages and theatre buildings have been subject to constant experiment so that playwrights are constantly challenged to rethink their craft. Audiences have also been experimented upon; for example, it is only during the period of modern drama that they have sat in a darkened auditorium. So you must remember that any play you are studying was written for a sophisticated yet frequently changing theatre.

Third, you will find that modern plays, as a result of some of the changes I have mentioned, are very varied in form. They include some extremely long plays, such as Shaw's *Man and Superman* (1901), but also many short ones, such as the one-act plays and brief sketches by Pinter and the play *Breath* (1966) by Beckett that only lasts thirty seconds! There are also plays written for performance by an entire community, such as David Edgar's *Entertaining Strangers* (1986), and plays for a single character like David Hare's *Via Dolorosa* (1998) in which the playwright was also the actor. 'One woman' plays such as Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* (1998) and Dario Fo's and Franca Rame's *Female Parts* (1981) have also proved popular. To some extent the prevalence of short plays reflects tastes and habits: the pace of modern life generally seems to call for shorter plays; but this new timescale and the interest in plays for single performers also stems from the development of

many non-commercial and experimental theatres which have small numbers of performers yet greater freedom to try out new ideas. During the modern period there has been more debate about what theatre was for, who it was intended for, who should create it and where and how it should be performed than at any time in our history. There has also been a recognition that the isolated playwright is not the only person who can create plays, so we have seen the emergence of Companies such as Joint Stock, Shared Experience or Tell Tail Hearts with their emphasis on collaborative modes of working. Such plays as David Edgar's massive dramatisation of *Nicholas Nickleby* (1980) or Helen Edmundson's *The Mill on the Floss* (1994) came about by this way of working. A further, more recent, development has been the emergence of a number of outstanding women playwrights and we shall be looking at some of their work at later stages in this book. In 1958 Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* and Ann Jellicoe's *The Sport of My Mad Mother* were produced in London and the following year *A Raisin in the Sun* by the first black African-American woman writer, Lorraine Hansberry, was produced in New York. These, however, were lone female voices and, indeed, as recently as 1982 John Russell Brown named only Delaney and Jellicoe as woman writers in his *Short Guide to Modern British Drama*. However, the picture had begun to change: in the 1970s Caryl Churchill and Pam Jems established themselves as important playwrights and they were joined in the 1980s by Louise Page, the overtly lesbian Sarah Daniels, Timberlake Wertenbaker and Michelene Wandor. In the 1990s Sarah Kane, Diane Samuels, Josie Melia and Judy Upton were among the many important contemporary playwrights.

Among modern plays, however, you will find many that conform to what has become something of a traditional structure of three Acts, each containing one or two scenes, a structure often used by Ibsen and his successors. Such plays present a series of episodes of roughly equal length, each with its own climax. Studying a modern play includes discovering how its particular structure works, but you need to avoid any idea that there is a 'right' way for a playwright to construct a play.

► What about film and television?

The period I have defined as belonging to 'modern drama' has also seen the development of a form of drama that can be permanently recorded in performance. We cannot ignore film or television in a study of modern drama but there are important differences from published stage plays that mean that a detailed study of film and television is outside the scope of this book. Almost certainly, you will not be required to study a film or television script as part of a conventional drama course, and the additional factors involved in the making of a film or TV drama mean that you would not be able to

explore such a script in practical terms unless you had access to a great deal of equipment.

However, there are some very important points to make. The experience of attending the live performance of a stage play is totally different from watching a film or TV drama. Live performance involves interaction between actors and audience and invariably includes an element of risk. Every performance is subtly different from every other performance and playwrights depend on such variation in emphasis and interpretation for their success and for the continued life of their play. On the other hand, once a play is screened, it is fixed.

It follows from these facts that stage playwrights expect and hope for a long 'run' of their play and many 'revivals', whereas the TV dramatist or writer of a screen play can usually only hope for repeat showings of the same version of their work, and these possibly for a very limited time.

Some playwrights, such as David Mamet, Christopher Hampton and Harold Pinter, have been equally successful in writing for the stage and cinema, and the contemporary British playwright Mike Leigh has shown a mastery of stage, television and film writing. Paula MacGee, whose first play *In Nomine Patris* (1983) was concerned with sectarian violence in Scottish football supporters, is now also established as a major film and TV writer. Such writers have allowed their work for one medium to enrich the other but, in the broadest sense, the 'language' of film and TV is different from that of the stage. It may well be that you are only able to see a film or TV version of a play you are studying. If this is the case, you should be mindful of the differences and ensure that any critical analysis you may make is based, initially, on the published stage version with its emphasis on audience response and theatrical space.

What is certainly true and significant is that film and television *techniques* have profoundly influenced the writing of plays in the modern age. This is particularly evident in two ways: first, in the use of such devices as 'flash-backs', very short episodes and a wide variety of locations; and second, in the realisation that there are certain things that film and TV can do much *better* than the live theatre. This second factor has forced playwrights to focus on what makes live theatre distinctive and what it can do better than film. The conventions of film, television and the stage are different and we must turn now to consider the central idea of *conventions* in the theatre.

► What are stage conventions?

In my description of the ritual of 'theatre' I suggested that there is an unspoken agreement between the audience and the performers. This agreement actually begins with the playwright and the audience. Every member of an

audience unconsciously agrees to make certain assumptions to enable them to derive anything from watching a play. The most basic assumption an audience makes is to agree to imagine that the actors they see on stage represent fictitious or actual historical characters. In a similar way, the audience agrees to imagine that the physical space we call 'the stage' frequently represents somewhere else. This is a stage *convention*, and there are others: for example: the 'aside' – words spoken aloud which are heard by the audience but not supposed to be heard by other characters on the stage; the 'soliloquy' – in which a character is supposedly thinking aloud; direct address to the audience or even the pretence that the audience is not there at all.

These are all conventions through which drama works, and the more you think about them, the more you realise their possibilities. Deciding which conventions to use is a vital part of a playwright's work, as is also a decision as to how to make the audience aware of them. As a student of drama you are well on your way to understanding a play if you can recognise and discuss the conventions that are in operation. This, of course, is another reason why the study of film and television is so different, since they use different conventions.

One of the consequences of the enormous amount of experimentation in the modern theatre has been a renewed interest in the conventions of drama. Directors and playwrights have studied a whole range of historic theatre forms and have discussed the nature and purpose of theatre in order to explore the relationship between performers and audiences. Everything from the Ancient Greek Theatre to recent 'stand-up comedy' has been analysed and debated. This has led to a great deal of writing about the theory and practice of the modern stage, much of which you will find helpful in your study; but it has also led to a very wide variety of conventions being adopted by modern dramatists: and that is where we shall begin our study in the next chapter.

Checklist

Key topics covered in this chapter:

- Definition of modern drama and some of its characteristics
- Approaches to the study of drama
- The term 'playtext'
- The ritual of theatre
- Stage conventions
- The main differences between stage and screen drama

► Workshop activities

(You may wish to turn to Chapter 4 at this point.)

1. Devise a very short improvised scene in which a single character enters a mysterious room. The scene may be presented with or without speech and the activity may be done in pairs with the second person directing or as an entire group with a single actor and the remainder as audience. Repeat the scene five times in the following ways: with the audience at one end of the room; with the audience surrounding the actor; with the audience on three sides of the actor; with the actor in the light and the audience in the dark; with the actor's performance recorded on video. Now discuss the differences in the various presentations from the point of view of actor, audience and director.
2. Discuss a very short extract from a modern play you are studying and suggest which of the conventions explored in the previous activity might be the basis for an effective presentation of the extract. Try it out and discuss the results.

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