



However although famous new writing theatres such as the Royal Court and the Bush in London and the Traverse in Edinburgh continue to flourish, offering audiences the best of contemporary British and foreign plays, it is not just new playwrighting that is thriving. The play is not always the thing. At the start of the 21st century, British theatre has never had quite such multiformity. When people talk of "going to the theatre" they could mean going to the commercial theatre in the West End to see the latest Andrew Lloyd Webber musical *Bombay Dreams* or a Hollywood star such as Gwyneth Paltrow in a new American drama, or, equally, they could intend going to a railway arch in Bethnal Green in East London to see a performance art piece on the theme of terrorism from innovative young company Shunt. Or spending a weekend on the South Coast in early May where the Streets of Brighton Festival offers the UK's biggest showcase of street theatre and large scale outdoor performances that can attract higher audiences numbers than a Manchester United home match.

A new century has seen a breakdown of the old divisions between West End and Fringe, regional and metropolitan, text-based and visual or physical theatre, new writing houses and other theatres, indoor and outdoor theatre. Puppetry and circus has invaded the stages of the National Theatre; physical theatre companies such as Complicite and Volcano are as likely to turn their attention to a well-made play as devise their own work. Successful playwrights such as Abi Morgan and David Greig will not only write their own plays but also experiment and collaborate with companies such as Frantic and Suspect Culture.

The old tensions between visual theatre and text-based theatre are melting away as companies realise that they can pick and mix the best from both forms. This year's prestigious BITE season at the Barbican includes the cross-cultural contributions of companies such as Motiroti and Duckie, the latter more used to playing a gay pub in Vauxhall than a major mainstream arts centre.

Shakespeare doesn't just mean the Royal Shakespeare Company, but also the intimate performances of Andrew Hilton and his ensemble at the Tobacco Factory in Bristol, the brilliant pared down, all-male

versions of Shakespeare directed by Edward Hall at the beautiful little Watermill Theatre near Newbury in Berkshire, or the robust productions by Barrie Rutter for Northern Broadsides, the Yorkshire-based company whose mission to let actors speak Shakespeare's verse in their own dialects rather than received pronunciation have proved enormously popular with actors and audiences alike. The Globe, next to the Tate Modern on the re-energised South Bank, has allowed modern audiences to experience the conditions for playgoers in Shakespeare's time, while award-winning touring companies such as English Touring Theatre take fine revivals of Shakespeare and other classics into the regions and young companies such as Kaos subvert all expectations with a re-mixed version of *Titus Andronicus*.

Shakespeare's Globe Theatre



Traverse Theatre productions of *Iron* (right) and *Gararin Way* (below)



We continue to build theatres such as the exquisite modern version of the 16th century Rose theatre that has sprang up by the river in Kingston Upon Thames to the Southwest of London or the new Hampstead Theatre, the small but vibrant new writing theatre in the Northwest of the City-but just as the late 1960s saw theatre moving into pubs, so many theatre makers are looking beyond the purpose built theatre. Southwark Playhouse, a converted warehouse, the Arcola (an old clothing factory) are two of London's most recent and sympathetic converted spaces, and in Halifax, Northern Broadsides has found a home in an old textile mill.

Many practitioners go beyond this, increasingly taking theatre out of theatres or finding spaces that are in sympathy with or the inspiration for a particular show. A company that specialises in site-specific work such as Grid Iron is more likely to perform in an underground storage space or a children's playground as a purpose-built theatre, and the same is true for

the director/design partnership of Wils and Louise Wilson whose productions can often be found in derelict houses or department stores. Some of the most exciting site-specific work has been done by companies who specialise in theatre for children, particularly for the under-fives. Here companies such as Theatre-Rites and Oily Cart lead the way from most of the rest of theatre in their use of found spaces, the blurring of relationships between performer and audience and the creation of a kind of total theatre where all the senses and emotions are brought into play. Using this approach Oily Cart even produces theatre for babies.

Since the early 20th century a network of government subsidised regional repertory theatres has criss-crossed the UK, providing local audiences with local theatre and British actors, directors and designers a useful opportunity to hone their skills and craft.. The end of the last century saw both a crisis of confidence and a crisis of funding for these regional reps, many of whom no longer seemed

sure of their role in a modern world. But the realisation that unless they changed and embraced the future, together with an injection of £25million the largest annual increase in subsidy ever received by any art form-has lead to a new found confidence and a will to experiment and take risks. Many are now reinventing themselves as centres of excellence and discovering that audiences enjoy being stretched and that popular theatre doesn't have to mean dull or play-it-safe theatre. Not only do they produce their own work which often reflects the ethnic diversity of the local population, but also play host to the best touring work from companies such as page to stage alchemists Shared Experience, new writing specialists Paines Plough, the versatile Out of Joint and the infinitely inventive physical theatre company Told by an Idiot.

Tiny theatres such as the Mercury in Colchester have returned to the idea of an ensemble company and a mix of work that includes classic plays and the best of contemporary world drama from Arthur Miller to Howard Barker. Larger theatres such as Birmingham Rep and the Royal Exchange in Manchester have hit upon the idea of pairing plays (Noel Coward's *Private Lives* with Patrick Marber's *Closer*) and running them in rep. Both Sheffield Crucible, one of the UK's



Royal Opera House, London

most exciting theatres under the dynamic Michael Grandage, and West Yorkshire Playhouse in Leeds have found it as easy to attract major classical actors and stars such as Joseph Fiennes, Kenneth Branagh or Christopher Eccleston and Patrick Stewart as the West End, London's fashionable boutique theatres such as the Almeida and the Donmar, and the RSC and National Theatre.

In a changing cultural climate the RSC and National Theatre have had to reassess their role as people have asked what is the remit of a national theatre company and do we really need them at all. Both now have new artistic directors in place Michael Boyd at the RSC and Nicholas Hytner at the NT both of whom show strong signs of seeing the national companies work as part of the tapestry of British theatre and organically connected to it, rather than something elevated and apart. Boyd's opening season includes directors Gregory Thompson and Sean Holmes whose backgrounds are in Fringe

and touring regional theatre, and Hytner's opening gambit at the NT is Jerry Springer -- The Opera, a musical spoof of the true-confessions style TV show. The latter was developed at BAC, the small South London fringe powerhouse, which over the last decade has nurtured many of our most exciting companies from Frantic Assembly to Improbable, a company which is also under commission to Hytner and the NT.

This more open kind of exchange and fluidity between Fringe and establishment theatre, small companies and large, regional town and London and all different kinds of theatre is a new phenomenon and one that in the longer term can only be of mutual benefit. A theatre culture that can adapt and change and that is prepared to value a superb outdoor performance such as Improbable's sellotape and firework extravaganza Sticky or the boundary-breaking shows produced under the auspices of the forward-thinking London International Festival of Theatre as much as a revival of King Lear, is a strong and dynamic culture and one that can attract audiences of all ages and backgrounds. It reminds us why, even in this technological age, live theatre helps us tell the stories we need to tell and make sense of and celebrate the world in which we live.



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- Edinburgh Festival Fringe: www.edfringe.com
- Edinburgh International Festival: www.eif.co.uk
- Barbican (BITE Season) : www.barbican.org.uk
- Royal Shakespeare Co: www.rsc.org.uk
- National Theatre: www.nationaltheatre.or.uk
- London International of Theatre: www.liftfest.org.uk
- Streets of brighton (Zap Productions): www.zapuk.com
- Royal Court: www.royalcourttheatre.com
- Total Theatre: www.totaltheatre.org.uk
- Live Art Development Agency: www.liveartlondon.demon.co.uk
- Independent Street Arts Network: www.streetartsnetwork.org.uk

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Inspire

UK Theatre

The UK has always had an enviable reputation for theatre, but it doesn't just offer some of the best theatre in the world but also the widest possible variety. Over the last decade the UK has seen a flowering of drama and new writing with the discovery of young talents such as Joe Penhall, David Eldridge, Jez Butterworth, Mark Ravenhill and the late Sarah Kane. It has been an era so rich and varied that many have compared it to the golden age of Jacobean playwriting in the early 17th century. Many of these playwrights have, like their Jacobean counterparts revelled in the shocking and violent as they try and reflect the society around them, giving rise to the term In-yr-face theatre. Others such as Gregory Burke and Charlotte Jones are proving themselves as popular writers with a strong gift for comedy.

