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The Rise of the Director

The dominant creative force in today’s theatre is the director. No longer just an organiser, directors are now considered artists in their own right. Critics write of ‘Brook’s Lear’, of ‘Planchon’s Tartuffe’, ascribing to the director the role of author. It is a distinguishing feature of directors’ theatre that here the director claims the authorial function even though they have not written the original play. Where the director is working with a classic text, he or she will rearrange, cut and rewrite to fit their production concept. Many contemporary directors dispense with the writer completely; outstanding examples are the image-dramas of Tadeusz Kantor and of Robert Wilson, some of which contain almost no written text at all. Even in less extreme examples, such as the work of Roger Planchon and of Peter Stein, the director’s contribution is the equivalent of that of an author, amounting to the development of a new stage idiom – the director assumes the function of ‘scenic writer’.

Despite assuming authorial function, the greatest directors are those who at the same time succeed in bringing out the talents of actors and playwrights. Several contemporary directors can claim to have achieved what Brecht did with the Berliner Ensemble. Joan Littlewood with Theatre Workshop, Ariane Mnouchkine with the Théâtre du Soleil, and Peter Stein with the Schaubühne have all succeeded in forging companies whose names are as well-known as those of their directors. Moreover, all these directors, besides devising their own productions, have been responsible for bringing the work of new playwrights to the stage. Others, such as Peter Brook and Jerzy Grotowski, have founded centres for research into the dynamics of the actor-audience relationship. Their work, like that of Robert Wilson, has led them to devise activities more often associated with psychotherapy than with theatre. They have become charismatic figures, saints for a secular age, valued for their insistence on pursuing their own vision despite the normal criteria of theatre practice.

HISTORICAL ORIGINS OF THE DIRECTOR

The function designated by the word ‘director’ in today’s theatre is no older than 150 years. Between the end of the eighteenth and the end of the nineteenth century changes took place that transformed the established
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European theatre from a restricted medium catering for the needs of the court to a mass medium appealing to a variety of social groups. In the eighteenth century, despite the thriving popular entertainers who performed at fairs and similar occasions, the only established theatre companies were those working under the patronage of royalty. These companies enjoyed the privilege of a monopoly on spoken drama; not only was their income assured, but competition was banned. Such conditions generated a measure of shared agreement between actors and audiences concerning the function of theatre and the appropriate manner of staging plays. The modern director has opened up a space for him- or herself by challenging these conventional assumptions and proposing new models of how and why theatre should operate within society.

The initiators of this development were the nineteenth-century actor-managers, who began to insist on careful rehearsal and a unified style for costumes and settings. Charles Kean’s Shakespeare productions, for example, were much admired for their accuracy of historical and geographical detail. In the same period the theatre’s commercial status was changing; as the old monopolies were dismantled, it became possible for a new breed of theatre manager to make substantial sums of money from building and running theatres in Europe’s bigger cities. As audiences increased in size and lost their former homogeneity, so the old consensus disappeared, to be replaced by an appetite for novelty. The most successful theatres were those whose managers were able to introduce spectacular innovations. Unable to deal with topics of political urgency, catering for audiences hungry for special effects (such as shipwrecks, erupting volcanoes and runaway trains), these managers gave more and more prominence to design. Opportunities for spectacle were assisted by the rapid development of stage technology, especially in the area of lighting. The old oil lamps were replaced in the 1820s by gas lighting and then, during the last two decades of the nineteenth century, by electric lighting. As the stage technology grew more complex, so did the need for a stage manager (régisseur in French) to ensure that the various stage effects worked well together. By the end of the century it was common for one person, often the leading actor and manager of the company, to assume artistic responsibility for all aspects of a performance, and the word used to designate this function was ‘producer’ (in French: metteur en scène), though the modernist theatre visionary Edward Gordon Craig called him the ‘stage director’ and can thus be seen as the first person to use the word in its modern sense. By choosing it, he intended to emphasise the director’s role as master of all the signifying practices peculiar to the stage – gesture and movement, sound, lighting, costume, design and speech. For the first part of the twentieth
century, however, the term ‘producer’ was generally employed in English, to be replaced during the 1950s by the term ‘director’, perhaps influenced by film terminology.

A SINGLE UNIFYING ARTISTIC AIM: DUKE GEORG II OF SAXE-MEiningen

By the end of the nineteenth century any social consensus as to the function of theatre had broken down, as had the monolithic structure of patronage that had formerly guaranteed a living wage for theatre workers. The first directors in the modern sense of the word, men such as André Antoine and Konstantin Stanislavski (see below), were determined to find new ways of filling both these needs. They proposed to create a new consensus by issuing manifestoes and establishing subscription societies. In this way, they hoped to gather a homogeneous audience, based not on class but on shared interest in art, and to share the burden of financial support among all their patrons. In the transition from the old to the new structures, the most influential figure was a man who combined elements of both the old-fashioned aristocratic patron and the new theatre director: Duke Georg II of Saxe-Meiningen (1826–1914), whose theatre company, founded in 1866, toured Europe between 1874 and 1890.

Duke Georg anticipated the development of theatre directing by seizing on the idea that all effects of the production should be subordinated to a single unifying artistic aim, with particular emphasis on the visual aspects of his productions. He made detailed sketches of how each scene of a play was to look, including the sets, the positions of the actors, the groupings of ‘extras’ and the movements they would need to make from one part of the stage to another. He was greatly helped when, in 1873, he appointed Ludwig Chronegk as his stage director and leader of rehearsals. Chronegk was a disciplinarian who insisted on punctuality at rehearsals and on the faultless learning of every move, even by non-speaking parts. Duke Georg’s designs and Chronegk’s rehearsal methods resulted in productions full of expressive details all harnessed to a single artistic vision. The crowd scenes in particular caught Antoine’s attention when he saw the company on tour: he was impressed by the ability of even the extras to project realistic characters without damaging the overall design of a scene.

Historical plays provided the Meininger with their greatest successes. For the production of *Julius Caesar*, ‘not only the settings, based on the remains of the Roman forum, but statues, armour, weapons, drinking cups and the rest were all modelled faithfully on Roman originals’ (Braun 1982, 14). Such
keen interest in historical reconstruction was a mark of the age, though not totally original: English actors had attempted similar effects since John Philip Kemble in the late eighteenth century, and Duke Georg appears to have been influenced by Charles Kean’s celebrated Shakespeare ‘Revivals’ (ibid., 11). Unlike Kemble or Kean, Duke Georg had the advantage of not being the star of his own productions, so he was able to retain an objective observer’s eye and approached the task of historical reconstruction in a rigorously systematic fashion.

The new historical awareness of the nineteenth century certainly contributed to the emergence of the director, who was able to reinforce his claim to authority by developing the notion of ‘the classic’. The twentieth-century French director Roger Planchon (see Chapter 3) has pointed out that in previous centuries it was assumed that to perform a play from the classical repertoire meant making a new adaptation: ‘The Miser only exists because Molière would not perform Plautus without rewriting him.’ For Planchon, it was the idea of the classic that did most to bring the modern director into being:

The emergence of the classic brings with it the birth of a dubious character. He presents himself as a museum curator; leaning on Molière and Shakespeare, he levers himself into a position where he is running the whole show. We may lament the fact, but the two things are linked: the birth of the classic gives power to the theatre director. In his hands the great theatres of the world become museums and justify their existence by producing Oedipus, Hamlet, or The Miser. A museum curator ‘restores’ works and puts them on show. And this is where the ambiguities begin [...] (Planchon 1986, 7).5

There is some force in Planchon’s argument that the modern director functions like a museum curator, an argument also advanced by stage director Jonathan Miller, who wrote in 1986: ‘Why did the director emerge when he [sic] did? Why has his influence now become so strong? The obvious answer is that historical change has accelerated so much in the last fifty years that the differences between “now” and even a quite recent “then” are much more noticeable.’ (Miller 1986, 70).

The productions of the Meininger were a response to the birth of this enhanced historical awareness, as were the experiments of William Poel, who in 1894 set up an ‘Elizabethan Stage Society’ in England for the purpose of presenting Shakespeare’s plays in uncut versions on a reconstructed Elizabethan stage.6 It soon became evident that such experiments, though producing fascinating results, could not succeed in their own terms, for
the audience of the 1890s perceived Shakespeare differently from the Elizabethans, just as Shakespeare’s picture of Julius Caesar’s Rome was different from Duke Georg’s. After a few decades, enthusiasm for historical reconstruction gave way to a realisation that each new period discovers new meanings in the works of the past and that historical reconstructions reveal more about the reconstructors than about the period they seek to revive. This is the source of the ambiguities mentioned by Planchon, for modern directors have frequently copied Duke Georg in claiming that theirs is the most ‘authentic’ version ever staged of a given classic. In fact they are laying claims to a function more authorial than directorial, hence the debate about the legitimate extent of the director’s power to adapt or ‘restore’ the classics.

**THE FIRST MODERN DIRECTOR: ANDRÉ ANTOINE AND THE THÉÂTRE LIBRE**

For André Antoine (1858–1943), the most interesting aspect of Duke Georg’s productions was their verisimilitude. Often described as the first modern director, Antoine also came to rely on productions of the classics in his later career, but when he set up his Théâtre Libre in 1887 he dedicated it to the performance of the new naturalist drama, seeking out and encouraging new playwrights. The theatre’s name was intended to emphasise both its independence of spirit and its determination to offer an alternative to the superficialities of the commercial theatre available in Paris at that time. Antoine's innovations were often framed as rejections of the existing conventions and they bore on three fundamental aspects of a theatre’s activity: its finances and audience relations; its style of design and production; its acting. Financially, the Théâtre Libre was set up as a subscription society. Because its performances were then ‘private’ it escaped censorship. Even more important was the financial independence this brought and the creation of a homogeneous audience. In production style, Antoine insisted on the detailed, realistic creation of setting and environment, ‘for it is the environment that determines the movements of the characters, not the movements of the characters that determine the environment’ (Antoine [1903] 1963, 94). His ideal for interiors (not always put into practice) was to build the set first and to rehearse the play as if in a real room with four walls, ‘without worrying about the fourth wall, which will later disappear so as to enable the audience to see what is going on’ (ibid., 95). He insisted that, instead of aiming chiefly to flatter and charm their audiences, his actors should devote all their powers to authentic character portrayal, introducing the notion, distinctly alien to French traditions,
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that acting was not only a matter of fine speaking: ‘the best of our actors [...] know [...] that at certain moments of the action their hands, their back, their feet may all be more eloquent than a long speech’ (ibid., 100).

Antoine’s crusade against ham acting and cheap theatrical tricks would not have achieved such far-reaching results without the backing of writer Émile Zola (1840–1902). For some years Zola had been campaigning in favour of naturalism in the theatre, but the prevailing inauthenticity of acting and production styles made it hard to achieve the effect he desired, even with stage adaptations of his own novels. He condemned ‘exaggerated gestures, movements made only for show, actors striking the stage with their heel’, and many other tricks of the trade. He longed for a more truthful portrayal of character and dreamed of actors who would ‘live the play rather than performing it’ (Carter 1963, 87). Antoine’s aesthetic provided the necessary seriousness of approach and the willingness to confront contemporary social issues. Zola’s active support became an important factor in the early success of the Théâtre Libre. In the previous decade he had published a torrent of articles in which he developed the idea that both literature and theatre had to adopt the experimental method of science if they were to recover their lost vocation as interpreters of contemporary society. He set out a programme for modern documentary writing, in which the author would be no more than an intensely scrupulous observer of reality. This fitted well with Antoine’s desire to establish the stage as a space of privileged authenticity, almost like a sociological laboratory. The illusion that theatre could operate according to strict scientific principles was short-lived, but the conception of the director as responsible for a laboratory of human relationships has become a key element in modern directors’ theatre, finding its most complete expression in Grotowski’s ‘Laboratory Theatre’ (see Chapter 5).

A FRAMEWORK OF AUTHENTIC MOMENTS: KONSTANTIN STANISLAVSKI

Konstantin Stanislavski (1863–1938) was an admirer of both Antoine and the Meininger. When he and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858–1943) set up the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898, they aimed to create a consensus in their audience by insisting that ‘the performance be treated as an artistic experience, not a social occasion – applause of entrances and exits to be discouraged’ (cited in Braun 1982, 60). Indeed everything was to be subordinated to the aim of artistic unity in the productions. Particular attention was to be paid to the creation of what Antoine had termed ‘environment’; Stanislavski and Nemirovich-Danchenko found it necessary to specify, against the current
practice of the day, that each production would have specially designed settings, properties and costumes. Stanislavski's use, or even abuse, of atmospheric detail in his productions is too famous to require comment; in his own lifetime Chekhov was already complaining of its excesses when applied to his own plays. The survival of Stanislavski's prompt books makes it possible to study these productions in the finest detail, right down to the movements, gestures and expressions of individual performers.

The creation of a realistic environment in which to set the action was as much the work of Stanislavski's designer Viktor Simov (1858–1935) as of Stanislavski himself. The aim of overall artistic unity dictates the closest possible collaboration between director and designer from the moment that work on a given production begins. This is a feature of much contemporary directors’ theatre. Peter Brook, for example, has written that ‘the earliest relationship is director/subject/designer. [...] The best designer evolves step by step with the director, going back, changing, scrapping as a conception of the whole gradually takes form’ (Brook 1996, 101). For all his meticulous control of every detail in his productions, however, Stanislavski ultimately concluded that the director’s most important creative work was done with the actors. As an actor himself, struggling for a new quality of truth and authenticity in his art, Stanislavski was constantly preoccupied with the difference between the actor who relies on externals, ‘going through the motions’ of a part, and the one who manages to ‘live’ the part, to convince the audience that the emotions portrayed are not merely simulated, but real, thus provoking a similar emotional response in them.

By observing his own reflexes as an actor, he discovered that he was sometimes inspired to the point of feeling the appropriate emotions as if he were the character, whereas at other times he felt quite wooden. During the last thirty years or so of his life he devised a method for enabling the actor to train his emotional reflexes so as not to have to rely on haphazard inspiration. This method, which he called ‘the System’, has been Stanislavski's most enduring legacy to the art of directing. Within this method, the role of the director is as much that of a teacher as that of an artist. Their role is to stimulate the emotional memories of their actors so that they can find, within their own past experience, feelings similar to those of the character they have to portray. The director will devise situations, often by using improvisation, through which these memories may be stirred. Observing the actors, he or she becomes a sort of director of conscience, firmly censuring those emotions or responses which are merely feigned, and helping the actor to build on moments of truthfulness. The aim is to create a framework of authentic moments, drawn from the actor’s own inner life, which will then give life to his or her character. Through his writings and through his disciples in
America, Stanislavski’s influence has been enormous. There is hardly a director working in the theatre today who does not use relaxation or improvisation techniques with their origin in Stanislavski’s System. The authority of many contemporary directors derives less from their artistic programme than from their force of personality and from their ability to establish a working relationship with their actors in which the actors believe that they can grow, emotionally and spiritually. Both Brook and Grotowski, among contemporary directors, exhibit this characteristic of the director as guru.

The influence of the naturalist stage directors Antoine and Stanislavski spread rapidly to other European countries, notably to Germany. In 1889 Otto Brahm (1856–1912) set up his Freie Bühne in Berlin. Like Antoine, Brahm was dedicated to performing new plays, often picking those with a socialist slant and introducing new work by playwrights Gerhart Hauptmann (1862–1946), Lev Tolstoy (1828–1910), August Strindberg (1849–1912) and Zola. Antoine and Stanislavski’s influence made itself felt more slowly in England, where J. T. Grein set up the Independent Theatre Society in 1891, modelling himself explicitly on Antoine but without enjoying the same success.

THE THEATRE OF THE FUTURE: EDWARD GORDON CRAIG AND ADOLPHE APPIA

It was not, however, naturalism but the rival symbolist movement that gave rise to the first great theorist of directors’ theatre: Edward Gordon Craig (1872–1966). In his writings on the art of the theatre, Craig formulated a prophetic vision of the director as the supreme theatre artist of the modern age, uniting all processes in a single creative enterprise:

I am now going to tell you out of what material an artist of the theatre of the future will create his masterpieces. Out of ACTION, SCENE, and VOICE. Is it not very simple?

And when I say action, I mean both gesture and dancing, the prose and poetry of action.

When I say scene, I mean all which comes before the eye, such as the lighting, costume, as well as the scenery.

When I say voice, I mean the spoken word or the word which is sung, in contradiction to the word which is read, for the word written to be spoken and the word written to be read are two entirely different things (Craig 2009, 90).
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This vision suggests a director bringing together and mastering all the different expressive idioms of the stage. In fact the practicalities of theatre work often defeated Craig. For his few successful productions he drew heavily on the pioneering work of the Swiss designer Adolphe Appia (1862–1928), who was the first to exploit the possibilities of electric lighting in the theatre. As the new electric systems and dimmer boards were installed during the last decades of the nineteenth century, Appia saw that the art of production could become not merely the art of establishing an appropriate environment, but the creation of a new spatial idiom, more like that of dance or music. In responding so enthusiastically to the new possibilities opened up by Appia and others, yet achieving relatively little in practice, Craig demonstrated the fundamental paradox of directors’ theatre. For the director must indeed be the orchestrator of all the expressive idioms of the stage; yet if they treat them exclusively as raw materials to be reshaped they miss the most important thing, which is that, however impressive their vision, it only comes to life through the creative work of the actors, designers and all others involved in the process.

NEW FORMS OF DRAMATIC EXPRESSION: VSEVOLOD MEYERHOLD

This was something well understood by the Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874–1940). Meyerhold had been an actor with Stanislavski’s company, so he understood the demands placed on a naturalistic actor. He believed that Stanislavski’s method was mistaken, because, by putting so much emphasis on creating the illusion of reality, it was unable to exploit that most essentially theatrical quality: play. Meyerhold turned his attention to the traditional skills of the popular performer: clowning, acrobatics, juggling, mime. He also studied the commedia dell’arte and the conventions of Asian theatre. After the Russian Revolution he eagerly accepted the challenge to elaborate new forms of dramatic expression, developing a system of actor training known as ‘biomechanics’. Reflecting both the eurhythmics of the Swiss-based pedagogue Émile Jaques-Dalcroze (1865–1950) and the optimistic belief in scientific method, this was an attempt to develop the body’s capacity for movement with machine-like precision. Where actors were called upon to display emotion, they were to do so by selecting appropriate physical movements, not by miming an internal state, as in Stanislavski’s theatre. In his approach to stage design, Meyerhold discarded both realistic environments and symbolist evocations. With the help of constructivist designers,
he employed sets that were entirely functional; the actors no longer played in front of, or even within, the set; they played *with* it. These sets were characteristically composed of frameworks with ramps, steps and platforms at different levels over which the actors ran, leapt or tumbled. In this way Meyerhold managed to integrate the elements of line, movement, colour, rhythm and space of which Craig had spoken.

Inevitably, since most playwrights had not written with Meyerhold’s performance idiom in mind, he was obliged systematically to re-create the dramatic action in terms of forms, images, movements unsuspected by the author. Indeed, he was often accused of supplanting the author. He denied this charge but agreed that his work amounted to a redefinition of the director’s function, and this he expressed diagrammatically by saying that the director had traditionally seen himself as merely a privileged spectator arranging and perfecting the performance before it was shown to the public thus (see Meyerhold 1913, 35):

![Diagram showing the traditional relationship between Spectator, Director, Author, and Actor.]

In his own work this relationship was no longer triangular, but linear:

![Linear diagram showing the relationship between Author, Director, Actor, and Spectator.]

This conception of the director’s role became one of the essential defining qualities of directors’ theatre. All the directors considered in this book believe that the director must reformulate the author’s work in terms of a fresh and
living stage idiom, though not all would claim to place themselves so squarely between the actor and the author. Meyerhold’s great contribution to directors’ theatre was to insist that a unified artistic purpose was not enough; it was the director’s responsibility to develop a style or idiom specific to the theatre within which every element became a significant bearer of meaning.

JACQUES COPEAU AND THE VIEUX-COLOMBIER

By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century the director’s claim to artistic authority in the theatre was gradually becoming accepted. The man who did most to cement this authority was Jacques Copeau (1879–1949), who founded the Vieux-Colombier theatre in Paris in 1913, as an explicit attempt to renew the art of the French stage. Similar to Antoine two decades earlier, he considered the mainstream theatre of his time to be both corrupt and corrupting, offering its audiences nothing besides superficial bedroom farces or lavish spectacular shows whose only aim was sensational novelty. In their place he planned a theatre that was simple but inventive, one in which play and performance became an integrated whole. His repertoire was based on the classics, especially Molière and Shakespeare. He believed that, given faithful productions, creative, sensitive acting, and the minimum of special stage effects, these authors would reveal qualities of poetry and truth which contemporary theatre had lost sight of. Copeau dreamed of developing a new performance vocabulary of modern types similar to the old masks of the commedia dell’arte, permitting actors to develop a supple, inventive commentary on contemporary life.

For a theatre that is now considered to have been so influential, the Vieux-Colombier had a remarkably short existence, playing for a total of only seven complete seasons between 1913 and 1924. Copeau’s influence spread wide for two reasons. One was that two of these seasons were played in New York (1917–19), where the company was sent on a cultural mission. Its success was considerable and ensured rapid dissemination in the United States of Copeau’s view of the role of the director. The second was that Copeau had also founded a theatre school alongside the theatre and he continued as its director after the closure of the theatre. The training given in this school began, like that of Meyerhold, by placing the emphasis almost solely on physical training and developing the expressive powers of the body. As the training progressed, other elements were introduced: study of art, philosophy, and literature. The students were encouraged to cultivate the whole person, not just their performance technique, and to work for the group rather than as
individuals. Almost all the leading directors in the French theatre of the next few decades were trained by Copeau or by former pupils of his, and so, in the French-speaking world, his influence as a teacher equals that of Stanislavski in Russia and America. Where Stanislavski stressed the director’s work in helping the actor to free his inner resources, Copeau and his disciples emphasised the director’s responsibility towards the European theatre tradition as a whole, giving renewed life to the plays of the classic repertoire and forming an ensemble of actors capable of group work and of generosity to one another. Copeau’s charismatic influence was such that he imposed his vision of the director as a person embodying both artistic and moral authority on most of the succeeding generation of directors.

TECHNOLOGY AND AGITATION FOR CHANGE: MAX REINHARDT AND ERWIN PISCATOR

A less pedagogic view of the director’s function, though an equally demanding one, was embodied by Copeau’s contemporary Max Reinhardt (1873–1943). Reinhardt was an unashamed master of the spectacular production style, favouring enormous casts and productions in spaces not normally used for theatre performance. He is said to have preferred poor or incomplete plays, for these allowed him more scope to introduce effects of his own devising. Certainly one of his major successes was the wordless play The Miracle (1911). It was staged in London at the Olympia Hall with the audience seated facing one another as if in a great church, a central rostrum which could sink beneath the floor, and a hillside on rails. In a programme note for the play, Reinhardt defended the director’s right to use whatever scenic means modern technology made available: ‘Our standard must not be to act a play as it was acted in the days of its author [...]. How to make a play live in our time, that is decisive for us’ (quoted in Cole and Chinoy, eds 1963, 297). With his love of the large-scale and the modern, it is not surprising that Reinhardt found a welcome in America, where he made a number of films. An interest in the application of technology to spectacle and a willingness to direct for both theatre and film have been a feature of many contemporary directors’ work.

Reinhardt’s work in Germany had not always been confined to grand spectacular productions, though. At his Kleines Theater in Berlin, he produced intense small-scale dramas by such authors as Strindberg and Wedekind. As director of the Deutsches Theater in 1905, Reinhardt had opened a studio theatre next door as a second house, and there he directed a number of intimate productions significant in the flowering of the German Expressionist
movement. Out of the Expressionist movement and its anguished protest against the mass slaughter of the First World War, there was to emerge a new concept of the director: as agitator for political change. The outstanding example is Erwin Piscator (1893–1966), who founded his Proletarian Theatre in 1920 with a manifesto which declared uncompromisingly that any artistic intention must be subordinated to the revolutionary purpose of the whole (see Piscator 1980). Piscator set out to create a political theatre which could speak directly to a working-class audience. He was constantly hampered in this aim by the fact that for most of his productions he had to rely on financial support from the very class whom he opposed: the wealthy bourgeoisie. Nevertheless he succeeded in developing a new style of episodic presentation which borrowed from music-hall, political cabaret, film and documentary material of all kinds to create a composite picture not of a character or a story but of a political theme. In the mid-1920s he developed the use of multimedia presentation to give an account on stage of a whole historical period, for example the First World War in The Good Soldier Schweik, adapted from Jaroslav Hašek’s novel, or the first seven years of the Weimar Republic in the revue Hoppla, wir leben! (‘Ooops, we are alive!’), scripted by revolutionary playwright-politician Ernst Toller. The latter was performed on an enormous structure with many different playing areas, allowing for the presentation of a whole cross-section of society, often with different scenes taking place simultaneously, or a film projection juxtaposed with an acted scene.

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF LIFE: BERTOLT BRECHT AND THE BERLINER ENSEMBLE

Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956) was able to learn from both Reinhardt and Piscator, since he was on the payroll of Reinhardt’s Deutsches Theater as Dramaturg from 1924 to 1926 and also helped on several of Piscator’s productions. He was clearly more impressed by Piscator, whose political aims he shared, and he later acknowledged the considerable debt he owed to him. But he nevertheless differed considerably from Piscator in his aims and methods. Brecht’s main priority was to show individuals in a process of continual change: changed by their society and environment but also changing it in their turn. He felt that Piscator’s emphasis on the mechanisation of the stage had led to the complex depiction of political circumstances appearing to crush the individuals caught up in them, and that he had paid too little attention to the actor. Brecht did not become the director of his own company until late in life, but his first work as a director was on Marlowe’s Edward II in 1924 and his
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development as a director ran parallel to his writing, so that Brecht the director cannot be separated from Brecht the playwright. The first requirement of theatre for Brecht was that it should be fun. He claimed to have learnt most from the Munich dialect comedian Karl Valentin and admired his relation with his audience, based not on emotional identification but on amused detachment. He found the same detachment in a crowd at a sporting event and he wanted theatre audiences to be as alert to the finer points of the actor’s craft as a sporting crowd is to the technique of a highly skilled footballer. In pursuit of this vision of theatre, Brecht evolved his characteristic production style: the half curtain which did not attempt to hide all the preparations in progress behind it; the use of placards or screen projections to comment on the action; the non-naturalistic settings; the visible rows of stage lights. Props had to be as authentic as possible, but the imaginary ‘fourth wall’ and other tricks of illusionist theatre were sacrificed in the interests of clear demonstration.

Perhaps the most significant element of all in Brecht’s peculiar production style was his refusal to resolve the contradictions of life on stage but to present them in all their stubborn reality. Rather than tell his audience what to think, he encouraged them (most of the time) simply to think. Hence the importance of what he termed the Verfremdungseffekt (alienation/defamiliarisation effect). This had a dual purpose: both to interrupt the flow of the story, emphasising its contradictory qualities, and to take the ‘human social incidents to be portrayed and labelling them as something striking, something that calls for explanation, is not to be taken for granted, not just natural’ (Brecht 2014, 180). When he became director of the Berliner Ensemble after the Second World War, he applied this method to his own plays, refusing to take anything for granted and quite willing to rewrite when necessary. In this company he tried to form a group whose leadership was collective, so as to ensure that everybody’s opinion was considered. This insistence on the need for democratic structures within the company itself has been a priority for many contemporary directors, especially Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Stein (see Chapters 4 and 7). Brecht’s use of space and setting was particularly brilliant, involving eclectic borrowing from the work of almost all the directors so far mentioned. His dramaturg Carl Weber wrote that:

Brecht regarded design as of the highest importance, and had worked out his methods of handling it with his friend Caspar Neher. [...] He began with people, sketching the characters in relation to the given situation, and thus visualizing the blocking. When he and Brecht were satisfied with the sketches, they started to develop a set. For Brecht [...] the set was primarily a space where actors tell a certain story to the audience. The first step was
to give the actor the space and architectural elements he needed; the next was to work out the set so it by itself would tell the audience enough about the play’s story and contradictions, its period, social relations, and the like; the last step was to make it beautiful, light, ‘elegant’ as Brecht used to say (Weber 1967, 105).

Brecht himself did not give much prominence to the director as such, seeing the two main tasks of theatre as that of the Dramaturg, whose responsibility was a clearly defined narrative, and the actors, whose responsibility was the characters. Nevertheless, his success in achieving a production style both delicate and complex is attested by the reactions of theatre people when the Berliner Ensemble was seen for the first time outside East Berlin in 1954. His influence was decisive for the development of Roger Planchon, and it was an important element in the work of almost all the directors we shall be discussing. His work was an inspiration to those directors, such as Mnouchkine and Stein, who helped to establish theatre collectives in the late 1960s, and in this case it was not simply his techniques that they learnt from, but his whole philosophy of theatre: what it was for and whom it was supposed to serve.

THEATRE AND THE PLAGUE: ANTONIN ARTAUD

This was the major question raised by the other great prophet of the modern theatre, Antonin Artaud (1896–1948). Although he had little success in practical terms as a director, his collection of essays called The Theatre and its Double (1938) has influenced the way directors are viewed, and view themselves, because of the all-embracing claims it makes for theatre, and for the director in particular. Artaud’s favourite analogy for theatre was the plague. Like the plague, he wrote, theatre’s effect should be that of a great collective nightmare, from which few would emerge unscathed but which would leave society somehow purged. Artaud’s ideas, and the impact they have had, are indicative of a time of doubt, despair and the decline of religious belief. At such times people cast around for a priest-figure: someone who can speak with authority and immediacy, short-circuiting the elaborate codes of scientific or sociological discourse. Artaud claimed that the role of theatre, rightly understood, was to break through language and touch the well-springs of life. In this vision of theatre, the director becomes a sort of shaman, and it is not by chance that Peter Brook, searching for a definition of ‘holy’ theatre in his book The Empty Space, concludes with the evocation of a Haitian voodoo ceremony, in which invisible powers are made present in the persons of the participants.
CONCLUSION

Over the past two centuries, then, the director has progressed from the role of simple stage manager to the position of central power in the theatre enterprise. Their rise to power has been assisted by the complex set of historical and cultural factors to which we have alluded in the course of this introduction. As a result, directors have been in a position to do very much more than just direct plays and have assumed a variety of different functions: the prophet, teacher and founder of schools; the revolutionary agitator working for a change in the whole society; even the priest and organiser of sacred mysteries. In the process they have attracted strong criticism, especially when they have usurped the function of the playwright. The precise location of the dividing line between the creative responsibilities of the director and those of the writer is a problem that has preoccupied many of the directors studied in this book.

The most important change in theatre structures, contributing to the power of the director in the second half of the twentieth century, has been the change in patronage: most of the major directors after the Second World War worked in state-funded theatre institutions. Unlike the old aristocratic patrons, or even the subscription societies of the turn of the century, the capitalist state of the twentieth century did not usually have clearly formulated artistic preferences. It may well have clear political imperatives, which a director ignores at his peril; Hitler’s fascism forced both Brecht and Piscator into exile, and Meyerhold died at the hands of the Stalinist state. Post-war capitalist states mostly assumed a stance of tolerance. Although Littlewood was systematically starved of funds, directors such as Planchon, Brook, Stein, and Mnouchkine were able to insist on a degree of creative freedom while at the same time receiving state subsidies. By and large the state has only been prepared to continue this funding for as long as a given director has enjoyed success at the box office.

Once he or she can persuade the state to fund them adequately, the modern director enjoys almost total control. The subsidy is often paid direct to them, so that their power over both actors and authors is as complete as that of nineteenth-century managers who hired or fired at whim. It was to this state of affairs that Ariane Mnouchkine referred when she said:

remember that the director has already achieved the greatest degree of power they have ever had in history. And our aim is to move beyond that situation by creating a form of theatre where it will be possible for everyone to collaborate without there being directors, technicians and so on in the old sense (Mnouchkine 1975, 12).
Paradoxically, it is those directors who have set out to diminish their own power in the company who have usually succeeded in creating the most exciting and also the most identifiable directors’ theatre. It is the purpose of this book to investigate that process in seven particular cases, all representatives of a second generation, building on the achievements of the pioneers of the early twentieth century. The seven we have picked form a representative sample of post-war directors, each representing at least one aspect of the different directorial functions outlined in this introduction.

NOTES

5 All translations from foreign language publications are by the authors, unless otherwise stated.

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