

The persistence of the 'well made play'

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The Persistence of the ‘Well-Made Play’ in British Theatre of the 1990s

The story of the well-made play in twentieth-century British theatre is one of dominance and decline, followed by an ongoing resistance to prevailing trends. In this article, I hope to argue that during the early 1990s the well-made play enjoyed a brief flourishing and momentary return (literally) to centre stage before it was superseded again - in much the same way that the likes of Terence Rattigan and Noël Coward were swept away by the Angry Young Men of the Royal Court during the 1950s. However, between 1991-1994 I contend that the well-made play re-established itself, not only as a West End entertainment, but one which came of age in terms of formal experimentation and the introduction of political commentary into a genre which had always been perceived as conservative in both form and ideology.

Despite its brief resurgence, I hope to trace how the so-called in-yer-face dramatists such as Sarah Kane, Rebecca Prichard and Joe Penhall quickly supplanted the well-made play. Lasting from 1994 until roughly the end of the decade, Aleks Sierz (who coined the term in his influential book of the same name) briefly classifies the key features of in-yer face theatre – all of which seem directly antagonistic to the ethos of the well-made play:

Characterised by a rawness of tone [...] it] uses explicit scenes of sex and violence to explore the depths of human emotion [...] it is aggressive, confrontational and provocative [...] it can be so intense audiences may feel they have lived through the events shown on stage. (Sierz “Outrage Theatres”)

In direct contrast, the well-made play is based on a structure comprised of the following: exposition, complication, development, crisis and dénouement. Its dramatic form is often self-consciously artificial, although at the same time it strives for an effect of verisimilitude; its subject matter is usually drawn from middle class life and as a form puts itself completely in the service of its audiences, providing expectation, suspense and emotional satisfaction.

Although its origins lay in nineteenth-century France with the work of Scribe and Sardou, the well-made play saw its fullest assimilation within English theatre during the twentieth century. John Russell Taylor in his book on the subject, *The Rise and Fall of the Well-made Play*, observes that from the work of Tom Robertson in the 1870s a trend was established for a type of realistic drama concentrating on aspects of middle-class life (Taylor 28). From this point onwards, English theatre effectively sealed itself off from developments in European drama until the mid-1950s, when other influences – notably Brecht and the Absurdists began to make their influence felt. However as already mentioned, the greatest challenge was mounted by a new generation of indigenous dramatists such as John Osborne, John Arden and Arnold Wesker. The well-made play went into rapid decline; writing in 1967, John Russell Taylor notes its low stock against a vogue for devised work and experimental playwriting (Taylor 9).

Nevertheless, during the intervening decades the form has proved to be remarkably resilient, weathering a succession of theatrical trends from the socio-realism of the 1950s, the agitprop epic historical / political plays of the 1960s and 1970s to the feminist theatre of the 1980s. Nevertheless, the well-made play continued a process of low-key development, accompanied by commercial success during the 1970s and 1980s through the work of dramatists such as Alan Ayckbourn, Michael Frayn and Simon Gray.

Writing in 1994, John Bull observed that Gray represented “the nearest the contemporary mainstream comes to a reworking of the territory of the well-made drawing room comedy supposedly killed off in the mid-1950s” (Bull 123). Yet far from Gray representing the genre’s twilight, between late 1992 and early 1994, aspects of the drawing room play and English variations of the Feydeau farce made a spirited return in the work of Kevin Elyot and Terry Johnson. Going further, an alternative history can be

presented against the dominant discourse on British playwriting in the 1990s, whereby the well-made play – whilst subsequently muted by a generation of younger dramatists – actually constituted some of the defining plays of the decade: moreover, several of these plays were spawned from within the ranks of in-yer-face theatre itself.

The return of the well-made play can be traced to September 1992 and announced itself to the sound of crashing cutlery and a collapsing set. This was in every sense a theatre ‘event,’ and despite the *ur* text coming from an unlikely source, it arguably reinvigorated a British theatre that John Bull dismissed at the time as a “parade of bland product uniformity” (Bull 219). The play in question was Stephen Daldry’s revival of J.B. Priestley’s 1946 play, *An Inspector Calls*, at the Royal National Theatre. The production has since become a landmark piece, transferring to both the West End and Broadway, while productions based on Daldry’s original conception still tour both nationally and internationally. Wendy Lesser considered the production to be a daring flight of directorial brilliance whereby Daldry had taken “a dull old theatrical warhorse – and, in the process, has given a contemporary stylishness and a political currency to Priestley’s post-war socialist ideas” (Lesser 17). While some saw *An Inspector Calls* (and by default the well-made play) as single-handedly responsible for kick-starting British theatre again, others felt that the necessity to find recourse in a 1940s drawing-room drama merely provided further evidence of the malaise enveloping British theatre at the turn of the 1990s. John Bull alludes to this by pointing out that Daldry’s acclaimed production coincided with a nostalgic vogue for West End fare that evoked the golden age of the well-made play: revivals of Oscar Wilde’s *An Ideal Husband*, Arthur Wing Pinero’s *Trelawny of the ‘Wells’* and Noël Coward’s *Hay Fever* and *Fallen Angels*. With this in mind it is little wonder that Benedict Nightingale rather sardonically commented that in 1992 *An Inspector Calls* “seemed the most contemporary play in London” (Nightingale 27).

However, this revival was closely followed by three new plays which arguably continued the momentum it had created: Terry Johnson’s *Hysteria* (1993) and *Dead Funny* (1994) together with Kevin Elyot’s *My Night with Reg* (1994). With the exception of *Hysteria*, the plays had contemporary settings and all explored themes and ideas associated with modernity. Like *An Inspector Calls*, Elyot’s and Johnson’s plays all made successful

transfers to the West End, yet started (at the The Royal Court and Hampstead theatres) outside the commercialised theatre sector.

As well as marking a return to the structure associated with the well-made play, Elyot's *My Night with Reg* also coincided with another short lived trend in the early 1990s by its association with a number of so-called 'gay plays' such as Jonathan Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* (1993) and David Greer's *Burning Blue* (1995). Perhaps prompted by the RNT's 1993 production of Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, *My Night with Reg* was one of the first major British plays to examine the male homosexual community and its reactions to the AIDS crisis.

Elyot himself comments that one of the reasons why the play is set in a drawing room (and as he points out "with French windows no less") comes down to reasons of structure: setting the play in one room can both allow for long periods of time to be condensed as well as what Elyot calls "writing sustained scenes, not using filmic cuts, but following the example of Chekhov and Ibsen, [of] a play revealing itself over three or four movements." More significantly Elyot comments, "I like the idea of the set suggesting a boulevard comedy but then subverting the genre in that it's about men desiring each other, betraying each other and dying" (Edgar 52).

This aim of subverting a familiar form is something that unites many of the dramatists in this article, but there is a further reason why Elyot's play, about the effects of AIDS on a group of long-standing male friends seems particularly apposite to the well-made play. While hostile critics such as Carl Miller found Elyot's plays "as conservative in form as anything by Rattigan and Coward" (Miller 1996), the playwright David Rudkin has observed that Rattigan's work utilises the perfect dramatic form by which homosexuality could make a veiled appearance. Rudkin comments, "The craftsmanship [...] seems to me to arise from deep psychological necessity [...] to invest it with some expressive clarity that speaks immediately to people yet keeps himself [Rattigan] hidden" (Innes 2002). Noël Coward, freed to some extent by a certain relaxation of censorship laws, was able to directly address the subject in one of his last plays, *A Song at Twilight* (1966), although Elyot's drama is far more direct in its representation of homosexuality. However, the one element from the well-made play that is itself most suitable for Elyot's purposes is its utilisation of the long-buried secret from a character's past slowly revealing itself during the course of

the play. While almost verging on a cliché of this type of drama, it becomes the ideal vehicle in which to express the knowledge of AIDS as well Guy's long-standing infatuation and unrequited love for his friend John.

While John Russell Taylor believes that the well-made play declined rapidly after 1956 due to its associations with moral and social propriety, in many respects it was this very conservatism that paradoxically made *My Night with Reg* a notable play. With its middle-class characters, well-structured plot and mannered comedy (not forgetting its French windows), based on the reunions between six male friends, its structure becomes a microcosm of the British homosexual community and its response to AIDS during the 1990s.

Like *My Night with Reg*, the use of the well-made play to reveal the unspoken and the taboo also forms the basis of two of Terry Johnson's most well-known plays from the 1990s – *Hysteria* and *Dead Funny*. John Russell Taylor argues that the decline of the well-made plays during the 1950s came about as they grew increasingly less theatrical in their aspirations: yet whether one is an admirer or detractor of Daldry's *An Inspector Calls*, it nevertheless restored a much-missed element of spectacle to a theatrical landscape in 1992 that looked dangerously close to ossifying into a branch of dramatic literature.

Similarly, Johnson's *Hysteria* and *Dead Funny* are important examples of plays that further restore and develop a vibrant sense of theatricality to these traditional forms of English theatre. While elements of drawing-room comedy exist in both (especially *Dead Funny*), both plays constitute major reworkings of the English farce tradition. While experimentation within the form is not new – Joe Orton, Alan Ayckbourn and Michael Frayn have all borrowed from this genre in their work – Johnson's two plays are significant in respect to how closely dramatic form is related to its principal themes.

This is most overtly displayed in *Hysteria*, where the play is structured on a recurring dream of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, in which the action at the beginning is repeated at the end: in this way the play becomes a narrative of Freud's unconsciousness which is centred around a production of Ben Travers's farce *Rookery Nook* (1926), that we learn Freud attended during his time in London. Johnson takes this historical detail as his structural basis, whereby familiar Freudian ideas and iconic

motifs are communicated in the form of a Whitehall farce which would have been familiar to metropolitan English audiences in the 1930s. These include a predatory woman (akin to the figure of Jessica in *Hysteria*) pursuing a victimised male (Freud), and Johnson even borrows one of the key incidents from *Rookery Nook* – namely a woman in a silk night-dress being thrown out of her house - for the opening of *Hysteria*, where the play begins in earnest once a rain-soaked Jessica taps on the French windows outside Freud's study.

From this point onwards, English farce refashioned itself in psychoanalytical terms. For instance, after his evening at the theatre watching *Rookery Nook* Freud interprets farce in the following manner: "It had a seductive logic, and displayed all the splendid, ha!, anal obsessions of the English" (Johnson 12), while in an early edition of the play Dali comprehends Englishness itself through this particular theatrical model: "So Dali chase you [Jessica] through French windows, round the garden, back through front door, yes?" (Johnson 45). It also becomes the pattern whereby Freud's dreamscape reveals his own obsessions and fears. Although at one point Freud asks Jessica "to please remember this is my study, not some boulevard farce" (Johnson 10), psychoanalysis and the energy of farce often merge as we witness Freud's increasingly desperate attempts to hide the naked Jessica inside his washroom closet. Like the spectre of AIDS in *My Night with Reg*, the well-made play / well-made farce becomes an apt theatrical model for explorations of the unwelcome secret. Freud's increasingly desperate attempts at concealment forms the basis of farce – and the need to hide that which wishes to reveal itself is a constant motif in *Hysteria*. Principally this takes place through the character of Jessica, who describes herself as Freud's "Anima [...] the denied female element of the male psyche" (Johnson 7). Jessica is essentially a manifestation of Freud's own repressed suspicions that his female patients in Vienna were being sexually abused by fathers and male relatives. Freud's reaction, according to Johnson is to shift the blame onto the patients themselves, forming in the process a cornerstone of his theory concerning infantile seduction.

Farce is less pronounced in *Dead Funny*, and here it conforms more to traditional elements of the well-made play through exposition (a marriage in crisis, a wife who craves a child and a physically and emotionally distant husband who sublimates his enthusiasms into vintage British comedians),

complication (despite being impotent with his wife Richard is shown having sex with a female member of the Dead Funny Society) and denouement (the fling between Richard and Lisa is discovered and Richard leaves). Again, like *My Night with Reg* the dramatic form employed comes through a predilection for the buried secret and its subsequent revelation. *Dead Funny* contains several revelatory episodes. Chief amongst these is Brian's confession of his homosexuality, and it is interesting to note that as late as 1994 this was still seen as a worthy central admission. It goes to show that if homosexuality in the light of AIDS was still a ticklish issue, then the seemingly 'conservative' form of the well-made play was its ideal presentational form.

As in *Hysteria*, Johnson presents darker themes in his play – crumbling marriages and various manifestations of male anxiety including physical and emotional inability to establish intimacy along with doubts about paternity – and renders these as subjects for broad entertainment. While *Hysteria* principally does this through farce, *Dead Funny* achieves this through the actors impersonating and performing the routines of their favourite comedians such as Benny Hill, Frankie Howard and Norman Wisdom. Johnson also incorporates slapstick incidents such as Eleanor losing her skirt. And while the underlining (and literal) sterility of the two marriages is more reminiscent of Strindbergian drama, the confrontation promised after Richard has been sleeping with his best friend's wife involves nothing more than a clownish fight with a large bowl of trifle.

However, this encroachment of the well-made play into more disturbing territory was curtailed by the arrival of the in-her face writers. *Dead Funny* premiered at the Hampstead Theatre in January 1994, the same year in which stirrings from the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs hinted that something new was in the air – by January of the following year Sarah Kane's *Blasted* had created an unprecedented brouhaha, and theatre writing suddenly appeared to change from what had gone before. This new style of drama seemed to reject attention to the detailed mechanics of plot or dramatic structure, often adopting an approach based around a series of short, seemingly unconnected scenes such as Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) and *Some Explicit Polaroids* (1999). Such plays, as David Edgar somewhat archly summarised concerned "young people shooting up in flats" (Reinelt 47), and it seemed that this vogue for the

shocking and the experimental, like the socio-realism of the angry young men forty years before had once rendered the well-made play moribund.

However, things were not quite what they seemed. Often, whenever a cultural or artistic moment / movement is identified or defined, a certain number of rogue 'stowaways' also come to be wrongly identified but subsequently assimilated into the new category. Just as The Stranglers, Blondie and even The Boomtown Rats in the late 1970s were wrongly identified as displaying a punk sensibility, so in-yer face theatre also contained its fair share of misplaced writers, who while on the surface *seemed* to display the necessary stylistic credentials, were in fact nearer to the Hampstead worlds of Simon Gray and Terry Johnson than the syringe-strewn squats of Che Walker or Mark Ravenhill. Dominic Dromgoole was one of the first commentators to spot this anomaly, pointing out that Jez Butterworth's *Mojo* (1995) – an early and high profile example of in-yer-face theatre – despite its stylish and amoral use of violence, was “close enough to a well-made play to delight all the critical devotees at that shrine” (Dromgoole 42).

It is also worth remembering that 1997 – arguably the year that in-yer face theatre was at the height of its ascendancy – saw the Evening Standard Award for Best Play go to Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*. With its principal subject the Victorian poet A.E. Houseman, and a structure that incorporated familiar ingredients from the genre, such as dramatic suspense being produced by delaying the arrival of its off-stage character Oscar Wilde, the play demonstrated a stubborn resistance to the prevailing zeitgeist. Stoppard's earlier play *Arcadia* (1993) can also be seen as one of the other key contributions to the development of well-made play, which if anything is even more formally ambitious and intricately structured, with its two alternating time frames and merging of Chaos Theory and Romantic poetry.

However, the key in-yer-face play that most readily adopted the model of the well-made play during this period was Patrick Marber's *Closer* (1997). While in simpatico with much new theatre writing of the late 1990s by being darkly savage, self-consciously modern and metropolitan in its sensibility – Christopher Innes for instance calls it “aggressively contemporary” (Innes 433) – *Closer* also employed a dramatic structure

based around the well-made play. These contradictory forces made *Closer* something of a theatrical oddity amongst its peers.

At one point in the play Larry tells Dan, “you think the human heart is like a diagram” (Marber 94), and in some respects *Closer* is also constructed along similar complex lines. Peter Buse has described this two-act play, with its twelve scenes, divided into six on either side of the interval, as “structurally immaculate” (Buse) to the point “where form and content are in absolute co-existence” (Macaulay). Marber himself has also spoken of the profound influence that ‘well-made plays’ and ‘well-constructed novels’ (Sierz, *In-yer-face Theatre* 191f) had on his own writing, and, as Daniel Rosenthal points out, each scene ends with “cliff-hanger moments” in which “our desire to find out what has happened next makes this character-driven play more compelling than many plot driven murder-mystery” (Marber xxvii). These features perhaps account in large part for the West End and Broadway success that the play enjoyed, where audiences simultaneously enjoyed the nostalgic comforts of the well-made play within what seemed to be a genuinely contemporary treatment of metropolitan relationships.

Closer’s formal structure is also governed by stage objects as well as by its language. John Russell Taylor notes that a feature of Scribean drama was “the art of making connections” (Taylor 15), and these abound in *Closer*. Key amongst these is the central image of the Newton’s Cradle, which we first see on Dan’s desk throughout scene three, and which Alice later buys as a present for Larry in scene nine. Not only does the Newton’s Cradle obliquely connect both Dan and Larry to Alice as her lovers but, as Christopher Innes observes, “with its swinging metal balls that knock each other out of contact...[it] becomes an image of the continually changing pairings in the play” (Innes 433).

More generally, *Closer* as a play also defines itself by constantly eluding and contradicting any easy definitions for belonging to specific categories of genre: while formalised and intricate, at the same time it never quite fully belongs within the realm of the well-made play due to its feature of breaking from its artificial structure with outbursts of brutal, yet honest emotion. As Marber explains: “The idea was to create something that has a formal beauty into which you could shove all this anger and fury. I hoped

the dramatic power of the play would rest on that tension between elegant structure [...] and inelegant emotion” (Buse).

In the same year as *Closer*, David Hare, a dramatist from the generation who emerged after 1968, also made a notable foray into the world of the well-made play with *Amy's View*. Written when New Labour came to power and at the height of ‘Cool Britannia,’ Richard Boon describes *Amy's View* as “a pastiche of precisely the kind of Rattiganesque fifties play [that] is invoked only to be exploded” (Boon 52). Certainly, the play seems to follow a style reminiscent of Harley Granville Barker or Arthur Wing Pinero in which a social or political critique is carried out through a domestic family setting. During its four acts, *Amy's View* spans the years between 1979 and 1995, and with it changes to English culture reflected in the decline of the theatre and the corresponding rise of media culture. The play’s success – transferring from the RNT to the West End (and revived with similar success in 2007) – makes *Amy's View* one of Hare’s most commercially and critically successful plays. While it may seem a long way removed from work such as *Knuckle* (1974) and *Fanshen* (1975), the use of the well-made play in *Amy's View* is no less uncompromising than earlier, more avowedly ‘political’ work.

What of the well-made play in the millennial decade? It is certainly true to say that its brief zenith in the early 1990s seems to have passed: yet if this is so, then the same is also true of in-yer-face theatre. One offshoot or consequence of in-yer-face theatre is what Aleks Sierz calls ‘me and my mates’ plays, which he defines as “naturalistic plays set on underclass council estates,” although often written by young middle class writers whose “visits to the lower depths are pure cultural tourism” (Sierz, *In-yer-face Theatre* 81). Specific examples are always subjective, but might include Grae Cleugh’s *Fucking Games* (2001), Maggie Nevill’s *The Shagaround* (2001) and Simon Farquhar’s *Rainbow Kiss* (2006).

Two other dramatic forms have also dominated new writing in recent years: Verbatim and Faction Theatre. David Edgar, writing in 2004, sees the popularity of Verbatim Theatre (especially in ‘tribunal plays’ such as Richard Norton Taylor’s *The Colour of Justice* in 1999 and plays based on interview material such as David Hare’s 2003 *The Permanent Way* which examined the state of the British railways since privatisation), arising out of the political vacuum that followed in-yer-face theatre; to accentuate this

Edgar draws on the parallel to the establishment of the Theatre of Fact movement in the 1950s being a direct reaction against the playwrights associated with the apolitical Theatre of the Absurd (Reinelt 48).

Edgar's other category, 'Faction,' has perhaps been the most significant dramatic genre to establish itself within recent years in film, theatre and television. Ten years ago it would have been difficult to convince anyone that a play concerning the 1977 television interviews of David Frost and former President Richard Nixon would make promising material for a play, but Peter Morgan's *Frost / Nixon* successfully transferred in 2006 from the Almeida Theatre to a long West End residency. *Frost / Nixon* has followed a successful formula in which established historical events are blended with a series of imagined 'what if' scenarios.

Yet despite other theatrical trends the well-made play stubbornly persists – maybe not at the moment in terms of new writing, but glancing at current West End listings one can see successful revivals of Somerset Maugham's *The Letter*, Patrick Hamilton's *Gaslight* and the 1960s English farce *Boeing-Boeing* as well as adaptations of John Buchan's *The Thirty Nine Steps* and Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*.

In many respects it seemed a return to John Bull's pessimistic trawl through the West End theatre of 1994. However, all may not be lost for the well-made play. In January 2007, Dominic Cooke, the incoming Artistic Director of the Royal Court, announced that the theatre was to turn its attention to the middle classes in terms of subject matter. Whether by this Cooke meant an encouragement of the well-made play as a dramatic form to tackle difficult subjects as it had in the past with Elyot's *My Night with Reg* or Johnson's *Hysteria* was unclear.

If new playwright Polly Stenham's *That Face* (2007) is anything to go by, the dysfunctional pseudo-families of Ravenhill et al. will be replaced by dysfunctional middle-class families with daughters at boarding school and investment-banker fathers on their second marriage in the Far East. This may confirm what critics of the Royal Court such as John McGrath have said all along: that a theatre which claims to be oppositional is in reality little more than one step removed from West End audiences who flock to see revivals of Coward and Rattigan.

However, the French window – that seemingly indestructible, if at times somewhat dilapidated feature of the British stage – whether a rickety relic

from the theatre of William Somerset Maugham, or deriving from a sustainable rainforest in the work of contemporary dramatists – still allows for something unexpected to enter through its portals. In this respect, the well-made play itself as a genre may yet have the capacity to surprise us by concealing further tricks up its contrived sleeve.

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