New Writing: Moving into the Twenty-First Century

New writing in the United Kingdom

In the year 2010, the rise and rise of ‘new writing’ in the United Kingdom seemed to have arrived at an interesting point. At the beginning of the year *The Stage* newspaper reported that over the first decade of the twenty-first century, the amount of new writing in the subsidized sector had trebled,\(^1\) while a few months later producer Richard Jordan wrote in his column for the same publication that a similar trend was in evidence in London’s West End too.\(^2\) Nevertheless, as the former article showed, there was also concern and dissatisfaction being expressed by British writers at the turn of the decade in response to the Arts Council’s ‘decision to remove new writing from its funding priorities in 2007’\(^3\).

As noted previously, the late twentieth century, by and large, had seen a parallel development of ‘new writing’ and ‘physical/visual/experimental theatre’ in the United Kingdom, with occasional moments of collaboration across the board. Marred by Margaret Thatcher’s attitude to the arts – ‘she did like the theatre as a representative of English traditions but not as a critical institution’ (Broisch 2001: 207) – the 1980s theatre scene was largely dominated by commercially viable work: classics, musicals and adaptations.\(^4\) Despite the burst of new writing activity in the mid-1990s, and its strand variously referred to as ‘In-Yer-Face theatre’ (Sierz 2001), ‘New Brutalism’ (Nikčević 2005), ‘theatre of blood and sperm’ (Broisch 2001), ‘Cool Britannia’ (Sierz 2001; D’Monté and Saunders 2007) and ‘Cruel Britannia’ (Urban 2004), the cumulative impact of this phase appeared to be more enthusiastically received internationally than at home. By the year 2000, the Arts Council-commissioned Boyden Report revealed that only 14 per cent of the repertoire was comprised of new work and that regional British theatre needed a boost. A series of policy and strategy documents\(^5\) in the early 2000s could be seen to have led to an increased support and development of ‘new writing’ in the United Kingdom and to a £25 million funding boost for the regional sector in 2003. As a result, the 2009 Arts...
The Theatre-Making Council and British Theatre Consortium (BTC) report *Writ Large* found that ‘new plays made up 42 per cent of all theatre shows’ (BTC 2009: 53) between 2003 and 2008 in the sample of 65 regularly funded organizations in England which responded to the survey.\(^6\) Jacqueline Bolton (2012) offers a persuasive account of the role of the writers’ organizations, literary managers and dramaturgs in promoting new writing even throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the absence of Arts Council support. Nevertheless, the financial support helped to compound the effect of these efforts and the 2009 report revealed that plays comprised 77 per cent of the repertoire (BTC 2009: 53) and the ratio between plays and devised work was 81 per cent to 19 per cent (BTC 2009: 61). This seemed to be the case despite the fact that in 2007, the simultaneous growth of site-specific and devised theatre had forced the Arts Council to revisit its 2000 *Theatre Policy* document and revise its references to ‘new writing’ using instead the term ‘new work’ in recognition of changing trends.\(^7\) Both the British Theatre Consortium (2009) and the Dunton, Nelson and Shand (2009) reports found that writers felt threatened by what they perceived as the Arts Council’s investment in devising over new writing, which suggests that the gap between new writing and devising was potentially being perpetrated by political and economic rather than aesthetic and methodological factors.

Writing in 2011, Rosalind Haslett established that even the perceived division between sites of production – ‘new writing’ being staged in theatres and ‘new work’ in alternative spaces – is itself no longer tenable, as demonstrated by the National Theatre successfully producing both types of work. Similarly, some regional theatres which have emphasized ‘new writing’ in the 2000s seem to be recognizing the need for dispensing with this previously held terminological categorization in favour of a more holistic approach.\(^8\) Alex Chisholm, Literary Associate at the West Yorkshire Playhouse, has even questioned whether we have arrived at the ‘end of New Writing’. Acknowledging her own position as a ‘beneficiary of [the] change in mood’ in favour of new writing in the 2000s, she also observed that:

> The rhetoric of New Writing is all about ‘serving the text’ and ‘serving the writer’ but can result in under-funded, under-rehearsed and unimaginative productions where little is gained from seeing the performance that you would not have had from reading the play.\(^9\)

Nevertheless, ‘new writing’ is commonly understood as a ‘very British idea’ (Sierz 2011: 16), whereby the figure of the writer is ‘a unique selling point of British theatre’ (Lane 2010: 2).

According to Aleks Sierz, the origins of the term ‘new writing’ are ‘hazy’, but it appears to have been ‘widely accepted’ by the 1970s – particularly by 1975, when the New Writing Committee was established at the Arts Council (2011: 27). Sierz traces the trend of promoting the writer and writing over other