1 Introduction
Political commitment and performative practice

> Anybody who used to call themselves a Marxist now has fairly intense self-definitional problems.
>
> David Edgar (1994)[1]

> He is an optimist who has been around.
>
> John Peter (1994)[2]

Of the distinctive voices in the contemporary British theatre, David Edgar's provides the most comprehensive articulation of major political questions. His career spans more than four eventful and politically complex decades, and encompasses every variety of writing for performance, including agitprop and touring pieces; community plays; radio, film and television plays; and large-scale plays produced in major national venues such as the Royal Shakespeare Company and the National Theatre.[3] In addition, Edgar has maintained a high profile as a public intellectual, engaging in depth with a wide variety of political issues through newspaper opinion pages, journal essays, and book reviews, as well as via frequent public speaking engagements before a variety of organizations, including the Commission on Racial Equality; the Royal Society of Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce; the Fabian Society; and the annual Marxism conference. Thus, well beyond his own creative work, Edgar has been a central figure in British public life, particularly with regard to the relationships among the arts, government, and society.[4]

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Edgar has been politically on the Left since he was a young man at university, attracted by the idea of Marxist revolution.[5] What it means to be on the Left, however, has changed dramatically over the years – for Edgar as for most others. Maintaining a sceptical attachment to Trotskyism during the 1970s, Edgar joined the Labour Party in 1981,[6] and two years later wrote a kaleidoscopic critique of the history of the Left (*Maydays*, 1983), which explained in part why he had turned from revolutionary socialism to social democratic parliamentary politics, but which also anatomized certain left-wing defectors who had moved all the way to the reactionary Right. It was already characteristic of Edgar to stage the contradictions through which he and his generation were currently living; and he has continued to forge a theatre that embodies the social predicaments of modernity as they have developed from the Second World War to the new millennium.

All of Edgar's writings, plays as well as other forms, address the most basic questions of how humans organize and govern themselves in modern societies; in this regard he is a consummate political writer. His *oeuvre* stands as a kind of illustrative compendium of the leading conceptual puzzles of political theory. In studying the politics of his work here, we have concentrated on twelve of his most important plays and organized our discussion thematically, linking the plays to their overarching problematics. For example, we discuss the two plays that make up his diptych *Continental Divide* (2003) alongside *Maydays* (1983) because together these plays attempt to track the decline of the Left (and the rise of neo-conservatism) through a sweep of history, and at the same time confront situated moments in recent party politics in the United States (*Continental Divide*) and British seventies radical left politics (*Maydays*). Thus seemingly different plays, separated by twenty years, are joined by their representation of the failure of ideological visions as well as by the impact of blighted history on idealistic activism. The twelve plays explored here address issues such as the relationship between politics, government, and the state, as well as difficulties of democratic practice and conflict over definitions of public interest. Each play, however, creates a different encounter for spectators with the fictionalized reality of these conundrums and the human beings who live and work within them. As we move through the volume, a

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cumulative notion of Edgar's political architecture, his convictions, insights, and blind spots will emerge along with an examination of his success and challenges in placing these before his audiences in different theatrical productions. The plays selected for detailed examination include *Destiny* (1976), *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1978), *Mary Barnes* (1978), *Maydays* (1983), *The Shape of the Table* (1990), *Pentecost* (1994), *Albert Speer* (2000), *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (2001), *Continental Divide* (*Mothers Against* and *Daughters of the Revolution*) (2003), *Playing with Fire* (2005), and *Testing the Echo* (2008).

The decisions about which plays to focus on and which to treat only indirectly reflect our judgments and interests, but also the necessity of choosing from among a large number of works which would require several volumes to survey adequately. We focus on theatre works rather than Edgar's substantial body of television and radio plays, paying most attention to his plays from the 1990s onwards, which serve as a means of thinking through our recent history and daily sociality.

Thus Edgar's most successful box office hit, *Nicholas Nickleby* (1980), is not extensively discussed here because we have limited our focus to plays whose subject matter is the contemporary world. We acknowledge, however, *Nickleby's* importance within Edgar's career and within British theatre history.[7] Representing a significantly large investment of resources and artistic talent by the Royal Shakespeare Company, Edgar's adaptation of Charles Dickens's novel featured over one hundred characters and originally played over two (long) nights. It proved hugely successful in London and on Broadway, winning the 1980 Best Play Award from the Society of West End Theatres and the Lawrence Olivier Award, and in 1982 the Tony Award for Best Play.[8]

To illuminate the twelve plays that are our central concern, our collaboration on this book brings together the disciplines of political philosophy and theatre studies to approach Edgar primarily as a political writer and a public social critic. We believe he merits serious critical attention that combines a complex analysis of the socio-political context of the plays in relation to a sustained discussion of the formal political problems figured in the texts and in his related body of public writing. In addition, his dramaturgy and theatrical stylistics are both integral to the subjects he explores and

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independently valuable in their own right as a subject for aesthetic investigation and judgment.

The detailed material situations and characters of Edgar's dramaturgy embody and configure a key political concern that has grown increasingly present during modernity: the gap between wide-ranging, sometimes utopian visions of political theory and the always more limited actual human practice, often not even coming close to the desired good. Indeed, in some ways Edgar is an elegiac writer because he most often stages such failures to achieve satisfactory human social arrangements. Yet Edgar's purpose in exploring so many ways of falling short becomes clear in the demonstration of his will to persist, reinvent, begin again. Thus, it is no surprise that most of his plays end in simultaneous disillusionment with a given project and recommitment to social purpose, and have as their major dramatic actions the negotiation and retrieval central to the playwright's vision of polity. In this volume, we have attempted to foreground the nature and quality of *negotiation* as a method of political praxis and *retrieval* as the appropriate response to failure. Edgar, taking his cue from the great modernist writers (Brecht's 'long anger' and Beckett's injunction to 'fail better'), is supremely committed to celebrating quotidian human gestures of re-engagement with polities and failed political initiatives.

Edgar's work has been important to us (and of course to many others) not only because it humanizes the large abstractions of political theory, but also because it confronts the specific pressing issues of contemporary life in Britain and the West: the rise and threat of fascism in the moment of pre-Thatcher reaction (*Destiny*, 1976); the impossibility of sustaining 1960s-style utopian collectives (*Mary Barnes*, 1979); the emergence of 'Fortress Europe' and the predicament of refugees after the fall of the Wall (*Pentecost*, 1994 and *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, 2001); race relations and community relations at the end of New Labour and in the aftermath of 9/11 and 7/7 (*Playing with Fire*, 2005). These and other extremely topical and specific socio-political problems are taken up to be embodied, imagined, and worked through in dramatic form. Edgar uses theatre as a powerful tool of public discourse, an aesthetic modality for engaging with and thinking/feeling through the most pressing social issues of the day.[9]

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In this, he is also unrepentently rationalist: he deploys character, plot, language to explore ideas, make certain kinds of discursive cases, model hypothetical alternatives. He is, in this sense, a rhetorical playwright: he lives for engagement with spectators who will not necessarily agree with him, but who will use his theatrical figures to think through their own understandings of the dilemmas he stages. An audience deep in political argument on its way out of the theatre is his highest mark of a successful play.

From the perspective of British theatre trends in the second decade of the twenty-first century, Edgar can sometimes be perceived as being 'out of fashion'.[10] His theatrical style is mostly based on language and rhetoric rather than the now ascendant 'physical theatre' or in Hans-Thies Lehmann's term, 'post-dramatic theatre'. Actually, Edgar's plays offer a robust reminder of the values of narrative, discursive exploration of character and situation, and above all capacious thinking about social reality. By investigating his work in depth, we hope here to argue for a reconsideration of some of these recently undervalued concepts. In addition, as we argue concerning competing definitions of political theatre in the following pages, a pluralistic set of aesthetic modes and styles is a sign of a healthy theatre, and there is room for many overlapping and complementary forms. As Edgar moves into the fifth decade of his writing career, he continues to transform his vision and his dramaturgy to suit the changing times. We see him as a major contributor to a polyvocal theatre scene in the UK and beyond, where a variety of dramaturgical strategies successfully coexist to form a vibrant theatrical panoply of performances about our lives in common, and our attempts to improve them.

In the rest of this chapter, we tackle the key questions that must be answered in any sustained investigation of Edgar's work, especially those that cluster around the central concern: what is political theatre today? This term is often used in common parlance, as if everyone is agreed on its meaning, but we think consensus is far afield. Recent theatre scholarship has challenged the term 'political theatre' and also the discourses around politics (especially democracy), changing previously familiar sources and formulations. Much of this work is extremely valuable and provocative, and contributes to a renewal of

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our scholarship appropriate to widespread changes in the wake of neoliberalism, globalization, the 'war on terror', and the breakdown of confidence in fiscal and parliamentary institutions. We will discuss it here with both sympathy and critique in equal measure, and explain how we see Edgar participating in the changing spectrum of theatrical performances with political valences.

What is political theatre?

> I sometimes think I've spent my life sitting on the same panel in the same black box theatre above the same pub, debating whether British political theatre has a future. The fact that I have spent so long addressing the question implies the answer.
>
> David Edgar (2010)[11]

There is a persistent and perhaps escalating attempt to uncouple or bracket off the term 'political' from theatre, especially within the academy. Critiques of the concept come from several different quarters, and have serious and compelling analyses to offer as to why this might be desirable. We oppose this tendency, which is frequently simplified in the press and other journalism, but even to state this opposition is to presuppose a stable, unified concept around which to wrangle with others. Therefore, first, we need to know what the concept entails.

Political theatre is often discussed without any real delineation of the meaning of the term 'political'. Newspaper critics label this or that performance 'political' readily enough, but scholars also often assume we all know (and agree on) what the term means. Edgar's witty polemic quoted above points to the perennial recurrence of the claim that political theatre is in eclipse. What inevitably happens, however, is that several critics and scholars point out that the terms of engagement have changed under the pressure of contemporary events, and that we need to understand what it means to be political in a new and revised way. Then we can designate as 'political' performances that stage the new conjuncture or interrogate the new uncertainty.

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The 'in-yer-facers' of the 1990s are a specific case in point.[12] Graham Saunders, in introducing an excellent collection of essays on the period, *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, takes up the critical assessment of Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Nick Grosso, Jez Butterworth and others who came into their ascendancy towards the end of the eighteen years of Conservative rule (1979–97). Arguing that by the mid nineties 'there appeared to be a disengagement and dismantlement from recognizable forms of political engagement', Saunders then carefully rehabilitates key plays of these writers. He suggests that critics such as Aleks Sierz, scholars such as Patrice Pavis, and the dramatists themselves (quoting Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* [1996] and David Eldridge) recognized that the new playwrights were reacting to shifts in the British political scene but also 'to the impact of globalization, technology, and theories posited by postmodernist thinkers such as Baudrillard and Lyotard, who questioned the nature and veracity of "reality" – and with it the viability of eliciting social or political change'.[13] Quoting Pavis in a pronouncement that Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids* differs from the past because it is a '"problem play" rather than a "thesis play"', Saunders advances a careful judgment that what was familiar as political theatre had changed as new forms and new content appeared, appropriate to a transformed situation. In the same breath, however, Saunders still marked the 'naive sentimentality' of many of the plays, as well as noting that some were superficial, self-absorbed, and fetishized violence and shock value.[14] He also pointed out that in the new millennium new forms of explicitly political theatre reappeared, especially verbatim, as the global situation changed dramatically once again.

A recent and very sophisticated version of this argument has been made by Dan Rebellato. It will be considered further below on other grounds, but here we wish to highlight the tendency to redefine 'political' in order to retain its meaning in relation to theatre. In an essay that delineates a shift from politics understood through 'state-of-the-nation' plays to politics understood through the staging of globalization's effects, Rebellato writes:

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> I want to argue that the political context in which the state-of-the-nation play was developed has changed, and as a consequence political theatre has changed. I want to suggest that British playwriting continues to respond to its political surroundings with remarkable imaginative power and that the critics, with their outdated dramaturgical models, are looking for political theatre in all the wrong places.[15]

The problem with these otherwise useful and complex discussions of changing times and theatre styles is that they assume that while 'politics' may be different in any historical moment, there can be only one corresponding theatrical style to suit the times. Thus for Saunders, the new writers of the nineties were forging a style that was in some cases, but not all, political; and for Rebellato, the state-of-the-nation play no longer suits the political state of affairs under globalization. This is also the problem with journalism that periodically asserts that political theatre is dead – it privileges only one conception of political theatre. In order to propose a different way of configuring the relation between politics and theatre, we would suggest separating politics and theatre, only to rejoin them again by analysing their relationship as a third term as mobile and processual as both of the others.[16]

A definition of politics or the political must be general enough and flexible enough to serve as a theoretical platform for analysis of a range of human interactions from parliamentary participation to gender behaviour. Politics configures human relations through structures of social meaning and organization, and these structures are ubiquitous and always present, although they are also chimerical and fluid. Referencing precisely these structures keeps them visible and prevents them from going unremarked, naturalized as ideology. (As examples, 'identity politics' is in disfavour now in part because it has become ideological, and likewise the popular charge that politics has become too corrupt and unseemly is also dangerously close to becoming naturalized as an unexamined judgment.)

What, then, do we think politics actually is?[17] The best articulation of politics we know comes (ironically) from a conservative

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political theorist, Michael Oakeshott, who nonetheless offers a mobile, nitty-gritty definition inviting deep engagement and not a little reflexivity:

> Politics is the activity of attending to the general arrangements of a collection of people who, in respect of their common recognition of their manner of attending to its arrangements, compose a single community ... This activity, then, springs neither from instant desires, nor from general principles, but from the existing traditions of behaviour themselves. And the form it takes, because it can take no other, is the amendment of existing arrangements by exploring and pursuing what is intimated in them.[18]

What is especially valuable here is the recognition that people find themselves in certain relations with others *in media res*, and then attempt to rearrange, transform, or in some cases strengthen the existing arrangements, and this effort is always a negotiation with sociality, even if it might be violent or unilateral. It can describe a high-level legislative deliberation in a democratic state, or it can describe a dispute over a back fence or a tower block or a blog with an opponent one does not know, who speaks a different language half way across the world. Looking at these arrangements as arrangements that proceed through both micro and macro practices, one finds small adjustments and occasionally huge seismic shifts in the ways these politics work. We seek to map this notion of politics on to theatre and performance.

Looking at theatre as its own separate practice, what can we say about its apparatus of self-reflexivity and 'ontological queasiness'?[19] Following from Oakeshott's definition of politics, theatre is a micro-political practice in that it invites its spectators to pay close attention to a number of relations between the performers and spectators, and among all the humans participating in the event. To quote Nicholas Ridout's description of the politics of theatre, 'Theatre's failure, when theatre fails, is not anomalous, but somehow, perhaps constitutive ... It is precisely in theatre's failure, our discomfort with it, its embeddedness in capitalist leisure, its status as a bourgeois pastime that its political value is to be found'.[20] The failure he has in mind is theatre's

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inevitable failure to evade or transcend capital, as well as more pedestrian but ubiquitous failures that follow from such theatrical imperfections as 'corpsing' (uncontrollable laughter), stage fright, or children's and animals' tendency to rupture the expectations of performance conditions. All of these things can be made sense of if Oakeshott's is the model for what constitutes the political; it is more difficult if the model is Machiavelli's or Marx's.

Our line of thinking argues for a connection between the presence of political relations in the apparatus of the theatrical machine itself as well as its ability to stimulate awareness of the fundamental political situations developing elsewhere. Theatre attends to the amendment of existing arrangements by exploring and pursuing what is intimated in them, both reflexively on a metatheatrical level and with reference to other 'arrangements', through metaphor, allegory, modelling, or mimesis. In the fluctuation of history, both politics and theatre change significantly, and the third term, 'political theatre', changes its meanings and form as well. If any one of these terms is taken to be fixed, the result is inaccurate and unsatisfying.

Of course, what Machiavelli and Marx add to the equation are the distinctions of value, power, and justice. Oakeshott's formulation is value-neutral – as is theatre's political process. Politics is attending to those arrangements in the name of some values over others – struggling as much as attending in most cases. For example, 'equality' understood as the demand for equal treatment under the law is different from the demand for equal respect in the workplace, or equality in a primary classroom, where teachers may achieve equality by treating students differentially according to each one's particular combination of intellectual and personal attributes. Joe Kelleher, in his short, thoughtful book *Theatre and Politics* turns to Stefan Collini to define politics as 'the important, inescapable, and difficult attempt to determine relations of power in a given space'.[21] This version is also value-neutral, but it does underline, as Kelleher points, out that 'shaping and determining these questions is not straightforward and is likely to be contested', and also that Collini's 'inescapable' insists 'that whatever this or that image or this or that theatre is capable of provoking, and however we are capable of responding as spectators and as participants,

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the politics is unavoidable, is bound to come round sooner or later'.[22] We think this is a nice addendum to Oakeshott's slightly too breezy and genteel formulation.

In order to engage the relationship between theatre and politics in a historicized fashion, it becomes necessary to take up this concrete level of attending to the particularities of specific arrangements. David Edgar, for example, is commonly considered a 'left-wing' playwright and is associated with the early decades of his career when, in the 1970s, he worked toward revolutionary change and thought he knew what it would look like. The fact that his own political positions have changed significantly since then notwithstanding, this is often the aspect of Edgar's work that is sometimes considered passé. To examine this perspective, however, involves thorough consideration of the recent work (which we do in the coming chapters). As a place holder against a more extensive analysis of plays such as *Playing with Fire* or *Testing the Echo*, we return to Dan Rebellato's claim that 'we're looking for politics in the wrong places'.[23]

In addition to this assertion in *The Guardian*, written in the wake of a number of new plays that were produced in the run up to the May 2010 general elections, Rebellato has mounted a fuller argument in the essay quoted earlier, 'From the State of the Nation to Globalization: Shifting Political Agendas in Contemporary British Playwriting'. Rebellato describes the state-of-the-nation play (SON) as a model of political theatre developed in the 1970s, identifying a number of plays by David Edgar as well as Howard Brenton, David Hare, and others (men), that involve

> (a) large-cast plays, with (b) a panoramic range of public (and sometimes private) settings, employing (c) epic time-spans (years rather than hours or days), and (d) usually performed in large theatres, preferably theatres with a national profile. The grand scale of these plays represents a belief that the domestic rooms of mainstream naturalist theatre represent a conservative and highly individualistic view of the world.[24]

These SONs were/are no longer viable, according to Rebellato, not only because Thatcher made large plays too expensive, or because their

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sexual politics were inadequate, but because the world changed to render the terms of SON obsolete. Rebellato, in a rhetorical sleight of hand, substitutes 'nation-state' for 'state of the nation', and suggests that the technique of the seventies SONs worked only as long as nation and state were co-joined. He describes the state as the institution of 'public political organization', with its responsibility for justice, reason, and law, while nation 'binds people together through shared temperament, language, history, culture, landscape and so on'.[25] Since SON plays worked by combining the agitprop conception of judicial generality at the level of the state with the realism equivalent to the 'sensuous particularity of the nation', the coordination of nation and state to private and public was the way the plays staged 'recognizable human beings against the background of the historical and social forces that carry them forward'.[26] Once the connection between state and nation began to break down, with the emergence of globalization, the connection between private and public could not be sustained: global capital has overtaken states and nations have fragmented, becoming 'unbundled from state'.[27]

At this point it is pertinent to quote David Edgar in terms of what he himself perceived socialist plays to have been doing in the SON heyday: 'The political plays of the 1970s shared a number of characteristics, of which the most important were a hostility to domestic and familial settings, a determination to write plays set in present-day England ... and a shared model of what had made that England what it was.'[28] So, fair enough, in terms of Rebellato's linkage of these traits to the SONs. However, the rhetorical turn of 'state-of-the-nation' to 'nation-state' is less fair, and produces a more rigid geometry than that which applies to SONs, then or now. The state–nation distinctions Rebellato is using are versions of the terms *dēmos* and *ethnos* in political theory, which have an intellectual history that extends well beyond the present context. In Chapter 4 below we cite Etienne Balibar's use of the terms to discuss the geopolitical situation of the changing configuration that is Europe. In other words, a *dēmos* (or a state) could be either a small community, like a city-state (read Athens), or a federation of larger units (read Europe). Not only does this make 'state' a term that might signify beyond its linkage to nation;

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it also makes nation more loosely a 'people' (the meaning of *ethnos*) who share history, kinship, language, culture, and so on, not necessarily joined to particular territory – think diaspora peoples. Furthermore, a state-of-the-nation play can be one that deals with the *condition* of the nation rather than, more narrowly, the relation of the nation to the formal institutional forms of its governance through the state. The Merriam Webster Dictionary offers eight definitions of 'state', and the first given is 'a mode or condition of being'. Only in its fifth definition does it offer the meaning of a literal political body – 'a politically organized body of people usually occupying a definite territory'.[29]

The point is that the unfortunately popular term 'state-of-the-nation' caught on as shorthand for political theatre, much as 'in-yer-face' caught the zeitgeist of the plays it purported to describe in the 1990s, but also severely limited their description. Michael Billington is probably the main source of the popularization of the SON term. The left-leaning *Guardian* reviewer championed the form during forty-five years of reviewing (ongoing), and identified it in his 2007 retrospective on postwar theatre as the 'obsessive concern with using the stage to symbolise and analyse the state of the nation that was to become the animating force in British drama over the next fifty years'.[30] Rebellato comes by the term honestly and mounts his attack with sophisticated attention to the impact of globalization on life within nation-states. For him, the nation-state could no longer be the source of possible 'hope and liberation' because the state had been by-passed by capital while the nation had 'widened to the state level', losing the particularity of the individual.[31]

However, in Rebellato's view this dissociation produced new dramaturgies that identified and engaged with the new conditions: he champions Caryl Churchill's *This is a Chair* and *Far Away* because they stage explicitly the 'experience of radical dissonance and an affirmation of the desire to build connections between the general and the particular'.[32] Employing a Kantian notion of the sublime, he finds the plays that stage sublime dissonance nevertheless 'affirm the desire to express ethical judgment in the world, and the possibility of this judgment even against overwhelming odds'.[33]

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We would suggest, however, that *This is a Chair* and *Far Away* can also be seen as SONs, in the sense that they confront the state-in-the-sense-of-condition of collective life in the *dēmos*, where there is a doubleness of the United Kingdom as *dēmos* on the one hand but the global surround as *dēmos* on the other, and where the 'people' are both configured (through language, British casting, venue, etc.) as British *ethnos* but also citizens of the world. The double references actually strengthen the politics of the pieces because they ask spectators to consider their own situatedness locally and globally together. In addition to these plays and the others Rebellato singles out, we would then add to the mix a play focused on governing elites such as David Hare's *Stuff Happens* as well as David Edgar's *The Prisoner's Dilemma.* A different style of play featuring a cross section of British society, Edgar's *Testing the Echo* also operates within this double referential scheme. Its comparison of citizenship tests from Canada, Australia, and the US builds a critique of 'Britishness' along with other national constructions, and calls for cosmopolitan citizenship (or, at least, individual membership in multiple overlapping communities) – a problematic that might touch the Kantian sublime. The point is that the SON label can describe new plays with different dramaturgies; different dramaturgies approach the current SON differentially.

Perhaps it is useful to remember that Caryl Churchill is herself an accomplished SON writer of the type identified with the 1970s: *Cloud 9* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982) are, as Reinelt argues in her book on British epic theatre, cut from the same cloth as the big SON plays by Hare, Brenton, and Edgar.[34] In addition, a number of early SON plays already pictured the state and nation severed, and looked to a global frame of reference to oppose (dialectically) the state. David Edgar's *Maydays* is surely one of these plays, as much as is Hare's *A Map of the World*, praised by Rebellato. Produced in the same year (1983), both of them ask for audiences to look from an international perspective at more parochial values associated with the state, through the eyes of their protagonists. Surely Brenton's *Weapons of Happiness* (1976) also ruptures the cosy marriage of state and nation by making the Czech communist minister, Josef Frank, come back from the dead as a key protagonist in that work, allowing history and memory to undermine

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any nation-state exclusivity in its concerns. The truth is that the particular forms of revolutionary socialism that many of these playwrights then entertained were international (or, perhaps better, extra-state) in character: Edgar along with his colleagues was at that time influenced by Marxism. All of them thought about the United Kingdom in relation to a larger geopolitical map, since Marxism believed that contemporary states were simply creatures of the capitalist power structure, and would wither and die once the revolution had come and they no longer had any function. The terminology of SON is the real problem because it covers up a multiplicity of subject matters and dimensions of 'attending to arrangements'.

The other important rejoinder to Rebellato's argument is that the concern with linking the individual to the larger body politic (*dēmos* or *ethnos*, but in any case collective interaction and not inner psychological states abstracted from the social) continues to be a defining imperative of political theatre. Saunders parses his judgments about the in-yer-face writers of the 1990s along these lines, and even in her most abstract plays Churchill never abandons the representation of subjects-in-context (where the context is a set of relations linking her personages to history, to forms of *dēmos*, to conflictual relations of gender, sexuality, race, and class). Mark Ravenhill has written plays set in domestic space without territorial markers, but his characters are still 'types' in a Lukácsian sense, seen against a socio-political context. We are not denying theatrical styles that are anti-realist here, but we are saying that 'political theatre' attends to individuals who are in some sense typical *in situ*, or else imagines alternative worlds that exist in tension with what we know to be the current state of affairs, getting its effects thereby. This need to move beyond the individual subject is acute because it is precisely under neo-liberalism and the ideology of global capitalism and consumerism, that the celebration of the individual has become almost unchallenged in popular western culture. To attempt to offset that atomism is a political aesthetics worth struggling over.

What is no longer tenable, and certainly David Edgar knows it, is a programmatic approach to problems in our contemporary arrangements of sociality. Most of his plays, as he has said repeatedly, are

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about failure of vision or programme to deliver on emancipation or justice or freedom. From *Maydays* to *Playing with Fire*, Edgar stages the recurrent breakdowns of human attempts to cooperate and legislate – attempts to improve upon arrangements. He has written that his great theme is disillusion, 'the political consequences of disillusion'.[35] Although this remark refers especially to *Maydays*, he returned to this formulation in 2006, when interviewed by Peter Billingham:

> I think the overall theme for me . . . is of coming to terms with the failure of Socialism to live up to the ambitions of its founders. Each new generation comes to terms with that in different ways. But also, why did the idea of a more equal society and – more and more – a society that enables people to emancipate themselves and discover themselves prove to be so unrealisable? How can one get over the waves of disillusionment and avoid the kind of retreat into cynical despair or the defector's march to the Right?[36]

Edgar belongs to a particular age and a generation – that much is true – and his generation developed what came to be called the 'state-of-the-nation' play in the 1970s. Yet looking at work that transcends nation and state from *Mary Barnes* to *Pentecost*, and in Pavis's formulation noted above, most of his plays from *Destiny* onwards are 'problem plays' rather than 'thesis plays', and it seems that he and most of the other major writers of his group transcend the limitations of the category.

Focusing on the details of his political landscape, we find that Edgar's writings address the most basic questions of how humans organize and govern themselves in modern societies. The thematics of his work match up their classical formulations in studies of politics, international relations, and democratic theory. In writing this volume and surveying Edgar's work, we have identified the following list of key problematics:

1. The basic relationships among individuals and society, and how these are shaped by the way people organize (or are coerced by) their lives together to provide security and material benefit.
2. How contemporary modes of such organization – 'nations' and 'states' – create authority, require legitimacy, and generate power.

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3. How these forms are institutionalized through constitutions that detail relationships by specifying membership in the group, and the rights and duties of members to one another, embodied in systems of law and justice.
4. How constitutions detail the methods through which the system will be actualized, providing for representation, practical democracy, and some way to pursue public goods.
5. How such institutions protect and balance competing values central to political systems, such as freedom, tolerance, equality, social justice, and welfare.
6. How political communities deal with change, either repressing it, pursuing it through orderly means, or experiencing violent and revolutionary transformation.
7. How opposing regimes deal with one another.

In the second half of this chapter we will take a closer look at Edgar the dramatist, tracing a genealogy that links him to the great modern writers such as Ibsen, Brecht, and Shaw, but also to his contemporary colleagues. We will also discuss Edgar's critical reception in the press, and comment on the typical challenges of his work for producers and audiences.

Edgar the playwright in theatrical context

> Throughout my writing career, but particularly since the fall of the Berlin wall, I have been fascinated by the process of politics: by negotiations, the drafting of documents, strategising, roleplay and ceremony . . . In the same way that David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* is about selling real estate but also about ambition, deception and dread, I felt that the deaths of communism, apartheid and Yugoslavia were not just processes it was important to understand . . . but also sites for rich drama about human beings confronting their bitter enemies, risking their own futures and playing for the highest stakes.
>
> David Edgar (2003)[37]

In looking for an entry point to begin to describe David Edgar's dramaturgy, we thought Edgar's passion for political processes came close to

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capturing the unique focus of his playwriting *oeuvre*. In this statement, he not only identifies some of the theatrical aspects of concrete politics (obvious in role play and ceremony, but equally suggestive as negotiation or strategy) but, in the comparison with the David Mamet play, he highlights the connection between the emotions, psychic investments, and personal struggles of dramatic protagonists and the concrete historical configurations within which they live. He indicates that 'flesh-and-blood' dilemmas of living in global times are important, in fact central, to his concerns, and he affirms once again a political commitment to investigating the present arrangements to which we must attend.

The link to David Mamet here is ironic, because, of course, while Mamet has been admired by some British left-wing playwrights, his true reactionary streak became painfully clear in his 2008 'conversion story', 'Why I am no longer a "brain-dead" liberal'.[38] Edgar cites him in 2003, however, to directly address the possibility that the kind of gritty three-dimensional characterization associated with Mamet's work might also apply to his own.

Edgar has his own narrative about the development of his aesthetics, which moves from an agitprop period to a social realist period to an eclectic mix of styles, sizes, and structures. In numerous accounts, he has written or spoken about his agitprop years with General Will (1971–4), the theatre company in Bradford that he joined after university and for whom he wrote a number of plays in agitprop style. He explains the rationale at the time in terms of an opposition between descriptive agitprop and representational naturalism with its 'individualist assumptions'. Television's domination of popular culture sharpened this difference: 'the dominant form of television drama is naturalism, which shows people's behaviour as conditioned, primarily or exclusively, by individual and psychological factors. The socialist, on the other hand, requires a form which demonstrates the social and political character of human behaviour'.[39] Susan Painter's study of Edgar includes a detailed discussion of the techniques he developed in the plays he wrote for General Will, but for our purposes the most useful part of her discussion is about the techniques of craft he developed which remain useful to him even in the present.[40]

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These dramaturgical techniques involved adaptations of Piscator's early documentary theatre strategies, as Painter points out, but seem to us most clearly an adaptation of Brechtian epic techniques for the English stage: juxtaposition of scenes with clear, independent images and actions; economical representation of complex ideas through using images, symbols or gestures; borrowing from other theatrical styles to parody or create satire that carried explanation (such as Victorian melodrama, used to explain the Housing Finance Act in *Rent or Caught in the Act* [1972]). When Edgar abandoned agitprop, his skills in these techniques were still useful in order to communicate complex information economically and to historicize the events of narratives by juxtaposition and episodic structure. In fact, all of the major characteristics of Brechtian epic – episodic structure, historicizing the incidents, use of *Gestus*, and alienation or distanciation effects (Brecht's celebrated *Verfremdungseffekt*) – have been retained and refined in Edgar's corpus of work subsequent to this period. The larger, truly epic plays, such as *Maydays* and *Albert Speer*, probably contain the greatest number of these strategies, but many of the other plays, such as *Pentecost* or *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, also utilize these playwriting techniques to keep prominent the analytic and socio-political elements of the narrative.

Edgar has cited *Destiny* (1976) as the breakthrough play in which he achieved a new style that combined agitprop with realism in a synthesis that historicized individual experiences.[41] Telling the story of four figures, three military men and an Indian servant, whose lives intersect thirty years after Indian independence in the local politics of a midlands by-election, Edgar pointed up the possible rise of fascism within a country that had fought to defeat it in the Second World War. In fact Dan Rebellato quotes Edgar's programme note for *Destiny* in order to set up his perception that in the state-of-the-nation play (of which *Destiny* was the prototype) the state was equated with 'public' and agitprop while the nation was equated with 'private' and realistic characterization.[42] By the time Edgar wrote the introduction to his collected *Plays: One* (1987), he mentioned agitprop in terms of a negation: '*Destiny* is not an agitprop play'.[43] While we analyse *Destiny* in Chapter 4 below in terms of its epic characteristics, it is perhaps more

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important here to explicate Edgar's understanding of the uses of realism, and to describe his deployment of it. It is as if he gets this term (agitprop) out of the way to make space for the discussion of characterization he wants to develop, based mainly on the theories of Georg Lukács.

Earlier, in 1978, Edgar had turned to John Berger's version of Lukács in *Art and Revolution* (1969) to describe realism in opposition to naturalism (which attempts a faithful representation of the surface of human behaviour) as selectively striving towards the typical. Edgar wrote: 'The actions of people are presented within a "total" context' the central character's actions are felt 'as part of the life of his class, society, and universe'.[44] In the piece from 1987, he identifies *Destiny* (and also *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* and *Mary Barnes*, which we discuss in Chapter 5 below) as 'social-realist pieces'. He elaborates:

> That is, unlike symbolist or absurdist or agitprop plays, they present what aspires to be a recognisable picture of human behaviour as it is commonly observed – but, unlike naturalistic drama, they set such a picture within an overall social-historical framework. The characters and situations are thus not selected solely because that's how things are – but because they represent a significant element in an analysis of a concrete social situation. The most popular definition of this endeavour is by Lukács, who said that social-realism presents 'typical' characters in a 'total' context.[45]

The post-structuralist and postmodern critique has developed, however, and 'typical' and 'total' are not exactly edifying concepts today. 'Typical' tends to be read as 'stereotypical', and is criticized for exaggeration and shallowness that often entails bigotry; 'total' sounds like the grand narratives of progress, democracy, the Enlightenment, Modernity – in other words, all the 'totalizations' that Lyotard, Derrida, and Deleuze and Guattari, among many others, have dismissed as oppressive and falsifying. Of course communism is one of these forms of totalization, and Lukács was a Marxist literary critic. However, rather than dismissing his formulation by acknowledging that Edgar and other writers on the Left have moved away from

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revolutionary socialism, we think it is important to spend a little more time with Lukács in order to argue that he meant something much more nuanced by these terms, and that they in fact can continue to have strong descriptive powers in the contemporary situation.

In the preface to *Studies in European Realism*, Lukács wrote a full account of his idea of realism. We quote two critical passages:

> The central category and criterion of realist literature is the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations. What makes a type a type is not its average quality, not its mere individual being, however profoundly conceived; what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development.
>
> True great realism thus depicts man and society as complete entities, instead of showing merely one or the other of their aspects. Measured by this criterion, artistic trends determined by either exclusive introspection or exclusive extraversion equally impoverish and distort reality. Thus realism means a three-dimensionality, an all-roundness, that endows with independent life characters and human relationships.[46]

This description of realist dramaturgy still works pretty well – it calls for seeing individuals in their particularity, embedded in the historical context within which they live. In some formulations, it can be a deterministic vision (these individuals behave this way *because* of the conditioning factors in their milieu), but in more sophisticated formulations, arguably from Ibsen and Chekhov to Edgar and Churchill, Hare and Brenton, the dynamic interplay between individuals and their contexts creates effects and affects reciprocally. Playwrights such as Harold Pinter or even Samuel Beckett are sometimes discussed as realist writers because, although they attenuate their representations to a sublime minimalism, aspects of the three-dimensional character *in situ* remain a strong feature of their dramaturgy. Many newer British writers could be called realist in this sense (Roy Williams, Tanika Gupta, David Greig, and Lucy Kirkwood, for

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example). After *Destiny*, Edgar's next two major plays both featured individual psyches and interiorities as a central focus of the drama. Albie Sachs and Mary Barnes not only gave their names to the plays, they animated the plays. During this period Edgar honed his craft for the ability to achieve this kind of characterization without losing the larger public canvas so important to keeping the focus on the social relations unfolding in an historical moment with attention to their arrangements. *Mary Barnes* embeds Mary within the typical (for the times) attempt to form a utopian community, using the particularity of the psychiatric profession and her remarkable true story to stage the contradictions and aspirations of this type of experiment in living out a set of egalitarian principles. *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* dramatized, as we argue in Chapter 4 below, a crisis of leadership within progressive white South African politics at the beginning of apartheid while concurrently examining one person's prison experiences as a test of his political commitments and personal resoluteness.

The skills developed during this period, roughly 1976 to 1979, have remained with Edgar throughout all of his subsequent writing for the stage. The plays that followed take several different forms – for that reason, we do not think the labels 'epic' writer or 'realist' writer are adequate to describe him. He has worked with a canvas that includes aspects of both in different proportion, but there is a third stylistic that also plays a strong role in determining his signature: David Edgar is a rhetorician.

All writers pay attention to words and language – it is what they do. Thus in saying that Edgar's work is especially marked by rhetoric, defined as an emphasis on language and speech in order to create rhetorical effects (where 'rhetoric' is simply 'the art of speaking or writing effectively'),[47] we have not said very much about what is unique to his work, or indeed to any writer's. However, David Edgar privileges words and language as the major scaffolding of his playwriting, and although he also develops image, scene, plot, action, character, and many other aspects of dramaturgy, his major strength lies in the discursive strategies of shaping the meanings and melodies of his stage plays. Of his closest colleagues, Howard Brenton is a stronger poet in the theatre; David Hare writes more emotionally detailed characters; David Edgar writes better dialogue designed to carry

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argument and conceptual complexity. He does this by employing the craft of rhetoric, ranging from conventions of emplotment to devices such as pointing or echoing. He is the only one of the three who could have written *How Plays Work*, because he is the only one who has systematically and self-consciously developed a compendious knowledge and classification system for dramaturgy across the western canon – not only Shakespeare, whom he can deftly anatomize, but Sheridan, Ibsen, Brecht, and Wilde as well as Brian Friel and Alan Ayckbourn.[48]

Edgar writes clever, witty banter that encodes a deeper thematic meaning (see Chapter 6 below, on *Pentecost*), repetitions with a difference that add up to a final 'drop line' (*Maydays* as well as *The Prisoner's Dilemma*), plots that resemble or invoke detective fiction as their genre motor (or well-made plays with their dependence on secrets from the past) – such as *Speer*, *Playing with Fire*, and *Continental Divide*. All of these and many more 'devices' allow Edgar to represent a double layer of meaning, the general and the particular, or in another formulation, the fiction and the analogous 'real'. Much of the comedy in Edgar's work delights through irony, word play, even punning – this is a writer who loves language and treats it playfully as well as seriously. Although romantic comedy does not come immediately to mind when one thinks of Edgar, scenes of erotically charged low-level flirtation occur in many of the recent plays, including *Pentecost*, *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, and *Playing with Fire.* His adaptation of Ibsen's *The Master Builder* (2010) perfectly realizes the difficult first scene between Solness and Hilde by balancing its combination of playful and menacing eroticism.[49]

The more important exhibition of skilful dialogue occurs in scenes which explicitly deal with negotiation. In negotiations, the drafting of documents, strategizing, role play, and ceremony, his skill at parsing group negotiations through precise attention to dialogue and word choice shines through. In *Destiny*, his version of a community-based political meeting is both funny and frightening as the small irritations of community-based organizing detail typical meeting behaviour and ceremonies, while the gradual amalgamation of positions quite different to each other (high Tory vs petit bourgeois) result in a forged unity under the concept of 'patriotism', actually masking

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fascism. In *The Shape of the Table*, in which the main action *is* negotiation, the whole regime changes – a peaceful turnover which could not have been predicted at the beginning of the play, but which inch by inch comes to pass through words struggled over at the negotiating table (see Chapter 6 below). In fact, looking at Edgar's plays since *Destiny*, every one of them that we discuss here contains a scene of public negotiation turning on the way words are used, from Albie Sach's interactions with his jailers around testimony and law, to the positions fought over by the gubernatorial candidates in *Daughters of the Revolution* (*Continental Divide*) concerning the wording of the fictional Proposition 92 – the 'Oath of Allegiance'. The specific difference words make is an overarching thematic in Edgar's work, as is complex multifaceted jockeying for position within democratic deliberation. In these negotiations, the ways people communicate through words, and the word choices themselves, are highlighted as a particularly powerful way of 'attending to social arrangements'.

Edgar and Shaw

> Shaw's ideas may have begun as jokes, but they didn't end there.
> David Edgar (2006)[50]

It is probably not surprising that the great modernist playwright who most reminds us of David Edgar is George Bernard Shaw. Superficially, we might note that, like Shaw, Edgar favours prefaces and afterwords or publishes accompanying articles and essays for the plays, contributing a good deal of additional material as background for his dramatic depiction. Edgar has even written an introduction to a volume of Shaw's *Plays Unpleasant*.[51] Shaw, of course, was canonized for his 'theatre of ideas' or his 'discussion plays' (a term he developed in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* to describe Ibsen's reliance on discussion scenes, but as Christopher Innes has pointed out, it self-described 'the basis for Shaw's drama in a far more direct way').[52] And there are few modern dramatists with lengthier disquisitions than Shaw in a play like *Man and Superman* (although Edgar's *Nicholas Nickleby* and *Continental Divide* also stretch the stage-time of conventional British theatre).

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However, if the Shaw and Edgar comparison is to yield any substantial insights, it must come at a deeper level of connection. Edgar himself puts his finger on this affinity when he writes that 'Shaw's great subject was disenchantment, though, as he pointed out, you can't be disenchanted unless you're enchanted first'.[53]

Edgar, of course, has studied Shaw's work, as he has Ibsen's and Brecht's, in great detail. He knows so much about Shaw that he was able to write a comparative review essay for the *London Review of Books* on the 2005 Shaw biography, *Bernard Shaw: A Life*, by A. M. Gibbs, assessing it against Michael Holroyd's multivolume standard. This long essay begins by contrasting Gibbs and Holroyd concerning interpretations of Shaw's sexuality, comments on Shaw's view of the discussion play in Ibsen ('a little dubious'), and moves on to offer Edgar's own view of the heart of Shaw's dramatic gifts, that Shaw 'was able to address the contradictions and difficulties that all thinking socialists come up against, but rarely feel able to articulate'.[54] In what follows, we recognize the great overlap between the socialist dramatist of disenchantment and the socialist dramatist of disillusion: 'The gap between what people believe and the way they live' and 'The fear that, as currently constituted, the masses aren't up to the tasks history has set them'.[55] Discussing the internal contradictions between Shaw's Fabian utopian socialism and his later 'flirtation with Italian Fascism and full-blown dalliance with Soviet Communism', Edgar finds that Shaw's paradox is that 'the deformations of Stalinism both implied and resulted from a rejection of individual emancipation as a socialist goal'.[56] In the following chapters, as we develop as a major theme of Edgar's writing the coming to terms with his generation's disillusionment with revolutionary socialism, we shall have cause to remember that the comparison to Shaw does not only turn on the rhetorical nature of dramatic technique, but also on the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will.

Edgar and the critics

Journalists love and hate the plays of David Edgar in almost equal measure. Contrast these estimations of *The Prisoner's Dilemma:*

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> *The Prisoner's Dilemma* is a clever-clever bloodless drama penned by a boffin.[57]

> This is one of the most urgent and intellectually committed political plays of the past two decades, and it should be seen by everybody who wants to understand the world of wars we live in.[58]

> There are moments when Edgar, who has clearly digested a stack of conflict-resolution handbooks, bombards us with one too many intellectual paradoxes. But in contrast to *Albert Speer*, his last play, which groaned with historical detail, here his erudition and appetite for major subject-matter have paid off. This must be seen.[59]

These three reviews pretty well sum up what David Edgar has come to expect from journalist reviewers – there are some who are overtly hostile and anti-intellectual from the start; there are some who fully appreciate his engagement with the contemporary world, and there are some (maybe the majority) who seem often to give credit with one hand and take it away with the other. In the course of researching this book, we have read most of the press reviews for the twelve original productions of the plays considered here, and along with this range of responses we have also noticed that most reviewers either do not grasp the main thrust of the play's thematics or else describe it rather badly. Part of this is due, no doubt, to the pressures of reviewing that call for instant reactions and written responses to what may be complex events of multilayered theatrical signification; part of it reflects the task of journalism in the increasingly shorter form of review for the general public – quick judgments and showy adjectives to tell a person scanning the review whether or not they should go to the show. Still, the overwhelming impression of the cache of Edgar's reviews is that most often the response of the critics has been genuinely mixed for his most ambitious and densely packed works.

This archive seems to reflect a judgment about how much intellectual content is appropriate to art – rather than a judgment about the politics under review. (Indeed, Michael Billington is one of the critics

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who often gives Edgar mixed notices, or writes positively of the play in question, but withholds one or two stars so that the quick verdict looks like 'so-so'.) On the other hand, we could find little evidence that certain reviewers always praise or loathe Edgar's work, and that seems like a positive finding since it means that at least they consider each play on its own merits.[60] In the chapters that follow, we quote from these reviews as they highlight or illustrate a point we are making or where the impression of the audience seem critical to our topics, but we do not deal with them extensively. We are much more interested in the longer scholarly considerations that theatre studies colleagues have given the work, because at least, even when the reaction is quite negative, as in the case of Alan Read to *Playing with Fire*, (see Chapter 3 below), it is placed within a full and thoughtful discussion of the grounds for judgment.

In the light of our preceding analysis of Edgar's rhetorical skill and affinity to Shaw, it is amusing and ironic that the two writers have been compared – and not altogether favourably – in several critics' pieces. A key example would be Benedict Nightingale's review of the original production of *Pentecost* at the Other Place, Stratford. The subheading to 'History below the surface' already warns of the mixed verdict: 'Benedict Nightingale reviews the RSC's staging of a "fascinating but flawed" new play by David Edgar'. The first paragraphs are taken up with the (not insignificant) task of describing the premise and action of the play's first act. Apart from the 'fascinating but flawed' pronouncement in the first paragraph, it looks like it will be a largely positive review, and it is. However, here comes the Shaw comparison: 'Indeed, the play sometimes seems likely to turn into a neo-Shavian argy-bargy, asking what's meant by culture, nationhood, West, East, and other grand concepts. It is not until the second half that Edgar transforms those ideas into living suffering people and brings them pell-mell onto Robert Jones's set.'[61] This is the sort of criticism-by-association that the Shaw/Edgar duo elicit: too many words, too many 'grand concepts'. The review continues to connect *Pentecost* with Nightingale's reading of Shaw by way of *Man and Superman*, and concludes in favour of Shaw: 'What we are watching is a demonstration – less lucid, admittedly, than Shaw would have made it – of the tribal mess and muddle that is our world now.'[62] In the last paragraph,

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Nightingale does in fact write that he likes Edgar's play: 'I like the idea that human diversity and the complexities of history have their up as well as their down sides.' This sum-up is an illustration of the glib remarks that often characterize press reports on Edgar plays.

For now, we would like to acknowledge an ambivalence in both critical and popular response to Edgar's work. We lack the systematic analysis of audiences that would allow us to generalize about those responses further. However, in closing this section, we would like to discuss some of the factors that can typically affect reception of an Edgar play in production. We have seen multiple productions of *Pentecost*, *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, *Continental Divide*, and *Testing the Echo*, and have attended a workshop performance as well as the full production of *Playing with Fire.* Thus at least with regard to Edgar's more recent work, we have some comparative impressions about the impact of venue, casting, staging choices, and the historical moment of production upon the performance and reception of the plays. While we comment on those experiences in the chapters below, it might be helpful to present a short overview here of some viewing experiences that throw light on some aspects of Edgar's plays in concrete production circumstances.

Audiences at Edgar plays need to be able to 'hear' the play at least as much as to see it. It should not be surprising that clarity of diction and speech is at a premium in plays where words matter as definitively as they do in the negotiations of *The Shape of the Table* or *The Prisoner's Dilemma*, or the political arguments in *Continental Divide* or *Testing the Echo.* The complexity of the plots and themes involved, and the emphasis on wit and rhetoric, mean that the language of the plays carries their main valences. If one cannot hear the actors or finds the action muffled or blurred, this surely hurts the play – and the production as a whole. As in staging Shakespeare, 'speaking the speech trippingly on the tongue' is as essential as evoking location through sculpting actors in space (something Edgar's plays need too, especially the large epic plays such as *Maydays)*. Two examples, from *Pentecost* and *Testing the Echo*, pertain specifically to the auditory aspects of production and underline this feature.

Pentecost brings together a desperate set of refugees from many countries who take hostages in a central European church. Waiting for

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a response to their demands for safe passage to an EU country and the right to remain, the group begins to tell each other stories, each in his or her own language. The 'Pentecost' scene plays on the biblical idea of speaking in tongues, and depends on an extremely well-orchestrated unfolding of stories which gradually brings the characters into a kind of brief community, as they understand each other across language barriers.

The ease with which a mishandling of this scene can wrong-foot the play was very clear in an otherwise inventive and well-executed production in Los Angeles in 2002. A young and innovative company, the Evidence Room, made ingenious use of a large warehouse-like space, seating the audience on two sides of the rectangle, which served as an excellent spatial approximation of the large, empty church Edgar designates for the setting of the play. A site-specific quality enhanced the realism of the situation, as actors raced down the long length of the room in response to the action. However, because the actors were often speaking with their backs to the audience, it was sometimes difficult to hear the text. Furthermore, in the critical 'Pentecost' scene, the presence of drumming intended to provide rhythm and counterpoint to the stories actually drowned out some of them. The acoustics of the venue were no doubt partially responsible for this problem, in addition to a slip-up in the otherwise crisp direction by Bart DeLorenzo.[63]

The Evidence Room problems created a false impression of the play itself, as was evident when the *Los Angeles Times* critic wrote, 'Only once does Lorenzo's staging falter, in a painfully leisurely sequence evidently meant to induce a trance-like, tribal atmosphere'.[64] Apart from a questionable, even offensive choice of descriptors, the judgment shows how this crucial aspect of the text depends on timing and precision for its effect. A counter-example, when the brief utopian moments of the scene were fully recognized, came in Tony Taccone's excellent productions in Ashland, Oregon, and Berkeley, California (co-produced by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in 1997).

A gifted director at home with improvisation, Taccone also had a solid voice and text director, Nancy Benjamin, who was part of the artistic team from Oregon who regularly work with Shakespeare

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productions as their major assignments. The challenge of polyglot speech as well as the wit and rhetoric of a typical Edgar play set many challenges for actors who are not well trained vocally. American actors are often faulted for not handling language well when it is verse or otherwise complex. This ensemble was very good as a result of their combined efforts. Taccone describes some of the rehearsal process:

> The actors came into the rehearsal room and the only person they saw was the stage manager. They were blindfolded, put in a van, and for the rest of the day they didn't hear a single language that they understood. We drove them to a place they did not know, and we had hired two actors who they didn't know who spoke Russian and Polish. They were split up and the rule was they couldn't speak in English to anybody; their stuff was taken from them, and according to the hierarchy of the play, the troublemakers got isolated right away. We had this fantastic speech coach [Benjamin], and she had these different coloured yarns, and she connected everybody in the cast according to who could understand who. They had to develop a vocabulary with the others who understood them.[65]

The result in production was a clarity of diction, rhythm, and pacing which orchestrated the scene to an emotional high – partly because of the sense of urgency that communication was essential to these characters struggling with their own fear and need.

Another example of the difference ensemble work makes to complex verbal interactions comes from the dinner party scene in *Testing the Echo*. In this play, a group of friends and relatives argue among themselves, while the scene is intercut with another scene in which the hostess of the party argues with one of her (Egyptian) students from the ESOL school where she teaches. The dialogue is composed of overlapping speeches (Edgar gives a slash notation in the text to help clarify how this should work). The original Out of Joint production toured the UK, and we followed its progression. As we discuss in more detail in Chapter 4 below, the execution of this scene varied from muddy and unfocused to sharp and clear juxtaposition of character and argument. The role of rhetoric and speech stood out as most

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important, even in a play such as this one, which is more fluid and less discursive than much of Edgar's earlier work.

The other factor that seems to influence Edgar's reception is the ratio of complexity to clarity on offer within a single viewing. As we have pointed out, many reviewers complain about Edgar's detail and depth as being too intellectual or ambitious, or sometimes just too long. If people cannot follow the action, they sometimes feel patronized or wrong-footed. Michael Attenborough, who is David Edgar's most important British director (along with Ron Daniels for the earlier work), describes this aspect of working with Edgar very specifically:

> There is nobody, David Hare included, who writes with such density and complexity as David [Edgar] does. If he comes to a subject, he comes with research manuals as thick as *War and Peace* – to an awesome degree, he brings a wealth of knowledge, understanding, and perception. The challenge for me as director is to say to David, 'We are rehearsing for five weeks (as happened with *Playing with Fire*), the audience can't read it, and will only hear it the once.' The extraordinary thing about David – the most fascinating thing about working with him – he doesn't have easy political answers, he finds paradox, contradiction, ambiguity, like Shakespeare. The political is circular, not a straight line; this is true about the world, the lives we live, and human personalities. But it can be confusing for audiences, when their brains are being teased. Unconsciously they are waiting for the result; he rarely gives them a result. When you are looking at something so burningly relevant, people say, 'What went wrong? Tell me how to make it work.' [66]

We think that the tension between the sensible experience of performance, where in one short exposure audiences must take in all that is on offer, and the experience of a written text, which can be read, consulted several times and the words parsed, is a classical problem that is more acute in contemporary times when habits of listening have changed and audiences are often not made up of similar language communities or performance traditions. As we move through the discussions of Edgar's *oeuvre*, we will be asking about the capacity of audiences to

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process the playwright's creations, and also about the nature of the playwright's expectations of his audiences.

In the chapters that follow, we look in Chapter Two at Edgar's adjacent writings and political activism to establish a fuller picture of him as a public intellectual, attending in a number of ways to the arrangements of the British polity and also to a more global cosmopolitan imagined community. This second chapter will draw heavily on Edgar's writings and speeches to establish the extra-dramatic interventions he has made into public discourse on a wide variety of topics from Islamophobia to contemporary politics, censorship, and the need for the NHS to treat overweight people the same as others.[67] The chapter argues that his writings, whether they are in the form of creative work or in review essays for the *London Review of Books* or op/ed pieces in the *Guardian*, need to be read intertextually, as they are part of a deliberate configuration of his persona as an engaged artist participating in activist practice.

Edgar continually experiments with dramatic forms, and Chapter Three begins with his juxtaposition of epic and realist dramaturgies: *Continental Divide* (2003) is actually two plays intertwined around a single focusing event (a fictional political contest for the governorship of a western US state). One play focuses on the political Right, the other on the Left, but they are not mirror images of each other. *Mothers Against*, the one on the Right, is an Ibsenite family drama with a 'secret' centred around preparing a candidate for a campaign debate; the one on the Left, *Daughters of the Revolution*, is the 'quest' adventure of a former political activist seeking to understand what really happened in his past, and takes the form of a Brechtian epic. The two plays are united by their depictions of what has happened to the political idealism of the US sixties – both right and left – as it devolved at the end of the century. In this, they are compared to *Maydays* (*1983*), Edgar's exploration from twenty years earlier of how the English Left dealt with the decline of international socialism between 1945 and Thatcher's ascendancy. These three plays, then, represent a large historical canvas, and share a common concern with how individuals respond to events that disillusion them over time, often through various kinds of defection from the movements they

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originally joined, but in other cases through a faithfulness to the ideals that originally motivated them but that now seem to require another form of behaviour.

Chapter Four on *Destiny* (1976), *Playing with Fire* (2005), and *Testing the Echo* (2008) centres on issues of racial conflict, citizenship, reaction, and reform. This chapter will allow us to look at how Edgar views the impact of thirty years of generational change, immigration and assimilation, economic development, and evolution of political style on the nation's self-concept – in three different incarnations. In the process, this chapter will also allow us to explore another characteristic dimension of Edgar's dramaturgy: these plays involve large casts of characters and no clear protagonist, a compositional strategy used to avoid presenting issues in black and white or some other schematic polarity.

The fifth chapter will group together *Mary Barnes* (1978), *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1978), and *Albert Speer* (2000) as plays dealing with problems of leadership, but the chapter will go far beyond this obvious feature to question the problems of communitarianism, the effects of isolation on human nature, and the limits of moral defence based on acts of omission. These plays problematize humans' ability to see themselves clearly in relation to their social roles. They also provide major insights into Edgar's dramaturgical style through the way in which his use of Albie Sachs, Joe Berke (Mary's psychiatrist and a leader of the alternative therapeutic community) and Albert Speer, as paradigmatic individuals, develops and then departs considerably from a 'social realist' way of approaching characterization.

Three plays, sometimes considered a trilogy, in which Edgar confronts Europe after communism are the subject of Chapter Six. Beginning with *The Shape of the Table* (1990), which takes place on the very cusp of change, representing negotiations to replace one regime with another – a so-called 'velvet revolution' – Edgar asks what is worth salvaging from the old system and what totally new options are possible in a time of radical change, as well as what can confer legitimate authority on leadership in a situation where most are compromised one way or another by involvement with the former regime. By *Pentecost* (1994), the second play in this group, the

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disillusionment of those who believed that democracy would quickly translate into a new, just society is the main concern, but this problem is investigated in tandem with several related issues, especially those surrounding the question of how much commonality (linguistic, cultural, historical, etc.) is necessary for a functioning polity (and what size and shape of immigration threatens such necessary homogeneity). *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (2001) searches for a realistic solution to years of ethnic conflict and outside intervention in a fictional country in the Balkans (or a region like the Caucasus). In our treatment of that play, we look at theories of conflict resolution explored through the play and what is possible versus what is likely when the rationalistic processes of something like game theory are applied to human life. In the background, however, are questions of whether the wrongs of the past can ever be righted by devices like truth and justice commissions or must inevitably result in complete separation of the former oppressors and victims; whether 'liberal interventionism' ever really serves the interests of those in whose country the intervention takes place; and how much the outcome of public processes may often owe to private projects and motivations, frequently unrelated to those public events.

In the Afterword to the volume we will return to the subtitle 'Negotiation and Retrieval' in order to read the project of Edgar's career in terms of his determination to persist in finding ways of continuing to attend to the arrangements of the polity by amending them in whatever fashion possible, since 'the form [politics] takes, because it can take no other, is the amendment of existing arrangements by exploring and pursuing what is intimated in them'.[68]

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