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"Ours is not to be a Producer's Theatre, nor an Actor's Theatre; it is to be a Writer's Theatre"

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Abstract: Royal Court has forged its reputation of being one of the most influencial companies that discovers, produces and promotes new writing. The history of this company is practically the history of contemporary British theatre. This article follows the start-up period, the `50s and the `60s, when the company built a longstanding identity as a "writers' theatre", through innovative and provoking plays and performances, that often reflect the political, social and cultural climate of the era. The pattern designed by George Devine, the first artistic director of Royal Court, proved to be one of the most outstanding and successful, despite the financial difficulties or the obstructions of the official censorship.

Keywords: Royal Court Theatre, British theatre, contemporary drama, new writing, censure

The British stage after 1945 is dominated by commercial productions, especially light comedies or American musicals, classical revivals or plays written by successful writers, which can satisfy both the economic interests of the theatre owners, and the conservatism of the British audience. "Any show which does not reveal immediate signs of a long run is whipped off at once. The twin mottoes of the London Theatre are: long run or sudden death."[2] In the `50 Shakespeare is a very actual playwright and very often a "vehicle" through which the stars of the stage show their abilities in acting.

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2. Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 14.

A good example in this respect is 1951, the year of the *Festival of Britain*, when on the stage could be seen important productions such as: *Richard II*, with Michael Redgrave, *Henry IV* with Richard Burton, *Hamlet* with Alec Guinness, *Othello* with Orson Welles, *Antony and Cleopatra*, with Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier or *The Winter's Tale* with John Gielgud[3]. Such an offer, supported by an impressive gallery of great actors, could only create the impression of a theatre in one of its best moments. The great playwright, synonymous with British theatrical tradition and a consistent part of the national identity, has been a constant presence for centuries, but as many voices have noticed, the obsesive revival on such a large scale (in 1953 an English critic commented 24 premieres of Shakespeare's plays on London stages)[4], hides in fact a pitching, an obsolete theatrical system, where Shakespeare is "both the glory and the curse of British theatre"[5]. He is a convenient refuge, that hides the failure of producing new drama, but "a nation's drama cannot be fully alive unless it is being continually created"[6]. In the terms proposed by Peter Brook, he was "deadly theatre".

In the early '50, George Devine was a well known personality in London's theatrical realm and had gained over twenty years of experience as a pedagogues, actor and director. He had studied acting either from Russian perspective with Fyodor Komissarzhevsky[7], and from the French one with Michel Saint-Denis[8] and had worked with British stage personalities such as John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier or Peggy Ashcroft. He had also participated at

3. Robert Tanitch, *London Stage in the 20th Century* (London: Haus Publishing, 2007), 150–51.
4. Dominic Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 32.
5. Michael Billington, *State of the Nation. British Theatre Since 1945* (London: Faber & Faber, 2007), 51.
6. Billington, 51.
7. Fyodor Komissarzhevsky (1882-1954), director and stage designer. He worked from 1906 to 1908 with Meyerhold and Evreinov, and in the 20s and 30s he moved to London where he directed especially Chekhov and Shakespeare, performances considered "revolutionary".
8. Michel Saint-Denis (1897-1971), actor, director and pedagogue. He studied theatre guided by Jacques Copeau, his uncle, at Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier. In the 30s , he sets up London Theatre Studio, and after war Old Vic School, two important moments for Bristish theatrical pedagogy. In 1962, he joins Royal Shakespeare Company as a director, respectively adviser and sets up an experimental theatre studio.

the Old Vic project, the first post-war attempt to set up a permanent company, and at the same time, the starting point for the future National Theatre. These experiences made him convinced of the necessity of profound reforms, because "the urgent need of our time is to discover a truly contemporary style"[9], meaning a place "where contemporary playwrights may express themselves more freely and frequently than is possible under commercial conditions"[10]. For Devine, the new writing is the only way through which theatre can stay vital. This is the principle that he would never give up and on which the consistent searches of the next period are based on.

His approach seemed almost impossible to be accomplished at that time, but some meetings and coincidences would become salutary. Firstly, in 1952, a young producer convinced him to take part in a TV production by BBC. This the beginning of the friendship with Tony Richardson, the one who, although not having connections with the theatre, joined him in this adventurous project: "a radical new theatre company, the objective of which was to get writers, writers of serious pretensions, back into the theatre"[11]. The attempts of the both of them to find a place and financial support to cover the initial costs, failed one by one, until 1954, when he is asked to become the artistic director at English Stage Company. This newly established company, took over an old Victorian theatre, Royal Court, with the purpose of promoting and producing non-commercial plays. Although, in the meantime, he had received the offer to take over the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, Devine would choose to risk with the new company, after he had managed to assess to the managers a first schedule for the new season, where three of the eight productions would be original plays written by British playwrights. For Devine the first season was a crucial moment for setting a coherent and clear repertoire policy tending the new drama, in spite of the artistic council that was rather cautious and not so willing to give credit to unknown playwrights. There come divergences of opinions, intense disputes that will persist for a long time from now on, in the game being the status of the artistic director, his role, his importance, and his limitations in the hierarchy of the company. His

9. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, 9.
10. Roberts, 10.
11. Tony Richardson, *Long Distance Runner – A Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 1993), 60.

way will be a sinuous one, but he will gain more and more freedom of action and, since 1961, the full control of artistic strategy. First of all, Devine organizes auditions, selects twenty-two actors, most young people, appoints Richardson as associate artistic director, and releases a dramaturgy contest. Of the 750 texts recieved[12] only one attacts his attention, *Look Back in Anger*, written by a young actor, aged 27, named John Osborne. Although the artistic council was not entirely convinced ("it was thought to be a very promising find, although a difficult play to swallow"[13]), this play was to be the third production of the season.

Even from the rise of the curtain, the audience are having a shock: the deplorable image of a cramped room, cluttered objects, and three young men in ordinary costumes in everyday life. A toneless microcosmos whose mark is the ironing table, near which Alison spends much time in the first act of the play, an activity which afterwards comes into Helena's interest as well. Probably the next shock for the audience was to hear Jimmy Porter speaking, strident, irreverent and with a non-BBC accent. Almost nothing escapes his attacks: "the official" attitude, the passivity of people (including his own), taboo topics, like the church and homosexuality, anguish induced by a possible nuclear war, vulgarity or preciousness in media. The play is not just a domestic drama, but rather a radiography of the moment that captures the spirit of the era and the division of the British society in the 1950s: workers and the upper class, americanization and tradition, new *Welfare State* universities and traditional universities (Oxford), jazz and classical music. In the end, this divison was found in journalists' reactions, from the most hostile ones, to the extremly favourable ones. Jimmy Porter "was a character who should have gone to a psychiatrist rather than have come to a dramatist"[14]. "Osborne was a good dramatist who had somehow written the wrong play"[15]. On the other side, the influential journalists Harold Hobson and Kenneth Tynan express

12. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, 47.
13. Roberts, 33.
14. Gibbs, Patrick, *A Study of an Exhibitionist*, Daily Telegraph, 09.05.1956, *apud* Shellard, British Theatre Since the War, 53.
15. Wilson, Colin, *This actor is a great writer*, Daily Mail, 09.05.1956, *apud* Shellard, British Theatre Since the War, 53.

without reservation, even passionately, the admiration for the production at the Royal Court: "a minor miracle", "that rarest of dramatic phenomena, the act of original creation", "I doubt if I could love anyone who did not wish to see *Look Back in Anger*"[16]. Despite these positive signals, the adherence to the public was initially low, and only six months later, when the BBC presented an 18-minute fragment, the interest started to increase[17]. The theatre began to be assaulted by young people, who through their behaviour suggested that they were for the first time in such a place[18]. They found themselves in Jimmy, the new "rebel without a cause", in his revolt, in his anger, in his anarchic accents, in his dispair, and, ulimately, in his passivity. Massive mediatization released a phenomenon of unprecedented magnitude in the history of British theatre, opening the way for a whole generation of playwrights who bring on stage realities and tensions latent before that. It was an impulse for young people not only to come to the theatre, but also to write for the theatre and "Jimmy himself quickly became a dramatic archetype to be copied and emulated"[19].

The distinctive mark of this new direction is rebellion, questioning established myths and the *establishment*. The prototype launched by *Look Back in Anger* is continued in more radical formulas by John Arden, Joe Orton, Arnold Wesker, or Shelagh Delaney (and many others, known as *kitchen sink drama*), and further away by left-wing dramatists in the '70. "The anger" brought on stage by Osborne is transferred beyond the theatre world, becoming omipresent in the newspapers, on the radio and on TV. The phrase "angry young men"[20] will soon be able to gather together filmmakers, novelists, poets and philosophers, although there is no common programme, and most of them decline their belonging to the movement.

16. Tynan, Kenneth, *The Voice of the Young*, The Observer, 15.05.1956 Shellard, British Theatre Since the War, 55-56.
17. Estimated audience was five million viewers; Shellard, British Theatre Since the War, 56.
18. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, 49.
19. Billington M., *op.cit.* p. 99.
20. The media officer from Royal Court, dissatisfied with the play, would have told Osborne: "I think that you really are an angry young man". Subsequently the expression was used in promotional materials and then taken over in the media. V. John Osborne, Almost a Gentleman: An Autobiography, 1955-1956 (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), 20.

Look Back in Anger is still one of the most controvesial plays, its importance and its qualities are always analyzed and nuanced, although it is almost unanimous that May 8, 1956, the date of the opening night, is the moment that separates two eras into the British theatre. Even if the play is traditional in its structure, its mesage and its energy are different from everything written before. But the great change that Osborne brings is the language, exuberant and lacking of artificialism, a legacy that will help young playwrights get out of monotony and sterility. As he himself admits, the play was "a formal, rather old-fashioned play"[21] and for that reason it has not left such deep marks in modern drama as the plays written by Brecht, Ionesco or Beckett. But, Aleks Sierz says, that it is "the foundation myth of the Royal Court theatre and British new writing in general […] also represented the revenge of English naturalism on European experimentalism."[22]

The May 8 1956 moment will not immediately produce major changes in British theatre and in particular at the Royal Court. Clearly the company did not have a constant audience in the first seasons, and the funding from the Arts Council, although rising from year to year, was at a low level[23]. The repertory theatre formula will be abandoned in favour of a model based on exploring a show as long as it is effective in terms of tickets sales. It will often work under conditions of financial uncertainty, some shows producing considerable losses, while others are profitable and, as Devine says, "the new contemporary theatre was saved by a classical revival"[24]. Opening towards commercial theatres in West End is inevitable, as transfers provide to be a true "breath of fresh air" for the company and in the meantime assures some extra visibility, how equally necessary is sometimes working with famous actors for some shows, a concession that Devine explains: "We tried a series of star productions to fill in the gaps and make money. They didn't always work, and we were said to be betraying our cause, although we never declared an

21. Billington, *State of the Nation. British Theatre Since 1945*, 102.
22. Aleks Sierz, *John Osborne's Look Back in Anger* (London: A&C Black, 2008), 6.
23. In the late 50s, funding from Arts Council was approximately 7-8 % from the total income obtained by selling tickets.
24. *Apud* Lacey, S., *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave in its Context 1956-1965*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995, p. 75.

anti-star policy at the beginning [but] it seemed implicit in our attitude. These misunderstandings always occur when you are dealing with idealists"[25].

Designing a programme that would ensure the financial balance, implicitly the survival of the company, while preserving its identity was the great challenge for Devine. New plays usually attracted higher costs, while a diversity of productions was difficult considering the limited number of permanent actors. Despite these limitations, Royal Court is at this moment the main, if not the only, theatre in the UK where new playwrights and innovative dramaturgy on the continent can find a place of expression. After Brecht (*The Good Person of Setzuan* having the opening night at the end of 1956), in the second year of existence, the company proposes Beckett, Giradoux, Ionesco and Sartre, a substantial and risky step as well:

> When we had a success with the Osborne, I said I am not going to pursue that line exclusively. I am going to introduce this other line, the line of Beckett and Ionesco and all that, because I believe that the truth lies somewhere between these two points. […] From the audience's point of view, it is not so easy because... one minute it is Beckett, the next minute it is Osborne, the next Arden, then Jellicoe, then Brecht... In fact, the two major events that have transformed the British theatre in my opinion were the production of Waiting for Godot in 1955 and the production of Look Back in Anger in 1956. These are what I call the two lines... these were the two main influences [which] changed the face of the theatre.[26]

Due to some circumstances, Beckett would be on the stage of Royal Court earlier than Devine predicted. The two had already been talking about translating in English and putting on stage *Fin de partie*, play which was at that time in rehearsals in Paris directed by Roger Blin. The Théâtre de l'Œuvre, where the opening night was about to take place, suddenly withdraws its commitment, so Devine proposes the transfer of production to the Royal Court and undertakes to cover all the necessary costs. The event in London, in April

25. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, 60.
26. Roberts, 56.

1957 – six performances in French (in *coupé* with *Acte sans paroles*) - is the beginning of a unique collaboration in the history of British theatre. "The Royal Court was the home of Beckett"[27], the place where thirteen of his plays will be performed, including three world premieres (*Krapp's Last Tape* in 1958, *That Time* and *Footfalls*, both of them in 1976) and from where his sober, iconoclastic and poetic aesthetics will constantly diffuse in the next decades. "Over his career in the theatre Beckett would be extraordinarily fortunate to find producers and directors who have respect for the writer: Roger Blin in Paris, Alan Schneider in the United States, and, perhaps chief among them, George Devine in the UK"[28].

Endgame, the English version, needed a long time for being translated and for getting the censors' license. The translation was made by Beckett himself, but even under these circumstances he was reserved for the outcome: "the French is at least 20% undecantable into English and will forfeit that much of whatever edge and tension it may have"[29]. Much more complicated seemed to be the interaction with Lord Chamberlain's office, who at that time was known for mutilating the first play, *Waiting for Godot*, in 1955. If he did not have any objections for the French version, instead, some parts of the translation were considered "blasphemy" and less offensive equivalences were required. Beckett agreed to make only partial changes, and so, for six months negotiations were held, but the outcome would ultimately be in favour of the censors. An intensely disputed subject was the scene in which Hamm, Clov, and Nagg were praying, then gave up, where the line "He doesn't exist. The bastard!" was replaced by a more inoffensive one: "He doesn't exist. The Swine!"[30].

Devine's interest in European avant-garde drama is also confirmed by the presence of Eugène Ionesco's plays on the stage of Royal Court, starting with *The Chairs* in 1957, then in the next years *The Lesson*, *Rhinoceros* (directed

27. Gresdna Doty and Billy Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre. 1956 - 1981: Artist's Talk* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990), 208.
28. David Tucker and Trish McTighe, eds., *Staging Beckett in Great Britain* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2016), 41.
29. Tucker and McTighe, 40.
30. Terry Browne, *Playwrights' Theatre: The English Stage Company at the Royal Court Theatre* (London: Pitman, 1975), 58.

by Orson Welles, with Laurence Olivier playing Bérenger), *Jacques or The Submission* and *Exit the King*. The two exponential voices of the theatre of the absurd would not bring commercial success (ticket sales did not exceed an average of 30% of the total capacity)[31], but in turn, they would generate a more visible interest for experiment in British drama. We also mention that in nine years, Devine managed to produce more than forty foreign plays[32], mostly playwrights from Europe, and this significant and constant infusion contributes to revitalizing the theatre with new themes and forms. *The Times* noted the unique place that Royal Court had won among theatres in London: "a steady output of sophisticated cosmopolitan drama and pilot staging of work by home authors of promise"[33].

The other direction that Devine had set in his programme, to encourage and produce new dramaturgy, was and would remain the first mission of the Royal Court, named in a statement that would make history: "ours is not to be a producer's theatre, nor an actor's theatre; it is to be a writer's theatre"[34]. So that, he tried to create a supportive environment and to develop an infrastructure to attract and train young talents. He began by organizing lectures, followed by discussions, to which were invited both the internals of the company and the members of the English Stage Society - the club of the theatre supporters. The very large number of unsolicited plays that the theatre received, many of them not suitable, required the organization of a department to analyze these texts and to manage the programme for lectures.

An important step was to propose that the new plays, that hadn't been put on stage before and considered "risky", to be produced with a minimum of costs "in a simple way without scenery"[35]. They had the chance to reach the audience, to be tested and eventually to be transferred to the programme of the theatre, but they were also a good occasion for playwrights and directors to

31. John Elsom, *Cold War Theatre* (Waltham: Focal Press, 2016), 61.
32. Elaine Aston and Mark O'Thomas, *Royal Court: International* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 7.
33. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, 64.
34. David Pattie, ed., *Modern British Playwriting: The 1950s: Voices, Documents, New Interpretations* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012), 59.
35. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre and the Modern Stage*, 58.

improve their style and to experiment. Such shows, called *The Sunday Night Productions*, benefited from the financial support of the English Stage Society members and, in addition, only addressed to them, they did not require a license from Lord Chamberlain. Some of those who made their debut that way were playwrights as Ann Jellicoe, Arnold Wesker, John Arden, but also Lindsay Anderson, John Dexter, William Gaskill or Anthony Page, important names for British theatre directing.

"A characteristic of vital theatres was that they all had a dramatist or a group of dramatists attached to them"[36], said Devine. He was also convinced that the education and training of all those involved in producing the show are essential for a theatre to develop. In the light of this and as an extension of the "non-setting productions ", he founded in 1958, *The Writers' Group*, practically a "school" for playwrights from Royal Court. It has evolved from group discussions, to dramatic writing and improvisation workshops, animated by Keith Johnstone[37], mime classes led by William Gaskill (Étienne Decroux's student[38]) or those of moving and using mask coordinated by Devine. They come to improve playwrights' training, but they are also informally important because they stimulates creativity and cooperation within the group. In the words of Ann Jellicoe: "Everyone appreciated the talent of the other and encouraged him, although it is said that this is so rare among the writers. The meetings were fun and never boring. […] Everyone shared the idea of a direct theatre - a theatre of action and images rather than one of words."[39] The existence of this group also shows the fact that from this moment on, the theatre has an increasingly important role in the process of creating the dramatic text, of searching for new voices, and in producing and promoting of the final result. Existing plays are less used, in favour of new plays written by associatted playwrights (employees or residents), but also by those outside

36. Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre 1965-72* (London: Routledge, 1986), 10.
37. Keith Johnstone (b. 1933), actor, director, pedagogue, one of the most important practitioners and theorists of improvisational theatre,the creator of Impro system and Theatresports.
38. Étienne Decroux is considered "the father of modern mime". Some of his students are Jean-Louis Barrault and Marcel Marceau.
39. Richard Findlater, ed., *25 Years of the English Stage Company at the Royal Court* (Derbyshire: Amber Lane Press, 1981), 55.

the theatre, alongside the increasing interest in collective work. Royal Court becomes a complex institution, both a performative space and a "training field" where the playwright occupies a privileged place. This "cult" for the author, or at least for the dramatic text, is expressed by the directors of the theatre, such as William Gaskill: "we were constantly fixed on the idea of the play and that nothing should interfere with the play, nothing should make a statement beyond the play, and the design was always at the service of the play"[40]. The director does not try to bring on stage a personal aesthetics, but the show that somehow the play itself bears, "what is important is not the 'sort of theatre' - but the PLAY" (Linday Anderson)[41].

However, as British theatre commentators point out[42], a great gain brought by Royal Court comes from an aesthetic point of view. Due to the stage designers and directors, the visual puritanism promoted by Devine's theatre gradually becomes deeper and deeper and undermines decorative excesses specific for West End. If we take into account the fact that John Dexter and William Gaskill will be Olivier's assistants at the future National Theatre and that a whole generation of actors trained at Royal Court will follow them here, we will have at least partially the dimension of this influence.

In an essay about theatre in 1955, Devine set the visual aesthetics he intended to follow: "What is needed, however, is not adaptability, or a synthesis of the past but for the theatre to create a new milieu in modern terms which will be a completely fresh restatement of the old traditions. […] The stage must have space and air and freedom"[43]. The stylization of the stage design, that he brings at Royal Court and that will be a landmark for the shows, mostly in the 5th decade, has its roots in the theories of Copeau and Craig, about the acting place purged of ornamentation and illusionist conventions. As a matter of fact, he had always kept in touch with Craig through a steady correspondence and numerous visits to France, Craig being a guiding mark and a shadow advisor. From here, he acquired the

40. Doty and Harbin, *Inside the Royal Court Theatre. 1956 - 1981: Artist's Talk*, 185.
41. Dan Rebellato, *1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama* (London: Routledge, 1999), 87.
42. V. Billington, *State of the Nation. British Theatre Since 1945*, 119–20; Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*, 81.
43. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre 1965-72*, 24.

idea of a simplified, practical and yet elegant stage device in which light and colour are indispensable plastic elements, a conception that at that time had few supporters in the British theatre.

Materializing these ideas and developing them into a new, distinct formula is due to Jocelyn Herbert, considered "the most influential figure in the new theatre, and the first British scenographer"[44]. She made her debut in 1957 with the scenography of the show *The Chairs*, and next year, with *Endgame*, she begins a lasting and extremely fertile collaboration with Beckett. The minimalism of the text was undoubtedly in conjunction with the stage purism promoted by her: "when you have a bare stage it's very beautiful, like a bare canvas. You put one thing on it and it changes the entire dimensions. One chair and you have all sorts of possibilities."[45] She used textures and layers, combinations of curved and straight lines, angles, diagonals, which produced distortions of space and forms, somewhat in the direction of cubism in the Fine Arts. Herbert was interested in highlighting the actor's performance, she disliked the decorations, and eliminated any unnecessary details. She tried to bring the equivalent of poetic realism on the stage, which proved to be a perfect counterpoint to Wesker, Arden, or Osborne's plays. The impact, visual in the first place, produced by the shows from Berliner Ensemble, is also seen at Royal Court in the feeling of authenticity transmitted by materials, objects and costumes or by integrating in the stage design, light devices or stage installations. As Herbert herself says: "Brecht was a very large influence on all of us – my generation – visually and in general staging… the idea that you didn't have to hide anything, didn't pretend you were somewhere you weren't, and yet you created a visual image that was interesting and exciting, evocative of something."[46]

In 1965, Devine gave up being artistic director due to some health problems: "the weight of this edifice has driven me into the ground up to my neck, like poor Winnie in "*Happy Days*"[47]. He managed to make Royal Court a vital theatre for the new dramaturgy, he discovered and promoted young

44. Pamela Howard, *What Is Scenography?* (London: Routledge, 2001), 64.
45. Jarka M. Burian, "Contemporary British Stage Design: Three Representative Scenographers," *Theatre Journal* 35, no. 2 (May 1983): 215, https://doi.org/10.2307/3207150.
46. Burian, 216.
47. Burian, 100.

playwrights, who have an important place in the history of British theatre, he provided new, urgent, challenging and risky plays to the audience, he was the mentor of a generation and a visionary leader. Devine's term is impressive: 145 shows and 87 productions without setting - *Sunday Nights* – of which, 126 belong to contemporary British authors.

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Devine's successor, proposed by him, will be for the next seven years William Gaskill, a product of the Royal Court, the fervent defender of the new drama and "a fighter who always stayed loyal to the writers in whom he passionately believed"[48]. These qualities will prove to be essential for the theatre in an extremely difficult period characterized by permanent financial crises, internal tensions and much more pronounced competition from the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theater. From the very beginning, Gaskill appeared willing to give credit to wholly unknown authors, saying that he had to keep the position of a theatre "where you can take risks in a way that big companies cannot afford". Such an author was Edward Bond, one of the members of *The Writers' Group*, whose play, *Saved*, would have its opening night in November 1965. As in Devine's case, the third production of the season will generate violent reactions in media and among the audience, and later it will be considered a major landmark in the history of British theatre, being decisive in the process of abolishing censorship. Royal Court had at that time a rich experience with Lord Chamberlain's office, "the most undemocratic institution in our public life […] this antiquated absurdity"[49], as Devine publicly stated. The license for Wedekind's play, *Spring Awakening*, was obtained only after two scenes had been cut, but subsequently received "two warnings about kissing between boys"[50]. For *Meals on Wheels* by Charles Wood, the censors had to request a revised copy of the text, because the pages had become unreadable due to numerous

48. Michael Billington, "William Gaskill: A Fighter Who Stayed Loyal to His Writers," *The Guardian*, 2016.
49. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre 1965-72*, 102.
50. Ibidem.

observations and corrections[51]. *A Patriot for Me* was considered too provocative and important changes were required but the author, John Osborne, refused to make any. In their report, the censors said that "this is a serious but not a good play about homosexuality"[52], the objections being mainly: the travestite ball and a deliberately provocative way of Osborne's tone ("he almost never misses a chance to be offensive"[53]) and the many licentious details which might "corrupt" the audience. The only possible option was that the play was acted in club conditions, although officials had expressed their disagreement with this subterfuge at the limit of legality. It will be awarded for Best Play of the Year, and it will also have an important success among the audience: "in eight weeks 25,000 or 30,000 people saw *A Patriot for Me* and they went through this elaborate farce of becoming members"[54].

For Bond's play the situation is similar: the text was rejected and more than 50 changes were required[55], including the cutting of a scene, considered the most violent, in which a group of young people kill with stones a baby. "It was a revolting amateur play by one of those dramatists who write as it comes to them out of a heightened image of their experience"[56], was mentioned in the censor's report for the Lord Chamberlain. Bond refused any compromise, so this time again the show was played as club theatre. Gaskill and other members of the company's management were brought to trail for breaking the law, by putting on stage a play without license, and more precisely because a person (in fact an official observer) was allowed to have access to the club without being a member of the club. The case ended with a penalty, but it turned out to be an important moral victory for the Royal Court and at the same time the beginning of an intense campaign in media and also in the parliament to amend the law of the theatres.

51. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre 1965-72*, 103.
52. Shellard, *British Theatre Since the War*, 139.
53. David Thomas, David Carlton, and Anne Etienne, *Theatre Censorship: From Walpole to Wilson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 183.
54. Thomas, Carlton, and Etienne, 183.
55. Thomas, Carlton, and Etienne, 144.
56. Ibidem.

Bond's next play, *Early Morning*, was rejected without any further observation, the reason being however transparent and predictable: Queen Victoria was presented as being in a relationship with another woman. At that time, the legislative initiative was blocked in Parliament, and the Arts Council threatened to withdraw funding if Lord Chamberlain's requests were violated, so some of the leading members of the company did not agree with performing the show as club theatre, as there was the risk of new sanctions. Gaskill refused to give up, and eventually the play would be performed twice in the presence of a restricted audience and of the media. They were called "dress rehearsals with audience", that is why police investigations failed. *Early Morning* was the last play to be banned, because after six months, in September 28th, 1968, the new law that eliminates censorship was approved.

The effects of this liberalization are seen very soon through a significant increase of theatrical initiatives, stimulated by far more consistent funding provided by the Arts Council. It "looks like a golden age: an equivalent to the first Elizabethan era in which a wealth of new writing was accompanied by a prodigious amount of theatre building and a quest for new expressive forms"[57]. The independent theatre (*fringe*) gains a more and more visible position and becomes a counter-culture and Royal Court seeks to connect to this phenomenon, primarily through the small studio called Theatre Upstaires, a space for young writers and experiments. The *fringe* spirit of the collective writing is found in eclectic performances created by juxtapositions of various style, as *The Enoch Show* (1969), based on a text created by nine writers, directors and journalists or the productions made together with Portable Theatre, *Lay By* (1971) and *England's Ireland* (1972), both written by seven authors. This place attracts young playwrights who often come from the alternative theatre and it will be the meeting point with the experimental American theatre represented by Open Theatre and Bread and Puppet Theatre.

A much more difficult period will be in the 1980s when due to a substantial cuts in funding, Royal Court dramatically adjusts its programme to avoid bankruptcy: if in the previous decade there were eight or nine shows

57. Billington, *State of the Nation. British Theatre Since 1945*, 162.

in each studio, now their number is reduced to half. In 1989, for financial reasons, the Theatre Upstairs will stop its activity for a six-month period, although somewhat ironically, the report of that year published by the Arts Council stated that the Royal Court is "the major new writing theatre in the country."[58] To partially counterbalance the closure of the studio, the artistic director Max Stafford-Clark will adopt a lecture-shows strategy and will also work with the Methuen Publishing House to edit a series of new texts. Even under these circumstances, Royal Court succeeded in promoting an entire generation of playwrights, including Jim Cartwright, Caryl Churchill, Sarah Daniels, Timberlake Wertenbaker and "it was the first theatre to realize that there were women out there who could write and that there was an audience for those women."[59]

In the mid-90s, a new wave of radical playwrights revive the energy of "angry young men", proposing powerful, uncomfortable plays and innovative dramatic formulas: Martin Crimp, Sarah Kane, Anthony Neilson, Mark Ravenhill, Martin McDonagh and Jez Butterworth are just a few of them. For Royal Court begins a new era, a dinamic and complex one, an era of expansion unapproached in the previous decades. In a relatively short term, between 1992 and 1998, the artistic director Stephen Daldry manages to produce an impressive number of new plays, he grows considerably the offer of residences for native and foreign playwrights, he relaunches the idea of international repertoire and having a considerable financial support from Arts Council[60], fully reconstructs the infrastructure of the theatre.

The success of the company is the direct result of an active involvement in searching, training and promoting the new authors, a consistent approach that has always been a priority: "The Royal Court has always understood that writers are born *and* made"[61]. The plays that come to the stage are most

58. D. Keith Peacock, *Thatcher's Theatre: British Theatre and Drama in the Eighties* (London: Greenwood Press, 1999), 188.
59. Peacock, 189.
60. The Arts Council grant of £ 18.8 million was conditioned by obtaining a £ 7 million in co-financing from other sources.
61. Kate Kellaway, "Royal Court Theatre Prepares to Bid Farewell to King Dominic," *The Guardian*, 2013.

often created in the theatre laboratory - *Writers' Group* - and extremely rarely they are chosen from those that the theatre receives from outside[62]. Future playwrights are attracted through the programme *Young Court* for young people, under 21 and promoted during some events like *Young Writers' Festival* or *Open Court*, "a six-week festival of drama, ideas and events chosen and suggested by a group of more than 140 writers"[63], including performances, lectures, discussions and dramatic writing workshops such as "Six New Plays in Six Weeks".

No other company has so much influenced contemporary British theatre, as the Royal Court has done since its set-up until today: the "revolution" in 1956, the "war" with the censorship in the 1960s or the "revival" at the end of twentieth century, are key moments to which it has contributed decisively. In more than six decades of activity it has confirmed that it is the most important producer of new drama, moreover it has transformed it into an industry where artistic and economic criteria are not always irreconcilable. Even though it has gone through difficult times, the Royal Court has remained essentially the theatre of George Devine, a theatre that takes risks and protects the artist's "the right to fail."[64]

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62. According to the company's website, the literary secretariat receives more than 3,500 unsolicited texts each year, http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/playwriting/

63. http://www.royalcourttheatre.com/season/open-court-festival

64. Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre 1965-72*, 10.

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