

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86986-7 - The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Theatre

Simon Shepherd

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Modern British Theatre*

British theatre has long been regarded as a world leader in terms of its quality, creativity and range. Starting in 1900, this book introduces the features that characterise modern and current British theatre. Topics covered include experimental performances under motorways, plays by Stoppard and Ayckbourn, amateur theatre and virtual spaces, the emergence of the director, the changing role of writers and political and community shows. The book is clearly divided into four sections: where it happens, who does it, what they make, and why they do it. It discusses theatre buildings and theatre that refuses buildings; company organisation, ensembles and collectives; and different sorts of acting. A large section describes the major work done for the stage, from Shaw through to *Complicite*, via poetic drama, different sorts of realism and documentary drama. The *Introduction* stands apart from other accounts of modern British theatre by bringing together buildings, people and plays.

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*For Mick,
with my love*

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Foreword

In this book, ‘modern’ is defined as everything after 1900. It is an ‘introduction’ not a history, so it aims to explain the sorts of activity and thinking that seem characteristic of the modern period. Most slippery of all, it deals with ‘theatre’. Theatre can include a very wide range of artworks and companies and here a number of exclusions have been made.

I am the sort of person that picks up a book like this and goes straight for the index, to check out what is said about favourite shows and companies. I would probably find myself triumphantly disappointed by the gaps. The book doesn’t aim to do coverage, and it doesn’t seek to reproduce accepted lists of the great and the good. Some pretty obscure work comes in for analysis, on the grounds that it tells us something significant about the modern period, and, by way of the reverse, some wonderful theatre art is ignored.

I have cut brutally short my accounts of two very large areas – theatre scenography and music theatre. Clearly these areas are deeply connected with the subject matter of this book, but they also spill over way beyond it. They are rather too large and significant, I think, merely to bolt on, and have crucial differences as well as connections – in modes of work and production, and in relationships with other artforms and disciplines. Properly considered, an account of theatre scenography in the modern period would range across genres of visual culture, production of visual pleasure, and changes in how we look. So too an account of music/theatre would move from cantata and folk song through dance and interlude to revue, musical and opera. Each account is a book of its own.

Meanwhile this book is written so that you can begin at the beginning and go straight through, or alternatively use the headings and index to criss-cross it. The structure of the whole thing is explained by the Contents list.

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for looking at the Blast Theory bits, to Mischa Twitchin for reading through the material on Shunt, to Mick Wallis for putting me straight, as it were, on the facts of inter-war amateurism. And big thanks to Kate Harris for researching all the illustrations and permissions.

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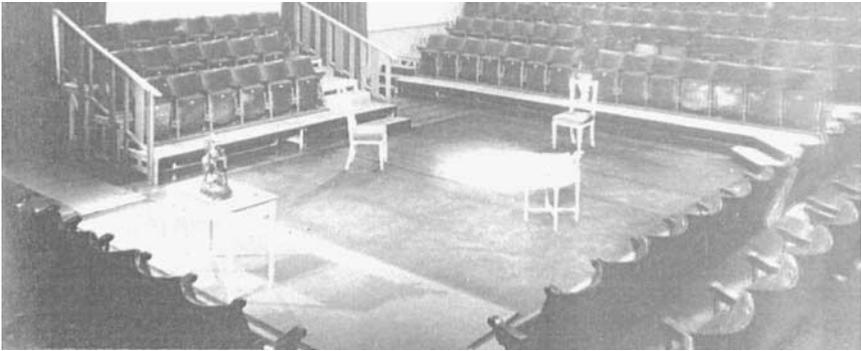
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Modern Theatre: two characteristic arrangements for performance from around the middle of the modern period. Of these the second is the more ancient, with its roots in the medieval pageant wagon.



1. The Library Theatre, Scarborough, 1955, designed by Stephen Joseph, although 'no-one really designed the Library Theatre; it just happened' (Joseph 1968: 114).

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2. Inter-Action's Fun Art Bus, Festival of London, 1972.