PLAYING WITH THE TRUTH:
THE POLITICS OF THE THEATRE

MICHAEL KUSTOW

In ancient Greek theatre, where drama was born, feelings could be expressed which were too dangerous to allow in society. Giving offence was, and remains, part of theatre’s business. You can identify with a murderer through your imagination, but it doesn’t mean you condone Macbeth. Through imagination, the feelings are exorcised.

(Nicholas Hytner, Director, National Theatre of Great Britain)

… lies like truth.

(William Shakespeare, Macbeth, Act Five, Scene 5)

On Saturday December 18 2004, a crowd of about 1,000 British Sikhs gathered outside Birmingham Repertory Theatre to protest about Behzti (‘Dishonour’ in Punjabi), a new play by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, a young woman playwright, a Sikh herself. People began chanting that her play was sacrilegious and an insult to their religion. The organized protest soon turned violent: bricks were thrown through windows, eggs hurled and when the crowds clashed with police, three officers were injured. Inside the theatre, two performances were taking place: Behzti and a play for children.

As the protestors broke into the theatre, terrified children and their parents were trapped in the foyer along with the actors and theatre staff. On the Monday, the theatre ‘very reluctantly’ cancelled the remaining ten performances of Behzti. ‘The Sikh community’, said the theatre’s executive director, ‘was unable to guarantee that there would be no repeat of the violence. It is now clear that we cannot guarantee the safety of our audience… The theatre vigorously defends its right to produce Behzti and other similar high-quality plays that deal with contemporary issues in a multi-cultural society’.

By now the play’s author was in hiding, having received death threats. What the Sikh community spokesmen most objected to was a scene in
which a mother brings her daughter to the local Sikh temple, the *gurdwara*, to find her a husband for an arranged marriage. The marriage broker, Mr Sandhu, an apparently respectable local dignitary, is said to keep lists of suitable bridegrooms. But he is also notorious for rape and sexual abuse. The young woman is having her period, and stains show on her dress; two other women raped by Mr Sandhu, and now his accomplices, beat her up, getting her mother to join them. It turns out that Mr Sandhu has no list of suitable husbands; what he does instead is offer himself in marriage, and then rape the woman. One of his victims describes it:

TEETEE: They stripped me first and covered my mouth. Then he bent me over and pulled my hair. He was young then so he had better control. Your Mr Sandhu went inside me and took what was human out of my body. My mother wept salty tears while she watched. Afterwards she beat me till I could not feel my arms or legs. Then she turned to me and said, now you are a woman, a lady. Now you are on your own, *behsharam*.3

Birmingham Repertory Theatre had been in negotiation with leaders of the Sikh community for weeks about the play. It agreed a statement with them, which was handed out to the audience. But the theatre refused their main demand – to alter the play by re-setting the offensive scene in a community centre, not in the sacred precincts of the temple. Theatres rallied to support the author and the theatre. Another Birmingham theatre, the tiny Birmingham Stage Company, offered to stage the play. The Royal Court, the Bush Theatre and Chichester Theatres called on all British subsidized theatre to join them in giving the play a rehearsed reading on the same day. Then a message came back from the playwright in hiding, asking them not to do so as it would put her and her family in even greater danger.

David Edgar, a leading British playwright who has lived and worked in Birmingham for most of his life, wrote:

The Birmingham Rep has a superb record in giving voice to the culturally invisible communities that surround it. The theatre premiered Ayub Khan-Din’s *East is East* and produced a ground-breaking mainstage dramatisation of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*. It is a bitter irony that this theatre, of all theatres, has been forced to pull Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti’s second play, *Behzti*, one of a growing number of plays being written by young Asian women about the conflict between faith and institutional religion in culturally
isolated communities. Its importance can be judged by the large number of young Asian women who have packed in to see it.\footnote{4}

On December 23, under the heading ‘We must defend freedom of expression’, the \textit{Guardian} ran a letter signed by over 300 people, a cross-section of British theatre. Actors, dramatists, artists from all the ethnic minorities in the country, publishers, agents, professors, critics, artistic directors and technicians deplored the cancellation forced on the theatre by an angry mob, and reaffirmed that ‘it is a legitimate function of art to provoke debate and sometimes to express controversial ideas. A genuinely free, pluralist society would celebrate this aspect of our culture. Those who use violent means to silence it must be vigorously opposed and challenged by all of us, whatever our faith, belief or opinions’.\footnote{5} Some of those most directly concerned with what the play was about also wrote to the \textit{Guardian} letters page: ‘As Asian women of Sikh, Muslim and Hindu backgrounds, we have been struggling for many years against attempts to silence our voices in relation to violence against women. The issues depicted in \textit{Behzti} – rape, corruption and the abuse of power – are real and need exposure’.\footnote{6} For his part, Salman Rushdie attacked the government’s failure ‘to condemn the violence when they should be supporting freedom of expression … frankly, book shops and theatres are full of the things that would upset an interest group’.\footnote{7}

The right to provoke dialogue and generate debate has to be defended. But are there other considerations that should qualify this right, such as the risk of providing fodder for racism and prejudice? Does Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti’s play go out of its way to use ‘shock tactics’ and offensiveness – placing its scene of sexual abuse in the Sikh temple itself, rather than in a community centre? Is there any justice in accusing her of ‘letting down her community’, of ‘washing dirty linen’ before an audience of non-believers? Who is to judge how far a playwright may go?

Doubtless the Sikhs who assailed the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, flooded it with e-mails from all over the world by people who had not seen the play, or even put themselves forward as rewriters of \textit{Behzti}, believed they were defending Sikhism against a heretic, one of their own who had broken ranks. Doubtless there were calmer Sikh voices who would have been satisfied by the statement the theatre agreed with community representatives and handed out to audiences. In her foreword to \textit{Behzti}, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti does not write as an apostate: ‘The heritage of the Sikh people is one of courage and victory over adversity. Our leaders were brave revolutionaries with the finest minds, warriors who propagated values of egalitarianism and selflessness’.\footnote{8} But has that legacy been propagated in the minds and words of the community leaders who condemn her play now? The community
leaders and spokesmen who faced the media right after the riot talked as if the Sikh community were monolithic and homogeneous in its condemnation of Behzti.

‘Community’ is fast becoming a slithery term which closes down critical debate and rational argument. Little is gained by making it into a cosy buzz-word, evoking ancestral bonds, placed in opposition to anything big, centralized and threatening, like global corporations or the construction of dams. At the other end of the spectrum, why should the tolerance of privileged liberals stop short at, for example, making time for Muslim prayers at Stop The War rallies, as happens in England? If post-modern relativism permits the cultivation of a portfolio of identities, like an actor adopting roles, should it not go further, at least by arguing that fundamentalists and their disruptions, e-mail blitzes and brick-throwing can be understood as actions of the excluded, as a first step to forgiving them? Take this to its conclusion and you get identity politics as the new feel-good public faith: Let a multitude of identities bloom. Let faith schools thrive. Let books be burned and theatres shut down, if they offend.

Nobody quite wishes to go that far, because such actions still seem to cross a white line. Images of brown-shirts flinging books into the flames come to mind. As does Heinrich Heine’s warning that when you start by burning books, burning people isn’t very far away. The violent acting-out of rage against perceived offensive performances or publications marks the point where ‘identity politics’ or ‘communitarianism’ part company, not only with democracy, and not only with the whole Enlightenment project: not simply the project of Voltaire, Rousseau and Kant, but the universal values of tolerance, rationality and an openness to learn – that can equally be found in Sufism and Hinduism, and within Sikhism itself.

We need to place these skirmishes in a wider context. In his book *Jihad versus McWorld* Benjamin Barber suggests that we now live in a world in which by and large there are only two human roles to be played: as members of a tribe (*jihadists*, in a metaphorical sense) and as consumers in a globalized economy. But man, as Aristotle famously wrote, is a political animal, and the third role which once distinguished human beings – being an involved citizen in a *demos* – is still unachieved by most people. Neither globalism nor tribalism has much use for democracy – or truth. Powerlessness breeds fanaticism. People seek refuge in religious or traditional beliefs, in strict forms of faith, unchangingly handed down by their authoritarian forefathers, or else in drugged obedience to the garish brand names, the wall-to-wall womb of the super-mall or the world-wide products of the multiplex. Consumerism can be every bit as idolatrous as mass abasement before an evangelist preacher. Francis Wheen speaks nothing less than the truth when he exco-
iates ‘the fortissimo hosannas of those who regarded the global market as a
benign universal deity – immortal, invisible, omniscient, omnipotent’.\textsuperscript{11}

In her introduction to the published text of her play, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti
affirms the exacting and elating possibilities of her art.

I wrote \textit{Behzti} because I passionately oppose injustice and hypocrisy. And because \textit{writing drama allows me to create characters, stories, a
world in which I, as an artist, can play and entertain and generate debate.}
The writers I admire are courageous. They present their truths and
dare to take risks whilst living with their fears. They tell us life is
ferocious and terrifying, that we are imperfect and only when we
embrace our imperfections honestly, can we have hope. Such writers
sometimes cause offence. But perhaps those who are affronted by
the menace of dialogue and discussion, need to be offended.\textsuperscript{12}

\textbf{THEATRE’S DNA}

There’s a long history of ‘going too far’ planted in the genetic code of drama,
and Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti is working within that tradition. Defenders of thea-
tre’s freedom of expression point to its origins in fifth century BC Greece.
Transgression, unmasking and excess were planted in theatre’s very nature
from the start. From its invention in ancient Greece – or more specifically,
the democratic city of Athens – it has been the job, indeed the vocation, of
playwrights to probe difficult and dangerous feelings, to explore the outcast,
the pariah and the Other, and to follow the actions of the protagonists to
the furthest extreme. Outrageous actions are the bread and butter of theatre,
leading to tears or to laughter.

Aeschylus’ Agamemnon kills his daughter to enable a war to begin. Else-
where he portrays the defeated Persians, Athens’ enemy, in a way that inspires
pity, not gloating. Sophocles’ Medea, a foreign woman married to a Greek
prince, murders their children to spite her unfaithful husband, in a kind
of kamikaze act of despair. Greek comedy, though not so fundamentally
outrageous in its form, laid about its targets with equal relish: famously, in
Aristophanes’ \textit{Lysistrata}, a play in which the city’s women refuse to have sex
with their men until they stop making war, and the stage is soon filled with
sex-starved men with painful erections.

Athenian drama – with its all-male, masked casts, infectious music and
dancing – was a one-off performance for up to 20,000 people at a civic
event that was also an occasion for the military and religious re-dedication
of the city-state. In this many-layered situation, imagination was licensed to
open up themes which divided society as well as values that united it. Athe-
nians’ sense of their citizenship was strong enough for them to face together some of the most rending moral and political situations the theatre has ever addressed.

The Greek tragedies were complemented by the satyr-plays, disrespectful aftermaths to the main event, performed by actors in half-human, half-goat forms, brandishing enormous penises. At the end of a long day, the audience followed these creatures into a topsy-turvy realm where all notions of duty, justice and propriety were overturned by the forerunners of medieval European carnivals’ Lords of Misrule. Theatre’s sensuous freedom of play has its roots in a polytheistic society where it was seen as something god-given, the god in question being the elusive Dionysus, the sexually-ambivalent, boundary-crossing deity of wine and theatre, who had come from as far away as India, dancing at the head of a train of aroused women.

This Dionysiac source gives theatre its exuberance, and its power to cast a spell. It also licenses it to play with and mock things that the world, its priests, censors, community leaders and legislators see as deadly serious.

From Dionysus comes theatre’s drive to unmask and demystify, to reveal miscreants, hypocrites and killers. But its truth-telling is indirect – ‘through indirections find directions out’, says Polonius, though that may also be taken as Shakespeare’s note to himself. Through disguise and deception, mistakes and misapprehensions, portents and oracles, the truth, in Shakespeare, will out. It is no accident that Hamlet turns to the travelling players to enact a drama which will reveal the usurper who has murdered his father. ‘The play’s the thing / In which I’ll catch the conscience of the king’.

The pretence and make-believe of theatre may be its surest route to truth, as Kenneth Tynan grasped in his last years, gasping out truths into his diary (performed as a one-man show in 2005 by Corin Redgrave at the Arts Theatre in London): ‘How much of theatre has to do with imposture! How much of world drama concerns people pretending to be what they aren’t … Mistaken identity is not only what the craft of acting is all about, it is about what much of drama is all about. An actor is a man who pretends to be someone who is usually pretending to be someone else’.13

Offence is another weapon which theatre has never shirked in its thrust towards truth. In The Merchant of Venice, Shylock, the butt of a fiercely anti-Semitic, mercantile Venice, gives as good as he gets, unforgettably destabilizing what would otherwise be a love-comedy. His come-uppance in a Venetian courtroom, through a quibble about a pound of flesh but not a drop of blood, leaves a bad taste in the mouth. Such is the verismo of Shakespeare’s non-idealized, portrait that the institutional voices of Judaism continue to protest against what they see as Shakespeare’s anti-Semitism, but is better seen as his ruthlessly realistic imagination.
Theatre’s transgressors and over-reachers have the power to seize the centre stage. Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus goes way beyond the prevalent orthodoxy, and Molière’s Tartuffe is an inspired religious con-man. Both commandeer the audience’s imagination, force it to suspend its moral judgement. They are the bad guys you love to hate. As Hytner says, that doesn’t mean you condone Macbeth the king-killer ‘steeped in blood’, the fore-runner of every blood-boltered Stalin, Pol Pot or Idi Amin. The force of the playwright allows you to enter into the world of another human creature before the shutters of judgement slam down and write him off.

Modern theatre’s gaze on contemporary history began in the early years of the Russian Revolution, when agit-prop train plays and films combined the street theatre skills of an Eisenstein, the formal daring of a Meyerhold and the jagged urgency of film in the hands of Dziga Vertov newsreels. In the 1920s the German director Erwin Piscator created a new form, ‘epic theatre’, which deeply influenced Brecht. Taking advantage of theatre’s new technology – film projection, mechanized stages – Piscator brought not only the factual immediacy of contemporary events on stage but also a belief in the great Hegelian and Marxist tides of history.

A member of the German Communist Party from 1918, Piscator insisted that the value of his theatre lay not only in ‘multi-media’, but in yoking new stage technology to revolutionary thinking. ‘What would happen’, he asked, ‘if theatre were to introduce a wholly new architecture, making the stage a play-machine, a wonder-world, an arena for battling ideas, perhaps even setting the audience on a turntable, dynamically bursting the static illusion of the present stage? I do not say that new techniques will be the saviour of the theatre. I merely say that they can express new dramatic contents by liberating the creative forces of playwrights, directors and actors’.

Piscator’s work also called forth a new kind of acting, more like a witness in a court case than a romantically emotional leading player. In the work of Brecht, a great poet as well as a dramatist and director, these currents found their apotheosis in the productions at his Berliner Ensemble – Galileo, The Threepenny Opera, Arturo Ui. They were the poetic expressions of a dramatist, not ‘fact-based theatre’, but they bore in themselves the hallmarks of the epic theatre Piscator had invented; above all, a cool, conscious and aware performance style, always aware of the piece as a whole, not just the fate of the actor’s character. ‘Gestural’ acting Brecht called it, seeking ‘alienation’, to give the spectator room to reflect, as opposed to ‘identification’, when the audience swoons in the presence of a star.

I was lucky enough to see the Berliner Ensemble in 1961, crossing over from West Berlin and staying afterwards in the theatre canteen to talk to the actors late into the night. It was a revelation at the time; but through the
1960s, with an even greater saturation of media reporting, theatre began more and more to turn away from Brecht’s poetic and political drama to documentary evidence, with plays, often from Germany, about J. Robert Oppenheimer, the complicity of Pope Pius XII in the crimes of the Third Reich, and a massively edited version of the Frankfurt war-crime trials.

THE FACES OF BRITISH THEATRE TODAY

Against this backdrop, it would be hard to overlook the basic conservatism of British theatre. In his now canonical book *The Empty Space* (1968), Peter Brook named four species of theatre in a famous taxonomy: The Deadly, The Holy, The Rough and The Immediate.\(^{17}\) His categories have not been outdated, nearly forty years later. The Deadly Theatre persists, with some encouraging exceptions, in London’s West End and Manhattan’s Broadway; commercial theatre relies increasingly on revivals with casts headed by stars from movies and television, and on musicals (to be discussed a little later). High-culture Holy Theatre flourishes as ever in the world’s opera houses, with their corporate entertainment parties and connoisseurs fondly recalling the great days of Maria Callas.

Defiantly non-cultural Rough Theatre still sprouts wherever the energies of the street, the carnival and the circus are summoned to create Dionysian theatre – in the lofts and cellars of the fringe locations, in site-specific venues and occasionally on the main stages of theatrical institutions. The Immediate theatre – for Brook the essential theatre, which packs more into ‘each second and micro-second’ \(^{18}\) – may be rare, but it is unmistakable when you meet it. In 2004 I saw Shakespeare’s *Othello* in London’s Riverside Studios done by the itinerant English group Cheek by Jowl on a bare traverse stage. It was Meyerholdian in its swoops of energy, packs of actors sweeping across the stage, Shakespeare’s text about jealousy and race borne along in a cat’s cradle of movement and rhythm.

In recent years, there’s been a marked revival of political theatre in Britain, still trying to find its own necessity, its way of truth-telling, in our news-drenched age. Fact-inspired productions in British theatre veer wildly between Brechtian epic construction (David Hare coined the phrase ‘verbatim theatre’ to describe his documentary account of the effects of the privatized railways, *The Permanent Way*), courtroom ritual, with its inherently dramatic progression of evidence and cross-examination, and the grotesque humour of Justin Butcher, whose new barbed comedy about WMD inspection in Iraq, *A Weapons Inspector Calls*, sending up J.B. Priestley’s angry 1946 play *An Inspector Calls*, joined the National Theatre in 2005.

The Iraq war produced a flourish of new pieces, from Butcher’s gleefully angry *The Madness of George Dubya* which used the plot of Kubrick’s *Dr
Strangelove to satirize Bush and Blair in Iraq, to Hare’s Stuff Happens on the main stage at the National Theatre, an account of the events leading up to the attack on Iraq, with a cast as big as a West End musical playing Bush, Blair, Rumsfeld, Colin Powell, Condoleezza Rice and assorted diplomats, weapons inspectors, journalists, a Palestinian woman and an Iraqi exile. Directed with chilling calmness by Nicholas Hytner – the atmosphere sometimes recalled a wake – Hare’s dispassionate chronicle had the quiet power of an artist speaking more in sorrow than in anger.

Even more sombre was Guantanamo, drawn from documents and interviews by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo. Hyper-realist, with its iron cages and orange uniforms, Guantanamo brought home the emotional and physical reality of the detainees, even if it lacked the forensic drama shown by the earlier work of Nicolas Kent’s Tricycle Theatre in north London, which has specialized in what it calls ‘tribunal theatre’. Drawing on transcripts of official enquiries, these productions have laid bare, in a way that media cannot, the Nuremberg trials of 1945, police mishandling of the killing of black teenager Stephen Lawrence, Britain’s export of arms to Saddam Hussein, the massacre at Srebrenica, and most recently, the events of ‘Bloody Sunday’ in Northern Ireland. Even when you know the words have been condensed, you become aware that the physical presence of the protagonists and theatre’s charged present tense puts you into a different relationship with the material than when you’re sitting back to watch reportage on a small screen. Because the curve of the action is uninterrupted, it’s that much more telling, and there are no ad-breaks or new items, which sap the truth of what you see.

Another way British theatre in recent years has penetrated into the oppression and violence of the world has been to take a classic play and re-configure it for here and now. Sometimes this has involved a playwright’s reinvention of a classic. At the Young Vic, playwright Martin Crimp took hold of Sophocles’ tragedy of marriage and violence, Trachiniae and rewrote it as Cruel and Tender. In a clinically precise production by Luc Bondy, it became a bloody nightmare, in which a mighty general who has massacred a village is reduced to a broken war-criminal pathetically yoked to a colostomy-bag, which is emptied on stage. ‘I have purified the world for you’, he growls. ‘I have burnt terror out of the world for people like you. I am not the criminal, but the sacrifice’. Echoes of massacres and abuse from Sabra and Shatila to Abu Ghraib crisscross Crimp’s taut re-visioning of Sophocles.

Other readings, especially of the Greek tragedies, were directors ‘re-writing’ plays to bring out their contemporary relevance. Sometimes the result can be merely conceptual and schematic. But Nicholas Hytner kicked off his tenure at the National Theatre with a resonantly updated Shakespeare – Henry V in a Middle East war, with armoured personnel carriers scaling
the Olivier Theatre stage, and the black actor Adrian Lester as King Henry. At the start of the play, he presided over a cabinet meeting eerily reminiscent of Blair and Bush scuttling around to find a *casus belli*, with everyone dressed in suits and touting smart document cases. It looked like a gathering in the White House or Downing Street now, and Shakespeare’s text rang home across four hundred years:

```
KING HENRY V
My learned lord, we pray you to proceed
And justly and religiously unfold
Why the law Salique that they have in France
Or should, or should not, bar us in our claim:
And God forbid, my dear and faithful lord,
That you should fashion, wrest, or bow your reading …
For God doth know how many now in health
Shall drop their blood in approbation
Of what your reverence shall incite us to.
Therefore take heed how you impawn our person,
How you awake our sleeping sword of war.
```

A flow of fresh public funding into the theatre, starting in 2002, helped theatre-makers in Britain to transcend parochialism. A new internationalism has been afoot, largely spearheaded by LIFT, the London International Festival of Theatre, run since 1984 by Rose Fenton and Lucy Neal. They have shown through their ten biennial festivals, importing plays and performers from as far as India and Russia, that the horizons of theatre can be limitless. LIFT also embarked in 2002 on a three-year inquiry into the nature of theatre, through performances, talks and installations, trying to connect the insights of ecology and the informality of anti-globalization politics with an extended practice of theatre.

This internationalism prods the imagination of home-grown talent and audiences, prompts bolder visual and physical metaphors, and pushes performances beyond the confines of British theatre traditions. New work and models from abroad meets the on-going practice of another enduring force of British theatre: the cluster of independent theatre groups, many of them still going strong after twenty years or more. Out Of Joint, Forced Entertainment, Improbable Theatre, The People Show, Theatre de Complicité – these are post-war British theatre’s ensembles of creativity and continuity, and there is already another generation of experimenters at their heels.

One pioneering group, Theatre de Complicité, marked its twenty-first year in the business with a flurry of activity in 2004. *The Elephant Vanishes,*
based on the stories of Haruki Murakami, was an evocation of alienated big-city life in Tokyo, performed by a Japanese cast, negotiating urban dreams and nightmares in a cats’ cradle of video screens and replicated images, which recalled Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*. Simon McBurney, the company’s founder, and his actors have learned from stand-up British comedy, the physical teachings of the great French mime Jacques Lecoq, and the rigour of Japanese theatre. They also collaborate with John Berger, staging the story of Lucie Cabrol from Berger’s book *Pig Earth* and devising with him *The Vertical Line*, a ‘site-specific’ performance about the people who made the first paintings on the walls of caves millennia ago. It took place in the lift-shaft and on the platforms of a disused Underground station at the Aldwych, three hundred feet below street level, and was an unforgettable work of theatre poetry.

In 2003 McBurney also did a chilling production of Shakespeare’s *Measure for Measure* at the National Theatre. He revived *A Minute Too Late* there as well. This had been one of Complicité’s earliest successes, a desperate clown show about dying and death. Three actors with a few poor props, handling a corpse which threatens to flop out of a hearse driven by a manic undertaker, create a piece about the awkwardness of dying, of trying and failing to imagine a beyond. This was theatre of fearless incongruity, crossing the boundaries of taste and the limitations of genres, grounded in the fluency and flexibility of the body. But how does this inventive piece – conjuring situations out of the air in an act of theatrical magical realism – relate to the bigger picture of what was really going on in most of the British theatre today?

**NO BUSINESS LIKE SHOW BUSINESS?**

According to the West End theatre managers’ association, a 1998 survey showed that only a fraction of the 11.5 million people who bought tickets for theatrical shows went to the National Theatre or the Arcola, to Riverside Studios in Hammersmith or the Tricycle in Kilburn. Most of them went to the West End – the generic name for London’s commercial theatre – and the greatest proportion of those went to see a musical, the hallmark genre of the West End (and, in New York, of Broadway). In doing so, they spent £433 million on restaurants, hotels, transport and merchandise – ‘souvenir’ programmes, CDs, DVDs and T-shirts – over and above the £250 million they paid for tickets. The theatre managers’ report salutes the massive economic importance of ‘Theatreland’ – the other ‘Square Mile’ in London – on which depends the well-being of hundreds of British companies … London remains the Theatre Capital of the world with more shows and bigger audiences than anywhere else, including Broadway. World-wide earnings of the biggest British
shows dwarf those of Hollywood blockbuster films, e.g. *Titanic*, *Jurassic Park.*

Show Business is serious business; ‘tax revenues of more than £200 million were produced by West End theatre in 1997’, says Wyndham, who estimates that ‘as a net currency earner for the UK, West End theatre is similar in size to the entire UK Advertising, Accountancy and Management Consultancy industries – and hugely bigger than the UK Film and Television industry’.

The index of success for the commercial theatre, in 2004 as for the past four or five decades, comes not from the medium-size theatres (600 - 1,000 seats) where straight (i.e. spoken, not sung) plays can be presented, but from the performance of the big houses (up to 2,000 seats), which only a solid-gold, crowd-gathering, superlative-touting musical can fill: the Adelphi (*Chicago*), the Apollo Victoria (*Saturday Night Fever*), the Cambridge Theatre (*Jerry Springer The Opera*), the London Palladium (*Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*), the Prince Edward (*Mary Poppins*), the Theatre Royal Drury Lane (*The Producers*).

It is here that the drama of the West End is acted out: producers and backers scrutinizing box-office returns as anxiously as Hollywood checks the weekly numbers; the inflation of every backstage drama into a tabloid event, as in the departure of Richard Dreyfuss from the Mel Brooks musical *The Producers* four days before the start of previews. The producers said he left because of complications following back surgery. Dreyfuss said it was ‘because I sing like a seal and dance like your Uncle Leo’. Would the show go on? For days the debate raged, until the miraculous resurrection of its New York star Nathan Lane ensured that it did.

It garnered a range of reviews which are, as New Yorkers might say, ‘to die for’. ‘To say that it unleashes an epidemic of bliss would be too mealy-mouthed’. After three delirious hours one is left stunned by a combination of unstoppable laughter and sheer happiness’. ‘[It] puts the comedy back into musical comedy. After years of quasi-operatic musicals that have turned poverty and oppression into a showbiz spectacle, we are at last allowed to laugh’. *The Producers* is also a wry comment on the political economy of musicals, for its plot turns around the eponymous producer’s scam of collecting a thousand investors for a musical which is bound to fail, and making off with their money. Trouble is, the musical within the musical, *Springtime for Hitler*, becomes as much of a smash hit as *The Producers* is. I made one big mistake when I went to see it; I did not take enough Kleenex tissues. By midway through act two I was holding my ribs and streaming tears of laughter. This is what show business should be like, and only rarely is.
It would be wrong to call all the musicals that blanket the West End business rather than art. There is theatrical art of the highest calibre in them: Susan Stroman’s elegant direction and pulse-quickening choreography for *The Producers*; Julie Taymor’s magical evocation of Kipling’s jungle creatures through every species of puppetry in *The Lion King*; William Dudley’s kaleidoscopic projected decors for *The Woman in White*.

But the price to be paid for these high-definition performances (apart from the £40 in London or $100 in New York that a decent seat will set you back) is an alteration of theatre’s contract with its audience. These musicals establish a new paradigm for theatre — and indeed have altered the staging of classic drama, as directors from the public sector theatre direct musicals commercially and then import their techniques onto subsidized stages. With its aura of superlatives brandished on the front of theatres and in bold type in the classified ads, with its tourist-brochure offers of a combined ticket, dinner and overnight hotel, and with its ticket prices out of step with the cost of going to the cinema (or buying a CD or a paperback), West End and Broadway theatre has created a glittering market of its own. Because it shouts its wares so loudly, it persuades many people that it is the one thing they should sample if they are going to try theatre at all.

The National Theatre has risen to this economic challenge. A sponsorship of £1 million over three years by the travel services company Travelex enabled it to introduce a £10 ticket for a good seat in the major part of the year in the Olivier Theatre, with spectacular results. During Nicholas Hytner’s opening season as director of the NT, 50,000 people watched a play for the first time, and the theatre posted an average attendance of 95 per cent. The audience on Travelex nights is younger, fresher, more informal, undaunted by having to book in advance, or feeling intimidated by the splendour of old buildings, or having to pay rip-off prices for an ice-cream or a drink.

A different kind of immediacy, a different place for truth has been created by Hytner’s National Theatre, and other public theatres across the country. We have experienced, not the trumped up, over-the-top, inflated sense of occasion promised by the commercial theatre, emulating the ‘event culture’ of reality television and other voyeuristic aspects of our media, but something palpably communal and communicative, taking drama’s wily and circuitous route to the truth, through tragedy, comedy or factual drama. Theatre, they implicitly say, is about learning to live together with strangers, with the Others. Not customers, not consumers as in the bright-lit playhouses of Broadway or the West End; but our compatriots for a two-hour, ephemeral togetherness in the land of theatre.

In 2004, at the Lyric Theatre in the heart of the West End, I saw an adaptation of *Festen*, originally a film by the Danish ‘Dogme’ film-makers that
hit home like a sledge-hammer. It began once more on a bare stage, where family and friends gathered to mark the father’s birthday. A hundred tiny oddities and discrepancies exposed a raw crime in his past, involving rape and suicide. The play was directed with a complex choreography by Rufus Norris, a young director whose career to date shows how boundary-breaking the British theatre can still be. Originally an actor, Norris directed fairy-tales for children and adults – Grimm’s Tales and Sleeping Beauty at the Young Vic, where he also staged Lope de Vega’s Peribanez. Two years ago he went with playwright David Greig to Ramallah. They worked with a group of Palestinian actors and created a dark comedy about the everyday harassments and tragedies of the Palestinians under occupation. They brought a rehearsed reading of the play to the Royal Court Theatre. Norris played an Israeli sentinel at a road-block. All he did was shout ‘no’ in Hebrew.

Breaking the mould of a career is a long-standing tradition in the British theatre: Peter Brook, at eighty worshipped as perhaps the greatest theatre director in the world, started out doing French comedies and British farce in the West End, a musical on Broadway and American plays in Paris, as well as Richard Strauss at the Royal Opera House and Shakespeare at Stratford-upon-Avon. This creative promiscuity, this alliance of avant-garde experiment with red-blooded show-business, gives British theatre a zest and edge. It’s not for nothing that at Christmas 2004 Ian McKellen, a fabled classical actor and mesmerising Gandalf in Lord of the Rings, played Widow Twankey in drag in the pantomime Aladdin at the Old Vic. This was the stage on which Laurence Olivier, Richard Burton and a galaxy of classical actors kept the plays of Shakespeare alive. As a teenager in the upper circle of the Old Vic I had an early immersion in Shakespeare, relishing the beauty of Claire Bloom and the alchemy of Shakespeare’s language. Now the Old Vic is under the artistic direction of Kevin Spacey, the latest and most determined American émigré to London’s theatre. Spacey’s is a longer-term commitment than that of most American actors who come here for limited runs: he wants London to be his base, with occasional forays into Hollywood, not the other way around.

CONCLUSION

The Behzti business, blowing up in a regional theatre but reverberating through the country, is one incident among many fluctuations in Britain’s multicultural society. It is also a sign of new awareness of cultural clashes and cross-currents in those parts of British theatre that are not ‘hermetically sealed’ from the society it inhabits, as Arthur Miller once put it.

In 2002, after a thorough-going enquiry into the entire theatrical system, the Labour government made an unprecedented funding increase, putting
£25 million over three years into theatres across the country. Some of the positive effects of this, especially in terms of allowing theatres to transcend parochialism, were mentioned above, and it is important to recognize that the production of *Behzti* at Birmingham was one of the many imaginative new departures that theatres, no longer obliged to live from hand to mouth, were able to plan and schedule in recent years as a result of this infusion of cash. Research and development of experimental projects; exploration of new subject matter; new voices from different cultural traditions; collaborative co-productions between theatres; increased touring – these have been some of the results in the public-funded theatres across the country.

In spring 2005, however, there was a *peripeteia*, a total reversal of fortunes, as at the climax of a Greek tragedy. The government decreed a freeze on arts spending and made a skittish decision to devote more of the available funds to museums instead of theatres, presumably on the basis of ‘You’ve had your turn, now give other arts forms a chance’. This means cutbacks, a return to hand-to-mouth or sudden death for many theatres, especially those outside London, who are now going to have to work on drastically tightened budgets.

This matters to theatre’s ability to tell the truth. Telling the truth ought to be easier in live theatre than in other kinds of drama. It carries the weight and expectation of so much less financial pressure. Hollywood movies may reach global audiences of billions, but they have to, in the industry parlance, ‘perform’, in order at least to recoup their costs and if possible make a profit. Above a certain budget ceiling, movies conform to genres, conventions and to interference by ‘the back office’, stars, middle-men, agents and marketing executives. This lessens their capacity to tell the truth. The same applies, at a lower budget level, to television drama, with its formats, its narratives always anxious that viewers will switch channels, its season-after-season exploitation of formulaic series, its advertisers’ requirements.

Theatre, by comparison, is a cottage industry. It is a labour-intensive, hand-crafted form, created by authors and actors, most of whom, defying the commercial logic of the age, perform in tiny auditoria and limited runs, living an insecure and often nomadic existence. In principle untrammelled by commercial and industrial pressures, theatre should have the potential, and sometimes achieves the reality, of telling the truth. The two-way contact between stage and audience shows up falsity and manipulation. But when truth is manifest on stage, you know it at once: witness, among many examples, the first night of Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* in 1949, when the curtain fell and the audience was literally stunned silent by the truth of the play, held immobile in their seats while it sank in. Miller’s play has played its part ever since in telling and showing the truth about the waste of human
life in our system, and despite his death in 2005, it will continue to do so. As Willy Loman's wife says: 'Attention must be paid'.

NOTES

1 In the Daily Telegraph, 21 December 2004.
7 Rajeev Syal, 'I'm Disgusted Ministers did nothing as Sikhs Forced Play's Closure, says Rushdie', Sunday Telegraph, 26 December 2004.
8 Gurpreet Kaur Bash, Foreword to Bhatti, Behzti, p. 10.
10 Aristotle, Politics, I, 2.
12 Bashti, Foreword to Behzti, emphasis added, p. 12.
22 Ibid., Introduction.
24 Charles Spencer, ‘Laughter all the way as Hitler’s Troupers go Down a Storm’, Daily Telegraph, 10 November 2004.
26 Notably, in a 1996 essay on Mark Twain, Arthur Miller reflected on ‘…the artist’s complicated disgust with his art, the disgust mixed with equal amounts of pride plus the feeling of control over the imaginations of other people and his guilt at having planted images in their minds which he knows are hot air molded to beautiful and sometimes meaningful forms. It is all a lie, a lie like truth’. Arthur Miller, Echoes Down the Corridor: Collected Essays, 1944-2000, Steven R. Centola, ed., New York: Viking: 2000, p. 262.