

British drama has finally woken up and discovered there's a wide world out there. **Michael Billington** hails the return of anger to the stage

Theatre of war

It's almost like the old days. Political theatre has started popping up everywhere. Topical satire in Alistair Beaton's *Feelgood*. Dialectical debate in Camus's *Les Justes*. Impassioned protest and philosophical enquiry in two plays about asylum-seekers, Kay Adshad's *The Bogus Woman* and Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Credible Witness*. Suddenly theatre seems an important activity again rather than a marginal delight.

Obviously political theatre ebbs and flows. It was strongest in Britain in the immediate post-1968 period. *Les événements* in Paris, student revolt, the growth of women's lib, the dispatch of British troops to Northern Ireland – all these, plus the emergence of fringe theatre and the end of theatrical censorship, conspired to produce a frenzied volatility. Even the failures of the left in Britain, and the ability of capitalism to absorb revolutionary impulses, yielded a political masterwork in Trevor Griffiths's *The Party*, premiered at the National Theatre in 1973.

The Thatcherite 1980s also yielded much oppositional theatre. Writers such as David Hare, David Edgar, Caryl Churchill and Alan Ayckbourn attacked the grasping spirit of the times. But political theatre has fallen out of fashion. Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane have registered a moral disgust with the Thatcherite legacy, but theatrical economics militate against state-of-the-nation plays. More crucially, the Blairite big-tent approach has tended to stifle ideological debate. As Max Stafford-Clark said at a discussion at the Bush this week: "In the 80s we all knew who the enemy was. Now we are not so sure."

Does the decline of political theatre matter? Desperately, I would say. I am not claiming it is the sole function of theatre to analyse government and society. But if drama withdraws from engagement with the public world, it is inevitably diluted. It is no accident that attacks on theatre have

increased as drama has privatised experience. You may dislike a theatre that deals with societal violence or ingrained colonialism – as in Edward Bond's *Saved* or Howard Brenton's *The Romans in Britain* – but you can't ignore it.

I'd go further and say that drama is less vital when it ceases to relate private experience to the public world. It's a bit unfair to pick on Simon Gray, a good dramatist whose oeuvre commands respect. But his latest play, *Japes*, proves my point. It offers an insightful study of a sibling relationship over 27 years. But, except for a bilious attack on conscienceless youth, private lives are not influenced by public events. The brothers change but Britain seemingly doesn't, even though the action covers the years from Heath's accession to Major's decline. For all its virtues, the play offers a goldfish-bowl view of life.

If political theatre is to make a comeback it cannot resurrect old forms. The epic, state-of-the-nation play looks to be a dead duck, and not just for financial reasons. How does a dramatist attempt to speak for Britain at a time of governmental devolution, growing nationalism and a massive north-south divide? In recent years, only Peter Whelan has written a big work on an epic subject – *Divine Right* (1996), about monarchy; but that, while admirably adventurous, subverted its own republican premise.

If political theatre is to survive, it has to constantly reinvent itself. One way, in an age top-heavy with opinion, is by establishing the importance of fact. For me *The Colour of Justice*, the Tricycle Theatre's edited version of the McPherson enquiry into the Stephen Lawrence killing, was the most exciting political play of recent years. It took us behind closed doors to reveal not just the police's criminal negligence but the warped racism of the prime suspects. The enquiry's stripping away of institutional evasion also had the contours of Sophoclean tragedy. In short, *The Colour of Justice* showed that documentary drama



Written in anger, rooted in reality ... *The Bogus Woman*

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can be aesthetically exciting as well as crucially informative.

The key to the political drama of the future is information. We want stories, but we also want to feel that the writer is communicating his or her researches. That can come in a variety of ways.

The great strength of Kay Adshad's *The Bogus Woman*, brilliantly performed by Noma Dumezweni at the Bush, is that it transmits the writer's incredulous shock at the operation of the asylum system in this country. Adshad shows the racism of the privatised security guards at Campsfield Detention Centre, the bureaucracy confronting an appellant against deportation and the nightmare of trying to survive on weekly £30 food vouchers. The play is written in anger but rooted in reality.

But information can take many

forms. David Hare's *Via Dolorosa* was, on one level, a superb piece of reportage about modern Israel; it was also a philosophical enquiry into the limits of fiction in dealing with political fact. And even when fiction seems the appropriate form – as in *Feelgood*, Alistair Beaton's merciless satire on political spin – a play's strength derives from its intimate knowledge of the system. Only this week it emerged that Labour's new mantra is "the challenge of change", lines that actually come from the PM's proposed conference speech in Beaton's peerlessly prophetic play.

When I talk about the need for more political theatre to directors and dramaturgs, however, I often get the same response: you can't force writers to write the plays you want. Of course not. But the lesson of recent times is that theatres and companies can be more proactive in marrying writers to subjects. It's happened with the Tricycle, who

initiated the documentary agenda, and with *The Red Room*, who commissioned *The Bogus Woman*. When challenged – as I was recently – to name topics the British theatre should be dealing with, I would say they are self-evident: Europe, comprehensive education, the rural revolt, the resurgence of direct action as in the petrol-price protest. The result may not automatically be good plays. But I stick with my original contention: theatre is a place of information as well as entertainment and the more it cuts itself off from society – and relies on a mixture of anodyne musicals and Hollywood-star casting – the more it is doomed to glamorous irrelevance.

The Bogus Woman is at the Bush, London W12 (020-7610 4224), and *Les Justes* is at the Gate, London W11 (020-7229 0706), until March 3. *Feelgood* is at the Hampstead Theatre, London NW3 (020-7722 9301), and *Credible Witness* is at the Royal Court Upstairs, London SW1 (020-7565 5000), until March 10.

Feelgood plus, Billington Guardian

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