

"HOWARD BRENTON : A CRITICAL STUDY OF THE PLAYS."

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SUMMARY.

The subject of this thesis is the plays of Howard Brenton, published and unpublished, from 1965 to 1973. The period is identified as the writer's "apprenticeship".

An Introduction provides a short biography of the writer's early life and accounts of his first, now suppressed, works for the stage.

Chapter One examines his involvement with the Fringe theatre of the late nineteen-sixties. The short plays produced for the Brighton Combination and Bradford University are considered in the light of how style and form evolved largely out of practical circumstances.

Chapter Two describes the impact of contemporary political unrest on Brenton's attitude to his work. The plays Revenge and Christie in Love are discussed with reference to their production by the Royal Court Theatre and by Portable Theatre, which are identified as key agencies in furthering the writer's career.

Chapter Three deals with more Fringe work, charting the playwright's growing doubts about the efficacy of such work, and his increasing assimilation of new political thought.

In Chapter Four, Brenton's increasing desire to write for the bigger stages and audiences of the established

theatre is discussed. The chapter concentrates heavily though by no means exclusively on Hitler Dances as both a summary of the Fringe work and the progenitor of the later, full-scale, "epic" plays.

Chapter Five is concerned with Magnificence as the first of those plays and the first to be produced on the main stage of a mainstream London theatre. Particular reference is made to its troubled production history.

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My greatest debt of gratitude must belong to Howard Brenton. He has been most generous in giving me access to unpublished work and early drafts of published work. He has also given me foresight of introductions to published work. In formal interview, correspondence and private conversation he has been helpful and supportive to a degree I could hardly have anticipated..

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PREFACE

The subject of this thesis is the plays of Howard Brenton from 1965 to 1973: from his earliest work to Magnificence, his first full-length, original play to be performed on the main stage of an established London theatre.

In that time, Brenton developed from a novice writer at the University of Cambridge to a leading dramatist of his generation, and one of the first of that generation to make the move from the Fringe to the established theatre. He has subsequently become, for many, one of the most important contemporary British playwrights. Throughout his career his work has attracted controversy and his critical reception has been mixed.

The period I have identified may be thought of as the first phase of Brenton's career. This phase saw produced some twenty-two performed pieces of work. These comprise "Ladder of Fools" and "Winter, Daddykins", 1965; "It's My Criminal", 1966; Gum and Goo, Heads, The Education of Skinny Spew, Revenge and Christie in Love, 1969; Wesley and "Fruit", 1970; Scott of the Antarctic or What God Didn't See and "A Sky Blue Life: Scenes after Maxim Gorki", 1971; Hitler Dances and "How Beautiful with Badges", 1972; "Mug" and Magnificence, 1973. In addition to these original pieces, three adaptations were produced: "Gargantua", 1968; "Measure for Measure:

A Comedy", 1972; and "The Screens", 1973. Brenton was also involved in three collaborative projects - Lay By, 1971; "England's Ireland", 1972; and "A Fart for Europe", 1973 - and wrote two screenplays: a television play, "Lushly", 1972; and a film, "Skin Flicker", 1973. (The List of Plays below has fuller details of this work and includes the rest of Brenton's work to date.)

Of this work, the first three plays are regarded by the author as novice pieces and are no longer available for performance. Of the remainder, only ten plays have so far been published. In the case of unpublished work I have consulted typescripts from a variety of sources: these are indicated in the Bibliography. I have been unable to trace a copy of "The Screens". With the exception of "Measure for Measure" (Northcott Theatre, Exeter) and Magnificence (main stage, Royal Court Theatre, London) none of the stage plays after 1967 found a home in the established theatre, although it should perhaps be noted that the novice plays, "Ladder of Fools", "Winter, Daddykins", and "It's My Criminal" were produced at, respectively, the ADC Theatre, Cambridge, Nottingham Playhouse (as part of a triple bill) and - as a Sunday-night performance - on the main stage of the Royal Court Theatre. Two unperformed pieces were also produced during the period: a stage play, "The Plague Garden", 1967, suppressed by the author; and a radio play, "Government Property", 1972, commissioned by the BBC but never recorded.

I have had access to typescripts of both.

The body of work in toto may be regarded as Brenton's apprenticeship, and it is in this light that I have made my study of it.

Throughout I have concentrated on those plays which seem to me to carry the burden of Brenton's development as a dramatist, irrespective of whether they have been published. Inevitably, this means closest attention is paid to the stage plays of his single authorship. I have considered the work which falls outside this definition only in terms of the contribution it makes to the central thrust of the writer's growth: for example, I have avoided lengthy discussions of the nature of collaborative writing in favour of assessing Brenton's reasons for participating in such work and, most important, what he takes from it. However, I have provided accounts of all the plays, and particularly of those which have not been published. I have tried, too, always to relate my findings to later work, whilst avoiding the temptation to see in every line or image the seeds of some future development.

My aim has been to establish why Brenton has become the kind of writer he is by examining his earlier work in the historical, cultural and practical context of the contemporary British theatre. I have considered him as a leading member of the so-called "second wave" of new British playwrights, tracing his development from a writer of "joke" plays, aimed largely at challenging

audience assumptions about theatre, to the key role he has played in bringing on to the established stages a new kind of "British epic" theatre. Above all I have tried to show how Brenton has always been an essentially practical writer, evolving his craft through a process of experiment and self-education, writing to and for the human, technical and financial resources of the theatres that have produced his work, however limited or abundant those resources may have been.

I treat the work chronologically, except in rare instances where clarity is better served by seeing a particular strand through to its conclusion. My division of the material reflects the pattern of Brenton's career, because although there is a general movement towards longer, larger and more complex plays, there are also periods when there occur small "explosions" of shorter, more diversified work. I have allowed the structure of my thesis to reflect this, rather than impose or imply a spurious neatness or coherence.

THE PLAYS OF HOWARD BRENTON*

"Ladder of Fools"

First performance 1965, A.D.C. Theatre, Cambridge.

"Winter, Daddykins"

First performance 1965, Lantern Theatre, Dublin.

"It's My Criminal"

First performance 21 August 1966, Royal Court Theatre, London.

Gum and Goo

First performance January 1969, Brighton Combination.

Heads

First performance June 1969, University of Bradford.

The Education of Skinny Spew

First performance June 1969, University of Bradford.

Revenge

First performance 2 September 1969, Theatre Upstairs, Royal Court, London.

Christie in Love

First performance 23 November 1969, Oval House, London.

Wesley

First performance 27 February 1970, Eastbrook Hall, Bradford.

* It has not been possible to establish the precise dates of some of the early work. I give the fullest details available.

"Fruit"

First performance 28 September 1970, Theatre Upstairs,
Royal Court, London.

Scott of the Antarctic or What God Didn't See

First performance February 1971, Mecca Ice Rink, Bradford.

"A Sky Blue Life: Scenes after Maxim Gorki"

First performance 18 November 1971, Open Space, London.

Hitler Dances

First performance 20 January 1972, Traverse Theatre Club,
Edinburgh.

"How Beautiful with Badges"

First performance 2 May 1972, Open Space, London.

"Mug"

First performance 9 June 1973, Inter-Cities Conference,
Manchester.

Magnificence

First performance 28 June 1973, Royal Court Theatre, London.

The Churchill Play

First performance 8 May 1974, Nottingham Playhouse.

"Government Property"

First performance 1975, Aarhus Theatre, Aarhus, Denmark.

Weapons of Happiness

First performance 14 July 1976, National Theatre, London.

Epsom Downs

First performance 8 August 1977, Round House, London.

Sore Throats: An intimate play in two acts

First performance 8 August 1979, The Warehouse, London.

The Romans in Britain

First performance 16 October 1980, National Theatre, London.

Thirteenth Night. A dream play

First performance 2 July 1981, The Warehouse, London.

Subsequently broadcast 4 December 1983, B.B.C. Radio.

The Genius

First performance 8 September 1983, Royal Court Theatre,
London.

Bloody Poetry

First performance 1 October 1984, Haymarket Theatre,
Leicester.

ADAPTATIONS

"Gargantua"

After Rabelais. First performance 1968, Brighton Combination.

"Measure for Measure: A Comedy"

After Shakespeare. First performance 25 September 1972,
Northcott Theatre, Exeter.

"The Screens"

After Genet. First performance 20 March 1973, Bristol
New Vic Studio.

The Saliva Milkshake

See below.

TRANSLATIONS

The Life of Galileo

By Bertolt Brecht. First performance 13 August 1980,
National Theatre, London.

Danton's Death

By Georg Büchner. First performance 21 July 1982, National
Theatre, London.

COLLABORATIONS

Lay By

With Brian Clark, Trevor Griffiths, David Hare, Stephen
Poliakoff, Hugh Stoddart and Snoo Wilson.
First performance 24 August 1971, Traverse Theatre Club,
Edinburgh.

"England's Ireland"

With Tony Bicat, Brian Clark, David Edgar, Francis Fuchs,

David Hare and Snoo Wilson.

First performance September 1972, Mickery Theatre, Amsterdam.

"A Fart for Europe"

With David Edgar.

First performance 18 January 1973, Theatre Upstairs, Royal Court, London.

Brassneck

With David Hare.

First performance 19 September 1973, Nottingham Playhouse.
Subsequently broadcast 22 May 1975, B.B.C. Television.

Deeds

With Ken Campbell, Trevor Griffiths and David Hare.

First performance 8 March 1978, Nottingham Playhouse.

A Short Sharp Shock!

With Tony Howard.

First performance 21 June 1980, Theatre Royal, Stratford, London.

The first amateur performance was given simultaneously by students at the University Drama Studio, Sheffield.

Sleeping Policemen

With Tunde Ikoli.

First performance 4 October 1983, Hemel Hempstead.

Pravda. A Fleet Street Comedy

With David Hare.

First performance 2 May 1985, National Theatre, London.

FILM

"Skin Flicker"

First shown February 1973, Almost Free Theatre, London.

TELEVISION

"Lushly"

First shown 21 August 1972, B.B.C. Television.

The Saliva Milkshake

Adaptation of Conrad (Under Western Eyes). First shown 5 January 1975, B.B.C. Television. Subsequently staged: first performance 23 June 1975, Soho Poly, London.

"The Paradise Run"

First shown 6 April 1976, Thames Television.

"Desert of Lies"

First shown 13 March 1984, B.B.C. Television.

Dead Head

First shown 15 January-5 February 1986 (four weekly episodes), B.B.C. Television.

OTHER WORK

The Thing

A play for performance in schools, written 1981.

INTRODUCTION

In his diary for 11 July 1973 Sir Peter Hall makes the following entry:

To the Royal Court to see Magnificence by the new writer Howard Brenton. This is bursting with talent although not fully achieved. But there is a great imagination at work and a wonderful power of speech and character... Brenton is a writer worth watching.¹

The play which attracted Hall's attention was one of considerable significance both to its writer and to the history of modern British theatre generally. For its writer, Howard Brenton, it was the first full-length play in a career already some eight years old to be performed on one of the country's leading public stages. As such, it was also one of the first plays to secure the entrance to the mainstream theatre of a whole generation of writers who had learned their craft on the Fringe; in theatres in colleges, arts centres and village halls. That generation (it includes, inter alia, Brenton, David Hare, David Edgar and Trevor Griffiths), whilst never quite amounting to a "movement", has nonetheless shared a belief and determination that political debate is the proper stuff of the modern British theatre, Fringe or established, and that a daring and experimental theatricality is the language appropriate to such a debate. In many ways, Brenton has been the figurehead of his generation of playwrights.

Hall's interest in Magnificence and its writer produced

concrete benefits for Brenton: it was largely on the strength of that play that Weapons of Happiness was commissioned and produced by the National Theatre in 1976. Weapons began an association between writer and theatre that has continued ever since: translations of The Life of Galileo and Danton's Death were produced in 1980 and 1982, and the notorious The Romans in Britain in 1980. Most recently, Brenton's collaboration with Hare, Pravda (1985), has been immensely successful. Of all the new writers, Brenton is the most performed by the National. At the same time, his work has been regularly performed in the country's other major subsidised theatres; his association with the Royal Court pre-dates Magnificence, as shall be seen, and has continued with The Genius (1983). The Royal Shakespeare Company revived the 1974 play The Churchill Play in 1978, and premiered Sore Throats in 1979 and Thirteenth Night in 1983. This is a body of work which places the writer at the heart of the established British theatre, and suggests a "respectability" which the recent productions by the BBC of "Desert of Lies" and "Dead Head" (1984 and 1986) would seem to confirm.

Much though by no means all of the above work has been, in terms of box-office, successful. Yet Brenton, more than any other contemporary British dramatist of comparable stature (with the possible exception of Edward Bond), has consistently attracted public controversy and a critical reception that has at times bordered on the vituperative.

Most obviously, The Romans in Britain attracted a degree of public - or at least media - interest in a play almost unprecedented in the recent history of the British theatre, its director having become the object of an unsuccessful prosecution under the Sexual Offences Act.² (It is perhaps worth noting in passing that Hall kept faith with Brenton throughout the furore.) Yet Romans is by no means Brenton's first experience of public or establishment hostility. As shall be seen, earlier Fringe work like Christie in Love (1969) and "Fruit" (1970) drew critical fire, whilst "England's Ireland" and "Measure for Measure" (both 1972) encountered considerable difficulties with theatre managements. Magnificence itself has a troubled critical and production history. To a large extent such controversy, whilst never having been courted for its own sake, has been inevitable. From the beginning of his career Brenton has dealt with uncomfortable and sometimes disturbing subject matter, and has done so in ways specifically designed occasionally to shock and always to challenge his audiences. If he has become, as one commentator suggests, "the wolf within the gates" of the theatrical establishment,³ then that is an indication of his success in bringing on to the public stages ideas, issues and arguments which he has always believed properly belong there. The early, formative evolution of Brenton's brand of theatre is the subject of this thesis.

Brenton was born a "Blitz baby" in Portsmouth in 1942.

His mother, a docker's daughter, was a shop-worker; his father, a policeman, who had

joined the police force in the depression because they had nowhere else to go. They'd just got married and it was the only security.⁴

The writer's early years were spent in a "tiny council house"⁵ in Bognor Regis, where he was brought up

with policemen's families. And there was this echoing, ugly 1930s police station with the kids playing endless games of table tennis and the smell of tea and all the lost dogs tied up. I used to go and play with the lost dogs.⁶

At the age of eleven he went to Chichester High School, where he remembers himself as "sullen and churlish":⁷

I was a state school kid. It was a very vicious school. I'm glad now that the grammar schools are going. I think they are as harmful, socially, as public schools.⁸

He left the school early, against its advice, to move with his family to Yorkshire. His father, after twenty-five years as a policeman, had resigned to join the Methodist church, and his first post as minister was in Castleford.

Brenton taught in local secondary schools for a short period before the family again moved, to Ebbw Vale.

"In the Methodist Church, if you join late, you get all the hard churches."⁹

His father clearly had a considerable influence on the writer's life:

He achieved something it's very difficult to achieve - a renaissance in middle life. To actually wrest yourself out of a job which has destroyed your health. After twenty years on the beat you can't do it any more.¹⁰

Brenton remembers his father's career as a policeman with some bitterness:

He always hated it and many of his generation were disaffected coppers. The old George Dixon, the policeman who has cups of tea or is always round the backs of pubs, come (sic) from his generation. He was a figure of tremendous spunk and stood up. He became a union man for police constables. They always hated him. He never got promoted. Twenty-five years as a P.C. It takes some doing.¹¹

There are dangers in making correlations between a writer's life and the concerns of his work too readily, and Brenton himself identifies the 1973 play Magnificence as the first in which he makes direct use of his personal experience (see Chapter Five); nonetheless, the early plays do reflect to some extent the events of his life. Policemen recur throughout these plays and, particularly in Christie in Love (1969), the ordinary copper of popular imagination - the mythological "George Dixon" - is, as shall be seen, juxtaposed against a harsher characterisation that is informed at least in part by the unrewarding and physically demanding reality of his father's career. Another early piece, Wesley (1970), was written out of a sense of debt to Methodism, "which sustained my family. Not the church but the people in it. In Yorkshire it's a working-class church."¹² Brenton's distinction is significant: by eighteen he was wholly atheistic, and "we had very stormy times when I was an adolescent."¹³

His father also played a part in introducing Brenton to the theatre, although the

interest was always there. Always. My father was a keen amateur director. I remember when I was nine. I wrote a play out of the Harris Tweed strip in the old Eagle comic, just copying my father.¹⁴

At the age of fourteen, Brenton saw - against the will of his parents - a production of Look Back in Anger at an end-of-the-pier repertory theatre in Bognor which he still remembers "very vividly,"¹⁵ and, a little later, started reading John Arden, "which seemed to me marvellous."¹⁶ His own adolescent plays were "incredibly violent and huge and vast",¹⁷ and included a life of Hitler, written at the age of seventeen and subsequently burned. His interests, however, were not exclusively theatrical. He wrote poetry as well as plays, and has continued to do so throughout his career (see Bibliography); he also produced, in his teens and later, as a student, three novels. These are no longer available - "One friend has one in a garage and the other two are lost"¹⁸ - and Brenton claims their only value was that they taught him to type.* Furthermore, his hobby at school (and since) was painting, "and I wanted to be an artist, a painter. I couldn't paint hands or heads, but I painted hundreds of abstracts".²⁰ Brenton got as far as applying to and being accepted by an art college before deciding to commit himself to writing, "and I thought, well, a writer must

*It is, however, worth noting that Brenton was still at least considering writing another novel as late as 1973.¹⁹

go to university and study English."²¹ In 1962, having sat the entrance examinations, he went up to St Catherine's College, Cambridge.

Brenton hated Cambridge passionately. Although he found the freedom it allowed useful -

I soon gave up lectures and wrote all the time, and acted and ran a magazine - an appalling rag - for a while. I met a lot of fellow writers, only one of whom - John Grillo - is still writing.²²

- he was oppressed by what he perceived to be its self-regarding, unreal isolationism:

Cambridge was totally decadent in my time: like a greenhouse out of control. Inside all kinds of idiotic plants were flowering but you knew that it would only take one smashed window-pane to kill the lot.²³

Brenton's remarks concern not simply the relationship of the institution to the outside world, but also the ethos of his course. With a few notable exceptions, he found that "there's a lot of timeserving goes on in a university, a lot of careerism."²⁴ The teaching of literature seemed to him to be sealed off from life, self-sustaining and artificial, and not concerned with reality. The result was that he

became very anti-cultural. I thought it wasn't on - you didn't improve people's lives reading these books. The humanist notion behind the idea of teaching literature was just not proved. There was no enlightenment from reading a book well.²⁵

This sense of "anti-culturalism" was to become, as shall be seen, the driving force behind much of the early work.

It was at Cambridge that Brenton's writing career began in earnest. On the advice of his tutor he "stole" a year of university time and began work on what may in retrospect be seen as a sequence of plays linked in theme and thought: "Ladder of Fools", "Winter, Daddykins" and "It's My Criminal".²⁶ All three are now regarded by their author as novice work and none is available for performance. They are, in different ways, dark, nightmarish, even morbid pieces: in them, the world lacks a moral centre, authority figures are corrupt, inept or vicious, and "ordinary people" manipulative, deceitful and violent. Individuals threaten and betray their neighbours in endless battles for dominance. What is important about these plays is less their content - which is often obscure and inchoate - than what they reveal about a young writer beginning a long process of self-education in the theatre.

The first of them is "Ladder of Fools". It was written in 1964, and performed, after much editing and some re-shaping, at the ADC Theatre in Cambridge in 1965. The writer himself has described the play as "a huge, jokeless, joyless allegory."²⁷ It is certainly a difficult, often inaccessible piece; in many ways, essentially a young man's play: ambitious, experimental and largely "unworkable - the language was so ornate. There was a lot about dying animals in (it) - and there was one twenty minute speech. Every thirty seconds during

that speech someone used to leave the theatre."²⁸ A brief extract gives a flavour of the speech in question:

I heard once of some birds who nested and flew about over the sea and in the air as any other birds do. But one day the air became sick, and it made them sick. Some of the birds died. But some went into the earth and burrowed there, and made chambers and passages like moles... when the world is sick birds become moles, and men also go to ground. But you could not make the birds be birds again. If you took one in your hands and threw it at the sun it would only fall helpless at your feet, then peck itself into the dirt to get away from air and wind and warmth and everything it once loved. How can you say 'It should fly, it should love air and wind and warmth.' It doesn't. We can only say - 'Birds are blind and live in the earth'. So what can I say to you, that you should have. You have a chair for a doll, stone for a bed, foul air to breathe, a warren desert of stone to live in. To see the sky would drive you mad.

This is the first of two stories told to a lost boy by Pomjoy, one of the play's two central characters; both stories are allegorical in form and are attempts, one feels, to rescue the play generally from obscurity.

Pomjoy and his tormentor and fellow-victim, Edwin, inhabit a dark, Kafka-esque society of reality and illusion, game-playing and ritual. Above them stretches "an endless hierarchy" of vague authority; a "ladder of fools". Edwin himself belongs to it, though he is "one of the least, so low as to be almost animal". Its highest representative in the play is designated simply "The Official", but

OFFICIAL: I myself am merely the pattern stamped out by others, formed by the old thoughts from those

greater than I. Higher than I.

Under the Official's instruction, a "Secretary" and three women - Melisande (dressed in eighteenth-century costume), Clarissa (in black) and Anna (in white) - play out a series of games and role-plays designed to amuse themselves at the expense of first Pomjoy, then Edwin. Their games are concerned largely with different kinds of sexual relationship, including a mock marriage, and often seem innocent; but they erupt into unexpected violence, a violence given full expression in sequences of ritualized torture leading to the destruction of both Pomjoy and Edwin. As far as can be determined, neither is guilty of any crime other than powerlessness. Indeed, both are quite willing to participate in those games which allow them a little authority or sexual dominance. By the end of the piece, victims and tormentors alike are revealed to be "all children, really believing in bogey men"; their games, exercises in power: "...by being bullied, tyranny is passed smoothly downward". The final objective of their society is "an easy world (which) turns on its cogs, the intricate wheels and mechanisms, one thing moved by another", its inhabitants knowing their place. What cannot be allowed is individuality and anarchy of the kind revealed in Pomjoy's private world. Outside the games and role-plays, he is uncertain even of his own identity, and prey to vivid nightmarish visions of disease, physical corruption, and decay, a burden passed later to Edwin. Such chaos and

horror must be repressed, or "...each time you saw someone you would have to say: is he the same? ... Or has he in the night been visited by new thoughts out of the dark, which have made him someone else?"

Brenton's allegory suffers mainly, perhaps, from over-ambition. Parts are inchoate, other sections heavy-handed; in form and style, it lacks coherence, and the writer's precise intentions are by no means fully discernible. Uneven and esoteric as the piece is, however, it does prefigure later work in a number of significant ways. Most obviously, there is no attempt at a naturalistic presentation of the subject, and no conventional interest in the psychology of the characters. Whilst there are stories told within the play, overall a strong narrative structure is discarded in favour of a series of more loosely-linked set pieces, vivid in language and visual imagery. Indeed, there is a strong visual sense at work throughout, from a relatively sophisticated use of lighting to the formal composition of stage pictures, including tableaux. The only set is "of dull, sheer metal surfaces": changes of location are accomplished by lights, basic props, and the (nine) actors themselves. What is in evidence here is an incipient sense of a powerful and immediate theatricality, able at times to cut through the rhetorical excesses of the language used. It is this kind of theatricality that comes to characterise so much of Brenton's later work. Similarly, the seeds of future

preoccupations are present in the play's content. At the heart of Brenton's extended metaphor is a vision of a dehumanising, violent society feeding on and sustained by cruelty and fear and ruthlessly coercing its members into dependency and conformity. Opposed to that is the individual's private, inner life of imagination and desire. That inner life, constrained by and at war with society's repressiveness, turns quickly to nightmare, even psychosis. This conflict between the private and the public, the individual and the social, is a dominant theme in Brenton's early work, and, as here, often finds expression in the figure of the child and the games he plays.

Brenton left Cambridge in 1965 with a third class degree and "in a drunken neurotic state."²⁹ Later comments about the "long putrescent plays"³⁰ of his teens and university career are often tinged with humour - for "Ladder of Fools", "the record for people leaving in the middle was 45 one Thursday night"³¹ - but, more seriously, "my effort to write a long play with a great deal of seriousness had burnt me badly."³² With the exception of the suppressed "Plague Garden" (see Chapter One), it is not until Revenge, in 1969, that a play of comparable length was produced. Between the two pieces come plays of a very different kind: short, fast, comic playlets of which the first is "Winter, Daddykins".

"Winter, Daddykins" was written in 1965 as an immediate

reaction to what Brenton had already come to perceive as the florid excesses of "Ladder of Fools". It was toured extensively, including a visit to Ireland, by a company "of refugees from Central School and Cambridge"³³ and later revived at Nottingham Playhouse in November 1966. Both productions were directed by Chris Parr, who came to play an important role in the early stages of Brenton's career, as shall be seen. Brenton himself describes the piece simply as "a short farce":³⁴ it is a one-act play of five scenes and five characters. No set is used, but the stage-directions clearly specify the use of sound effects ranging from recorded music to "BIRDSONG.OUTSIDE ACOUSTICS". No instructions regarding lighting, props or costume are given.

The play begins with one of its characters addressing the audience:

Hello. I'm Rosy. This is our house: a family house. There's me and there's Mummy, and my idiot brother... and there's poor old dad. He's upstairs - stuck upstairs, you could say. I do the cleaning with my Mum and the cooking too, and the house is as clean as a pin and smells of veg., all day. (CONFIDENTIALLY) But I do have my pleasure too, on the side... if you catch my meaning.

Rosy's "pleasure" takes the form of regular bouts of sex with her boyfriend, the flashy "Luvly Boy". These take place secretly in the spare room of the house. It is the discovery of Rosy's secret by Sonny, the "idiot brother", that sets in motion the play's frenetic events. Sonny attempts to blackmail Rosy and Luvly Boy by

threatening to reveal all to their eminently respectable Mummy. Panic-stricken, Rosy hides her lover in the attic where her father has lived for thirty years, unvisited by his wife. Unsurprisingly, his grasp on reality is limited: he is obsessed by aviation and has built, but subsequently somehow lost, an aeroplane in which he entertains dreams of escaping from his attic. Rosy takes advantage of Luvly Boy's predicament, pressuring him to agree to marry her. Sonny meanwhile tells his mother what is going on; Mummy forces a confession from Rosy, but her righteous anger unexpectedly evaporates when she learns that her daughter's lover is imprisoned upstairs with her husband. Luvly Boy realizes the horrible truth: that he is as trapped by Rosy as her father is by her mother. His resistance, however, crumbles: the play ends with Daddy dying and Luvly Boy adopting his role and his attic prison.

As even the briefest comparison between the two quoted extracts shows, the play is very different from "Ladder of Fools", and yet in terms of content and thought at least it has a surprisingly close relationship with that play. Indeed, to read "Winter, Daddykins" is to come to a fuller understanding of the central concerns of the earlier piece, for Brenton's treatment of them is both more localised and more focussed. The shifting, dark, labyrinthine society of "Ladder of Fools" is concretized in the shape of the family home, the very picture of calm,

well-ordered domesticity but for the frenzied sex in the spare room and the madness in the attic. The games played in the earlier play here recur in the gender roles gleefully adopted by mother and daughter: the former's ambitions for the latter are simple -

One day you'll have a little one too...
Knitting little booties every day. Getting ready. It's lovely. That's what love is for...

- whilst Rosy's desire to marry Luvly Boy amounts to a fixation. As before, however, the role-playing, for all its apparent innocence, both masks and sustains vicious battles for dominance. Here, the women are triumphant. Sonny, like Edwin before him, is both victim and help, his volatility bordering on the disturbed:

SONNY: In the rat hole mother rat. She had a little child it's in the jaws now. Love of human bread put her there.

LUVLY: What's he saying?

ROSY: That he'll tell.

The father in his attic clings pathetically to the remnants of pride: in him Brenton parodies paternal authority as his advice to Luvly Boy collapses into fragments of worldly-wisdom, patriarchal pomposity and male bonhomie, delivered with comic ineptitude and confusion. Luvly Boy himself, for all his slick confidence, is easily and hopelessly trapped by Rosy. Yet as with Pomjoy and Edwin, there is also in the men here a sense of willingness, even complicity in the nightmare.

LUVLY: ...it's family abduction!

DADDY: What did you expect? You came in.

LUVLY: I went out. Seven years on your daughter in and out and not a door closed.

DADDY: Closed doors from the start.

LUVLY: I came. I went.

DADDY: You came. You never went.

LUVLY: No.

DADDY: Lust. You bricked it all around.

LUVLY: Don't preach.

DADDY: Bricks of lust mortar of spunk.
(LAUGHS)
Gerry built.

In "Winter, Daddykins" as in "Ladder of Fools" there is a powerful sense of cruelty and torment, of the sexes preying on each other like animals. Where, however, the earlier play rather loses its way in sheer weight of verbiage, Brenton's second attempt at the subject makes its point more clearly and simply through the comic juxtaposition of the bland surface of domestic life and its dark, even sinister underbelly.

In style as in subject the play's guiding spirit would seem to be Joe Orton, yet, as suggested, its origins in fact lie in a quite deliberate decision by Brenton simply to find a mode of writing opposite to that employed in "Ladder of Fools". Throughout his career the writer has consciously sought to educate himself in his craft, and the rejection of the rhetoric of his earlier work

in favour of the farce and jokiness of "Winter, Daddy-kins" is one of the most important lessons of his apprenticeship, for it is the first experiment in finding the kind of style that comes to characterise almost all of his early plays. Although the writing is by no means Brenton's best, it does contain elements which come to form the stylistic bedrock of later plays. Scenes are short and transitions between them rapid. Chatty colloquialism takes the place of poetic elaboration. There are few long speeches: instead, short, fast interchanges between characters dominate, often coming close to a music-hall "patter":

LUVLY: (TO HIMSELF): The idiot brother.
 (TO ROSY): We're seen?

ROSY: I think he peeped.

LUVLY: Peeped?

ROSY: The keyhole.

LUVLY: The keyhole. We'll bung it
 up.

ROSY: Too late...

Characters announce themselves informally to the audience, and subsequently stay within the bounds of two-dimensional, comic caricatures, as appropriate to farce. Indeed, the invocation of farce is apparent not simply in the comic surfeit of plot, the frantic pace, and the constant misunderstandings between characters, but emerges in the form of recognisable "routines", as when Luvly tries to escape:

LUVLY: I'm off.

ROSY: Don't leave me.

LUVLY: I'll not be vacuum cleaned.

ROSY: Luvly stay!
 (HE GOES.
 DOOR OPEN.)
 The bastard the tyke the tart
 he didn't.
 (HE'S BACK.
 DOOR SHUT.)

LUVLY: Your mother's in the kitchen.

In many ways, the radical change of direction that "Winter, Daddykins" represents is for Brenton a matter of pragmatism. Where "Ladder of Fools" drove its audiences out, the sharpness, the brevity and the jokes of the later play are designed specifically to hold attention and, simply, to entertain. There are however, wider implications:

You need to be able to write the jokes, you see, and at first I never could: jokes to a playwright are like hands and feet to an artist - once you can do them you never have to think about them again, but until you can you're in trouble.³⁵

Achieving the control and discipline in his writing that would enable him "to write the jokes" becomes the major objective of the early parts of Brenton's career.

Between the original tour of "Winter, Daddykins" in 1965 and his joining the Brighton Combination in 1968 (see Chapter One), Brenton supported his writing by doing a variety of odd jobs, including labouring and factory and kitchen work. His later comments on this period of his life suggest an education more appropriate to his aims than Cambridge could provide:

The wisest people I've met were at the odd jobs I had, where I learned from people about

how to survive, about how not to worry about money, about how to keep myself fit and reasonably fleet of foot on a difficult job. I learned that from cooks in a kitchen... The people in the factory I worked in know what's happening. They have a savage insight.³⁶

(It is worth noting that this early experience of factory life emerges ten years later in Weapons of Happiness, where it is recorded in careful detail and with some affection.) Although he spent a short period in the Civil Service ("the one useful thing about a university degree is that you can easily find a clerical job"),³⁷ he generally made a principle of avoiding the career professions:

I had to make myself unemployable at everything else first: my education had given me spurious possibilities of easy living in some office, and I knew I had to protect myself against that.³⁸

Despite the difficulties of leading such a hand-to-mouth existence - "there were long periods in which you just didn't have time to write"³⁹ - Brenton was determined to commit himself formally to being a playwright. In fact, the period produced work on four pieces. Early versions of Revenge and "A Sky Blue Life" were written in 1966-1967, whilst 1967 saw the unperformed and subsequently suppressed play, "The Plague Garden" (see Chapter One). Only one piece was performed: the third of the "novice plays", "It's My Criminal".

Subtitled "a play in four scenes", "It's My Criminal" was produced at the Royal Court Theatre in August 1966.

It was performed for one night only as a Sunday night performance, sharing the bill with Joe Orton's The Ruffian on the Stair.³⁰ In content, the play occupies similar ground to its two predecessors, and it continues the search for a harder, sharper style of writing begun in "Winter, Daddykins".

The action of the play takes place over an afternoon. Only two characters, Mike, and an older man, Georgie, take part. The play begins in an unkempt, nettle-choked allotment owned by Mike's boss, the unseen and mysterious Jenkins. Mike has trapped Georgie in the allotment shed the night before, having witnessed Georgie's attempt to burgle Jenkins' nearby house. Unaided by Mike, Georgie eventually breaks out of the shed, and there begins a cat-and-mouse game of deception and manipulation that lasts for the remainder of the play.

The more dominant character is Mike, whose volatile and unpredictable behaviour confuses and disorients Georgie. The police are not called: instead, Georgie is invited to eat at Jenkins' house, its owner being safely ill upstairs. Uneasily, Georgie agrees and is fed on what transpires to be dog meat. Now ill himself, he finds a large blonde doll in the house, a replica of a woman who may be dead in the allotment pond. The doll is for Jenkins' sexual "use". Georgie is disgusted, but begins himself to "tease" the doll sexually as Mike works it as a ventriloquist. The game is interrupted by the

arrival on stage of Jenkins, a figure in a wheelchair, swathed in rugs. It is not clear if the figure is human or itself a dummy. The stage is plunged into darkness.

When the lights return, Jenkins has gone, and Georgie has been beaten; he has been paid £20 for some unspecified "service" to Jenkins. Mike reveals the doll to be a replica of his sister Sally, murdered by Jenkins. Together, the two plan murder, though Georgie is never more than half-hearted in his support of the vicious Mike, suggesting instead they escape together to London to form a criminal gang. Mike agrees to commit the crime himself and to meet Georgie in the allotment.

When that meeting occurs, Mike is oddly silent. Georgie, confused and panic-stricken, attempts to discover if the murder has taken place. He is directed to the shed but, looking inside, finds only Jenkins' empty wheelchair. Mike points to the pond, but Georgie does not look. Mike suddenly speaks: he seems now to not recognise Georgie, and claims his own name is "Gerald". Georgie retreats, inventing aloud his story for the police. Mike is left alone on stage. He tips over the wheelchair.

"It's My Criminal" has its jokes, but it is generally a darker play than "Winter, Daddykins"; one reviewer called it "a solemn slice of Pinter".⁴¹ Certainly it shares with "Ladder of Fools" a sense of latent violence and paranoia. Mike feeds off Georgie's fear and confusion cannibalistically, and one is never entirely sure if the

gross, threatening Jenkins exists at all or if he is a nightmare invention of Mike's. As in the earlier play, ultimate authority is vague and nebulous, but its influence all-pervasive. Whether or not Jenkins is real or illusory, what he represents is a power to corrupt that expresses itself in terms of sexual perversion: in many ways, he is the first of a line of "dirty old men" who threaten younger characters in Brenton's work, and awaken in them the darker sides of their natures. Mike and even Georgie are at best ambivalent figures, more concerned with gaining ascendancy over each other than with any larger sense of right and wrong. Their world, like those of the earlier plays, is self-sustaining and runs by its own rules of power and fear. It is also inward-looking; the only sense of a world outside comes from the off-stage fields in which copulating couples are spied on by Mike.

Yet the play is not without a lighter tone: it is present in the incompetence of Georgie's criminal activity, and in the childlike glee with which the two plan their criminal future, with spells in prison as a necessary and proper part of the package: shades here of the criminal bunglers of Revenge. Moreover, if the play in some ways returns to the more nightmarish vision of "Ladder of Fools", the stylistic lessons of "Winter, Daddykins" have also been learned; Brenton is continuing his exploration of a harder, sharper style of writing and a more terse and colloquial dialogue:

GEORGIE: No need to earn it if you come with me.

MIKE: That's true.

GEORGIE: Be really filthy money with me.

MIKE: It's filthy money now.

GEORGIE: Really filthy though...

MIKE: Yes really filthy.

GEORGIE: From tarts and queens.

MIKE: We could do well.

GEORGIE: It would roll in.

Generally, however, the play is not very successful. Ultimately, it fails to achieve a convincing synthesis of the particular characters and situations it uses and the wider issues one senses it wishes to invoke. Certainly its reviewers were unimpressed: one called it simply a "crude and incoherent jumble",⁴² another felt that Brenton had

a lot to learn. His play has no atmosphere, the characterisation is flimsy, the dialogue monotonous and colourless... I think it was the most boring play I ever saw in my life.⁴³

Yet, as one of his critics allows, Brenton is still at this point in his career very much "a prentice author in search of a style",⁴³ and in this context the importance of the play for him resides in the venue of its production. The Court was the obvious place for a young writer like Brenton to send his play, and the policy of Sunday-night productions was designed specifically to help writers in his position, as Browne explains:

The play cannot be 'dolled up' by production, and hence both its strong points and its weak points are plainly visible. It is an invaluable aid to the budding playwright to be able to see his play in production, even though it may not be considered good enough for a full production.⁴⁵

Seeing his work exposed on the large public stage was one of a number of advantages for Brenton arising from the Court's production. As shall be seen, simple but important material help was also forthcoming. More than this, however, the production of "It's My Criminal" paved the way for a long and valuable association between writer and theatre. Although Brenton was never "picked up" as other Sunday-night writers were, the Court remained the natural venue for later plays like Revenge (Theatre Upstairs, 1969) and Magnificence (1973), the work which marked his return to the main stage; both pieces are, in their way, landmarks in his early career.

CHAPTER ONE

PLAYS FOR THE POOR THEATRE: 1967-1969

It is the period from 1967 to 1969 that marks the emergence of Brenton as a full-time dramatist. Indeed, he identifies 1969 as the point at which he was able, for the first time, to make his living by writing plays,¹ although full financial security was still to come. Some seven pieces remain available from this period which may be identified as playing a significant role in the writer's development. The first version of "A Sky Blue Life" and the unperformed and suppressed "The Plague Garden" have already been mentioned (see p.19). "Gargantua", Gum and Goo , Heads, and The Education of Skinny Spew are short pieces, working with a limited number of actors, minimal financial and technical resources, and playing in a wide variety of venues to audiences who would not normally go to the theatre. Furthermore, the authorship of some of these playlets is unconventional, insofar as individual pieces were not so much written for and presented to contemporary companies as made with them. In all, they seem to stand in marked contrast to Revenge : Brenton's first major, full-length, performed play for three years; a solo effort, produced for the Royal Court. Yet in a sense, the history of this phase of the dramatist's career is the history of Revenge.

Revenge was first staged in 1969, but had been three years in the writing, and went through several major revisions. In its original conception, the play was five hours long and "very literary", insofar as "it was going to be a re-write of King Lear, no less".² Brenton's dissatisfaction with early attempts at the subject is an indication of his continuing search, after the "novice plays", to find his voice as a writer. One aspect of that search is dramatised in "A Sky Blue Life", a play, like Revenge, begun in 1966-67, much revised, and not performed for several years (until 1971, in fact). A full account of the piece will accordingly be given later,* but it is worth noting here that, even as early as 1966, Brenton raises in the play important questions about the role of the writer in society, and, in line with his response to the Cambridge English course, fiercely rejects the humanist notion of the writer as moral teacher. (It might also be added that this early version of the play is rather "literary" : in comparison with the 1971 text it is static and wordy.)³ Similar preoccupations surface in "The Plague Garden". This is a long piece which carries further the concerns of the "novice plays". The nightmare vision of a degrading and alienating society remains, though the power-games of the earlier work are expressed here more clearly in terms of class relationships. Stylistically,

* See Chapter Three.

though it is a full three acts, the play shows a continuing movement towards rapidity of action and a violent anarchic jokiness which is often designed to subvert audience expectation. (A Prologue sets the tone. Two characters address the audience directly: "Prologue./Prologue./Prologue to stinking play./Prologue to smelly play./Prologue to the stinking smelly play in which./In which. Some come on and some go off.") However, what is of particular interest about the play is that it deliberately invokes The Decameron, and, in doing so, invites debate about the relationship of literature to society. Brenton's characters, like Boccaccio's, flee a plague and hide in a country villa, and tell stories to pass the time. Brenton's concern is that the stories told contain no hint of the horrific reality of the outside world: "great literature" here is escapism for the few.⁴

Notwithstanding the continuing stylistic experiments of "The Plague Garden", it is in its way as "literary" as the early drafts of "A Sky Blue Life" and Revenge. Yet by 1969 the monolithic Revenge of 1966 has vanished. Whilst, as shall be seen in the next chapter, traces of King Lear are still discernible in the final version, there is little sense of the "literary" remaining. Instead, powerful images, hard, "pared-down" language, savage jokes, fast-moving action and a disciplined structure and design combine to produce an overall effect of intense theatricality. To understand the considerable changes that Brenton's

writing goes through during this period, one must look to the short plays made with the Brighton Combination and with the students at the University of Bradford. For, although the writer himself specifies the "novice plays" as his "apprentice work",⁵ there is a real sense in which these later playlets themselves establish and begin to develop both fundamental concerns of subject matter and bedrock principles of structure and style: in them, Brenton begins to find his voice.

The Brighton Combination

Although the Royal Court production of "It's My Criminal" in 1966 was hardly a critical success, it did lead to Brenton gaining valuable experience in the theatre. Work as a stage-hand was found for him at the Court, and subsequent help from William Gaskill led to jobs as stage-manager in various provincial repertory theatres.⁶ (As shall be seen, Gaskill of all the Court directors was most sympathetic to playwrights of Brenton's generation and proved a key figure in the writer's career.) Immediately before joining the Brighton Combination, however, Brenton

had a hard period of work. I worked in an office during the day and washed up at night, and saved like mad to have just a bit of money to go and work with the Combination. I saved up six months' money and lived on it down there in Brighton.⁷

What attracted Brenton (and, incidentally, Chris Parr : see Introduction) to the Combination was the possibility of working as both writer and actor with a group he felt

to be "brave...adventurous", involved in projects that were "communicative...socially and politically active. There was the idea of very aggressive theatrical experiment."⁸

The nature of that "experiment" was typical of the kind of work being done by many of the newly-formed Fringe groups. The Brighton Combination was set up in 1967 by Jennie Harris, Ruth Marks and Noel Greig, all of whom had been influenced by Jim Haynes' work at The Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. Fed by contemporary political unrest and by a strong reaction against established theatre forms, the group aimed to develop a community theatre for a mixed audience of students, professionals and the unemployed.⁹ The character of their brand of theatre was polyglot: Brenton was exposed to a regime wherein up to six shows a week were staged, together with poetry readings, dance workshops, performance art and so on:

the idea of group work was there, the idea of instantly writing (,) the idea of responding to events - street theatre, multi-media ideas... I did a collective show and included a local painter who painted us - the actors and the whole theatre - for it. There was that kind of variety.¹⁰

In short, then, Brenton associated himself with a group whose aims, processes and resources were very much of the Fringe movement: a commitment to a radical departure from traditional forms; exploratory, often collective work; a target audience which at least attempted to cross class boundaries; and resources that were at best slender in terms of finance, equipment and venue.

Yet he has always been uneasy about the label "Fringe writer" and, ironically, identifies as the single most important conditioning factor on his career at this stage the meagreness of available resources:

What made me a so-called fringe writer was not an idea that it was ideologically good to be underground... It was the fact that I found poverty of means a great help... we had very little money. And we began trying to adapt to this and derived great strength from it. 30 shillings was the average budget for a play, and for that you could only have two torches and a board.¹¹ Ever since then, I've thought like that.

Repeatedly, in contemporary or near-contemporary interviews, Brenton stresses the importance of the practical and pragmatic circumstances of this stage of his career over and above the ideological or even the aesthetic. He identifies the influence in terms of

the feeling that you write not only the words, but for the place where the words are said. And the actors who say the words and the minds to whom they are said. They are all the things that you write with. The discipline of poverty, I think, tends to rub out the difficulties of style.¹²

In many ways, these comments may be taken as a personal manifesto for Brenton's work, not only during this early period, but throughout his career. The three considerations of specific place, human resources and audience come to form the parameters of the writer's artistic ideology, as he himself indicates:

Ever since then, I've thought like that. Even the play I've written for the Court, it's

written deliberately for the stage here,
deliberately to the audience that comes to
this theatre.¹³

The work referred to is Magnificence (1973), where, as shall be seen, considerations of both space and spectator play a very particular part in shaping the play.

The working circumstances encountered at the Combination, of course, both concretised and accelerated the process in the writer's mind - begun with "Winter, Daddykins" - whereby the rhetorical excesses of "Ladder of Fools" were being supplanted by a harder, more pared-down and "clipped" style of writing. Cambridge had encouraged him to write, but the work produced was, by his own admission, "very bad".¹⁴ In many ways, the Combination was, for Brenton, a "hard school". Whilst on the one hand it offered a complete and exciting freedom of ideas and of methods of approach, within the kind of flexible and experimental framework that is ideal for a young, inexperienced writer, working circumstances nonetheless imposed a rigorous discipline. Projects had to operate within tight budgetary limits, in spaces often devoid of technical resources, and to audiences that were, in terms of their experience of theatre, relatively unsophisticated. What was required of the writers that worked with the group, therefore, was a simple, but hard-hitting and direct style of play-making. Brenton was forced to return to basic principles; to "tailor-make" his plays for the specific practical circumstances in which they were to be produced.

"Gargantua" is typical. First produced in 1968 (thereby preceding Barrault's version, which visited Britain a year later), Brenton's adaptation of Rabelais' work clearly shows the two polarities of theatrical imaginativeness and austerity of means suggested above at work.¹⁵ Although the piece is relatively crude, and by no means looms large in the Brenton canon, some consideration of it is useful insofar as the circumstances and processes of its making demonstrate important influences on the writer regarding the nature and value of his "apprenticeship". It is from this selective angle that the play will be dealt with.

It is a short piece, lasting little more than forty minutes, and employing only six actors; its form, essentially, is that of a guided tour of Gargantua's body. A considerable amount of unpleasant anatomical detail is included, together with an enactment of the giant's birth and the rebellion of the "tourists" which leads to his death. The style of the piece is such that actors are required to move quickly from comparatively "straight" dialogue to telling jokes and performing snatches of doggerel; to mime; to the creation of slow-motion effects; to song and dance. Indeed, what repeatedly strikes one on reading the play is the evolution of a crude, but daring and powerful theatre from the barest resources.

The play is very much of the "poor theatre". The Combination's home was a school hall - with a leaking

roof - behind a café:

They had to get over difficulties, small difficulties like the box-office telephone being cut off, because they didn't have the money to pay the bill. There were candle-light shows - always full - because there was no electricity...¹⁶

Whilst simple properties and items of costume could be called upon, lighting and sound systems - when available - provided for only limited flexibility, and the first "technical" resources to be deployed were the size, shape, and structure of the building itself. The relative smallness of the theatre called for the maximum utilisation of its space, and enforced an intimate and often confrontational contact with the audience. Alcoves within the building became a family home, an organ in Gargantua's body and an executive business suite in his brain; rafters in the roof provided a structure for the exploration of the "higher" brain.

However, the richest resource available to Brenton was the group itself. The Combination's limited budget may have provided for a children's slide, stationed by the theatre door, down which the actors could slide into the giant's mouth; but the mouth itself was then formed by the group making a rugby "scrum". Likewise, most of the major set pieces throughout the piece depend not on elaborate sets and technical equipment, but on the collective action of the actors. Once inside the "mouth", the "scrum" is broken up and

TEETH EFFECT AT NORTH END IS SET UP. WILLIAM, NOEL AND HOWARD ON ALL FOURS, JOHNNY ON THEIR BACKS AS IF BETWEEN THE TEETH; COMING DOWN ON HIM, ELBOWS POINTED, KATYA AND LARA...BOTTOM THREE MOVE IN MASHING MOTION, FROM SIDE TO SIDE, AS THE UPPER TEETH COME DOWN.

Collaborative physical effects like these may not be sophisticated, but their humorous simplicity and accessibility to both participant and spectator gives them a certain raw power and hard-edged directness of style. Moreover, they are strongly suggestive of the kind of exploratory and experimental group improvisational work which informs not only particular moments, but the style and structure of the whole play, for there is a real sense in which "Gargantua" (however much in retrospect it appears an archetypal early Brenton piece) was "made" in collaboration with the Combination company.

Brenton, of course, already had some experience of the processes and conditions of group work from touring "Winter, Daddykins" with Chris Parr's company, but his involvement with that project had arisen from more or less "pragmatic" reasons;¹⁷ the Combination provided him, for the first time, with the opportunity to develop and extend his ideas by formally subjecting them to the scrutiny - both creative and critical - of a committed group of actors. As such, "Gargantua" is one of the first of a long line of collective and collaborative projects which leads on to the work with Portable Theatre (see Chapters Two & Three), and extends throughout his career

with pieces such as Hitler Dances (1972: See Chapter Four), Epsom Downs (1977), and Sleeping Policemen (1983). Whilst this kind of approach has since become considerably more complex, sophisticated and organised (as subsequent chapters will show), the work done at the Combination was essentially similar. Brenton explains:

I wrote a scenario divided into eight sections and this was used as a starting-point for rehearsal. In the afternoons the actors would improvise ideas around this, screaming and shouting as much as they wanted to. In the evening I'd go away and write a tight, closely-scripted scene based on what they'd done. Next morning we'd rehearse it carefully and then improvise again in the afternoon around the following scene.¹⁸

The final form of the piece reflects clearly the circumstances of its making. As a result of the group's work (the six improvisors included both Brenton himself and Noel Greig, one of the Combination's founding members), the eight-part scenario became a playlet of six scenes in which a wide variety of ideas and theatrical styles were invoked. The width of that variety was the almost inevitable consequence of the method of approach: with participants free to throw in new ideas, and to experiment with appropriate means of expressing them, the result could hardly be expected to cohere structurally and stylistically in quite the same way one would expect of a "conventional" play. Brenton, however - despite or perhaps because of the sense in which he felt "his own status as a writer (to be) challenged by group endeavour"¹⁹

- sought to capitalise on the process rather than work against it:

I had to put pressure on the actors the whole time not to make logical links between scenes. Actors are terrified of being made to feel fools and also often underestimate how much an audience can take. Because of this a show can be made to seem bland, safe, clean.²⁰

Indeed, notions of form and style, rather than content, tend to dominate Brenton's comments regarding his work at the Combination generally and "Gargantua" in particular:

The idea of a huge giant swallowing people appealed to me. We began to distort style. Two actors, for instance, look down at a doll's house. At the same time ten feet away there was a family sitting in an alcove - their house. The family start having Christmas dinner - when the two actors (the giants) over the doll's house suddenly announce: 'Look at those vermin!' and they take the roof off the doll's house. Then the actual family notice the roof coming off their house and DDT being sprayed in. The distortion of scales in theatre can be enormous. Stylistic innovation can be endless.²¹

The key words here are "distortion" and "innovation", for it is at this point that Brenton's own preoccupations with theatre style and those of the Combination group merge. Both shared the sense that too much of the contemporary theatre was "bland, safe, clean", but part of Brenton's experiment was not simply to startle the Combination's largely neophyte audience with a vivid, unexpected and accessible theatre, but to push further: to establish the possibilities and limits of his own writing and to see just how much his audience could "take".

Indeed, "Gargantua's" audience is asked to "take" a

lot, for much of the playlet constitutes an aggressive and disturbing assault on the spectator's sensibilities. Reference has already been made to the multifarious demands placed on the actors, but it needs to be stressed that the piece depends almost entirely for its success on the full utilisation of the individual and collective resources of their voices and bodies. For "Gargantua" represents an intensely physical brand of theatre. Across the spectrum of theatrical style, from the visual and atmospheric to the linguistic, the hallmarks of the piece are violence, anarchy and savage humour, working towards the constant dislocation and under-cutting of audience expectation. Vivid images follow in rapid succession; tone, pace and atmosphere change suddenly and unpredictably; a laconic, fierce language is liberally sprinkled with sexual and scatological references. For example, the account of the giant's birth, which begins as a children's story:

KATYA: Gargantua was born hairy like a sheep, and big.

JOHNNY: How big?

KATYA: Big as St. Paul's Cathedral.

ALL: Big as St. Paul's Cathedral?

HOWARD: He must have had a big ma then.

KATYA: He did, she was mom-umental. A monument to mothers everywhere. She was as big as Ben Nevis. Her navel was like Loch Lomond, and her cunt like the Cheddar Gorge.

LARA, JOHNNY, NOEL, WILLIAM AND HOWARD TURN TO AUDIENCE. ABANDON CHILDISHNESS HERE.

ALL: Her navel was like Loch Lomond and her cunt like the Cheddar Gorge.

KATYA: And the manner of her birth, was out.

NOEL: Was out. (STANDS)

LARA: Was out. (STANDS)

JOHNNY: Was out. (STANDS)

HOWARD: Was out. (STANDS)

KATYA: Of his mother's (SWEETLY) ear.

NOEL, LARA, JOHNNY AND HOWARD
TURN INWARD

ALL: Ah.

WILLIAM: (FROM THE LIGHTING BOX, AS AN ANNOUNCEMENT): The occasion and manner of the birth of Gargantua out of his mother Queen Gargamelle's ear. And if you don't believe it may your arse drop off.
Gargamelle was eating tripe.

ALL: (CLUTCHING STOMACHS, DOWN AND UP):
Ugh tripe...

The passage is typical of the whole piece: the swift interchange of styles, of tone, of vocal register, and the building towards a climax which is then immediately and savagely undercut, dominate the whole playlet. In fact, despite the superficial anarchy, it is possible to ascribe to the work a single, pre-dominant mode, whereby a comfortable, instantly recognisable style is lightly parodied ("Good afternoon. I am your official guide. My name is Mr Bartlett, call me Reg. You are standing at this moment in Gargantua's mouth..."), then suddenly and savagely cut down by a deflating joke. Furthermore,

although the group improvisational work of the Combination members is clearly visible in the final script of the play, its overall style is equally clearly Brenton's: this kind of "savage, absurdist, black comedy",²² first apparent in "Winter, Daddykins", undergoes a process of catalysis at the Combination, and continues to develop throughout the early part of his career. Indeed, as hinted in the Introduction, the discovery that he could "tell jokes"²³ goes on to become the bedrock of his work.

Gum and Goo; Heads; The Education of Skinny Spew

My comments regarding "Gargantua" have been very much concerned with the early evolution of style out of practical circumstances. Brenton himself, however, has always been wary of the word "style":

Playwriting is a very dirty art, it's not pure. I distrust all purists in the theatre, because they're only talking about style. The only way I can write is to use comedy basically and write gags.²⁴

This unease extends beyond formal considerations to any critical attempt to endow these, the very early plays, with undue "significance": consistently, the writer speaks of this period of his career simply in terms of the "joy" of being able to "tell jokes", of being able

to make an audience laugh - and for a short while that was enough. The fact that you could put together a piece of drama, acting, and people would find it amusing and laugh at it.²⁵

Brenton's refutation of any developed political and

ideological background to these pieces, however, should not be taken to mean that they are altogether devoid of "significance". As has already been suggested, they are of considerable importance in coming to an understanding of how Brenton's writing style was formulated. More than this, one can trace in them, often in only embryonic form, specific ideas and areas of content and theme that come to form central concerns throughout the playwright's career.

Gum and Goo²⁶ is the best known of the pieces Brenton produced for the Combination. It was written and produced in January 1969 as a response to an invitation from a teachers' conference. As the writer suggests, the circumstances of its production were essentially similar to those of "Gargantua": "I wrote a sketch about a girl crawling into a hole - which two actors then worked on. We played children's games for two days - then I wrote the play."²⁷ Again, the three concerns of place, audience and actors dominated the making of the play:

The play was formed by thinking of whom it was being done for (the teachers), where (a gymnasium floor with two big lights and a possible blackout), and who was free to do it (two big blokes, James Carter and myself, and a girl, Katya Benjamin).²⁸

Brenton further stresses the positive aspects of working within these kinds of limitations:

It gave the show a hard vocabulary - the limitations became a kind of freedom. I learnt how to write precisely - with extreme concentration.²⁹

However, whilst Gum and Goo is thus identifiable as a

"Combination piece", it received by far the greatest number of performances, and a production preferred by Brenton,³⁰ by the students of Bradford University.

Brenton's association with Bradford began in 1969 when he left the Combination. He had been sufficiently impressed by the Combination's work to hope that it might provide an ideal "breeding ground" for young writers such as himself and, with Chris Parr, went so far as to approach the Arts Council with an appropriate scheme.³¹ The Combination itself, however, was more interested in community work generally, rather than "simple" theatre:

(Young writers) saw it and thought great, an ideal place to put on our plays. And I really think that is all they saw, not the whole thing, not the new audiences. They just saw a little company to put on their plays. But none of them actually stayed because we weren't interested in what they were interested in - which was a literary field. Howard stayed with us a time and we did a number of his plays. But after a while he decided he wanted to write plays for theatre audiences. We were more interested in the process and the young people that were coming in.³²

If these remarks are taken as an accurate reading of the situation, then it may be argued that the seeds of Brenton's disenchantment with some aspects of Fringe theatre, which finally resulted in his move into the major public theatres in the early 1970s, were in fact sown as early as 1969. Certainly, the playwright felt at the time - not without irony, given the future pattern of his career - that at least one element of the Combination's "process" was beginning to inhibit his development: "before I'd collaborate

again I'd prefer to wait until there's three or four people who know each other intimately and don't mind taking risks".³³

Brenton's feelings were shared by Chris Parr, who left the Combination and

went to Bradford University, and formed a very lively, very unpretentious, hard-working line in university theatre. The idea was to do all new work.³⁴

The writer produced several plays for the University of Bradford Drama Group, together with two occasional pieces, commissioned and directed by Parr, for the 1970 and 1971 Bradford Festivals: Wesley, an account of the preacher's life "written to be performed in"³⁵ a Methodist church, and Scott of the Antarctic or What God Didn't See produced, on skates, in the local ice rink (see Chapter Three). The most performed of the Bradford work, however, were the three short plays done by the student amateurs of the University group "after or during rock concerts"³⁶ there, and subsequently toured as a trilogy to summer student festivals (Lancaster, Colchester inter al.) and to the Edinburgh Festival (September 1970): Gum and Goo, Heads (written in June 1969) and The Education of Skinny Spew (also produced in June 1969).³⁷ My analysis will centre on these three plays, taking them as a trilogy, and concentrating on Gum and Goo, which I take to be the best of them.

The conditions under which the trilogy toured - mainly to students' union buildings around the country, but the

itinerary included at least one "straight" booking, at Bretton Hall - put not only the student actors but the plays themselves under considerable pressure. Most of the tour was undertaken in a small van which accommodated not only the three actors and stage-manager, but also sound and lighting equipment, the group having learned not to rely on their venues' own technical resources. Jo Taylor (née Stell), the stage-manager and lighting technician, recalls that group feeling was nonetheless good, due at least in part to Parr's "open and fair" initial direction.³⁸ Brenton himself - who did not tour with the group but occasionally visited venues on the itinerary - describes the impulse behind the plays as

Fear. Fear of the play not 'holding' in the rough circumstances, and not being 'held' by the good, but elementary, straightforward performances you get from students. That fear was very creative - when playwrights lose it, they go otiose...flabby.³⁹

Indeed, it was Brenton's experience at the Combination of "tailor-making" his plays that did most to ease the pressures of touring. All three plays are short three-handers requiring no set and only very limited properties (Gum and Goo requires only a ball, two bicycle lamps and a blackout facility, reflecting its original budget of 30/-). Moreover, Heads and Skinny Spew were written specifically for the Bradford students. Taylor comments that the part of Skinny Spew was created out of and for the tall, thin Greg Philo, and that the style of both

pieces was influenced by the "aggressive, quick, mocking, energetic" character of Phil Emmanuel. Moreover, Brenton's initial contact with the group was very close: advising, listening to problems, and - even at this early stage of his career - giving very specific and precise instructions regarding the relatively simple, but important, special effects the plays demand.* In fact, despite the difficulties of touring, the plays "seemed to drop into their surroundings with remarkable ease." Taylor confirms Brenton's description of the pieces as "just jokes" that were "not saying anything." Audience reaction was "tolerant."

However, it is perhaps significant that, according to Taylor, the trilogy was well received by its Edinburgh Festival audiences. Although the Bradford group was by no means the only Fringe representative at the Festival - they shared a theatre with The Pip Simmonds Group, for example - Taylor ascribes much of the popularity of the plays to audience reaction to what seemed, at least, to be a Festival dominated by Chekhov and Pinter, and this is precisely the audience, in general terms, that Brenton was seeking:

* One may go as far as to suggest that Brenton's early experience of group play-making, and of his contact with the Bradford group, encouraged in him the wish to remain close to rehearsal processes throughout his career, as shall be seen.

I wanted to get ideas to 'get up and dance', and felt that by putting 'slice-of-life' stuff - which was what serious drama was taken with at the time - on to the stage, I couldn't really do that. So I wanted to get a so-called un-naturalistic or un-realistic theatre in order, so far as I was concerned, to be more realistic. I had that notion of the theatre as extremely brightly-coloured and capable of internal space, internal thoughts, of many many things as well as drama set in the detailed study of behaviour.⁴⁰

What is significant here is the growing emergence in Brenton's thinking about his art of a theatre that is not simply oppositional, but that is capable of expressing new concerns in new ways.

What Brenton means by "internal space, internal thoughts" is most clearly represented by Gum and Goo, the first play to attempt to "get inside" a character's head. Mary, the play's central figure, is autistic; lonely, isolated, living in her own enclosed world:

MICHELE: In the extreme condition, the child's senses are totally dislocated. Fire is cold, cold burns. Words screech. Animate objects are stone. The child walks on another planet, converses with beings not conceived of by the natural world.
(p.60)

Mary's childish, fantastic inner world is, in the first place, an appealing escape:

The dark inside.
The light inside the dark inside.
The beautiful lands inside.
The lovely ladies in the fields inside.
The silver children and the animals at play inside.
The snows, and Christmas-is-forever inside.
(p.60)

Brenton's technique, however, is not simply to verbalise

Mary's inner state. Where in "Gargantua", the theatre itself became the inside of the giant's body, so in Gum and Goo the stage fills out to represent Mary's solipsistic world, and the clue to the staging method is given in the opening lines of the quoted speech. The inner world is one of blackness, lit only by the hand-torches used to pick out the ghostly, disembodied heads of Mary's sinister "friends", the eponymous Gum and Goo. Possibly the most memorable aspect of the play is this, its visual power, composed in black and white of inky darkness and fiercely-lit faces; as such, it represents one of the earliest examples in the writer's work of the sort of imaginative use of lighting that is to become one of his most striking characteristics as a stage-craftsman. One thinks, for example, of the opening scene of Weapons of Happiness (1976). Again, the origins lie in poverty of resource.

What drives Mary to the creation of her inner world is the sterility and barrenness of her environment. The landscape of the play is inhospitable: rocks; a hole in the ground; the mindless bustle of a city street. Brenton has always been fascinated by the effects of an alien environment on the individual mind: in Weapons, that environment is one of urban decay; in Scott and Desert of Lies (1984), natural wastes. In either case, the focus of interest is fixed on the breakdown of identity under extreme pressure. As shall be seen, some of these central figures (Scott, Violette in Hitler Dances) become

strange, twisted "heroes" in their attempt to cope with intolerable pressure; others, like Mary, retreat into a kind of sensory withdrawal.

Perhaps more important than the effects of the natural environment on Mary, however, are the effects of her social environment. Her life is seen to be devoid of positive human contact. Indeed, the form of the play is characterised by a series of theatrical set pieces; in each of which Mary is driven further into herself by the action - or inaction - of others: the cruelty and viciousness of her friends; the comic lack of understanding of her parents; the cliché-mouthing policeman. The pattern is set by the opening scene. The play's establishing stage-directions describe games of "touch-he" and "pig in the middle" to be played by the three actors as the audience enters. The play proper begins when, for no immediately apparent reason, the two male actors suddenly "PLAY DEAD, LET THE BALL ROLL AWAY" (p.57), thereby ruthlessly excluding the actress from the game. The cue thus given, the actress moves into the role of the isolated Mary, the two actors into her childish tormentors, who initiate a vicious verbal attack on her. Whether the styles of subsequent scenes be dark or light in comic tone, the effect is always the same: the gradual destruction of Mary.

"Playing", in its various forms, recurs throughout Brenton's work, either as children's games or as their adult equivalents, sports. One thinks of the games in

Hitler Dances, of football in The Churchill Play, cricket in Weapons, and the Celtic "proto-football" in The Romans in Britain. Specific dramatic intentions of course vary from play to play, as shall be seen, but the general aim remains the same as it is in Gum and Goo. The origins of Brenton's interest in games lie partly in a general contemporary Fringe preoccupation with the notion, and partly in his own experience as a teacher in Yorkshire. Moreover, the relationship between children's playing and theatrical "playing" is one of which both writers and commentators have long been aware.⁴¹ To this extent, Brenton's own use of game-playing fits easily into a long theatrical tradition; a game, played on stage, offers a metaphorical clue to an audience as to how to read the play, for the fundamental concerns of both "games" are essentially similar: creativity, imagination, pretence. More particularly, however, Brenton fixes on, and develops throughout his career, a further aspect of the game-metaphor: the rapid, aggressive dynamism of children's play signifies the type of social and ideological interaction - making ideas "'get up and dance'" - that lies at the heart of his style.

The games in Gum and Goo, whilst displaying the "virtues" of creativity and imagination, nonetheless prove to be the agents of Mary's destruction. The passion and vitality of the players sets them apart from the adult caricatures which surround them, but their energies are ultimately

turned to deadly effect. What moulds the child's behaviour - not only in this play, but also in Skinny Spew - are the horrific and violent undercurrents of a society which, although impoverished, seems superficially to be bland and "safe". The child's anarchic imagination finds outlet in a sub-cultural world of monsters, be they real or fictional - Hitler, Capone, Crippen, Dracula - or, as in Mary's case, invented. Their reference points are figures from folk-mythology or from comic strips or horror films. The climax of Gum and Goo comes when the boys unwittingly unleash the violent reality behind their game of "Cowboys and Indians", and the fantasy of Mary's inner life becomes an horrific reality from which she cannot escape.

Implicit in my comments is the suggestion that Brenton is beginning to give voice to an increased sense of social criticism in these plays. Indeed, one may go so far as to argue that, in Gum and Goo, Mary's "autism" is not so much medical as sociological.⁴² Bull makes the point more generally that "the children are not portrayed as embryonically rational creatures in an innocent world, but as disturbingly frank examples of the aggressive animality that surrounds them in the grown-up society. Their playgrounds are urban battlefields of blood and sex..."⁴³ Ansoorge notes that "education, present-day adult society, are usually portrayed as corrupt, calcifying influences on younger, more creative energies."⁴⁴ The

like to see her silly legs up burning
and her knickers turning black. And
when all the world was burnt I'd. I'd.
Be happy.

(p.63)

However, Brenton celebrates his child anti-heroes, insofar as their energy, imagination and vitality set them apart from the shallow sterility of the adult world. In fact, as shall be seen, this kind of description, or inversion, of conventional values becomes a key component of the style of much of the early work, culminating in the black celebration of the mass-murderer in Christie in Love (see Chapter Two).

It must be stressed again that the central preoccupations of these plays arise more from instinct than from a conscious political or artistic ideology. Indeed, Brenton has even gone as far as to claim that he "didn't really know what they were about."⁴⁵ However, I have already indicated the presence of a number of ideas and themes, albeit in embryonic form, which come to assume a degree of considerable importance later in the writer's career, and the point may be developed further in broader, more generalised terms. The sense the plays contain of one generation corrupting another, of the public world of adults in their social roles at destructive odds with the volatile, anarchic private reality of children, comes to provide an increasingly concrete and sophisticated structure of thought within which Brenton is able to work out more detailed and complex analyses of the relationship between society and the individual.

The seeds of what is to be a crucial component of the structural design of the writer's work are sown in this early work, most particularly in the figure of the "dirty old man" who appears in both Gum and Goo and Skinny Spew. In many ways, he is the key figure, the arch-representative, of the adult world; to the children, he is fascinating, seductive, and dangerous, an ambivalent figure who is both a proper inhabitant of their nightmarish inner fantasies and a representative of the sinister under-belly of adult life. As a character, he is most fully worked-out in Gum and Goo. Here, he is identified as an ex-soldier, who "made the dead" (p.66). His appeal to Mary is clear: she equates him with Dracula, and her description of the film prompts a change in him. He "JERKS AND BEGINS TO TURN ROUND", continuing:

GREG: The dead lie with rotting eyes.
 And the Lord calls, and they
 rise up. Have a sweetie.
 (MICHELE TAKES ONE.
 GREG, AT ONCE.)
 I got a place.

MICHELE: What, a secret place?

GREG: Out there.
 (GREG GESTURES.)

MICHELE: Out on the rocks? It's creepy
 there.

GREG: There.

MICHELE: It your Dracula tomb?
 (MICHELE STANDS)
 Let's go there mister, go there and
 play...

(pp.66-67)

There is a strong sense here of the supernatural, almost of a "black mass". The old man is arrested before harm is done, but the "rocks" remain the scene of Mary's final destruction. We discover later that they cannot be made safe because, as an Ancient Monument, they are under a Preservation Order. The implication seems clear: past violence continues to breed in contemporary popular and folk culture, and remains just as deadly. The episode is comparatively short and is written minimalistically, but similar references, notably to figures of the last war, occur elsewhere in the text, often in the children's games, and combine to suggest that the recent past has a distorting effect on modern society. The theme returns again and again in Brenton's work, and is consistently characterised by the motif of the relationship between the child and the old man. Considerable variations are rung, of course, from play to play, and the results are not always as negative and destructive as they are in Gum and Goo; one thinks of Janice and Josef Frank in Weapons, and, perhaps less obviously, of Gilly and Leo in the 1983 play, The Genius. Most strikingly, however, Hitler Dances takes precisely the same theme and makes it a subject, analysing in considerable detail how recent history, in the figure of the resurrected dead German soldier, Hans, seduces and damages later generations. It is significant that, in terms of story, character and characterisation, and style, there are very strong links

between this play and Gum and Goo. Indeed, as shall be seen (Chapter Four), the latter play stands, if not quite as a blueprint, then certainly as a preliminary sketch, for Hitler Dances.

If the content of these early pieces contains the seeds of future preoccupations, then one may also find in their style Brenton experimenting with ideas and techniques of presentation that come to play an important part in the development of his writing. Most obviously, style is non-naturalistic. More than that, it is fiercely anti-naturalistic. Settings are bare; character, sketched vividly but minimalistically. Narrative per se is not a major preoccupation: the story of any of the pieces can be comfortably accommodated in one descriptive sentence. The conventions of the then dominant mode of the English stage, which Brenton characterises as "soft realism", articulating an "English humanism (which) seemed to be very weak and suspect",⁴⁶ are discarded in favour of a style that is savagely imagistic and theatrical, even farcical:

My instinct was to go for performance plays, pantomime plays - their nihilism seemed to me more humanistic than these loving, pallid representations of how people suffered.⁴⁷

The texts are suffused with a sense of the morbid, of moments of an almost Gothic horror, and of an emphasis on the scatological and physically repulsive which is first evident in the "novice plays" and in "Gargantua".

At the very heart of this savage, "nihilistic" style

is the avowed intention of seeking to achieve the maximum possible impact on an audience. This is the criterion which determines all aspects of the construction of these plays:

With the three-handers I had to think like that for the first time because they were a student audience, dates that were often in between rock concerts, and student performers. So I thought, any second is really worth gaining, a second where you can do something really good and clear is an advance, because the odds are against you, or said to be against you. So you sort a way to turn it to your advantage, just as part of the grammar in which you put it together.⁴⁸

Brenton's intentions are perhaps clearest in the simplicity and power of the visual images he presents: the girl in a hole in Gum and Goo; the birth in Skinny Spew, the exchange of bodies in Heads. The intensity of these images, as seen, can be truly disturbing. Yet the determination to "hit" an audience extends beyond the visual to inform the very style of writing. Both interchanges of dialogue and the (more infrequent) monologues are of a language that is hard-edged, rapid and direct, bereft of the kind of supplementary lines that detail story and setting and fill out character. Considerable strain is thus placed on the actor: the sense of a line lost in timing or delivery cannot later be regained through the subtle manipulation of, for example, a pause, for the ruthless excision of all that does not directly pertain to the achievement of the clearest and most direct statement of intention at any given moment, precludes it. The demands of the

technique - a high input of energy and fierce concentration on the part of the actors - may seem surprising in plays which seem at first anarchic and loose-limbed, but they become an absolutely crucial component of the writer's style. Though intentions are clearly different, the style itself becomes one of the defining characteristics of the "British epic", the artistic ideology which comes to dominate the later part of Brenton's career.*

If, however, Brenton placed these not inconsiderable demands on student actors, then he also sought to incorporate into his text various technical means by which they could be achieved. The point may be illustrated by a brief examination of an episode in Gum and Goo. The appearance of the "dirty old man" is of considerable dramatic importance, and the accompanying stage-directions are precise:

GREG GOES INTO AN OLD MAN, GOING ROUND THE
CIRCLE WORKING INTO A LIMP, A DRAG OF THE
LIMPING LEG, SWINGING OF AN ARM, COUGH,
SPIT AND STOOP.
STOPS BY MICHELE.

(p.66)

To the audience the intention is clear: an important figure is being carefully introduced, the manner of his introduction suggesting, through the slow build-up of tension, the slightly comic unease in which he should

* See Chapter Four, Hitler Dances. The writer himself briefly discusses the point in his Preface to "Plays:One".⁴⁹

be held. Yet the pace and timing of the entrance, and its step-by-step creation of the new character also instruct the actor how to achieve the otherwise difficult transition to this, a slow-moving, restrained scene, from its immediate predecessor in which the same actor, as Mary's father, has been the victim of an assault by his daughter in fast-moving, anarchic, farcical vein. Again, practical considerations - in this case, a developing understanding of the nature and difficulties facing his actors - informs Brenton's style and construction of his work and becomes "part of the grammar" of his writing.

Critical awareness of Brenton at this early stage of his career was, inevitably, limited. When Heads and Skinny Spew were produced as a double-bill at the Green Banana in London in 1970, however, they drew some attention, in particular that of Michael Billington:

Both plays are swift, sharp and have a theme neatly tailored to their length... Mr Brenton deliberately eschews psychological minutiae in order to present us with something instantly arresting in its use of bold, primary effects... the emphasis is on instant definition of character and the total sacrifice of realism to strip-cartoon brightness.⁵⁰

Billington's comments are generally positive, and show a clear and fair grasp of Brenton's priorities. It is worth mentioning here, however, that the references made to cartoons go on to give rise to misconceptions concerning the writer's methods of characterisation, especially in his later work. Clearly, cartoons - both the domestic variety (see Introduction) and contemporary American comic

strips - are an important influence in determining style. The world of these plays is scaled down, sketched simply and vividly, and peopled with caricatures not far removed from the character typology of The Eagle. (Bull cites "Major Bertram Buggery...Head Warden, Queen Elizabeth Home for Orphaned Little Bleeders" in Skinny Spew as a clear example.)⁵¹ Yet whilst "strip-cartoon" may be fairly taken as a broad description of style, it takes into account neither Brenton's developing, if nascent, notions of how human nature should be represented on stage, nor how his methods of presenting character inter-relation reflect specific dramatic intentions. For, just as the basic scenarios of these plays establish a framework within which social criticism is implicit, so those "savage insights" into character, which reveal a startlingly anarchic and violent picture of the mind, begin to articulate a view of human nature which is to become a central tenet of Brenton's artistic and political ideology. Again, it must be remembered that, at this stage in his career, Brenton's ideas were instinctive rather than clearly formulated, but it remains true that the energy, volatility and imagination shown by Mary and Skinny in particular are shared by many of the writer's later characters - one thinks especially of Linda and Violette in Hitler Dances - when they are seen to be central components of a particular "inner life" - in fact a psychology - that is complex and detailed.

The notion of "cartoon characters", however, comes

later in the writer's career to be used particularly pejoratively with regard to his characterisation of those figures who represent social and political institutions; in the trilogy, by parents, doctors, policemen et al.. The charge will be dealt with in more detail as and when it arises, but, again, the early work contains important clues as to Brenton's intentions. Certainly, many of these characters are written as comic stereotypes: cliché-mouthing, two-dimensional caricatures. However, as such, they form a vital part of the structure, and hence the meaning, of the pieces. In fact, they are in many ways defined by the structure of the plays. It has been suggested that the characters who surround Mary and Skinny are the agents of their destruction; indeed, that is all they are. As unthinking mouthpieces of received attitudes, they are the sum total of those attitudes and nothing more. To this extent they are not so much "characters" as roles, their flatness at once explaining and throwing into vivid relief the imaginative energy of their victims. Again, what is not necessary to the essential "drive" of the plays - in this case, any sense of psychological "roundness" - is ruthlessly excluded. The technique in Heads is a little different. Where, in Gum and Goo and Skinny Spew, the "inner life" of the children is set in constant juxtaposition to the social caricatures around them, the three protagonists of Heads are, for most of the play, themselves all two-dimensional, representing

stock, received notions of sexual typology. It is only at the end of the play, when the two men, having had their heads exchanged by Megan in her bloody attempt to create the perfect man, are left mutilated and wretched, that the audience is confronted by "real" people instead of "ideas". The savage bathos of the technique looks forward in particular to Christie in Love. More importantly, however, the notion of rejecting an exploration of "psychological minutiae" in favour of the presentation of "characters" whose limits are defined simply by their function in relation to the central concerns of a play - its "message" - is again one which develops into a precise and complex technique in the later "epic" plays.

Nonetheless, however much one may identify in these early pieces ideas and techniques which continue to develop throughout Brenton's career, one's first, and perhaps most accurate, impression is that they are very much plays of their time: anarchic, subversive and nihilistic. (Brenton admits that they were written in a "kind of anarchic spirit" that he shared with many of his generation.)⁵² As already suggested, the main vehicle of that spirit is a cruel, scabrous comedy; the central method of the comedy, the use of bathos and related techniques. The denouement of Heads, mentioned above, is perhaps the most clear-cut and vivid example of bathos at work, but the technique is to be found throughout the early plays, embedded in their structure down to the simplest verbal joke.

GREG: 'Ere. I bet her Dad's a gorilla.

PHIL: I bet her Ma's a Ford Cortina.

GREG: Don't be stupid. A gorilla and a Ford Cortina can't have sex.

PHIL: Yeh, they can...

.....

GREG: Where would the gorilla put it in then? That's what I'd like to know. Where would he put it in?

PHIL: In her petrol pump!

GREG: Up her exhaust!

PHIL: Smash right through her rear window!

GREG: You've got a dirty mind for a twelve-year-old.

PHIL: Yours in't bad, and you're eleven.

(Gum and Goo, pp.57-8; the joke, of course, is given added humour by having the "children" played by adult actors.) The intention is simple. A vital part of Brenton's aim of "reaching" his audience as powerfully as possible is to disturb their sensibilities: to set up expectation, then undercut and dislocate. Elsewhere, the technique is less clear-cut than in the two examples given above. Often, the audience is required to respond with an uneasy ambivalence to a single episode. Skinny Spew's birth, for example, is in many ways horrific: dimming light, a pounding heartbeat, a screaming mother. Yet as the climax builds, audience response is undercut by Skinny's own voice-over comments ("I know. I'll startle medical science and come out through her bum" (p.93)) and by the "gung-ho"

incompetence of the attending doctor. At one point, the delivery becomes literally a tug-of-war between mother and doctor, the savagery and force of the moment being given equal weight. Indeed, the subjects of all three plays are inherently serious : the alienation of children, the lovelessness of sexual relationships; it is the treatment accorded them that is comic. The resulting ambivalence and tension of an audience's emotional response is precisely what Brenton seeks. It lies at the heart of both his growing vision of the world he wants to write about - "the only thing that binds us together today is profound unease, and laughter is the language of that unease"⁵³ - and the way he writes and constructs his plays:

small plays are anecdotal and they are also like one-off propositions; and they often follow the structure of jokes, of one joke - setting it up, moving it away, from what the pay-off is and then switching back. They have that kind of shape to them.⁵⁴

This pattern informs the structure of all three plays, but is perhaps clearest in Gum and Goo, with its constant juxtaposition of the volatility of Mary's mind with the flat parodies around her; her savage assault on her parents which topples into farce; the threat of the old man made ridiculous by her readiness to participate and the arrival of a cardboard cut-out policeman; the children's game that suddenly becomes "real"; and, finally, the savage comedy of the whole piece suddenly and ruthlessly questioned as Mary dies.

Yet there is a sense in which the very nature of this type of play-writing leads the dramatist further, away from the simply entertaining. Brenton himself comments, "I was writing blind, I think, stumbling into things" and goes on:

Then the question - jokes about what? - begins to get to you, and at that point the ground opens under your feet, and you ask, What are my plays about? What do I think actually about the world? What do you care about? What do you hate? What do you love? And you're on the way to being a proper playwright, when that happens.⁵⁵

CHAPTER TWO

REVENGE AND CHRISTIE IN LOVE : 1969

1969 was an important year for Brenton. It saw, in its latter part, the productions of two plays which together mark the beginning of an acceleration in his career whereby the work both expands in scope and is presented to larger audiences. The key roles in that acceleration were those played by the Royal Court Theatre and by Portable Theatre. For the Court's Theatre Upstairs he produced Revenge in September 1969, a play which won him the John Whiting Award. The Theatre Upstairs was also a key venue on the touring network of Portable Theatre, which Brenton joined in November 1969 with Christie in Love.

It was also in 1969 that Brenton visited Paris, a year after the "événements".¹ The experience affected him profoundly, and was to exert a major influence on the future direction of his career:

(I) met many people who were survivors - barely survivors - of what had happened in '68. I began to think of political things for the first time. The sense of loss was enormous: something had been attempted by my generation and it had been smashed.²

Brenton, of course, was not the only writer to have this kind of response to the events of May 1968: indeed, the crushing of the French dissidents' rebellion may be said to have politicised a whole generation of British playwrights

including, notably, David Hare and David Edgar.³ In Brenton's case, his vague "anti-culturalism", developed at Cambridge and tentatively and instinctively articulated in the early short plays, was suddenly placed not simply in a wider context, but in a framework of systematic thought that enabled him, over the course of a number of plays, to develop his own thinking with increasing complexity and sophistication. The process is a gradual one, and ironically the influence of May 1968 on his work is not fully clear until Magnificence (1973), by which time the spirit of the "événements" is itself being questioned (see Chapter Five). Yet, as shall be seen in the next chapter, aspects of the kind of political thought that was generated by the rebellion begin to emerge in later Portable work like "Fruit" (1970) and come to assume increasing importance more generally.

As has been seen, the origins of Revenge pre-date 1968, and whilst it is at least arguable that Christie in Love shows some trace of Brenton's absorption of the kind of new political thinking inspired by the "événements", the point is hardly a major one: both pieces are best seen in terms of their developing the concerns of earlier work. However, there is one sense in which Brenton's visit to France in the aftermath of May 1968 exerted a more immediate influence. From Revenge and Christie onwards there is a new sense of urgency in Brenton's writing, an urgency occasioned by the shock he felt at the ruthlessness

with which the dissidents were destroyed:

(May 1968) destroyed the notions of personal freedom...anarchist political action. And it failed. It was defeated. A generation dreaming of a beautiful utopia was kicked - kicked awake and not dead. I've got to believe not kicked dead. May '68 gave me a desperation I still have.⁴

This "desperation" translates readily into the anger and occasionally vicious satire that informs most of the plays of this stage of his career. More than that, it is a key impulse behind the expansion of the geography of the playwright's work and his search for wider audiences.

The Royal Court

As suggested, the crucial role in finding outlet for Brenton's work was that played by the Royal Court Theatre.⁵ Its production of Revenge in the Theatre Upstairs was, at face value at least, simply one example of the traditional policy of giving new writers the opportunity of having their work staged; for Brenton, it was the obvious place to send the script of Revenge, particularly after the precedent of the Sunday night production of "It's My Criminal" three years previously. Despite the overwhelmingly hostile reception accorded to that play (see Introduction), it was the policy of the theatre to persist with any writer given a Sunday night performance, provided one of the theatre's directors was prepared to give his encouragement and support. In Brenton's case it was William Gaskill who saw the promise,

and it was his championship of the writer that began an association between Brenton and the Court that has lasted throughout his career, including a period as Resident Dramatist (see Chapter Five).

Yet Brenton has never been a "Court writer" in the manner of, for example, Bond, Wesker and Jellicoe; as shown earlier, his origins as a dramatist lie at Cambridge and in the Fringe rather than in the Writers' Group. Neither did Gaskell's support, though constant, ever develop into the kind of sustained creative partnership that benefited so many writers at the Court: one thinks of the associations between Gaskell and Bond, Dexter and Wesker, and Anderson and Storey. Moreover, the relationship between Brenton and the Court at this, the beginning of his professional career, was not easy. The writer's own contention is that, by the late nineteen-sixties, the Court's "new writing" policy had become ossified, and that the "dead hand of tradition" was stifling much new work.⁶ It was certainly the case that the emergence of the "second generation" of new British dramatists put the Court's financial and technical resources under some strain, and led to divisions of opinion amongst the theatre's directors. The debate centred on the understandable unwillingness of some of the directors - notably Page and Anderson - to lose faith with more established house writers like Bond and Storey by displacing them with the new.

The difficulty was to some extent mitigated by the opening of the Court's studio theatre, the Theatre Upstairs, in February 1969.⁷ The new space was Gaskill's idea, but the original impetus came from Peter Gill, who, in an earlier visit to the United States, had been heavily influenced by the same kind of theatrical exploration and experimentation (such as the work being done by the Café La Mama group) that so much informed the British Fringe.⁸ Gaskill's initial conception of the Theatre Upstairs was that it should operate very much as a laboratory theatre for precisely those new writers who were unable to get their work produced in the main house. To a considerable extent, the project proved successful: many of the "new arrivals" found a new outlet, Brenton's Revenge being the ninth piece to be produced. Gaskill went on to formalise the developing relationship between the Fringe writers and the older tradition of the Court with his "Come Together" Festival of October 1970. Yet friction remained: not only was the main stage still very much the preserve of the house "favourites", but also the huge differences in architecture, design and ambience between the two spaces effectively made transfers from the Theatre Upstairs very difficult. Further, the permanence of the new space was by no means guaranteed; at this point in its existence, the studio lacked the status of a second house. When Brenton refers to "the battlements of the Court" being "littered with the corpses of new writers",⁹ he testifies to the extent to

which his generation had great difficulty in finding a place on the theatre's main bill. Moreover, his own work was by no means universally accepted at the Court: Page and Anderson remained largely unsympathetic to the new writing generally, and the divisions between Brenton and Anderson (in particular) culminated in a major row over the 1973 production of Magnificence (see Chapter Five).

Yet it remains true that, despite internal politics at the Court, the Theatre Upstairs was able to function as a meeting-ground for two generations of dramatists and practitioners. From Brenton's point of view, the space's function as a nexus was particularly useful. Whilst his purely Fringe work went on, largely in the form of the continuing association with Bradford, and followed its own lines of development (see Chapter Three), the Theatre Upstairs provided him with the chance to test the ideas and techniques already evolved at the Combination and with the Bradford students in front of a different type of audience in a better-equipped venue, and at a length and complexity not previously possible. Further, although the work with Portable was, as shall be seen, conceived of primarily for touring a Fringe circuit, each project with which Brenton was involved received performances in the Theatre Upstairs as part of its tour ("Fruit", in fact, opened there). It is precisely this kind of exposure to different strands of thought, lines of approach, and practical circumstances, and the possibility of cross-

fertilisation, that provided for Brenton an ideal breeding-ground on which to experiment and learn.

Revenge

Revenge¹⁰ was presented at the Royal Court under the general title of "Romantic Melodrama in the Theatre Upstairs"; its title clearly indicates that a second, perhaps more important stylistic debt is owed by the play. Both Victorian melodrama and the Jacobean genre of Revenge Tragedy are invoked and parodied over the course of a play which "charts the career of a criminal, Hepple, pursuing a fanatical desire for revenge against the Assistant Police Commissioner, Macleish, who first brought him to justice and Brixton Prison."¹¹

The play opens with Hepple's release from gaol, and immediately moves to his recruitment of a "Super Gang" to aid his revenge on Macleish. The attempt on Macleish's life, however, is interrupted by the arrival of two ordinary coppers, George and Albert, to whom the play has already introduced us. The first act concludes with the murder of Albert by Hepple. Act Two introduces Macleish, whose bitter, but intensely melodramatic outrage at Albert's death becomes an exact parallel to the fanatical obsessiveness of Hepple's passion for revenge. The conflict between the "super-villain" Hepple and the moralistic, self-righteous Macleish results in the arrest of the former, but is not

finally resolved until the last three scenes of the play. In these scenes, the "Jacobean" element of the play is most clearly seen. "GROUPED LIKE A FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH", the gang, Hepple's daughters (Jane and Liz), and George, describe and enact their own deaths, bursting blood sacs in their mouths. The "Ghost of P.C. Albert" returns to become the agent of a final - in fact the only - direct confrontation between the twin protagonists. Both are left dead when the play ends.

Clearly, the play has moved far from its original conception (see Chapter One). Elements of its Shakespearean origins remain: Hepple has two daughters, but "they never mention the mother, which is one of the oddly crucial things about (King) Lear";¹² like Lear, Hepple relinquishes power only to discover he is unable to regain it. Otherwise any conscious allusion to the play's literary forbear has been ruthlessly excised; most notably, an opening scene with "Hepple giving up his gangster kingdom and then going to gaol".¹³ The degree of change through which Revenge passed is a clear reflection of the deep-seated and far-reaching re-appraisal of his work undertaken by Brenton during his Fringe "apprenticeship". To this extent, Revenge owes far more to the one-act pieces than it does to King Lear.

That Chris Parr, who had collaborated with Brenton in the production of the one-act plays at Bradford, was the director of the Theatre Upstairs production is significant:

it is also in a sense ironic that the play should benefit from precisely the kind of on-going creative partnership between director and writer that Brenton never established with a Royal Court director. Parr's production - described by the Bradford stage-manager, Jo Taylor, as "really beautiful"¹⁴ - deployed Bradford methods in Sloane Square: both director and actors collaborated with the author in developing and modifying the script.¹⁵ However, it is within Brenton's own writing that the clearest indications of the importance of his Fringe experience to the play are to be found.

In terms of theatre practice and style, the relationship between Revenge and Gum and Goo et al. is very close. Demands on the actor are again considerable: there is no set, and only minimal costume and props; parts are "doubled" and, at one point, two actors are asked to appear briefly as a pantomime cow. Scene Two is set in a billiard hall, but it is indicated only by two actors, with cues, miming the game: there is "NO NEED" for table and balls. The minimalistic clarity and precision with which the scene is established is typical of Brenton's writing at this time: on a bare stage, location and character are made immediately apparent. More than this, the scene must be considered as exposition; as such, one of its functions is to induct its audience into the style of the play. Hence not only character but the mode of characterisation is indicated: one of the players "PLAYS A NUMBER OF SMOOTH SHOTS, WITH AFFECTED MOVEMENTS", the other "APPROACHES THE

TABLE, THE CUE HELD THE WRONG WAY ROUND." The stylistic execution of the scene sets the tone for the play, and demonstrates the fundamental debt owed to the apprentice work; or, more accurately, to the practical conditions out of which that work was forged. Cushman makes the point well - although it is surely not only "words" but stagecraft generally upon which his point devolves - when he refers to the "elegance" of the piece,

elegance being a matter not of decoration
but of efficiency: an ability to make words
carry the maximum weight with the minimum
effort.¹⁶

Notwithstanding, it is equally typical of Brenton that, having set up such a scene, it immediately becomes a joke: the sequence is concluded by both players on their knees, searching for non-existent balls under a non-existent table. That sense of farce dominates the play, from the simple, dislocating joke, to the savage lampooning of its myopic public figures. The "Adam Hepple Super Gang" in fact consists of two: the appropriately-named Rot and Bung. Free use of caricature and stereotype is made, particularly in the characterisation of the police, whose arrest of Hepple is effected by a row of paper cut-outs. Whilst such figures are, as in the trilogy plays, allowed their sudden moments of bathetic insight (GEORGE (QUIETLY): "What a lonely job. What a horrible fucking lonely job" (II.viii)), generally the comic incompetence and ineffectualness of both factions constantly pours scorn on the fanatical crusades of their leaders.

as those of the earlier work, the "instinctive" approach taken to those plays is here beginning to concretise into a more formal statement of concerns:

Politically I had no ideas, I was very immature. But I had (an) instinct that there was a conflict I wanted to get at, between public figures, between figures who meant something in public, like a criminal, an old lag from the East End of London, and a religious, almost ancestral, policeman from Scotland. And I was aware that there was a conflict and I wanted to give it expression, and out of that the play came.¹⁷

In other words, rather than taking the form of the working-out of a simple idea, Revenge consciously tackles a subject:

It either works as a play about the police or not. A fantastic struggle is expressed in terms of a moral black and white. A whole debate between law and order and lawlessness - the policeman and the criminal - is set up.¹⁸

The larger size of the play, then, is not simply a question of length, but of scope. The exact formal and stylistic consequences of producing a play which seeks to engage in a debate dealing in the larger issues of public life will be discussed later; but even a first reading of the play reveals it to be more unified and cohesive, less anarchic and tangential, than the short plays. Its focus is both sharper and wider. The staging within the Royal Court - an established public theatre - may have been an influence; but the fuller and more formal examination in Revenge of the preoccupations of the trilogy, and their elevation to a larger public scale, most reflects Brenton's own need to continue to learn from his work.

By the end of Revenge the elements of fantasy present

in the earlier, shorter plays have expanded to a vision of Britain as "one giant pinball table" -

From Land's End to John O'Groats...the ball
running wild, Glasgow, Birmingham, Leeds,
Coventry, London, Brighton. Wonderful.
(II.xiii)

- and extend from the nineteen-sixties to a (then) futuristic nightmare of the nineteen-eighties. The play is a fantasy, but, within the fantasy, its world is self-sustaining and logical, discrete and complete. The central figures of that world are Hepple and Macleish. They are the creatures of the imagination of the children in Gum and Goo: "super-villain" and "super-hero", the one whose name is used "to frighten young bogies with", the other who is "one of the Elect", who will not shave - "Al Capone never did" - until the arch-criminal is brought to justice. But whereas in the earlier plays such figures remain within the imagination of the characters as myths, informing the kinds of games they play, in Revenge they are the characters, and the game is a public crime war. It is one of many ironies in the play, however, that, beneath the public roles which they consciously play out as heroes of the popular imagination, both Hepple and Macleish are in fact motivated by the same "primeval" savagery and viciousness that characterises the Brenton child. But the fundamental irony of the play, from which all its humour flows, is that both the protagonists and their struggle are seen to have become archaisms, meaningless and redundant in a world which no longer observes the rules of their game:

So ladies and gents, be warned. The days of Jack The Ripper, Donald Hume, Heath, Christie, John Haig, Adam Hepple are going. Now the true psychos, the truly vicious nuts and villains don't have names. They look ordinary. As ordinary as anyone.

(I.iii)

The "truth" of the world of the play is shown to be that the "black and white" struggle of Hepple and Macleish is taking place in the context of complete amorality, of a complete disintegration of the law and of society itself. The Britain of the play's last scenes is a country where there are

Rapes every night. No citizen abroad after dark. Gangs roaming the streets at will, burning down police stations.... (II.viii)

For Hepple, it is a dream come true - "the casino towns, the brothel villages, the cities red with blood and pleasure" (II.xiii) - but one in which he can no longer play a part. Significantly, and in true "Revenge" style, the play concludes with the deaths of all the characters, deaths which one critic suggests "also symbolize a dying Britain, or at least the passing of an age":¹⁹

GEORGE: A terrible carnage all round. And all within a few years of Adam going down. Like anyone who had to do with him was, how shall I put it? Doomed.

(II.xi)

Like the old man in Gum and Goo, both Hepple and Macleish are figures of a past, half-reality and half-myth, which continues to exert a malign and violent influence on the present despite the obsolescence of its codes and attitudes.

Both, too, prefigure characters in later plays (notably Christie, Wesley, and Scott, and Violette in Hitler Dances) in as much as they plough a straight and unbending course through what Itzin calls "a society devoid of any unifying moral code or political ethic."²⁰ Both, in the final sequence of the play, recognise their own redundancy. Hepple's destruction of Macleish comes not as an epic climax to an epic struggle, but out of a savage passion born of the realisation that all has been a charade. Similarly, Macleish's sense of defeat and hopelessness is compounded by his realisation that "his enemy has really just been the reverse, repressed side of himself."²¹ The two die united in senility and absurdity.

The demonstration of public life as a charade - no more than "the turn of a card the fall of a dice" (II.xiii) - is the clearest statement yet of Brenton's "anti-culturalism"; Revenge begins to explore more fully "the whole rag bag" of received attitudes and popular mythologies that are present in fragmented form in the trilogy. The play is cast as a fantasy because the public life with which it deals is a fantasy.

The point may be further developed by a brief consideration of the murder of P.C. Albert. Ansorge convincingly suggests that the scene owes a debt to a similar sequence in the 1949 Ealing film, The Blue Lamp.²² The film was seminal insofar as it gave rise not only to a long series of imitations, but also to a twenty-year television series,

Dixon of Dock Green: in so doing, "it burnished the image of the British copper for a generation or more."²³ That image was of the policeman as a righteous guardian of the law and purveyor of homespun philosophy, steady, reliable and approachable, and it is precisely the target of Revenge, where Brenton is "revealing how many of our ideas about crime, law and order stem, in fact, from sheer fantasy in the form of hackneyed 'cops and robbers' movies."²⁴ The reference to the film is not made any more overt and specific than are similar references to horror movies in the trilogy, except insofar as P.C. George is surely not only named but to some extent characterised after the George Dixon of both film and T.V. series. The comfortable, even complacent, values of such mediated views of the police are both lampooned - George is appalled that Albert's wife makes lumpy mash - and savagely exploded: after Albert's murder, George displays all the hatred and gut-fanaticism of his master, Macleish. The rather more precise identification of the media in Revenge as transmitters of a simplistic popular culture is another example of a sharpening focus in Brenton's writing: indeed, in later work, the use of the screen as a metaphor to articulate the relationship between the two-dimensional fantasy of public life and private reality comes to play an increasingly overt and sophisticated part (see Chapter Three).

Even as early as Revenge, however, the attack is

spreading to a wider cultural context. After Albert's murder, Hepple and Bung escape from London to the country, where they are finally apprehended. But there is no sense in which the countryside offers any kind of pastoral retreat:

HEPPLE: I hate the country. Listen to the
bleeding birds twittering. Shut
up, can't you?
(THEY DON'T.)
Little bleeders, twittering on and on.
And bleeding cows and bleeding sheep
and bleeding bulls after sticking
their horns in your arse. It's not my
natural habitat and it's not yours,
mate. We belong to the streets and
pubs and back doors, and Leicester
Square and the Elephant and Castle.
(II.x)

More than this, neither is the country the "little England" of the patchwork fields and rose-covered cottages of popular myth. The bumpkin cowhand relies on Sainsbury's for his meat and a machine to do his milking. Just as the moral blacks and whites of the law and order conflict are subverted by a sub-culture of animalistic violence, anarchy and sheer incompetence, so, more generally, the received, rose-tinted values of a "traditional" England "home and country" are supplanted by those of the urban jungle. George, inappropriately, envies the "simple life" of the bumpkin; he was himself

raised far away from mother nature. The only
farm for miles was for sewage. Fields of
tarmac, weeds and tares were all that grew.
Human weeds and tares.

(II.x)

Again the relationship between city and country, as shall be seen, is one which fascinates Brenton and recurs throughout

his career, including the 1986 television series "Dead Head". Always, it is used as an important means of laying the myths of public life and exposing its often sordid underbelly.

As suggested earlier, this kind of broadening of scope and vision necessitates a contingent expansion of form and has profound consequences on questions of structure. In contrast to the short "anecdotal" pieces, Brenton points out that a play like Revenge, which "can only be written from an idea or notion which has enormous energy and ramifications in it" is twice the length and "has a completely different way of arguing".²⁵ However, it would be wrong to assume that Revenge marks an abrupt or major change in the direction of Brenton's writing. Whilst some use is made of the conventions of Revenge tragedy and Victorian melodrama, any developments in style and structure owe less to outside influences than to what had been learned during the Fringe apprenticeship. Just as the subject of the play represents a fuller examination of the preoccupations of the early work, so its form owes a profound debt to those pieces.

The "idea" of "enormous energy" that lies at the heart of Revenge is cast in the form of a joke: the parts of Hepple and Macleish are played by the same actor. Act One belongs to Hepple, but from Macleish's first appearance at the beginning of Act Two the doubling of the part makes clear to the audience what the two characters realise only

at the very end of the play: that, far from being the black and the white, the leaders and representatives of the great opposing forces of evil and good, they are "twins", two sides of the same coin, both redundant and obsolete and, like the Britain they live in, vicious in their dying spasms.

The exploration of the dramatic possibilities of doubling parts is, of course, by no means new. In Brenton's case, however, the adoption of the technique arises from his own previous experience in the harsh economic realities of Brighton and Bradford. What is significant is the extent to which he chose to learn from that experience. Although the characters are kept apart until the last scene of the play, the actor is still required to play two quite distinct parts, and, moreover, to accomplish three very fast changes from one to the other. The skill with which the script allows the actor to achieve this difficult task is an index of Brenton's growing command of his theatre-craft and reflects the degree to which he has learned to structure his writing around a growing understanding of the capabilities and requirements of his actors. The very distinctness of the parts - the one a working class East Ender, the other a middle class Scotsman - gives the actor clear-cut and concrete characteristics with which to work, making possible, for example, the identification of the actors simply by their accents in the conclusion of the play, when they are reduced to

were voices in the dark. The first quick change, from Macleish to Hepple, is accomplished by having the latter waking in a tent at dawn: the actor changing costume is "covered" by the character getting dressed. More, the process of learning from and about the actor's skill is visible even within the rehearsal stages of the play. The second and third changes occur in the final scene, where the two characters are "together" on stage. The scene is made possible by seating Macleish in a "BIG WING-BACKED CHAIR" facing up stage, thereby covering the changes, but the speed and efficiency with which John Normington was able to make them allowed Brenton to modify his script, giving the scene a greater tightness and precision.²⁶ Again, it must be stressed that, from writing to rehearsal to production, the writer is developing his craft by learning from it and through it, rather than by seeking to impose new ideas - stylistic or political - on it.

This kind of increasing technical command makes possible the fuller and more complex structure of Revenge. Where the earlier plays took the form simply of "jokes" - "setting it up, moving it away, from what the pay off is and then switching back" (see Chapter One) - jokes in this play become the means of binding together the larger structure:

Jokes are really the sinews of that play.
 Though I've never been an epigrammatic
 writer, the jokes really are very epigrammatic.²⁷

Here, Brenton is perhaps using "epigrammatic" in both its senses. Not only is the comedy of the play characterised

generally by its wit and ingenuity, but, more importantly, many of its jokes work in terms of an epigrammatic antithesis. The central antithesis of the play - the ironic opposition of glamorised public charade and squalid, violent reality - is reinforced throughout by a host of "one-off" jokes. The expected, the received, the conventional is constantly challenged and opposed. The portentousness of the tones with which the Voice of Brixton Gaol addresses the liberated Hepple is destroyed by its lapses into cockney vernacular; conversely, the moronic Bung is unexpectedly stricken by an attack of poetic literacy; caricatures reveal momentary flashes of human warmth and vulnerability.

Generally, then, Revenge represents in terms of both thought and execution a consolidation of the experience found at Brighton and Bradford and a fuller development of it. More than that, Brenton begins to develop wider and more concrete ideas about the kind of theatre he wants to make. Revenge expresses more cogently and coherently the vague feelings against "conventional" theatrical representation found in the earlier plays. The writer himself gives one important example of how the play attempts to formulate those previously "instinctive" feelings into a more disciplined and precise technique:

I've always been against psychology in plays. I think that psychology is used like a wet blanket by many playwrights, and as a very easy explanation and I wanted to stop that dead in its tracks, the idea that 'this man is a criminal because...' or 'this man is a violent policeman, because...' One of the formal ways of doing that was to emphasize the role, the action. If you fit the two conflicting

elements of the action into the same actor, there is no danger, or it lessens the danger, of an actor working out a psychological performance.²⁸

The notion of emphasising "the role, the action" in a manner that is determinedly anti-psychological and anti-naturalistic goes on to become one of the defining characteristics of Brenton's theatre. Combined with the construction of his work around moments of savage humour, antithesis and irony, moments designed to destroy easy identification, confound expectation and challenge received attitudes, it begins to lay the foundations of a theatre that is questioning, critical and judgemental:

...I think the theatre's a real bear pit. It's not the place for reasoned discussion. It is the place for really savage insights, which can be proved at once by an audience saying 'Yes that actually is true', at some level, not necessarily in a representative way. And theatre does teach something about the way people act in public.²⁹

Portable Theatre

For all the importance of Revenge, and its staging in the Royal Court, it is Brenton's association with Portable Theatre that played the greater part in establishing his prominence among the new wave of writers and bringing his work to the notice of a larger public.³⁰ His association with the group began in the autumn of 1969 and lasted until 1973. During that time, he produced two solo pieces, Christie in Love (1969) and "Fruit" (1970), collaborated with other

writers on Lay By (1971) and "England's Ireland" (1972), and scripted a film, "Skin Flicker" (1973). (Except for Christie, this work will be dealt with more fully in the following chapter.) To almost all this work there attached a degree of controversy. Critical opinion divided sharply regarding its artistic merit, whilst the content of some of the plays made for considerable difficulties with their staging: Christie came close to a prosecution for obscenity in Brighton³¹ - the first of a number of similar brushes with the law, which culminated with The Romans in Britain trial eleven years later - whilst more than fifty theatres refused to stage "England's Ireland". Yet it remains true that, in the context of Brenton's career generally, the effect of the involvement with Portable was catalytic to the development of his writing in terms of both craft and thought.

That involvement began when Brenton visited one of the newly-founded Portable's first productions, an adaptation of Kafka's Amerika, at the Arts Lab in Drury Lane: "I was the only one in the audience. The show was therefore cancelled, so we went to the pub."³² Portable's founders, David Hare and Tony Bicat, quickly invited Brenton to join their group. What initially bound the three together was a similarity of background and experience. Like Brenton, Hare and Bicat had been to Cambridge - although they had never met - and had become disenchanted:

What we had in common was that we thought we were living through a period of extreme decadence, both socially and theatrically.

We just couldn't believe that the official culture was incapable of seeing the extreme state of crisis that we thought the country was in.³³

As Hare suggests, that general disenchantment extended, for both Bicât and himself, to a critical view of the contemporary theatre:

We both thought that the theatre of the day was rhetorical, over-produced, lavish, saying nothing, conventional - all those things.³⁴

This, of course, was very much in accord with Brenton's own feelings, as he confirms:

Part of the energy behind Portable was simply: the bastards won't do our plays, we'll do them ourselves. That was a good reason at the time, but there was nothing more behind it than that. It was against the bastards, it was boiling for a fight against the established values in the theatre.³⁵

It was this shared community of views and approaches that united Brenton and Portable and provided a solid foundation for the work which was to follow.

What Hare and Bicât gained from Brenton was his greater experience in theatre. Although actors had been allowed to modify and experiment with Portable scripts, the group's basic approach was, as Brenton's had been, essentially "literary". Hare identifies Brenton's influence, particularly as manifested in Christie in Love - "certainly the best play that came our way" - as the key factor in developing a more physical, visual and complete brand of theatre.³⁶ From Brenton's point of view, the advantages that accrued from his continuing association with Portable

were considerable. On a purely pragmatic level, the Portable touring circuit of institutes of higher education, arts centres and village halls provided him with a high level of exposure for his work: at the circuit's height, "Fruit" visited some seventy cities in England, "mostly for one performance only, but some for more",³⁷ before being toured extensively in Holland. What was equally important, though less tangible, were the benefits that arose from working in close association with like-minded theatre practitioners in a spirit of experimentation and exploration. Over the course of its existence, Portable attracted a wide range of writers who, whilst sharing a similar sense of anger and despair at what they saw to be a society on the verge of moral and social breakdown, also brought to the group a variety of different talents, ideas and approaches. It is that variety which produced what may be identified as the Portable "house-style": "a fast, raging mixture of styles"³⁸ aimed, as one Portable writer put it, at forcing "upon the audience a guilty awareness of a darker reality beneath our smooth façades".³⁹ Such a philosophy, however basic, is clearly very much in line with Brenton's own preoccupations, and the opportunity to argue, test ideas, and learn from others, both generally and in the shape of actual collaborative writing (see Chapter Three), produced for him a kind of "greenhouse" effect and the catalysis already mentioned.

It is also important to point out that, at its inception,

Portable was as a-political in its thinking as was Brenton. Although, as Itzin indicates,⁴⁰ the group has come in retrospect to be seen as one of the earliest "political" companies on the Fringe, its initial motivation, like Brenton's, was one of instinctive, rather than clearly formulated, opposition. However, as Brenton explains:

If you set up an antagonistic theatre touring to people who have never seen the theatre before, it transforms itself into political theatre. It has a political effect. And the anarchic, antagonistic theatre becomes increasingly one of political content. This is what happened to us. It reached its peak with "England's Ireland".⁴¹

One of the most important results of the writer's association with Portable was the creation of a context within which his thinking could begin to develop into a more systematic and structured political form.

Christie in Love

Brenton's first play for Portable was Christie in Love.⁴² Directed by Hare, it was first performed at the Oval House in London in November 1969, and subsequently went on tour round the developing Portable "circuit". The production was presented at the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs in March 1970 (in tandem with David Halliwell's "A Who's Who of Flapland"), and revived by Gaskill for the "Come Together" Festival in the autumn of the same year.

The play has often been seen as a companion piece to

Revenge, representing, as it does, a continuing exploration of the themes of criminality and the law. But Christie concentrates more on the criminal, and its eponymous "hero" is a real, and horrific, figure. Overall, the tone of the piece is darker and, at its heart, there resides a palpable and deeply disturbing sense of horror. Indeed, Brenton's original commission from Portable was "to write 'a history of evil'";⁴³ he took as his specific subject the life of one of England's most notorious and celebrated murderers:

My wife Jane and I were living in a rotting basement flat in Notting Hill. I realised that this in fact was Christie and Evans' area. The caff where he picked up one of the girls was just round the corner.⁴⁴

The resulting play, roughly half the length of Revenge, takes the form of eleven scenes, undivided into acts, and uses three characters: Christie himself, and two policemen, a constable and an inspector. Its structure is conditioned less by Christie's story - though the bare biographical details are provided - than by a series of powerful, imagistic set pieces, each of which attempts to penetrate further the appalling, yet fascinating mystery of Christie's actions. John Russell Taylor's description of the action as "a sort of Chinese box"⁴⁵ seems to me apposite: within the overall framework of the two policemen - typically Brentonesque guardians of public propriety - digging in Christie's garden for the remains of his victims, the audience is presented with scenes which confront

Christie with his interrogators, offer flashbacks to his confession, and provide savage, though deliberately inconclusive, insights into his mind.

What is most striking about the piece is its overt and daring theatricality. The nature of that theatricality is made evident by what is perhaps the first thing to strike both reader and spectator about the play: its use of a set. Dominating the stage throughout the action, and with the audience so close as to allow "barely enough room for the actors to walk round the sides",⁴⁶ is a large pen, made of chicken wire and full of tattered and torn newspaper. This is the first occasion in his career on which Brenton makes use of such a permanent and commanding physical context for a play, and it remains very unusual for him to do so (Bull points to a similarly "environmental" set being used for the Danish production of "Government Property" in 1975 (see Chapter Four),⁴⁷ but, as shall be seen, Brenton's over-riding preference is for a basically bare stage with elements of set being used only very carefully and selectively.). For Christie, Brenton designed the set himself, and it was built by fellow Portable playwright Snoo Wilson. It is "a filthy sight. The chicken wire is rusty, the wood is stained, the paper is full of dust." To this extent, its function is expressionistic, providing a continuing image of filth and decay. Beyond that, Brenton is quite specific in stating that it should not in any way be representational. If the set reminds one

of any real object, then it resembles a large public litter bin; but, during the course of the play it serves as Christie's garden, his front room, a police station, a shed and a lime pit, without being "like" any of them. "It's (a) theatrical machine, a thing you'd only see in a show. It's a trap, a flypaper for the attention of the spectators to stick on."

The pen is used to confront the audience not simply with a generalised image of decay, but, more specifically, with an image of the public's ambivalent response to Christie in the form of the lurid and sensational accounts of the newspapers. It is by rising from the pile of newspapers that Christie makes his first appearance, and it is under it that he is finally and "shamefacedly" buried at the end of the play; Brenton's set is a constant and concrete manifestation of his refusal to allow the audience to be passive spectators, and of his determination to challenge it to re-examine its own attitudes and obsessions regarding figures like Christie. The aggression of that challenge is the hallmark of the play and is what primarily informs its intense theatricality.

As the audience enters, a taped voice repeatedly gives the bare details of Christie's life and crimes. As Bull suggests, such an introduction induces an expectation of a documentary approach,⁴⁸ even though the cool factuality of the biography is knocked slightly off-centre by the assertion that Christie, like Skinny Spew, "hated his

mother, his father and his sisters. His childhood was normal." Nonetheless, it remains both surprising and disorienting that the action of the play should begin with jokes. In Christie's garden, the Constable digs for the "bones of English Ladies" in the pile of newspapers. Even after the tape has faded, he continues to do so until the audience's attention, like his own, is fixed on the papers. He then recites the first of a series of obscene limericks; his delivery is "UNCOMIC, DEADLY". The limericks are interspersed with more rapid exchanges of dialogue between the Constable and the Inspector, who contributes his own similarly obscene, and similarly badly-told joke. It is the limericks, however, which set the pace of the scene. Their recitation is slow, marked by pauses and repetition, and deliberately unfunny. The stage-directions for the Inspector's joke provide the key to how all the jokes in the scene should be played:

(HE WORKS OUT THE PACE OF A BAD JOKE TELLER,
THE ABOMINABLE AND HUMOURLESS TIMING, AND
THEN EXAGGERATES THE PAUSES. HE STRETCHES
IT TO BREAKING POINT.)

(sc.i)

In his production note, Brenton insists that the whole scene should be played very slowly; although it is quite short, Hare's production "got it right and it was taking at least twenty minutes to play."

The effect is to force on the audience a consideration of what such jokes, usually lightly-told, are actually about; the Constable himself pauses after each one, reflects,

and nods. Eventually, he is "APPALLED." The final limerick is shouted at the audience by both Constable and Inspector in unison. "THEY END FACING EACH OTHER, SHAKING WITH RAGE":

There was a young man from Bengal
Who went to a fancy dress ball.
Just for a stunt,
He went as a cunt,
And was had by a dog in the hall.

(sc.i)

John Russell Taylor suggests that such jokes are a form of "protective humour"⁴⁹ in the face of the impossibility of grasping the enormity of Christie's actions. Yet the jokes themselves, as the manner of their telling ruthlessly exposes, are popular manifestations of a vicious and violent sexuality. Again, the ambivalence, even hypocrisy, of public response to what Christie represents is thrown back at the audience.

The pattern of the first scene, with its invocation and immediate dismemberment of comic techniques, is sustained throughout the play. The two policemen are, as Brenton states quite clearly,⁵⁰ not "'characters'" as such, but "stage coppers", for the most part two-dimensional caricatures. Bull makes the point well that they are shown "not as reliable arbiters of social norms, but as vulgar and obsessed representatives of public propriety", their language being "a strange mixture of 'music-hall' patter and class-based morality."⁵¹ Their incapacity to deal with the horror of Christie, and their inability to find explanations for his crimes, are risible. Like their counterparts in Revenge,

they are shown to be incompetent and ineffectual. To this extent, as Brenton himself admits, the whole piece, if "played fast", might work as a "black sketch".⁵² But he is also emphatic that this is not his intention. He explains the relationship between Christie and the earlier, more overtly comic pieces, thus:

The development was that I could write gags, but I always wanted to write a kind of tragedy. What I did was to write comic scenes, comic situations, but stretch them intolerably by using massive pauses or bad jokes, which an actor has to try and tell so badly that an audience doesn't laugh, even at its being bad.⁵³

Of course, the comedy of the earlier pieces is never entirely comfortable, and always contains elements of a more disturbing vision. It is these elements which are pushed to the fore in Christie. By "taking jokes and driving them into the ground",⁵⁴ Brenton creates in his audience a response that is at the very least uneasy, and often what laughter there is may be cruel. Like P.C. George in Revenge, the Constable in Christie is allowed his moment of genuine human feeling:

We went to Clacton for our honeymoon, my wife and me. The sea was gentle as a baby. The moon was smoochy yellow. That were love. Not a corpse, in a dirty garden.

(sc.xi)

The naive sentimentality and child-like expression here seem to remain within the confines of comedy, yet the hopelessness of the Constable's attempt to reconcile his experience of love with what Christie has done unpredictably touches the spectator. To allow a previously two-dimensional

figure such a human moment, is, as Brenton says, "very cruel": it is "as if a cardboard black and white cut-out suddenly reaches out a fully fleshed, real hand."⁵⁵

What, however, more than anything else tilts the balance away from comedy in Christie is the presence of the murderer himself, and the unavoidable and incomprehensible horror of his crimes. His first appearance is very much as the monster of received public perception, resurrecting himself from the newspapers, wearing a grotesque mask, and violently masturbating in the darkness; more myth than reality.

But that's smashed up. The lights are slammed on, and the mask is seen as only a tatty bit of papier mâché. Off it comes, and what's left is a feeble, ordinary man blinking through his pebble glasses.⁵⁶

The revelation of Christie as "ordinary" and, indeed, for much of the time as a rather quiet, even reserved individual, immediately changes the terms of reference of the whole play. Not only is the monster of popular imagination contemptuously laid, but the Christie the audience is left with is palpably more three-dimensional, complex and human than his police interrogators. The technique deployed here is a development of the bathos device indicated above: in the middle of a comic world distinguished by the artificiality of its setting and the "staginess" of the characterisation of the policemen, Christie is lodged as a naturalistic figure:

That was to try and get perspective. I mean, the

search for something other (than) what Brecht was doing goes on endlessly amongst the writers of my generation, and it was in a sense an alienation device, because the surroundings are highly artificial. There was an attempt to look very hard at Christie, almost like a Bacon painting, where you have an absolutely hard edge, definite. Only a painter could invent that world, yet what's inside is a writhing live mess, and that's what I wanted for the play.⁵⁷

This kind of focus on Christie makes him the only recognisable human being in the play, and confirms Ansorge's observation that, for Brenton, "authentic characters can only be located beneath the surface of public life - with the monsters buried in our gardens."⁵⁸

Yet it is not simply the authenticity of Brenton's portrayal of Christie that draws audience sympathy to him. In many ways, he is seen to be a victim of his own legend, of a public attitude that combines appalled horror with salacious fascination. "The General Public", says the Inspector in scene one, "is a dirty animal", yet his own "investigation" is characterised by a voyeuristic interest in the macabre details of the murders, and he expresses genuine disappointment at Christie's "normality":

Why can't a mass murderer be just a bit diabolical?
 Why can't a pervert like you, already in the annals
 of nastiness, have fangs or something? Roll your
 eyes around. Sprout horns.
 (THE INSPECTOR KICKS UP THE PAPER IN A FURY.)
 Go on Reg, let's have a real bit of horror!
 (sc.vi)

Set against this, Christie's actions take on a curious honesty and straightforwardness. He killed his victims, he tells us, because he "loved" them, and his "love" has

a strange integrity when compared to the Constable's sentimental populist notions of romance. Brenton:

It seemed to me that what he was about was love, and that is an uncomfortable fact. His murders were acts of love...⁵⁹

This, then, is the final "Chinese box" that lies at the heart of Christie: the Dracula of modern myth is dislocated by an ordinary, rather feeble little man; and yet, that little man is a murderer and necrophiliac "in a state of total disorder, and acting beyond all humanity."⁶⁰ An audience is allowed no opportunity to come to an understanding of Christie: its sensibilities are assaulted, its attitudes exposed and savagely lampooned. The refusal to offer explanations is the main thrust of much of the criticism the play attracted,⁶¹ yet this was precisely Brenton's intention:

The policemen attempt all sorts of explanations - they try to find a meaning to the crimes. But none of those explanations work - there is no solution. The play should give an audience a sense of moral vertigo.⁶²

In Christie, as in much of Brenton's work for Portable, the abnormal, the deviant, becomes the normal, and Christie's real horror, as Bull indicates, is his normality.⁶³ The challenge thrown down to the audience is that it question its easy acceptance of the banal, lurid simplifications of public life as mediated through newspapers and two-dimensional "establishment" figures like the policemen, and that it confront the ambivalence of its own responses. For Brenton, the exposure of the sham of public life is

becoming an increasingly dominant preoccupation, and, in Christie, he creates the first and perhaps most disturbing of a series of "saints" or "heroes" - not necessarily criminals - who drive "a straight line in a society that has become very distorted."⁶⁴

CHAPTER THREE

"FRUIT", "A SKY BLUE LIFE" AND OTHER WORK: 1970-1971

In an article in Plays and Players in February 1971, John Russell Taylor includes, as part of a survey of the then "latest generation" of British playwrights, a brief critical account of Brenton's career to date.¹ With hindsight, the group of writers with whom Taylor deals - it includes, inter alia, Robert Shaw, Peter Barnes and David Pinner - seems even more eclectic than he admits, but he does succeed in finding common ground between some, at least, of his "new arrivals". Linking Brenton with Heathcote Williams and David Halliwell, he points to a similarity of subject matter ("child murder, sex murder, rape, homosexuality, transvestism, religious mania, power mania, sadism, masochism"), of style ("outrageous comedy"), and of a basic line of approach that upsets conventional standards of judgement by refusing to take moral sides in the depiction of what are often horrendous events.² Clearly, by these criteria, Brenton is being associated with what may be called a "movement" only in the broadest sense, yet it remains true that, from 1969 onwards, he comes to be identified as an increasingly prominent and important member of the new generation of young playwrights whose declared central concern was the charting of a decaying society ripe for breakdown. This increased critical awareness

of Brenton's work was often double-edged: whilst, for Michael Billington, the playwright was "a shining and encouraging exception" to his perception that the theatrical avant garde was led by too few writers too much in awe of comparable American work,³ Taylor's own judgement is more guarded and, perhaps, more typical. He concludes his piece by describing Brenton as "a hit-or-miss dramatist who hits often enough to be worth watching",⁴ very much the kind of response accorded to the writer throughout his career.

What placed Brenton in the forefront of the new writing between 1969 and 1971 was a body of work that was at once intensive and diversified. Now a full-time writer (the success of Revenge and Christie was consolidated by the award of an Arts Council Bursary for 1969-70, and this marks the point at which he first becomes able to earn a living from his work), his plays began to find an increasingly large number of outlets. The bulk of the work was for Portable Theatre. "Fruit" (1970) was followed by the collaboratively-made Lay By (1971) and "England's Ireland" (1972), and by a first film, "Skin Flicker" (1973). (These last two will, for the sake of clarity, be dealt with here.) The association with Bradford also continued, with productions of Wesley and Scott of the Antarctic or What God Didn't See for the Festivals of 1970 and 1971 respectively. 1971 also saw "A Sky Blue Life" finally produced, at the Open Space Theatre in London.

All of this work, in different ways, reflects the growing importance of the events and the politics of May 1968 to Brenton's work, and all of it was written for Fringe audiences. Beyond that, what impresses one most about it is its variety and experimentation. The Portable work comprises solo and group-made pieces for the touring network, as well as the first venture into another medium. The Bradford plays are on a smaller scale, and are designed for "one-off" productions in quite specific and unusual auditoria. Yet this work also brings Brenton's formal association with both Portable and Bradford to a close. Even as he comes fully to exploit the freedom and flexibility of the Fringe, he comes also to question it. As "A Sky Blue Life" shows, major doubts about the role and function of the writer in society still await resolution.

"Fruit"

Brenton's second solo piece for Portable was "Fruit".⁵ Directed by David Hare, it opened at the Theatre Upstairs in September 1970 on a double bill with Hare's own "What Happened to Blake" before embarking on its tour of England and Holland (see p.88).

The play was written as a response to the 1970 General Election which saw the establishment of a Conservative government under Edward Heath. Its reception by critics and audiences alike was almost universally hostile, at

least in England. Of the critics, Michael Billington's reaction was typical, and in sharp contrast to his earlier assessment of Brenton: the play was "a wild, flailing unfocussed attack on the corrupting effect of power", characterised by its "simple-mindedness", and "theatrically unrewarding."⁶ According to Brenton, English audiences "looked at it as a below-the-belt attack on Edward Heath - a bit of a cess-pool of a little play".⁷ A group of Englishmen who saw the play in Amsterdam "got very angry, they started shouting. They protested violently afterwards."⁸ Interestingly, however, Dutch audiences and critics, seeing the play out of its specific political context, praised it as a re-write of Richard III - something Brenton had not intended - and as "a rich piece of English avant-garde."⁹

In fact, the play is quite clear about its own nature and about what it expects of its audience. As a prelude to the action, one of the actors makes a formal announcement:

Fruit is a play of slander, lies, torture,
perversion in high places, vile plans in
low places, a rotting bag of half-truths
for an audience to throw where they will.

What follows is a play of two acts of five and three scenes. Its central character is Paul, a thalidomide victim who has used the freakish powers the drug which physically deformed him gave him, and his compensation, to rise to a position of power: his "approximate" trade is "'Osteopath to the Great'". (A nod in the direction of the Profumo scandal, perhaps.) Whilst Brenton's characterisation of him is marked by a genuine anger at the obscenity of

the thalidomide scandal, Paul is perhaps most fully understood as a development of the figure of Skinny Spew:

he was "born in a revolutionary manner":

...out of my mother's arse, and in the sea!
Yes it was high tide on holiday when I
popped up. Slimy.

Warped.

Deformed!

Holiday makers ran screaming up the beach.
The lifeguard had a heart attack. Peddloes
sank. Oil slicks darkened the horizon.
Fish screamed in the poisoned water. Ice
cream melted, candy floss exploded.

Portents of a national disaster.

Like Skinny, he is a grotesque, diseased figure of gross appetites and vicious, anarchic temperament: the scourge of authority. Where, however, Skinny's targets were simply those figures of authority with whom, as a child, he came into contact - parents, police, the warden of the orphanage - Paul has built a career by channelling his anger more specifically at the leading figures of public life; Skinny Spew, but "lodged in the body politic":

I finger public men! I poke the great among
you, daily. I pummel eminent arses, I
slap nationally known double chins. You baulk
at that? That yours truly, mutilated, half-
made, messed in my Mummy's womb, the fantasy
of an indiscriminate drug manufacturer, you
baulk that a freak like me has this one good
hand on the private parts of your public
men?

Paul's access to the "great" provides him, by means of the bitter and self-pitying ramblings of a drunken member of an outgoing Labour government, and the complicity of

his own chauffeur - a "civil servant's boyfriend for hire", who "specializes in suited gents" - with evidence of the homosexuality of the new Prime Minister (hence the title of the play). His attempt at blackmail, however, fails. The Prime Minister is untroubled by his threats, and sets the police on him; his wife, Hilary, sells her memoirs to a newspaper. Desperate and on the run, Paul encounters an old man, a Leninist who has been waiting for fifty years in a Covent Garden warehouse for the revolution. He reprimands Paul for his failure to learn from history, to control and channel his anger more productively. He concludes, however, by saying:

On the other hand, while we're waiting for the Thames to run red, and all that, we can get on.

The play concludes with the old man showing Paul, and the audience, how to make and use a petrol bomb. The final image is of the bomb exploding against the wall of the theatre. "GOD KNOWS", read Brenton's stage directions, "HOW WE'RE GOING TO GET AWAY WITH THAT."

"Fruit" is the first of Brenton's plays overtly to make the political world its subject, and the first to be written as a direct response to contemporary events. On a number of occasions throughout his career, the writer has felt a need, under the pressure of particular political circumstances, to deploy his craft as a contribution to a larger public debate: entry to the Common Market occasioned "A Fart for Europe" (co-written with David Edgar in 1973),

the policies of a newly-elected Conservative government, A Short Sharp Shock! (co-written with Tony Howard, 1980). Such immediate and specific responses are, however, quite rare, and need to be distinguished from plays which address contemporary issues without making specific correspondences with real events or real people: Thirteenth Night (1981), intended as a "warning play" to the British left about the dangers of Stalinism, was given a gloss of spurious topicality by some commentators who made over-simple identifications of stage-figures with leading Labour Party personalities. In a sense, "Fruit" is the progenitor of both these types of play. In terms of both subject (newly-elected Conservative administrations) and style (a black, savage, scurrilous attack), its nearest bed-fellow is A Short Sharp Shock! In both cases, the vicious lampooning of instantly recognisable Tory politicians caused some furore, even though "Fruit", unlike Shock, does not actually name its public figures. Yet there are also major differences. Shock, is straightforwardly a satire, designed to upset its victims and cheer their enemies; whilst there is a strong satiric strand running through "Fruit", its fundamental concerns lie elsewhere.

The point may be illustrated in this way. Whereas Shock is aimed simply at a Conservative government, "Fruit" is equally unkind to both its Tory Prime Minister and its Labour Cabinet member. Whilst the inclusion of a Labour figure to some extent reflects Portable's general

disenchantment with the Wilsonian "socialism" of the sixties¹⁰ -

I was a miner. God in Heaven, if my
own kind could see me now. Forgive,
Merthyr Tydfil! Forgive, Merthyr!

- the main thrust of the play deals less with the specifics of partisan politics in 1970 than with the charades of public political life generally, and, in doing so, develops Brenton's own thinking in ways which were to exert a profound influence on the rest of his career. For it is in "Fruit" that the events in France in 1968 begin to exert a palpable and concrete influence on Brenton's writing. The feelings of anger and despair occasioned by the failure of the rebellion continue very much to inform the spirit of his work, but "Fruit" demonstrates the degree to which he began to absorb elements of what was the more lasting legacy of the "événements": a huge redefinition of political thought on the left. He describes that aspect of the new thought which had the most profound effect on his thinking:

In writing "Fruit" I was influenced by some French situationist texts (the situationists were very important to the May '68 students). The situationists describe our world as 'the society of the spectacle'. There is a screen called public life which is reported on the telly and in the newspapers. This version of public life is a spectacle, it operates within its own laws. It's a vast, intricate confidence game. The last general election was a tight, fraudulent spectacle. So we've become very cynical about public life - just as the politicians are totally cynical.¹¹

"Situationism" is a large and complex political theory, and this thesis is not the place for an exhaustive examination of it. However, some indication of its central concerns

is necessary if its importance to Brenton is to be understood.¹²

Broadly speaking, the situationists offered a re-assessment of the traditional Marxist view of the basic relationship between the individual and his society. The need to change society remained, of course, paramount; but conventional political struggle - not only parliamentary democracy, industrial relations and so on, but Marxist revolution itself - was rejected as no more than the deployment of tactics within an existing system that would remain fundamentally unchanged. That system was defined as "the society of the spectacle". The situationist analysis argued that the main agent of capitalist repression had ceased to be located at the point of production - on the factory floor - and had transferred to a point of consumption: the consumption of bourgeois ideology as transmitted through culture generally and the mass media in particular. The relationship between the individual and society was thus analogous to that between the spectator and the events on a screen: both were passive consumers of a two-dimensional charade. It was by shattering the hegemony of received images that individuals had of society that the groundwork of revolutionary change could be established; smashing the screen of public life would expose the realities of private and daily life beneath.

Clearly, in general terms, such a philosophy is very much in accord with Brenton's own views as developed across

the pre- "Fruit" plays. It is important to note that it is not suddenly imported wholesale as a set of abstract ideas. Arguably, situationist ideas are present in nascent form in the public/private dichotomies of Revenge and, more obviously, of Christie; but, as has been seen, those plays were as much developments of his own personal "anti-culturalism" as reflections of his political reading.

It is impossible to identify a particular moment when situationism begins to influence Brenton's thinking: "Fruit" is simply the first occasion on which the debt was acknowledged.

Moreover, what Brenton took from the situationists was less a brand new philosophy than a framework of systematic thought which both confirmed his own views and provided a context for their further development. The process of assimilating the new ideas is a slow one, based on the need to test and explore them practically through his writing for the stage, and not coming to full fruition until Magnificence.

An understanding of situationism helps to explain how "Fruit" is a "political play" only in the most general sense of the term. (Indeed, Brenton is continuing to resist the label "political dramatist" as late as 1975, preferring "public" as a more accurate description of his work).¹³ As Bull points out,¹⁴ situationists were concerned less with the promulgation of specific political courses of action than with the need to challenge and disrupt the wider cultural stranglehold society maintained on its members.

This is very much the emphasis of "Fruit". The most concrete manifestation of situationist thinking in the play is the presence, early on, of a television set. As Paul watches the election-night coverage, his wife and chauffeur goad him into fury by persistently and scabrously undercutting and deflating the images on the screen. None is interested in the politics. Paul is concerned only with how the results will affect his business - "But all my posh patients are in the Labour Party" - the others only with driving Paul into one of his "tantrums":

PAUL: Watch and shut up!

(PAUSE.)

HILARY: His armpits smell.

(PAUL LOOKS DESPAIRING.)

HILARY: He's wearing dirty Y-Fronts.

(PAUL EXPLODES.)

PAUL: That is the Home Secretary of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

(HILARY SHRUGS.)

HILARY: He's wearing dirty Y-Fronts.

(PAUL JUST ABOUT CONTAINS HIMSELF.)

And make-up.

(PAUL CLOSES HIS EYES WITH PIQUE.
THEN, LOOKS AT THE TELEVISION AGAIN.)

His armpits smell too.

The ever-increasing violence and scatology of these comments is reminiscent of the images of disease,

decay and filth that proliferate in "Gargantua" and Skinny Spew. Here, the sordid and grotesque reality of the private world is juxtaposed with the two-dimensional, bland posturings of the public figures on the screen, shattering any sense of reality it may have. But the idea is not simply suggested, it is dramatised, in the form of what is the key visual image of the play: Paul, realising the Conservative victory will damage his business, finally explodes, kicking in the T.V. screen and jumping on its "innards"; the third time he has done so, we are told, in a month. "It relaxes me", he explains: "bring me my file on the new Prime Minister."

His subsequent attempt to blackmail the Prime Minister is not in any specific or partisan sense a political action. His all-consuming passion for personal revenge is targetted on what he perceives to be the conspiracy of public institutions: the drug company, who made him a monster, the politicians who capitalised on the scandal, the media and the fashionable magazines which exploited his "human interest" story. It is the Prime Minister's role as the figurehead of public life generally that makes him Paul's victim, and the means of blackmail is the threat to smash that public role by revealing the private reality of his homosexuality. One career - that of the outgoing Labour Minister - has already been destroyed in a similar way: his attempts to hide from the public the fact that "all these years in the public eye, I've

been bombed out of my mind" finally collapse when, in the drunken despair of defeat, he vomits during a television interview with Robin Day. However, what Paul fails to understand is the power of "the spectacle". Quite simply, the Prime Minister is unmoved by his threats: indeed, in private interview with Paul, he openly admits to his homosexuality. In one of the funniest moments of the play, homosexuality becomes simply one more element in the great conspiracy of public life:

I number among my lovers the Bishop of York, the Head of BBC Light Entertainments, the City Editor of the Daily Mail, the Chancellor of Bradford University, and the Leader of Her Majesty's Opposition.

The freedom of the Prime Minister's private confession is born of his absolute confidence that the public does not care, and that his public image is all-powerful. As Paul's verbal onslaught becomes ever more desperate and violent, his very language breaking down under the pressure of explosive emotion, the Prime Minister takes easy and comfortable refuge in the polished, bland conventionalities of "public-speak": repeatedly, he defuses Paul's attacks by refusing to "enter into a conversation that employs expletives". As to his reputation in the country as "Pooves Mum",

COLIN (PM): I know nothing of that.

PAUL: Don't you care?

COLIN: I know nothing of it. Wherever I go, I am received only with kindness. The odd bantering shout, which I join in with.

PAUL: The whole country is pissing itself
 with laughter at you!

COLIN: I very much doubt that. I know that
 not to be so.

The Prime Minister is the first of a long line in Brenton's plays of figures of power who are masters of, and hide behind, their ability to manipulate language to political ends. Exposing and attacking the nature of the public discourse of the "society of the spectacle" becomes an important and recurrent theme for Brenton.

Defeated, Paul, in Brenton's phrase, "falls through England",¹⁵ the "sub-cultural" England of Revenge and Christie: dark, anarchic and semi-criminal. London is a "nightmare city" of "mean streets" and howling sirens. His encounter with the old Trade Unionist develops to more political ends the use in the earlier plays of a "generation gap" between characters to suggest a wider relationship between past and present. In suggesting an alternative course of action - that of the traditional Marxist idea of a working class revolution - after the failure of Paul's personal crusade, the old man also prefigures Josef Frank in Weapons of Happiness (1976). In that play, Frank's political education of Janice, with its concentration on the practicalities of revolt, learned from history, is seen to be the vital component of any organised opposition. But in "Fruit", Brenton cannot accept that argument: the old man has been plotting his revolution, alone, for fifty years. As Anson points

out, "rather like Macleish and Hepple at the end of Revenge, (he) belongs to a past era of politics, his activities seem to bear little relevance to England in the 1970s."¹⁶ For the Brenton of 1971, the making and use of the petrol bomb is a more "political" and "realistic"¹⁷ line of attack, given Paul's failure and the perceived redundancy of the old man's Marxism. This is a clear statement of both Brenton's and Portable's politics of the time: the despair felt by the characters in the play is a reflection of the writer's, and the only course of action left is vengeful, violent, and literally explosive: "(a) really great outburst of nihilism like "Fruit" or the last act of Lay By (see below) is one of the most beautiful and positive things you can see on a stage."¹⁸

The unrepentant nihilism of "Fruit" presents a persistent and uncomfortable challenge to its audience. Indeed, the very manner of its staging enforces an intimate proximity between action and spectator that almost inevitably leads to an over-riding sense of confrontation. This is typical of Portable plays generally, and at least in part is born of the practicalities of touring, of playing one-night stands in non-theatre venues:

With the plays that are not done on stages - like Portable plays weren't plays for stages - the space between people defines the actual physical theatre, the space between the audience itself and the actors. And that space and relationship becomes an almost moral force in the writing and in the presentation - a sense of bodies and will and concentration, and laughter or abuse.¹⁹

Brenton's comments are worth emphasising, especially in as much as they again stress how much his art develops from a growing understanding of the practical circumstances in which theatre is made and performed. The need to tailor both writing and presentation to those circumstances, far from being a constraint, becomes something to be developed and exploited. In the case of "Fruit",

David Hare staged it deliberately against what is regarded as elegant theatre, which is what the piece needed, dirty linen. It had a scrubbed kind of staging which wasn't pleasing to the eye, only pleasing to a sense of the play, and in a way was very beautiful, so functional.²⁰

The deliberate usurpation of contemporary theatrical convention is written into the play, and does not reside simply in its remorseless and violent scatology. Conventional scene division is broken down: changes are covered by "voice-overs" in the blackout, or by characters' asides; action is made continuous by the lights being cross-faded from one focus of attention to the next, characters initiating a sequence of action even as their predecessors leave the stage. Hare's direction sought to capitalise on these elements of Brenton's script:

we worked on a deliberately and apparently shambolic style of presentation, where people simply lurched onto (sic) the stage and lurched off again, and it was impossible to make patterns. That is to say, we worked on a theatrical principle of forbidding any aesthetic at all....It was impossible to make aesthetic patterns, and it was impossible to apportion moral praise or blame.²¹

The aim was not only to prevent the spectator taking

refuge in the established conventions of stage-audience relationships, but also, in so doing, to force him to question his own assumptions regarding the subject of the play. In a very real sense, the play is not just about "disrupting the spectacle", it seeks to disrupt its own spectacle. An audience does not expect to have to accept a vicious, deformed monster as its "hero", nor to see major public figures quite so viciously lampooned; still less does it expect to be shown how to make a petrol bomb. But the key moment is when the bomb is thrown and explodes: just as events on television are undercut and questioned within the play, and the screen violently smashed, so the making and throwing of the bomb seems to smash through the accepted barrier between events on stage and the reality of the world of the audience. Brenton points out that, in the often very angry discussions with audiences that took place after the play, "all the questions were about 'Is that true?'"²² That question is precisely the response that Brenton demands, and it forms the essential element of the kind of relationship with his audience which he seeks throughout his career, whether it be through the "artistic terrorism" of "Fruit", or the larger, more complex and sophisticated form of "British epic".

The Bradford Festival Plays

Even during that period of his career that was so much dominated by the association with Portable, Brenton continued to produce work for Chris Parr, with two plays commissioned and directed by him for the Bradford Festivals of 1970 and 1971: Wesley - "a giant blow-up of (his) account of his faith" - and Scott of the Antarctic or What God Didn't See, a savage and often very funny debunking of a national hero.²³

Whilst, as shall be seen, both these pieces share certain characteristics with the Portable work, they are most fully understood as developments of the earlier work with Parr. Both plays used members of the Bradford University Drama Group to supply the majority of the cast, and both took to the extreme the notion developed in the early work of writing to a specific place, a specific cast and a specific audience (see Chapter One, p.30). Wesley was "written to be performed" in a thousand-seat Methodist church in Bradford, Eastbrook Hall. Its stage was narrow and built of rostra, occupying the space between the front pew and the communion rail; the pulpit was also used, as was a surrounding gallery. For Scott, the "stage" could hardly be more different: the play was performed on ice at the local rink. Neither space has the freedom Brenton was used to in Portable venues.

To a large extent, the peculiarity of the venues

determined the styles of the plays: as Brenton puts it, "the spaces were the design".²⁴ In purely architectural terms, the specific features of Eastbrook Hall imposed very tight constraints on how actors could move, position themselves and relate to the audience. Nor is the apparent freedom of an ice rink unproblematic: the actor must play "in the round", on ice, and in general conditions perhaps more akin to those of outdoor rather than indoor theatre. Technical difficulties were considerable: Jo Taylor remembers the problems of hanging theatre lights in a church, and of acoustics in an ice-rink.²⁵ Moreover, beyond the physicality of the buildings lay their particular ambience or "feel"; these spaces possessed neither the advantages of a purpose-built theatre nor the flexibility of a typical Portable venue, and came "ready-equipped" with their own "moral force" (see above, p.114). This is, perhaps, obvious enough in a church; but even an ice rink has a "spirit of place" which cannot readily be ignored. To these already severe limitations must be added as well those of working with a student (i.e. amateur) cast.

Brenton's solutions to these problems demonstrate again the brand of theatre he was developing; in particular, they reveal his attitude to "style" more clearly than ever. Style in these plays is not pre-determined by their author, nor is it a result of any particular theory. It is not even, in cases as peculiar as these, stipulated simply by

content (see below). Rather, it evolves out of utilising, even capitalising on, given practical circumstances: it is "tailor-making" pushed to its conclusion. The point is perhaps most easily demonstrated with regard to Scott. What the size and "public" atmosphere of the ice rink seemed to insist on for the play was a "large", expressive mode of performance of a kind normally associated with outdoor theatre or pantomime. Costumes were "(h)uge, gangling, gaudy apparitions"; visual effects generally were powerful: God, bouncing a football-world, the Devil entering on a (loud) motorcycle. Vocally, the actors had to use microphones, but were assisted by a text which often employs the quickly-recognisable rhetoric of music-hall "patter", with its repetitions, and a loud, declamatory style of speech worthy of British national heroes. Mime and formal announcement further aided the paramount need to communicate clearly in a difficult environment, whilst the many jokes and songs (provided by the New Portable House Band) provided a bedrock of "simple" entertainment. If some of these techniques are designed to combat the problems posed by the space, others capitalise on it. The reality of the ice is ever-present: Scott's party incessantly slips on it and collapses, an "anti-Scott" figure in torn costume shivers on the edge of the action. Moreover, local skaters were brought in to glide effortlessly around the actors, mocking their difficulties, and suggesting a black "ice gala". The beauty of this

style of presentation is that it suits its actors as well as their space: the "broadness" and directness fit the honest, "straightforward" performances given by students (see Chapter One).

The same cannot quite be said of the eponymous Wesley. Here, the "actor develops his performance in great detail and rhetorical display." The extra burden of the part, however, is to some extent at least borne by giving the actor both Wesley's original words - "I did it by collaging things he actually said, and most of the things said in the play he'd actually spoken"²⁶ - and the pulpit (naturally enough the focus of the church's sight lines); the two elements combine to give the figure great authority in the play. That authority has repercussions for the other actors: according to Brenton, their roles (Wesley's family, students, sailors etc.) "frame his performance. Whilst (his) part is ambiguous, the other parts are meant to be immediately obvious." One is reminded here of Christie in Love. The simple "functionalism" of these other parts perhaps reflects the difficulties of the long, narrow playing space and the limitations imposed on the actors' freedom, although Brenton did find a number of imaginative uses for it. During the play, it lends itself to the creation of a cricket pitch, a tennis court and a ship; in each case, the shape of the space is turned to advantage, the effect being "pointed up" by a few simple props. Otherwise, many of the techniques deployed in Scott are

first tried here, though often on a smaller scale: irreverent humour, visual effects, announcement, formal language, and music. The music is Wesley's own hymns, sung by a choir "as large as possible, and above all loud." Here, the full "moral force" of the church as building, institution and tradition is invoked, if only to be set uneasily beside the ambiguities located in Wesley himself.

Brenton offers his own account of why he chose to write about Wesley and Scott:

I'm very interested in people who could be called saints, perverse saints, who try to drive a straight line through very complex situations, and usually become honed down to the point of death.²⁷

Both, then, owe a debt to the twin protagonists of Revenge. In each case, the "hero" lives his life by a set of values that are obsolete or redundant, and of little use in a fragmented, uncaring world. Scott's expedition is prompted by a King piqued at the discovery of a bit of the globe that is not in the red of Empire; his efforts are subverted by a free-wheeling Satan and a bored God amusing himself by the creation of earthquakes and hurricanes. Scott and, with the exception of Evans, the rest of his party are God's Englishmen all ("I say, steady the buffs" (sc.xi)), remorselessly cheerful even as they collapse in a pile on the ice. Their attempt to "drive a straight line" through Antarctica is the ultimate absurdity, especially in a world described by Jesus in terms like these:

Soldier, soldier boy with the severed parts
of his enemy. Click click the camera. Kid
sucking a mum's cancered tit. And that man
sucking stones and that woman getting born
a bundle of bones. And unfair rents, and
jungle cities, and agricultural land
defoliated, and workers and poets in the
gaols, and fat men in the west and thin
men in the east, all going outta their
minds.

(sc.iii)

At such moments, the jaunty parody of the play is suddenly under-cut by a harsher criticism not simply of Scott, but of the criteria by which we make our heroes.

Wesley, "who saw the whole world just as a matter of faith",²⁸ similarly meets repeated and inevitable failure in his search to enlighten himself and others before, at the end of the play, peace comes to him "simple as that" (sc.viii), with no explanations and with an ease that mocks his earlier agonising and frenetic effort. There is, however, a more obvious ambiguity about Wesley than there is about Scott: the laughter at his expense does not come quite as easily. To some extent this must reflect Brenton's own feelings about Methodism (see Introduction), but it also points to a larger ambivalence about his "perverse saints". Indeed, he admits to finding them, in their way, "admirable.... Their fanaticism is admirable, but doomed. For me this makes them tragic figures."²⁹ One is reminded here of Christie, and of Paul in "Fruit": for all these characters' blind obsessive-ness and detachment from the "real world", there is about them an energy, even a purity, beside which those about

them seem bland, flat and lifeless. Such figures recur constantly in this part of Brenton's career, from Mary in Gum and Goo to Violette in Hitler Dances and Jed in Magnificence (see Chapters Four and Five). The extent of Brenton's interest may be gauged by the fact that similar "perverse saints" were to have been the subjects of two other pieces of work at this time, both still-born. In 1971 and 1972, Brenton had several attempts at writing a first radio play, about Schliemann, the discoverer of Troy, who research has shown faked some, at least, of his findings (see Chapter Four). Most tellingly, however, a third Bradford Festival project was planned: a version of Moby Dick, to be performed in the Corporation Swimming Baths. The piece was never written, but the figure of Captain Ahab might easily have been the apogee of Brenton's catalogue of "perverse saints".

There remain, perhaps, two general points to be made about the importance of the Festival plays to the development of the writer's career. The first again concerns the choice of Scott and Wesley as subjects. One aspect of their "herosim" not so far mentioned is that both are "cultural" heroes, figures of historical importance, part of the country's image of itself. It is a further ambivalence in Brenton's response to them that his heroes' complicity in "official culture" makes them figures to be loathed as well as admired: "The situationists showed how all of them, the dead greats, are corpses on our backs - Goethe,

Beethoven - how gigantic the fraud is."³⁰ The desire to break the stranglehold of "the dead greats", to demythologise history and culture comes to be a major preoccupation in Brenton's work up to and including The Romans in Britain.

Secondly, although Wesley and Scott conclude Brenton's association with the Bradford group, they also signal a growing determination in him to seek out new audiences for his work. It is that impulse which lies behind much of the remaining work for Portable.

More Portable work

The rest of Brenton's work for Portable comprises the two group projects, Lay By and "England's Ireland", and the film, "Skin Flicker". As indicated in the Preface, my approach to this work is selective. Except where some limited discussion of them is necessary, I leave aside wider issues of writing collaboratively and for the screen in favour of assessing Brenton's particular relationship to the work in the context of the central thrust of his career.

In terms of time, these pieces emerge over a period of some eighteen months. Lay By was first performed in August 1971 at the Traverse Theatre Club in Edinburgh, "England's Ireland" in September 1972 at the Mickery Theatre in Amsterdam;³¹ "Skin Flicker" was written in 1972 and first shown at the Almost Free Theatre in London in February 1973.

This period also sees a variety of other work: not only "A Sky Blue Life" (see below), but also Brenton's output for the whole of 1972, work which will be covered in the following chapter. (I break chronology for the sake of clarity.) Whilst it is true that many - though not all - of the pieces produced between late 1971 and early 1973 were for Fringe venues and audiences, it is also true that the Portable work represents a diminishing involvement with the group that itself reflects growing doubts about the efficacy of writing for the Fringe generally.

Lay By and "England's Ireland"³² are Brenton's first experience of working in collaboration with other professional writers; in both cases, he was one of a group of seven. The team for Lay By comprised Brenton, Hare, Trevor Griffiths, Brian Clark, Hugh Stoddart, Stephen Poliakoff and Snoo Wilson, who also directed. An eighth writer, Peter Ransley, was initially involved but later withdrew. For "England's Ireland", the group was Brenton, Hare, Clark, Wilson and David Edgar, Francis Fuchs and Tony Bicat; Hare directed. The original intention was, however, for a group of fifteen: given the subject of the play (see below), Irish journalists and "people who weren't writers at all" were invited to participate, but they "all suddenly chickened out and we didn't know why. We thought they felt they were bad writers and we were bad writers as well."³³

Both plays were born of a growing sense on the part

of Portable writers that the Fringe was becoming too insular and self-regarding; even, too sophisticated. Brenton:

(Audiences) became theatrically literate and the discussions afterwards stopped being about the plays' content and began to be about their style. And also we began to know the circuit too well. Those two things made it not dangerous any more. And somehow it had to be risky, it had to be dangerous, it had to be a gut operation or else it was no good. And so we began to try and get big shows out.³⁴

The need to get those "big shows out" led to what Ansoorge identifies as one of the first attempts at collaborative work in Fringe theatre: Lay By.³⁵

There was a meeting at the Court of playwrights, organized by David Hare, and we sat round trying to talk about our art and craft - disastrously! Then David said, 'Well, let's just do something, that way we'll find out about what everyone thinks.' And so he said, anyone who wants to write a play with me, join me in the bar. Six of us went out and we wrote it.³⁶

In the case of "England's Ireland", the collaborative method was adopted more formally; and, for more specific reasons, at least for Brenton, who felt that as "an English writer I was completely incapable of writing about Ireland, and that's why I joined the group, because together we could force a show onto (sic) the stage."³⁷

In both cases, the process of writing was essentially the same: "great rolls of wallpaper, and big children's crayons(,) and the seven of us crawled around on the floor, scribbling a continuous text".³⁸ Brenton in fact goes as far as to suggest that the method was "not playwriting. It's like a long argument... (a) complete row, a knockabout

between the playwrights."³⁹ What the group was driving at was what Hare termed an "experiment in public writing":⁴⁰ of necessity, an individual writer's personal perspective, sense of style, language and so on are erased by a group process that seeks to make a virtue of open-endedness, of the lack of any "aesthetic patterns".⁴¹ Clearly, this kind of style owes something to "Fruit" (see p.115), and perhaps suggests one area in which Brenton's contribution to the collaborative process may be identified. Beyond that, however, it is not possible to designate specific parts of either text as being Brenton's own (although Hare reveals the court scene in Lay By to be Brenton's and Griffiths'):⁴² the "public style" that was sought required the group to treat itself as a "public-in-miniature", to research its own responses to the chosen subject, and to submit individual views to general scrutiny ("you looked down and saw the latest line, and there'd be an argument about the next line").⁴³

The result was two plays which together stand almost as a manifesto for Portable work generally.⁴⁴ In them, the uncompromising confrontational style of "Fruit" is pushed to its limits, as audiences are presented with shocking subject matter and forced to confront the double standards and hypocrisies of their reactions. Lay By is its writers' response to media coverage of a real-life rape case. In the play the victim is forced by a lawyer to re-enact her experience. The audience is challenged

about the ambivalence of its response - shock, disgust and voyeuristic fascination - and further taunted by being presented with scenes involving a pornographer at work with his models. The piece - which Hare felt caught "the authentic stink of pornography"⁴⁵ - concludes with the dead bodies of the three central characters being washed in blood, hoisted into bins, and turned into jam: overpoweringly, the sense is of waste, of human "meat". "England's Ireland" deploys a battery of theatrical styles from documentary to song to comedy routines to present an uncompromising view of the Irish "troubles" (a subject to which Brenton was to return indirectly in The Churchill Play and to meet head-on in The Romans in Britain). Again, public attitudes are attacked: the dramatising of historical background challenges audience ignorance, a horrifying torture scene its apathy; contemporary (non-partisan) government policy is condemned, but no more than the racist laughter provoked by an Irish joke.⁴⁶

The dominant characteristic of both these plays is what Brenton calls "the black satire of revulsion",⁴⁷ and they are unrepentantly provocative in their attacks on the prurience, callousness and glibness of public life: their aim is very much the situationists' "disruption of the spectacle". In particular, the challenge is to what are perceived as the "easy answers" of humanism, in the theatre or in life generally. In the last scene of Lay By, "we tried to put every phoney humanist statement that

you could hear in the theatre from our elder playwrights":⁴⁸
 even as the hospital attendants turn bodies into jam,
 they discuss the nobility of man's suffering and the in-
 evitability of his triumph. For Brenton, the position of
 the humanist playwright is one made up of

(s)oggy aphorisms for a middle-class audience,
 assuring them that after all they need do
 nothing. That people are unhappy but nothing
 can change. It's a fake piety often clouded
 in elegaic despair, this Western humanism.
 Samuel Beckett is its high priest. It is a
 wet blanket on the spark of the possibility
 of change which should be burning in our
 theatre.⁴⁹

Similarly, Hare felt that many of the difficulties
 encountered by "England's Ireland" (see below) arose because
 "producers want(ed) plays about how 'this hating has got to
 stop'. That is the only sort of play the English can under-
 stand about Ireland, and it didn't fit the bill."⁵⁰ Instead,
 audiences were faced with plays which dealt with sex and
 violence explicitly, and which offered no answers; simply
 a savage and nihilistic vision of a society close to collapse.

Critically, the plays had their supporters. Anson found that the "seven writers created a remarkable unity
 in terms of style and presentation of (Lay By)",⁵¹ whilst
 Benedict Nightingale described "England's Ireland" as
 "a genuine attempt to comprehend and interpret the most
 substantial crisis this country has faced since the last
 war."⁵² Both plays, however, were dogged by controversy.
 The Royal Court originally guaranteed Lay By a Sunday
 night performance, but retracted on reading the play,⁵³

and this was typical of the kind of difficulty both plays encountered. In neither case were such difficulties surprising: a production like Lay By, which not only showed pornography at work but also presented its audience with "hard core" photographs, was never going to have an easy passage on tour. Its problems, however, were little compared to those faced by "England's Ireland", as Brenton indicates: "50-odd theatres refused to take it. Many lied quite directly, we knew they'd lied."⁵⁴ Hare agrees that, in effect, the play was "banned", "but that was simply a question of fear - fear of being blown up. And partly a feeling that the subject should not be discussed in the theatre at all."⁵⁵ The result was that "on both... occasions we were forced back down underground again. We couldn't get into big spaces; they wouldn't have us."⁵⁶

In terms of original intention then, both pieces must be accounted to some extent failures: however successful the evolution of a "public style", the audiences were ultimately as "private" as ever. For Brenton personally, however, their importance is considerable. Collaboration has remained an important aspect of his career, although the numbers involved in the Portable work were exceptional: apart from the 1978 play "Deeds" (written with Hare, Griffiths and Ken Campbell), he has chosen to work with no more than one partner. Interestingly, too, the majority of future collaborations involve writers first encountered with Portable. Griffiths has already been mentioned; in

1973, Brenton's co-author of "A Fart for Europe" was David Edgar. Undoubtedly the closest collaborator, however, has been David Hare. Both as co-writer (Brassneck, 1973; Pravda, 1985) and as director (Christie in Love; "Fruit"; Weapons of Happiness; Pravda) his part in Brenton's career has been considerable. Two kinds of collaboration may be identified here. The first involves Hare exclusively, and its results have been plays in the "large" sense: large in theme, scope and style, and dependent on their authors' ability to "merge", to work closely, line for line, in close understanding.⁵⁷ "England's Ireland" provides the model for the second, and more common type of collaboration. These are plays, often more limited in scope and more specifically targeted, where co-authorship has arisen for practical reasons and has not involved the same kind of intimate co-operation. "A Fart for Europe" (see Chapter Five) and A Short Sharp Shock! (1980) were written as "necessary responses" to public events (joining the E.E.C. and the election of a Conservative government respectively) in the same way that "England's Ireland" was born of a "need" to comment publicly on contemporary political life. In each case, Brenton's collaborator - Edgar, and Tony Howard - was strong in an area in which Brenton has always felt himself to be relatively weak: that of detailed factual research.⁵⁸ A similar strategy emerges in a different kind of play in the most recent of the writer's collaborations. In Sleeping Policemen (1983), Brenton and Tunde Ikoli wrote

separate plays around the same characters and events, the two pieces then being edited together to provide two insights into the same experience.⁵⁹ In all these plays the point is not that collaboration serves Brenton's own purposes, "covering" weaknesses in his craft; rather it extends the range of what can be written about, making more ideas, more subjects, available to more audiences: it is an insight into his view of the theatre as socially responsible.

The Portable collaborations are also important in an historical sense. Their determination to deal with public events in a public manner is a further stimulus to Brenton to tackle subjects on a larger scale in his own work, and to find wider audiences. Both impulses lie behind his final project for Portable, the film "Skin Flicker". It was perhaps inevitable that Brenton should look to new media in his attempt to "go public": 1972, the year of the writing of "Skin Flicker", also saw a first radio play written, "Government Property", and the broadcasting of a first television play, "Lushly". (These will be considered more fully in the following chapter.)

"Skin Flicker" was produced by the British Film Institute and made for Portable Films by Tony Bicat on a budget of £3000. It is small-scale piece with a running time of 41 minutes. Brenton's script is prefaced by his own synopsis of the plot:

A teacher, a nurse and a garrulous layabout kidnap

a public man somewhere in England. They employ a cameraman, a maker of blue films, to record what happens. The story ends with the defection of the cameraman, the murder of the public man, and the suicide of the kid-nappers. At a later date the material shot for the film is edited by government officials for 'training' purposes, to instruct public employees in the mores of extremist groups. It is in this form that the story is told.⁶⁰

Thematically, then, the film treads similar ground to "Fruit". As in Paul's case, "people's passions are justified, their anger is wholesome, but their actions are futile, and that is a kind of modern tragedy. Many young people have destroyed themselves in this way."⁶¹ Unlike "Fruit", however, the story of "Skin Flicker" is presented in a wider historical and political context: it was inspired in part by a real-life incident - the Laporte kidnapping in Canada - and deals by implication with the contemporary growth of urban terrorist groups like the Angry Brigade and the Red Army Faction. As such, it is the progenitor of both a television play, Saliva Milkshake (1975) and, more importantly, of Magnificence, which it prefigures in two ways. First, it deals less with a single "hero", more with a group of characters of comparable importance. Here may be perceived the influence of the Portable collaborative work: the group process, for all its apparent chaos (more true of Lay By than of "England's Ireland"),⁶² helped define the language and style appropriate to "public themes". "It force(d) you to learn and to argue. It force(d) you to be responsible to history, in a way."⁶³

The experience is reflected in "Skin Flicker": by placing a group, rather than an individual, at the centre of his film, Brenton creates space for argument to take place, for ideas to be examined and decisions made openly: public issues (of terrorism) are discussed public~~ly~~ly (in a cinema). (For a fuller discussion of the point, see Chapter Five.) Secondly, like Magnificence, "Skin Flicker" articulates Brenton's concern at the waste of young lives, and also imparts a wider sense of the tragic futility of actions genuine in impulse but fatally undermined by the lack of a proper understanding of the nature of the "enemy". The fundamental irony of "Skin Flicker" is that the film of the kidnappers becomes a weapon in the "enemy's" hands: ultimately, their actions have proved worse than futile. The sense of failure and despair felt by these angry young people is Brenton's own, occasioned by the failure of the "événements", and it is not until Weapons of Happiness that he is able to articulate a realistic, if extremely cautious hopefulness for his characters.

Yet if "Skin Flicker" is a bitter testament to the practical failure of the revolts of 1968, it also reflects again the more positive and lasting legacy of the dissidents' analysis of art and culture and its importance to Brenton's work. It is perhaps not surprising that, given the basic tenets of situationism, Brenton should take the opportunity to write for the screen.⁶⁴ The political analysis of "the society of the spectacle", as has been seen, naturally borrows the language of film and television to express

itself; "Skin Flicker" simply makes use of that communality of language and ideas. The terrorists' use of a pornographer to record their actions not only underlines the obscenity of their violence, but also, in a wider sense, makes comment on the reaction of an audience more interested in the spectacle of that violence than in the political issues raised, a point emphasised further by the title. Moreover, the very structure of the film dramatises the difficulties and dangers of how a piece of drama is received and can be used, as Bull points out:

The muddled and inhuman acts of the terrorists are transmuted into a 'snuff movie' which in turn becomes a part of the educational apparatus of the enemy that they wish to destroy. This sense of a film within a film within a film raises quite consciously questions about the role of a radical drama set in a non-radical theatrical context which are crucial...⁶⁵

Such issues form the underlying concerns of "Skin Flicker", but are approached more directly, albeit in rather different form, in "A Sky Blue Life" (see below), a play which again, significantly, makes use of a "Chinese-box" structure - play-within-play, story-within-story - to debate the relationship between the artist, his work and society. What is perhaps more important in the long term is Brenton's growing perception of the value of such a structure for the creation of a sophisticated dialectic around which may be constructed rich and complex investigations of any subject. One thinks of the play-within-a-play of The Churchill Play and of the twin or triple narratives of Weapons and Romans. The crucial role in developing these complex forms is that played by Hitler Dances, which will be discussed in the

following chapter.

"A Sky Blue Life. Scenes after Maxim Gorki"

Brenton's next play, like the Bradford Festival work, has as its central figure a "perverse hero". As has been seen (Introduction), "A Sky Blue Life"⁶⁶ has a long and troubled writing history. Between the first version in 1966 and the eventual production as a lunchtime piece at the Open Space Theatre in November 1971, Brenton had "several cracks at writing it".⁶⁷ As shall be seen, he found even this, the final version, to be not entirely satisfactory. There is not the space available to me to chart the various changes the play went through between 1966 and 1971, but their existence is worth noting as an index of the importance Brenton attached to the issues with which the plays deals.

The play was directed by Walter Donohue, who also revived it at the Bristol New Vic Studio in October of the following year. It is a one-act piece, comprising six continuously-played sequences of action with no formal divisions into scenes. Fifteen parts are played by four men and two women.

It is in many ways a very different piece from either the Portable or the Bradford work. It is set in Russia, at the time of the Revolution, and makes its subject an examination of the role of Gorki as a writer in a society

on the brink of a huge and violent upheaval: an artist of prodigious talent, caught in the swirl of history and riven by tensions in his life and his work, tensions between his ability to represent his society truthfully and the "historical necessities" of Lenin's revolutionary programme.

The action is prefaced by a statement from Gorki:

These were the universities of my life.
Factories and ditches. Fields. The great plain,
going for miles. A landscape of millions.
It was a hard life of bitter struggle. But sky-blue.

The form of the play that follows is constructed around a careful inter-cutting and counter-plotting of vignettes from Gorki's life, including meetings, and arguments, with Tolstoy and Lenin, and - making up the bulk of the play - dramatised adaptations of scenes from his works, in which he takes part. The works are adapted freely, each selected, ordered and tailored to fit Brenton's thesis. The first, which inaugurates the action of the play, is "Ice, A Story". Gorki and two others - Boev, a peasant, and "Moscow", a factory worker - attempt, inch by careful inch, to cross a half-frozen Volga to a party on the opposite bank. They succeed, but only after nearly losing "Moscow" to the river, and, on their arrival, Gorki is immediately imprisoned as "an extremely suspicious man". The action moves immediately to Gorki's real-life meeting with Tolstoy at Yasnaya-Polyana:

Leo Nikolaevitch! They say all Russia walks
on your old legs. I have come to ask you,
when will the Russian people shake off their
chains, and rise from the earth into the light?

But Tolstoy is senile, besieged by young writers hiding in his flower beds, and obsessed only with the cultivation of his orchard. Disillusioned, Gorki initiates the third and longest sequence of the play, "The Depths, A Play" ("N.B. NOT 'THE LOWER DEPTHS'", read Brenton's stage directions). In Brenton's version, Gorki becomes a guest of his characters, sharing their "hole" and watching as they squabble and tell each other melodramatic stories. He becomes increasingly alarmed as he loses control of his play and it moves to a sentimental ending with the death of one of his characters. The scene is literally torn apart by the entrance of Lenin, who denounces the play as bourgeois rubbish and argues that Gorki should write revolutionary pamphlets instead. Lenin remains on stage to watch the final two sequences of action. In "The Dead Man", Gorki is persuaded to act as surrogate priest to comfort the widow of a pig farmer; there being no Bible available, he reads from a manual on pig farming. The play concludes with "A Birthday": Gorki, pretending to be a medical student, forces his help on a woman in labour. He successfully delivers the baby, as Lenin stands to one side quietly laughing.⁶⁸

That so much of the play is constructed from revisions of Gorki's own work is crucial to Brenton's purposes. By inserting the Russian writer into his own literature, Brenton is able constantly to ask major questions about the relationship between the writer, his work, and society generally. It is the events in that society that place both writer and work in what is often ironic context.

One of the qualities that sets "A Sky Blue Life" apart from Brenton's earlier work is its pace and atmosphere. There is throughout a palpable sense of suspended tension and unease, of repressed energy and violence. The tone is set at the beginning of the play, as the three men cross the frozen Volga. As the ice cracks and screams beneath them, and they wait to be swallowed by the running water beneath, their mood alternates between a forced diffidence and fear and panic. Most characters in the play display a similar sense of anxious waiting: their lives are led in a limbo, their behaviour switching unpredictably from listless boredom to quarrelsome aggression. What is built up is a vision of the old Russia, frozen in immobility, gradually and spasmodically shearing apart under the pressure of explosive change. It is this sense of a land vast beyond comprehension, and on the edge of an unknowable and cataclysmic future, that is the context in which Gorki attempts to deal truthfully with his society; given such a context, what is forced on him is a fundamental examination of his role and function as a writer. He emerges as a figure acutely aware of the moment of history he is caught in, but uncertain of the part he should play and doubting the historical value of his work.

The manner in which Gorki participates in his own work changes over the course of the play, and indicates the degree to which he is able to resolve the dilemmas which afflict him. In "Ice", his role is introduced as

that of narrator - "We're on a raft. We're on the Volga." - but thereafter, he simply takes part in the action. Although he makes key decisions regarding the direction of his story - siding with Boev, who wants to risk the crossing of the river, against "Moscow", who does not - essentially he plays his part on an equal footing with his creations; he is as much a function of his story as they are. Beyond that, his role and responsibilities as writer are not defined: when Boev asks if he is an "intellectual", Gorki replies in the negative, to Boev's relief:

Too many bleeding intellectuals in Russia. One in every ditch, like rabbits, popping up everywhere. Twitching 'bout 'the end of the world as we know it'.

Moreover, when asked if he believes in poetry, Gorki remains silent.

His inability to commit himself to a particular role as a writer dominates much of the play, and is born of the ambiguity of his own feelings towards revolutionary Russia. That ambiguity often leads him close to despair:

How many real men are there among you?
Five in a thousand? Who believe man is
the creator and master of life.

I see you, the slaves of life or its cynical patrons.

...For you live under the earth. Your resemblance to human beings is only anatomical. When the wind comes to your burrows you block the holes, afraid of the cold. Oh my brothers the cold is coming, the great ice.

It is Gorki's doubt about the capacity of his countrymen to realise their destiny that leads him to the feet of Tolstoy, quickly established in the play as "master novelist.

Aristocrat, Freer of serfs. Mystic and saint." But the image of the cultural giant is immediately and thoroughly debunked; like the Russia he symbolises, Tolstoy has become an anachronism. He spends hours "unwriting" his books, and has relinquished all responsibility as a writer: "I'm leaving the corpse. I'll go off. Live in a field. Dig some tatoes. Bye Bye". Gorki has followed him across Russia, seeking enlightenment and hoping to set up a writers' commune, yet he is finally confronted with a figure who, as a writer, has become thoroughly redundant: a self-pitying, pessimistic figure, a prophet of doom, who sees nothing around him but decay. In this context, the only advice Gorki receives - "That story you wrote. About the bakers. The store was in the wrong place" - is not just absurdly pedantic, but purely technical, and divorced from any sense of the importance of literature to society. In his senility and dementia, Tolstoy has become an isolated, brooding moralist for whom the documentation of life itself is blasphemous: "I will not scrawl the name of the Almighty on the pavement. Beside the excreta of dogs". By assuming the role of moralist, he has effectively shut himself off from his raw material, as Gorki finally realises:

Your Russia is deserted, Leo Nikolaevitch.
Mile on mile of the heroic country, and never
the figure of a man. Only you, old scarecrow
father, waving the allegorical crowsoff the
allegorical seed. Where are all the people?
They're underneath, Papa, down under where
you never went. And where I'll go now.

Gorki's search for a truthful representation of the

"real men" of his society produces "The Depths". His own role in the play-within-a-play changes: at its start, he participates in the action as he does in "Ice"; but, as his characters begin to tell their stories, he withdraws and becomes simply an observer, "SILENT AND UNMOVING, HUDDLED AT THE BACK - THO' ODDLY DOMINATING THE SCENE." Three stories are told. In the first two, Nastia and Kostylyov compete with each other in the telling of romantic tales; Nastia's, mocked by the others, an elaborate and inconsistent "very tragic" version of her own love life, Kostylyov's, a "real" romance, a full-blooded story of gypsy life which he forces the others to enact. The third story is told by Luka, and follows the death of Nastia during an argument. It is the story of a man who kills himself after discovering that there exists no map to show the location of Utopia.

The anger and frustration shown by Gorki at the end of the sequence dramatise his dilemma: his play was designed to prove his belief that men control their own future ("Man - there's your truth! Only Man exists"), as a counter to Tolstoy's detached and superior pessimism; yet his creations take control of his work, and lead it to a conclusion he does not intend. As the piece slides into sentimentality and hopelessness with the death of Nastia and the Utopia story, Gorki ceases to be its creator and becomes its victim. Lenin enters, savagely to confirm Gorki's fears:

Pessimistic crap, sloshing black on black.
 Reality, Alexei Peshkov, is brighter and
 darker and more sly.
 It's grotesque!
 ...But a revolutionary play. Can it be used. Now.
 That's the sole criterion.
 But lovely death scenes, oh they'll wet the knickers
 of the bourgeois theatregoers, and do nothing.

Lenin's criticisms have force: Gorki's play has moved close to a statement of the kind of despair represented by Tolstoy. In fact, this seems to be close to Brenton's own condemnation of the "soggy aphorisms" of the humanist artist (see p.129). Yet Lenin's alternative is scarcely more acceptable. Although he is joking when he suggests that "the true literature of revolution" consists of "lists. Lists. Those to be shot, those to be fed", he is entirely serious in asking Gorki to produce hagiographic pamphlets instead. Gorki remains torn. Whilst he reacts passionately against Lenin's argument that the interests of literary truth should be sublimated to the propagandistic needs of the revolution, he is equally aware that his own play, like the stories of its characters, runs the risk of degenerating into something that is in social and political terms at best irrelevant and at worst escapist fantasy. After a "SLIGHT PAUSE", he agrees to write the pamphlets.

Tolstoy and Lenin represent the alternative courses of action between which Gorki continues to search for his social, political and cultural role as a writer: the choice is shown to be between writer-as-priest, celebrating the rites over a dying Russia, and writer-as-midwife,

helping deliver the new age. In the final two stories in the play - "The Dead Man" and "A Birthday" - Gorki takes on both roles, and achieves a partial resolution of his difficulties.

It is significant that the two stories should be announced together, and that one character should appear in both. In "The Dead Man", Sarah is the grieving widow; in "A Birthday", she is delivered of a child. Gorki officiates at both events. In the former, Sarah's family attempts to persuade him to pretend to be a priest for her sake. Gorki refuses: it is a role he cannot play. He does, however, agree to lend his ability to read, and a character is despatched in search of a Bible. That the only Bible available has been burned to provide warmth is an ironic comment on the value of books to a society in upheaval, and leaves Gorki with only a pig farming manual from which to read. Under pressure from the family and from the watching Sarah, he does so. Where, in "The Depths", Gorki's characters have rejected his control, in "The Dead Man" they force him actively to adopt a role in their story. Ridiculous as that role may be, he nonetheless accepts responsibility for it. "There's dignity in doing what needs to be done", Sarah tells him. This is the first time in which Gorki's participation in his own work consists of more than a passive joining in, and his more positive contribution develops further in "A Birthday". Where previously he had refused to pretend to be a priest, he now deceives Sarah quite deliberately, claiming to be a medical student

and incompetently, though successfully, delivering her baby. The baby is "a tough one", having survived Gorki's washing it in the cold sea.

The positive - even interfering - role that Gorki takes in the final story indicates the degree to which he has become willing to take ultimate responsibility for his work. In the face of the huge and complex forces at work in his society, he has effectively been forced to put to one side larger notions of literary truth and morality - to step down from Tolstoy's pedestal - in order to be able to write at all. Although the final scene is one of quiet, even beauty, Gorki's actions are kept in context by the watching Lenin's laughter. He survives as a writer by compromise and pragmatism, and, in doing so, comes close, through his reading of the farming manual and his remorseless attentions to the resisting Sarah, to plain absurdity; like Scott, he drives ahead irrespective of the dangers and complexities around him.

In many ways, "A Sky Blue Life" is an extraordinary piece of writing from a still young and relatively inexperienced writer. The questions it poses are considerable. In seeking to identify precisely what the social and political role of a writer should be - poet, intellectual, moralist, agent for social change - it must to some extent be seen as a dramatisation of Brenton's own doubts and beliefs. As such, the cool, detached irony with which the ambiguities of Gorki's position are exposed and examined stand in

stark contrast to the apparently brash confidence with which the Portable plays assault their audiences, demanding that they judge the truth of what is before them. Brenton himself remains ultimately dissatisfied with the play, a dissatisfaction reflected in the several attempts he made at writing it:

because whenever it's been performed the audience always flattened any criticism of Gorki. People thought that, because this is a play about a writer, a great man, then everything he says in the play is truthful, or has immense weight, and we are invited to believe it. That flattened any attempt to say 'he is very ambiguous, this Gorki, you should be wary of we writers as moralists, as public figures, you'll get more entertainment and enlightenment out of our work if you're more sceptical'.

Yet Brenton's point is to a degree made clear in the play by the attitude adopted towards Tolstoy. As in Wesley and Scott, a "dead great" is under attack here. Not only is Tolstoy's chosen role of writer-as-moralist condemned, so too is the cultural myth that he has become: this is the situationists' dismissal of "official culture" as negative and repressive. That a similar scepticism is not sufficiently invited by the figure of Gorki is perhaps due to a technical flaw in the writing: Brenton himself feels that he did not do enough in the play to counter-act the conventional audience response that the most prominent figure in a play, the character who says most, is "right". It is a problem that recurs in his work, most obviously in Magnificence, a play which is also very much concerned with the paralysing effects of

"official culture" and on which, significantly, Brenton was beginning work at the time of the production of "A Sky Blue Life" (see Chapter Five).

Whatever weaknesses one may detect in the play, its value as an insight into Brenton's own thinking is considerable. Whilst there may be dangers in making oversimple identifications between an author and one of his characters, Gorki's search for a truthful representation of his collapsing society surely reflects Brenton's own:

I believe that if you write well, that's a tool for finding the truth. There's a laboratory nature about a writer's desk; you can try and set out to describe an argument between two people: (for example) one is a policeman, the other a burglar. You have to be truthful to what you know of burglars and what you know of policemen and if you put the two together in a time and place and if, second by second as you write it, you are scrupulous, then you will find out the truth about the confrontation....You do have faith in that laboratory nature of writing, but it's not a faith to be too confident in, of course, because you can write yourself into all kinds of cock-eyed belief. But... what you're saying is 'I can tell the truth if I get this scene right and become confident in its authenticity, its pace, everything about it - I will be nearer telling the truth about the policeman and the burglar than when I sat down'.

However much it deals with the larger questions of the writer in his society, "A Sky Blue Life" is primarily an attempt to dramatise that struggle to be truthful.

CHAPTER FOUR

HITLER DANCES : 1972

In retrospect, the year 1972 may be seen as a watershed in Brenton's career: the body of work it contains - Hitler Dances (January), "How Beautiful with Badges" (May), "Lushly" (August), "Measure for Measure" (September), "England's Ireland" (also September; see Chapter Three), and the un-produced radio play, "Government Property" - represents, in a variety of ways, a growing urgency in the search for a theatre that was more "public" in terms of both content and location. The subjects of these pieces show a continuing move towards harder political thought, larger themes, and wider terms of reference. Whilst three of the five performed pieces found outlet in Fringe venues, two reached for a wider - or at least, different - audience. "Lushly" is Brenton's first script for television; Measure, his first major play to appear on the main bill of a large established theatre. The writer's developing attraction to the mainstream theatre is confirmed by his appointment, in June, as Resident Dramatist at the Royal Court (see Chapter Five), and reflects increasing doubt about the efficacy of writing for the Fringe.

The idea of Brenton abandoning the Fringe in favour of writing for the mainstream stage needs, however, to be treated with some caution. As has been seen (Chapter

Three), his experience on the Portable circuit was that Fringe audiences were becoming increasingly sophisticated, more interested in matters of style than content. Yet this does not necessarily imply outright rejection of any theatre other than the established. Indeed, Brenton has always strongly believed in the Fringe as what Itzin terms "a weapon in a repressive society":¹

It could be the one surviving democratic means of communication. That could well happen. If the police surveillance and interference became very heavy and the Arts Council was nobbled - and there are signs of that happening already, that kind of thing - then the back street activity, almost on the level of being an abortionist, an illegal doctoring service, could be one of the few surviving possible means of communication with people. And the fringe should never forget that.²

In fact, there is a sense in which Brenton has never "left" the Fringe at all, but has continued to write for various kinds of "poor theatre" as well as exploiting the larger, better-resourced public stages. What "going public" has meant for him has not been the swapping of one kind of "circuit" (the Fringe) for another (the National Theatre, R.S.C., Royal Court), but the development of a policy of diversification in his work, of different kinds of writing to reach different audiences and different kinds of audience.³ In this sense, the kind of work that begins to appear in 1972 and 1973 represents more a change of emphasis than of direction, and "going public" entails not simply seeking mainstream stages but beginning to consider the possibilities of other media as well, however

much stage work has remained a clear priority.

The impulse behind these changes does, nonetheless, reveal major developments in Brenton's thinking about his work. His concern in the early seventies about the limitations of Fringe work needs to be seen in the context not simply of the theatre, but of larger historical, social, and political forces. Speaking in 1975, he said:

I think the fringe has failed. It's (sic) failure was that of the whole dream of an 'alternative culture' - the notion that within society as it exists you can grow another way of life, which, like a beneficent and desirable cancer, will in the end grow throughout the western world, and change it. What happens is that the 'alternative society' gets hermetically sealed, and surrounded. A ghetto-like mentality develops. It is surrounded, and, in the end, strangled to death. Utopian generosity becomes paranoia as the world closes in. Naive gentleness goes to the wall.... The truth is that there is only one society - that you can't escape the world you live in. Reality is remorseless. No one can leave. If you're going to change the world, well, there's only one set of tools, and they're bloody and stained but realistic. I mean communist tools. Not pleasant. If only the gentle, dreamy, alternative society had worked.⁴

What is significant here are the larger terms of reference within which the specific decision about Fringe theatre is made: rather like Gorki at the end of "A Sky Blue Life", Brenton is choosing to place his writing at the service of his larger sense of social and political need.

It was perhaps inevitable then that Brenton should turn his attention to the public broadcasting media.

"Government Property: a play for radio" has a convoluted production history.⁵ A play was commissioned by the B.B.C. in 1972. Brenton's original idea was to make use of a project he had had in mind for some time; a piece about Schliemann, the discoverer of Troy (see Chapter Three):

"I wanted it to be a huge nineteenth century piece and finally I couldn't get it to work. From what I can remember, it was because it was a one-note piece."⁶ Instead, he produced a play about a British concentration camp for political prisoners. The idea came as a response to the pressure of public events, like "Fruit" or "A Fart for Europe": "it was in part an attempt to write about Ireland, and it was written in the shadow of the Industrial unrest of that year, the miners' strike, the three-day week, and the very strong possibility of anti-Trade Union legislation".⁷

It is in parts a harrowing piece, creating a vision of a Britain where civil rights have been eroded and where any form of "unofficial" political or industrial activity is dangerous. The play begins with the "detainees" (not "prisoners", insists one of the army guards) building their own camp. At its centre is the making of a tape-recording of an Irish Republican inmate's horrific account of his interrogation and torture by the army. The listener hears the tape being edited into a bland, re-assuring Press Release for the consumption of the public. The play

ends with the camp beginning to collapse and one of the prisoners escaping: in a startling last scene, he stumbles into the Ambridge home of Doris and Dan Archer who, as good citizens, immediately report him.

"Government Property" was judged by the B.B.C. to be too controversial to transmit: in fact, the play was never recorded. It remains, however, an important piece for the writer, in as much as it was the first of a series of works on the "camp" theme, a subject that was to preoccupy him for a number of years. Most importantly, it was used as a basis for The Churchill Play in 1974: several characters, a number of incidents, and the central thrust of the argument are all "stolen" from the earlier piece.⁸ Brenton, however, has not written for the radio since, although he did adapt his 1981 stage play Thirteenth Night for transmission by B.B.C. Radio Four in 1983.

The work for television has, however, continued throughout the playwright's career, albeit spasmodically and with occasional controversy. "Lushly", the first of the T.V. scripts, was transmitted by B.B.C. Television in August 1972; directed by Brian Farnham, it is a short piece, lasting only thirty minutes.⁹ Like "Government Property", it shows an increasing engagement with political issues, although the subject here is more general, being concerned with power relations within the class system. Its form is that of a

political exploration of the relationship between

three workmen - Jim and Bag, two house painters, and their foreman Eddy - and their employer and his cynical agent. As they redecorate a dilapidated slum house, Jim tries to complain to Hardacre, the owner of the house, about Eddy's alcoholism. He finally gets to see Hardacre, who is cavorting James Bond-style in a bath with naked secretaries. The three workers go to a pub, where they meet a deposed military governor of Venezuela. They return to the room they are painting, armed with a crate of beer and spirits, and are splashing paint around the place as the owner's agent enters.¹⁰

As with "Government Property", the political content in "Lushly" does not extend far beyond the simply oppositional: just as the escaped political prisoner has nowhere to run to, so the workers here can only make a gesture of protest. It is not until Magnificence (see Chapter Five) that more positive courses of action are posited, and then problematically. "Lushly" also prefigures the 1973 play Brassneck in its scathing attack on corruption in industry: there is at least a hint of Alfred Bagley in the slum landlord Hardacre. Brassneck, in fact, was subsequently revised for television production itself, but the remainder of the writer's work for T.V. - The Saliva Milkshake (1975), "Paradise Run" (1976) and "Desert of Lies" (written 1977, revised and transmitted 1984) - are all original pieces. 1986 saw a new departure: the thriller Dead Head, a serial in four parts. Yet Brenton has never been entirely happy with the medium: "I think the power of television has not really been thought out properly. I think people know it's the 'Lie Machine', and so its credibility is

very very low... the assumption of naturalism... in itself neuters political and progressive work in the medium".¹¹

Both the hardening of political thought and the search for wider audiences are most significantly represented by Brenton's stage work for 1972: it is always the theatre that carries the burden of his artistic evolution. "How Beautiful with Badges" and "Measure for Measure: A Comedy" together demonstrate what are to become the twin polarities of his writing for the stage.¹² Badges was commissioned by Walter Donohue (director of "A Sky Blue Life") and the Open Space Theatre Company for the Camden Festival of 1972. It is a short play of six scenes, requiring five actors and a "voice-over". Measure, in contrast, is a full-scale, freewheeling adaptation of Shakespeare. Commissioned by Jane Howell and directed by William Gaskill for the Northcott Theatre in Exeter, it is of particular importance for Brenton as it represents the first appearance of one of his plays on the main bill of a large public theatre.

Badges tells the story of a bizarre confrontation in the English countryside between two drug-raddled Hell's Angels (Gut the Buzzard and Child Molester), and a young, working class Maoist, Tony, and his feeble friend, Ian. Tony is disguised as a stamp-collecting Boy Scout ("I go about in Scouting Gear to confuse reactionary elements") and devotes his time to fervent if futile attempts to convert the local gentry to Maoism. The Hell's Angels,

on the other hand, lie dreaming of the "aggro" they hope will come their way. Tony's efforts to socialise provide them with their chance. The piece ends with Ian knifed and Tony run over by their motorcycles.

The confrontation between the two parties enables Brenton to investigate the confusions and contradictions of the kind of left-wing political activism represented by Tony. His cause is hopeless: his appearance as a Boy Scout is not simply a disguise, but signifies his approach to the politics he espouses: another convert, another badge on his uniform. As with the precepts of Baden-Powell, his easy slogans reduce to the comfortably simplistic a world complex and ambivalent beyond his comprehension, as he sometimes senses:

Look yourself up and down, and ask.
Is it possible that I am a redundant
anachronism?
...Is it possible that I do not
have a correct view of the world?

The means by which Brenton exposes Tony is to face him with the Hell's Angels. Their drug-induced dreams compare with his political fantasies, but their lives also represent an animal ferocity of experience that simply cannot be accommodated by his world picture. Brenton makes the point by resurrecting an old idea:

TONY: It's like going up to a cut-out
Kodak girl, outside a chemist.
An' touching her cardboard flattie
titties. And to your dismay...a
real hand comes out and grabs you.

The dichotomy is reinforced by the opposing views of the

surrounding countryside the characters give: for Tony, it is simply a garden for the bourgeoisie, and as such fits his ideological jig-saw neatly. For the Angels, it is a wholly alien environment, fit only for "concreting over.... Like L.A.... with jungle for scenery"; the wild fantasy of urban, criminal paradise first articulated in Revenge.¹³ Against this anarchy and volatility, it is Tony who appears two-dimensional and simplistic. Yet one also senses that Brenton has sympathy for his young Maoist: however much his lack of understanding is mocked, his anger, his passion to change things, is endorsed. The dialectic that is set up here, between the justice of the cause and the fatal lack of understanding as to how to achieve it is one to which Brenton turns his full attention in Magnificence, and in the figure of Jed may be glimpsed the Boy Scout Tony.

Measure is a political play in a rather different sense. Brenton's radical re-working of Shakespeare makes clear identifications of Harold Macmillan and Enoch Powell as Duke Vincentio and Angelo respectively, and was written in the clear knowledge that "Ex^eter was a High Tory town" and that the theatre's board were "Powellites... right-wing Tories".¹⁴ Given that the writer's intention was to attack "Powellism" "blatantly, unfairly",¹⁵ it was hardly surprising that the board resisted. Bull reports that the "pressure forced changes in the script; the lawyer retained by the Northcott's board claimed that Powell

could sue for up to £40,000, and the specific identifications were removed."¹⁶ The experience was a valuable one for Brenton, insofar as it gave an important lesson in the potential problems of working in the established theatre (one thinks ahead to the problems associated with Magnificence and The Romans in Britain), and confirmed his sense that the fringe was too valuable an outlet to abandon completely:

It taught me something, that your enemies know what they're doing, they're not bumbling old fools.... It was the first big theatre that I'd ever written for. I felt I put my head in the door and they had it off by the neck, without any trouble, and that was a terrible lesson. It's a very difficult situation, once a theatre becomes established. That's why I think I'll never desert fringe. I'll always go back and write short shows and try and work in companies that I have my hands on, and all the other hands on it I trust completely.¹⁷

Brenton's transposition of the play to contemporary Britain may have been designed as an outright attack on a specific political phenomenon, but it also allowed him to articulate a wider view of developments on the political right. The movement of power within the Conservative party in the nineteen-sixties away from a traditional, paternalistic old guard to what the writer identified as a new, hard-line, even fascist faction, is a theme to which he returns in Magnificence (see Chapter Five), and which also lies behind his fears for civil liberties as articulated in the series of works begun by "Government Property" (see above). A defining characteristic of Brenton's "new English fascist", as shall be seen, is the ability

to manipulate public image, and it is this discrepancy between public appearance and private reality which attracted the writer to Shakespeare's play (see below). What was also attractive about adapting Shakespeare was the idea of presenting "culture", in a public theatre, in a "High Tory town", and then confounding expectation. Brenton's Angelo is a simple racist; his Claudio, a black star of pornographic films; his Isabella, a Salvation Army officer. A number of original speeches are retained, but their effect is often under-cut: Angelo's agonising debate with himself about Isabella is delivered from a toilet:

Never could the strumpet
With all her double vigour, art and nature,
Once stir my temper - but this virtuous maid
Subdues me quite. Ever 'til now.
When men were fond, I smiled and wondered
how.

(HE COMPOSES HIMSELF, FLUSHES THE TOILET
AND COMES OUT.)

Your brother cannot live.

Most importantly, his Duke is inept: "his machinations are subverted by Angelo, not the other way round."¹⁸

That Brenton should assault "official culture" in this way is not surprising; yet it is also the case that a more serious debt is owed to Shakespeare, beyond even the shared community of interests specific to this adaptation. Brenton has invoked Shakespearean sources on a number of occasions in his career. The debt of Revenge to King Lear has already been mentioned. One may also

point to the influence of A Midsummer Night's Dream on The Churchill Play,¹⁹ and of Richard III on Pravda, whilst Thirteenth Night declares its allegiances immediately if a little misleadingly: Macbeth is the play invoked. There are specific reasons in each of these instances for turning to Shakespearean originals, and there is not the opportunity here to investigate each one. The occasion of Measure, however, does provide a suitable point at which to consider a more general debt to the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage.

With the exception of The Churchill Play, where the debt is in any case formal and stylistic rather than to do with content, all the Shakespearean originals are "dark" plays. They lend themselves readily to Brenton's own vision of a collapsing Britain: in the case of Measure, Shakespeare's themes of the law, of state corruption, of private passion and public hypocrisy, are tailor-made for Brenton, and, indeed, pass more or less intact into his play, however freely he debunks other elements of the original. At the heart of this shared vision is a sense of a world without a moral centre, and to this extent Brenton's theatrical masters must include the Jacobean as much as the darker Shakespeare. As has been seen, Revenge owes a quite specific debt to the Jacobean revenge genre: indeed, Ansorge convincingly argues for the play as "a kind of twentieth century equivalent of The Revenger's Tragedy." He goes on to expand his point:

The world of the Portable writers constantly appears as a murkier version of Webster or Tourneur's Italy where murder, sexual excess and tales of revenge occur against a baroque background of decadence and apocalyptic poetry.²⁰

A glimpse at the list John Russell Taylor makes of the major preoccupations of the new wave of writers confirms Ansorge's argument (see Chapter Three, p.100). Perhaps the more important obligation Brenton has to the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage, however, is formal and stylistic. What the move to a more public theatre in the end means for Brenton is not simply a change of location, or experiments with new media: it is the development of a style of writing that deals in large themes; that has a broad scope; that surges with ideas; that fuses the personal, the public and the political. These are plays that

are 'Jacobean' in a mix of the tragic and comic, taking great pleasure in the surprises and shocks of entertainment a huge stage can arm the playwright with as a showman: they are epic in that they are many scened, full of stories, ironic and argumentative and deliberately written as 'History plays for now.'²¹

The first experiments with this new theatre had already begun early in 1972 with Hitler Dances.

Hitler Dances

Hitler Dances was first performed in January 1972, some two months after the Open Space production of "A Sky Blue Life". It was produced at the Traverse Theatre Club in

Edinburgh by the Traverse Workshop Company, then under the direction of Max Stafford-Clark. The production subsequently toured the country, including an Easter-week stay at the Young Vic, before opening at the Theatre Upstairs at the Royal Court in June 1972. It has not received a full professional performance since, and was not published until 1982.²²

The play is divided into twenty-four short scenes, with no specified set and only minimal costumes and hand-props. It is performed by six actors and four musicians, who both take part in the action and perform the six songs in the script. Each actor plays several parts, sometimes using masks.

Two stories are told at once. On the last day of the second World War, Hans, a German soldier, struggles to return home to the Fatherland. Exhausted and starving, he dies, dreaming of his youth in the glorious early days of the Third Reich. The scene immediately moves forward twenty-seven years to where children, "somewhere, anywhere in Europe", are playing, unknowingly, on his grave. Their war-games resurrect the dead soldier. One child, Linda,²³ refuses to be frightened away like her friends, but leaves home to feed and take care of the soldier, her "dirty old man", and a relationship develops between them. When she begins to tire of him, he tells her a story to keep her with him. The story is enacted by the whole cast, and forms the second narrative strand

of the play. This is a version of the true story of Violette Szabo, a British agent in the last war. Violette is the daughter of a French woman and an English working man who falls in love with and marries a French soldier who is subsequently killed at El Alem^eain. Violette's hatred of the German nation leads her first into an anti-aircraft unit, and then into the Special Operations Executive of the Secret Service. Recruited by the disillusioned Captain Potter, and trained in Scotland by the upper class Brigadier Badge, she is sent on a mission to occupied France and captured. After interrogation by S.S. Sturnbann Führer Hans Josef Keiffer, she is, we are told, executed, largely due to an administrative error. As the story of Violette develops in parallel with that of Linda and Hans, however, the audience, instead of seeing Violette's death, sees Linda strangled by the German soldier, once more dreaming of home.

Brenton himself offers the best description of the play's essential style:

the sense of being fluid, working very rapidly, ensemble playing, the rapid creation and dismemberment of effects, the involvement of story-telling, the juxtaposition, stylistically, of things that are quite different in a very powerful sense.²⁴

This kind of style puts an enormous pressure on the actor. The lack of set requires changes of location (from a wood at night to a small room to a grouse-moor to a "bright and sunny" St. James' Park) to be conveyed almost entirely by the actor's personal resources: his voice, his body, his positioning on stage. Only in terms of lighting does

the script demand the range of facilities normally associated with a conventional theatre; and, in Hitler Dances, lights are used with the kind of striking effect to be found throughout the playwright's body of work. All the other technical resources of the theatre - costume, set, scenery, sound - are, largely for economic reasons, supplanted in favour of the actor's ability to create and to inspire the audience's imagination. Moreover, the actor is required to play not only several roles, but also several types of role, ranging from near-naturalism to two-dimensional satire and even to inanimate objects. The audience, similarly, is subjected to sudden and bewildering changes of style. Powerful theatrical images are invoked, only to be instantly cut down by savage humour, their seriousness deflated by a quick joke. Gothic horror is staged alongside a dialogue that trivialises and pokes fun at it. Yet however confusing the play may seem, there is at its heart an essential clarity.

The writing of Hitler Dances took five months, yet the original inspiration for the play came in 1970, when Brenton was touring "Fruit" in Holland with Portable Theatre (see Chapter Two):

I saw children in Eindhoven, which was flattened twice during the war, first by the Germans and then by the Allies, and is now the home of the world headquarters of the Philips Electrical Company. And at night...the huge Philips sign, like a weird emblem, flashes everywhere in the sky. I saw a bomb-site there with children playing on it...this heap of rubble - history. And the idea of a German soldier coming out of

the ground became meaningful.²⁵

The starting point of the play, then, was a single theatrical image, simple but enormously powerful. It was this image that Brenton took with him when, on the invitation of the Mickery Theatre (which also lent a certain amount of financial assistance), he returned to Holland with members of the Traverse Company in October 1971 to begin work on a play provisionally entitled "Hitler Dancing".

In typescript form, the text of the play appears as a combination of a conventional script and a letter from Brenton to the company written after the initial rehearsal period,²⁶ and it is this which provides the key to an understanding of the sorts of methods and techniques that were involved in its making. The text of Hitler Dances was not presented to the company as a finished piece of work that was purely of the writer's own making: rather Brenton's initial idea acted as the basis for a collective exploration by the whole group of the themes and possibilities it suggested. The final form of the play owes nearly as much to group experience and experiment as it does to formal authorship. To this extent, the play marks a return to the kind of method of play-making first used at the Brighton Combination (see Chapter One), but with a greatly increased sophistication. Indeed, the collective process was one with which Max Stafford-Clark, the director of the Traverse Workshop Company, had already experimented. As with so much Fringe work

at this time (see Chapter Two), the origins of the method lie in the United States. It was the 1967 tour of Britain by the New York group Café la Mama²⁷ which had encouraged Stafford-Clark to break away from the Traverse Theatre Club's policy of producing "straight" plays to set up an independent workshop with a group of actors and musicians and to invite writers to work with them. An early piece, "Dracula", was, like the Portable group work, made with a number of writers (eight, in fact), and Lay By itself was officially designated a Portable Theatre - Traverse Theatre Workshop co-production when it opened at the Edinburgh Festival in 1971. But, according to Ansorge, Stafford-Clark "concluded that it was wiser for the Traverse company to create a show with the help of one writer's vision and ideas."²⁸ He pursued the policy when he became director of Joint Stock Theatre Company, working again with Brenton on Epsom Downs in 1977.* His comments here refer specifically to the Joint Stock work, but they apply equally well to the methods used by the Traverse company in 1972:

(The) work includes the actors, the director or directors, sometimes the designer, and of course the writer, and during that time there's no script. The ideas of the play are discussed, and

* In fact, like Parr and Gaskill, Stafford-Clark becomes a key figure for Brenton. Between Hitler Dances and Epsom Downs he directs Magnificence in 1973, a play like Hitler Dances playing a major part in the move to the public theatre. See Chapter Five.

improvisations are initiated, not necessarily by the director, and this period acts as a fertilising ground or greenhouse for the writer....The writer's free to incorporate any material from the actors' improvisations or any material or ideas that weren't discussed at all. The workshop simply acts as a way of being able to explore themes and ways of dramatising them....(Actors') creativity is rarely called upon. You gain their commitment if you say to them 'The script will finally be written by the author, but first we all have an opportunity to explore our own obsessions and create things from scratch, to explore, to initiate subjects.' You're tapping a source of energy that normally plays don't demand.²⁹

This sense of the genesis of the play being as much a communal learning process as a piece of formal theatre is vital to an understanding of its eventual form, though it is equally important to remember that, in the final analysis, the play is very much Brenton's own.

Nonetheless, the presence of the Traverse company is felt everywhere in the text of Hitler Dances. The workshops Brenton initiated on arriving in Holland were designed specifically to explore and experiment with the company's own experiences, memories and personalities. The early stages of these improvisations were concerned with the recreation of the kinds of games they had played as children. Out of their research - and it should be stressed that the conditions of the work were perhaps more akin to those in a scientific laboratory than those in a conventional theatre - were formed the games the children play in the finished script:

TONY (ASIDE): Enemies is a kids' game, it goes like this.

ALL STAND.

Two leaders.

AMARYLLIS AND SABIN JUMP ASIDE.

Pick armies.

AMARYLLIS AND SABIN PICK SIDES...

AMARYLLIS: Bags!

SABIN: Bags!

AMARYLLIS: Bags!

SABIN: Bags!

AMARYLLIS: Bags!

SABIN: Bags!

TONY: Each army goes to its own country.

THEY DO, ONE SIDE SINGING 'GOD SAVE THE KING', THE OTHER SIDE 'ZIEG HEILING'...

Each country has four bricks.

EACH ARMY HOLDS UP THEIR BRICKS...

The game is to capture the bricks. But if you're 'had', like this...

AT ONCE CAROLE AND SABIN DEMONSTRATE. A SMASHING CHASE. CAROLE IS CAUGHT.

You're dead.

(sc.iii)

Although the scene is hardly naturalistic, it clearly demonstrates the careful observation of children's behaviour out of which it was evolved. Yet the improvisations which produced it were not concerned purely with the development of an authentic representation. The playing of children's games is an established workshop technique, designed to

break down personal inhibitions and to forge the sense of close-knit group identity and commitment that is vital to a collective project such as the making of Hitler Dances. The overall purpose of such work, as Stafford-Clark suggests, is to fire imagination and to stimulate personal creativity. This could take the form of utilising an individual's particular talent, or of building a stage character from elements of an actor's own personality. For example, Sabin Epstein (an ex-La Mama actor) taught a daily movement class to the rest of the company, and was encouraged to incorporate his own ideas into his playing of the dead German soldier rising from the grave:

Originally Howard wanted a wholly horror situation. I suggested a combined image of Christ's resurrection and a Frankenstein monster. That helped greatly. When I'm really working I have to think through the whole process of rising from the dead. First comes my breathing, feeling air going through my fingers, wrists, elbows, shoulders - then eventually spreading to the whole body. Then realising I am holding a gun - which immediately leads to other associations.³⁰

Similarly, Kevin Costello, who played Captain Potter, was personally involved in the development of his character:

At first I wasn't aware of being anything like Potter. Then Howard presented me with a speech in which Potter lists a series of books, like Paradise Lost and Wordsworth's The Prelude which he claims will help the war effort. It was quite eerie because I'd read all the authors mentioned - and they are my favourite books! The speech was as much about a side of my character I often repress as about Captain Potter. Howard had spotted this during an improvisation and had used it to write that speech.³¹

Collectively, the company also used its childhood

memories to provide much of the material present in the play which recreates in detail the atmosphere of war time Britain:

The idea of the Second World War became more powerful to me as the work proceeded. None of us had actually experienced the war - we were all born towards the end. But I remembered things my father had told me and gradually one started to think. Again it was a question of going back to childhood - remembering things like rationing, the sense of austerity, and the togetherness of the country during and just after the war. The country was unified - it's a very strong contrast to the way everything is totally disparate now.³²

Again, the experience was incorporated directly into the script:

TONY: Bake a cake in war-time England.
 CAROLE: Powdered eggs with love.
 KEVIN: Quarter pound dried raisins.
 LINDA: Stain the cake with siver (sic)
 of oils.
 TONY: To make it look fruity.
 CAROLE: Margarine in the marzipan.
 KEVIN: And two months coupons for the
 sugar.
 LINDA: Sugar to go in the icing.

(sc.xi)

More importantly, some of the personal experiences recollected began to suggest developments of the theme which was captured in Brenton's original idea - the children playing on the dead soldier's grave - and which came to lie at the very heart of the play. Carole Hayman:

The line I say about my father having been shot down in France was certainly true. I was born three months after his death. That's weird....We are left with this terrible residue of our families having been twisted and decimated by events which took place before we were born.³³

It is this sense of the quality of modern life having been forged by the experiences of a dead generation, this sense of the present being pregnant with the legacy of the past, which became the driving force behind the evolution of the play into its final form. Each member of the cast had been affected in some way, and their horrific stories were incorporated into the script:

TONY: Distant cousin of mine. Track
 of a German troop-carrier,
 went over his spine.

KEVIN: Yeh I got one of them, distant
 cousin died in the war.
 Burnt alive in a tank.

(sc.iii)

However, it became increasingly obvious that the indirect, "second hand" nature of the company's experiences, whilst inculcating the idea that the present generation is in some ways the passive victim of its savage past, was not in itself a sufficient approach to a subject as large and complex as that of Hitler Dances. Hence the company began to supplement its own memories with conventional historical research, and with interviews with members of the war generation, including Dutch resistance workers. Their findings not only began to undermine conventional assumptions about the nature of the war, but also confirmed the sense of distance between the attitudes

of the cast and those of the previous generation:

There's a total myth about the Second World War. My father was quite young when the war started. Yet he wanted to join up right away which is something inconceivable to me. I don't think you could ever have a mass call-up in England again. Too many people would refuse to fight. It's known that the only way those Battle of Britain pilots could get through their missions was to be pissed out of their minds all the time. That's what the characters in Hitler Dances say constantly - 'Back here in 1941 pissed out of our minds.'³⁴

This conflict of values led the company into a more detailed examination of received attitudes regarding the war, and in particular to the treatment accorded the subject in films, both English and American. Again, the approach was initiated by a group member, Sabin Epstein:

Being born in the US right at the end of the war, I had to approach the subject very differently from most of the others. I was working in terms of the recall I had of the movies I had seen - rather than on being able to talk to families who had actually lived through the Blitz or rationing and those kinds of things. We did a lot of work originally on films - trying to recreate old war movie situations....British films concentrate on the fight for survival, defending a long cultural heritage.³⁵

Out of these improvisations came the second narrative line of the play, the story of Violette Szabo. The company's version was based on the 1958 Rank film, Carve Her Name With Pride. The film perpetuates the myths surrounding the war, being a successful commercial mixture of light comedy, romance, character lionisation and glamorised violence.³⁶ Research showed the inaccuracy of this kind of presentation; Violette's mission has been shown to

be pointless, her death due to administrative inefficiency. It was this aspect of her story to which Brenton turned. The sense of a cruel discrepancy between the conventional, public face of "heroism" and the pointless, brutal historical reality dominates the finished play; and Violette's training by Brigadier Badge is its clearest expression:

TONY: Got to get a bit crude here ladies.
 But war is crude! Won on the
 playing fields of Eton? Bullshit!
 Back streets of Glasgow more like.

POINTS AT CAROLE.

You Miss! Stamp on me balls!

(sc.xvi)

As Stafford-Clark pointed out,

In order to fight fascism, the country had to become fascist itself. Violette is trained, corrupted, turned into a killer. To fight evil a society often unites and responds in an evil way.³⁷

Of course, that the group should have turned to film in this way dovetailed neatly with Brenton's own preoccupations: for him, the cinema screen is not simply another source of research material. In Hitler Dances, the situationists' metaphor of public life as a screen is utilised more fully and more precisely than ever. The bland certainties of old war films not only make their own contribution to the mythology of the war, but readily expand to represent the whole range of received historical and social attitudes towards it. The Carve Her Name With Pride narrative at once invokes, parodies and savagely attacks "public" versions of history as distortions - ultimately, dangerous distortions

- of reality. The idea is not simply implied throughout the Violette story, but is dramatised explicitly in the presentation of the dead German soldier's resurrection, where the real horror of the event fails to excite more than half-hearted voyeurism in spectators shown simply as somnolent consumers:

SABIN ON HIS WAY OUT OF THE EARTH...
AND A COMEDY ROUTINE FOR CAROLE AND
KEVIN. THE VOICES OF MR AND MRS
EVERYDAY OUT OF THE DARK. AS IF
THEY WERE WATCHING THIS
RESURRECTION ON A TELLY SCREEN...

CAROLE: I don't think he's gonna manage it.

PAUSE.

KEVIN: I dunno. Jesus managed it. Have
a choc.

CAROLE: Ta.

KEVIN: Didn't he.

CAROLE: What?

KEVIN: Resurrection. Jesus.

CAROLE: These chocs are plain.

KEVIN: No they're not they're milk.

CAROLE: Must be 'Good News'.

KEVIN: Yeh.

PAUSE.

What?

CAROLE: You know. There's a box full of
plain an' a box full of milk.
An' a big bloke comes on an'
does a karate chop, an' sticks
the two bits together. So you
get plain an' milk in one box.

KEVIN: I asked for 'Black Magic'.

CAROLE: Didn't you look?

KEVIN: Jus' stuffed it in the bag didn't I!

CAROLE: Oh don't get shirty Kevin. Put the light on, an' look at the box, settle it once an' for all.

KEVIN: Don't wanna do that. Spoil the effect won't I?

CAROLE: Oooh.

KEVIN: What's the matter?

CAROLE: Poor thing.

KEVIN: Oh. Yeh. Well....

(sc.v.)

The experimental work done by the Traverse company provided much of the material for Hitler Dances; indeed it supplied the "meat" of the play, in terms of both locating the subject's central areas of interest and suggesting appropriate theatrical means of exploring those areas on stage before an audience. Those early improvisations also forged what is the essential quality of the play: its profound and powerful sense of unease, of a world without a centre. Again, film was a formative influence:

Playing is an essentially positive act. But the children at play in Hitler Dances resurrect a dead German soldier. It's interesting that Sam Peckinpah's film Straw Dogs also has an opening image of children playing ring-a-ring-a-roses in a graveyard. It's an image Peckinpah uses a lot....In a lot of the new groups you find a similar going back to childhood, to kids playing....There's a going back to the simple

rituals - the ones a pre-literature theatre first grew out of.³⁸

It is this almost primaeval quality which induced that sense of "nihilism and breakdown" - the savage cruelty of children, the horror of the resurrection, the brutality of Violette's training, the obscenity of violence without a purpose - that Brenton was seeking. Indeed, he admits that "it's not a thought-out show, it's a very emotional show."³⁹ Nonetheless, the development of the two central narratives by the group provided Brenton with definite ideas about what the structure of the piece should be:

I was aware of trying to find where two stories fit together, and doing that was like a critical process... the story of a child and a dead German soldier, and a sexual murder and obscenity in that story - and in some way the two did fit together.⁴⁰

It is that phrase "critical process" that is crucial. The text of Hitler Dances reads in a very disjointed, fragmentary way; actors change role constantly, sometimes in mid-scene; sudden changes of style disconcert the reader, savagely under-cutting expectation and undermining the "rules" of conventional theatre. Yet what Brenton was beginning to search for was a specific and precise theatrical form which could articulate the complex relationship between the present and the recent past, and however confused the reader may be, the spectator, watching the play produced on stage, should not be. For Hitler Dances marks the first serious full-scale attempt to involve the audience directly in the argument of a Brenton play, to make the stage a public forum

for a debate in which not only the writer and the actors take part, but also the spectators. Experimenting with and evolving methods and techniques to achieve this new form characterises much of Brenton's major work from Hitler Dances onwards: Weapons of Happiness and The Romans in Britain both deploy similar techniques and both reflect a belief that the theatre can be an active agent for social and political argument. All these plays share a fundamental characteristic: structure is formed by the inter-play of two stories which could stand apart but which, "smashed together" (Brenton's phrase),⁴¹ fit into an overall structure of mutual commentary and argument, a "critical process". The story of the child and the dead soldier, cross-referring with the story of Violette Szabo, provides the framework for an act of interpretation by the audience whereby it re-examines the nature of its preoccupations and assumptions about its own past, in much the same way that the Traverse company did in its initial work on the play. I have said that the conditions which governed the workshops out of which the play grew were similar to those of a laboratory; those same conditions apply equally to the audience watching the finished play. The play dissects its subject matter, cuts it into its component parts and examines them one by one, thereby showing the structure, the relationship between the pieces. The business of analysis, of detailed criticism, is performed by the audience as the actors carry out the experiment on stage.

The means by which the play seeks to involve its audience in the critical process requires that it shows its own structure. One of the striking characteristics of Hitler Dances is the way it displays its own dramatic methods; the play constantly invites the spectator to see how it is made, how it is put together. The opening scene establishes the conventions of the whole play. The scene shows a resurrection of Hans, the German soldier. But it is not the resurrection initiated by the children playing on his grave; rather it is a theatrical resurrection. As the play begins, the audience is presented with simply a group of actors on stage, and, on the floor, a basic costume - a tin hat, mask, greatcoat and rifle. One of the actors announces the subject of the scene:

AMARYLLIS: Death of a German soldier, on the
 last day of the Second World War.

The Hans actor then dresses himself in the costume, assuming the outward appearance of the part he is to play. What follows is the recreation, by the rest of the company, of the character behind the façade: they impose on the Hans actor - who, at the start of the scene, is simply a blank, neutral figure - the situation and characteristics of a soldier struggling to return to a defeated Germany. First, they give him his voice "WITH INSULTS AND CATCALLS"; gradually, their torment produces a sound from Hans; then, imitated words, and finally, words that are purely of his own making. For the first time, the voice becomes independent, and no longer relies on the sounds given to it by the rest of the

company. The process is repeated in terms of movement and gesture as the actors place Hans first in his historical context -

SABIN (ASIDE
DEADPAN):

What was the attitude of the Dutch, the French, the Yugoslavs, the Czechs, the Belgians, the Norwegians, to the German soldiers on the roads, in rags, limping back to the ruins of the Reich?

PAUSE.

Hatred.

PAUSE.

The occasional killing.

- and then in his physical context ("Hans, you're very tired... cold... the dog bite's got gangrene..."). By the end of the scene, the actors have manufactured on stage, under the eyes of the audience, a character with an existence of its own. In a scene of immense theatrical daring, a figure from the past is introduced directly into the present, as happens in The Romans in Britain, where a Celtic slave, on the run from the invading Romans, is suddenly surrounded and shot by twentieth-century British soldiers in Northern Ireland. Yet in one vital respect Hans is unlike the slave: he does not, as it were, leap into the present as an intact historical reality. Rather he is "conjured up" on stage as a part-real, part-mythological figure, rather like the guilt-ridden mind of Josef Frank in Weapons "conjures up" his dead friend Clementis to share the stage with him; or, in a rather more orthodox way, Churchill rises from his coffin in

the prisoners' play in The Churchill Play. Hans is recreated in 1972 by the attitudes and responses of the company; they forge his role, impress characteristics on him, literally force him into being. He is their creation, their shaman. The second scene of the play stresses the role of the company in his making; Hans is once more reduced to a mere collection of props:

KEVIN, AS HIMSELF, ADDRESSES THE AUDIENCE. AT HIS FEET, THE HANS REGALIA.

KEVIN: Our German soldier. Rotted old corpse now, twenty-seven years on. Say hello to all the nice people, Hans, you rotted old corpse.

KEVIN LIFTS THE GREATCOAT SLEEVE, AS IF IT WAS A DUMMY, MAKES IT WAVE TO THE AUDIENCE. LIGHTLY, PUNCH AND JUDY.

Hello hello - Jawohl Zieg Heil.

Hans has reverted to a neutral figure, a mere ventriloquist's dummy that relies once more entirely on an operator for movement and speech. Indeed, the sorts of characteristics given to Hans are as much those of his creators as those of the historical model; it is not only their hatred and disgust that bring him to life, but their cruel fascination: the torment of the torture-chamber, or indeed of the playground. Although the members of the company are not actually acting the parts of children, they are, in a very real sense, playing, in both the juvenile and theatrical senses of the word. Their cruelty is a childish cruelty, but it is not being displayed by children but by actors, who have no specific characters

Hamlet could be conceived of to exist outside the parameters of the theatre, Hans cannot. Hans' identity is not fixed and is not consistent. I have already suggested two versions, two manifestations of Hans: there is the Hans of the opening scene, but there is also the Hans of the first narrative. Once resurrected by the children playing on his grave; this Hans is a free agent, independent and autonomous. He can have a relationship, even, it is implied, a sexual relationship, with the little girl, Linda; he can use her to procure food and weapons; he can tell her a story; finally, he can kill her, and her death is as "real" as any theatrical death. The Hans of the play's first scene can do none of these things: he can, ultimately, perform only to orders. For the purposes of the first narrative, he has his own life as Linda's "dirty old man". Yet throughout the narrative, the audience has knowledge of the other Hans, the Hans who is made up partly of historical reality, and partly of modern responses to that reality, a mythopoeic figure. In the audience's eyes the two versions of Hans overlap; indeed they are intrinsically linked. The way the relationship between past and present is dramatised in the first scene is examined from another perspective in the relationship between the reincarnated German soldier and the modern little girl.

This idea of perspectives is important. For in the course of the play Hans is presented in a series of roles. He is a projection of modern responses; he is an historical reality. To Linda's friends he is a grotesque but fascinating

"dirty old man"; to her parents, a "funny old man" in the woods, of the sort "who are wrong in the head. Who do things". He is also a story-teller, a ventriloquist's dummy, and, in the resurrection scene, a Frankenstein's monster. Often, these roles under-cut each other: the terrible vision of the Nazi rising from the grave is immediately deflated by the bewildered, rather sheepish Hans who is bullied by Linda into playing with her yo-yo. Brenton never allows the audience the opportunity to build a consistent, fluid psychological interpretation: Hans is played in turn by all the male actors, the swapping of the costume taking place in full view of the spectator. A series of aspects, or perspectives, is presented: Hans is as he is seen, and he is seen through different eyes; the eyes of the other characters, the eyes of individual actors, the eyes of the audience. A series of insights are given to the central identity of the Nazi stormtrooper who is, in a very real sense, still alive today. Those insights often reveal the face of received public attitude, but equally they provide sudden flashes of the deadly serious reality. It is the inexorable truth of this reality which kills Linda at the very end of the play.

I spend so much time discussing Hans because in many ways he provides the key to understanding the way "character" is used in Hitler Dances; it is no accident that the first scene is his. The techniques involved in the making of Hans are applied with even greater rigour to the creation of

Violette Szabo. Again the historical/mythological figure is conjured up on stage in much the same way that Hans was, but this time it is Hans himself who causes Violette to materialise on stage and it is Hans who defines the role she must play. The scene is the beginning of the second narrative strand of the play.

TONY: Tell - you - story.

PAUSE. LINDA TURNS.

LINDA
(SHARPLY): Story 'bout what?

.....

TONY: Story about... girl.

LINDA: Was she pretty?

TONY: Very pretty.
Pretty - as - you.

LINDA HUFFS AT THAT.

LINDA: An' was she clever?

TONY: Very - clever.

LINDA: And did she grow up?

TONY: Beautiful - young - woman.

TONY DRAWS HIS HANDS DOWN IN
THE AIR, THE FIGURE OF A WOMAN.
NOT LIKE THE JOKE, DEAD SERIOUS,
PUTTING THE GROWN VIOLETTE
THERE. AND BEFORE THEM, A SPOT
COMES UP, GENTLY, ON AMARYLLIS.

(sc.x)

What follows is Hans telling the story of Violette's marriage to the French soldier Etienne. As he tells the story - both to Linda as Hans and to the audience simply as an actor,

moving between the two roles throughout the story - it is acted out on stage before him. The actors playing Violette and Etienne take their cues from the Hans actor; in a sense, he controls them. The scene is a straightforward parody of a traditional film situation:

AMARYLLIS: Bonjour monsieur.

SABIN: Bonjour, mademoiselle.

ETIENNE A LITTLE SALUTE AND
A BOW. VIOLETTE LOOKS DOWN
MODESTLY.
A PAUSE.

SABIN: Le ciel est bleu, aujourd'hui (sic).

AMARYLLIS: Oui monsieur, le ciel est très bleu
aujourd'hui.

SABIN: Aussi les arbres sont très jolis.

ANGIE (one of the musicians) AND
CAROLE AS TWO GIRLS WATCHING A
FILM.

ANGIE: What they saying?

CAROLE: She says good afternoon Monsieur.
'E says good afternoon mademoiselle.
'E says the sky is blue today, she
says yes the sky is very blue today.
To which 'E replies, also the trees
are very pretty.

ANGIE: Oooh in't that lovely?

(sc.xi)

The glamorised version of the meeting and marriage is under-cut not only by the responses of the rest of the cast but also - and with a great deal more savagery - by the following scene wherein Etienne's death in the North African desert is presented in almost anatomical detail. The precise circumstances of a violent death are explored:

TONY (ASIDE): Death of Violette's husband, Etienne, in the North African desert, at the battle of El Alemain.

AMARYLLIS (as Violette) IN THE CENTRE. AT THE BACK KEVIN AS INSTRUCTOR. IN THE FOREGROUND SABIN AS ETIENNE IN THE DESERT, LIT BY A SPOT THAT STARTS WHITE AND ANOTHER THAT BLEEDS IN RED AS THE PASSAGE GOES ON... KEVIN GIVES THE BLOW BY BLOW ACTIONS OF ETIENNE'S DEATH. THE COMPANY GOES THROUGH THEM BY ROTE. SABIN REPEATS THEM, AS 'THE ETIENNE ACTOR'.

KEVIN: You're running. Bullet hits you. Left thigh. Forces your leg forward.

DRUM.

Twist your body with it.

DRUM.

Fall to your right. Right knee.

DRUM.

Involuntary contraction. Left calf twists. First scream.

DRUM.

SILENT SCREAM FROM SABIN.

(sc.xii)

The scene is an almost scientific demonstration, and it continues with the same degree of careful detail until the moment of Etienne's death. Only the Etienne actor is actually involved in the "action" in its conventional sense: the rest of the cast are engaged in performing an experiment and presenting it to the audience. Again, the "instructor" is imposing qualities in much the same

way as the company does for Hans in the opening scene, or Badge does as he trains Violette later in the play. The juxtaposition of two styles - the one a light-hearted parody of the myths surrounding the war, the other a brutal dissection of the ghastly violence which that war entails - is another example of Brenton ruthlessly dislocating audience expectation by contrasting public charade and private horror, and setting the myth hard alongside the fact.

Violette's "presence" at her husband's death is an event of a purely theatrical nature: the stage is being used as a space within which events, characters and ideas can be impacted together in a way that is possible in no other form. As soon as Etienne dies, Violette approaches the body and begins her long speech in which the enormity of her loss, and her eventual reaction to it, are examined and explored. Once more, the temptation to present a simple psychological interpretation of her responses is denied to both the actress and the audience:

LIGHT CHANGE.
AMARYLLIS COMES FORWARD.
WITH GRIEF AND GAIETY.

AMARYLLIS: Dreary.
'Due process'.
Knock on the door, and telegram.
'Father forgive me for I have
sinned - In what manner daughter
- ugly thoughts of hate father,
against the dirty German swine
who killed my Etienne - wash
these thoughts from your soul
my daughter with the blood of
Jesus Christ who died for us -
I'll wash with blood, Father, all
the fucking krauts.

SHE LAUGHS, AT ONCE OUT OF
THAT...

Traditional scene! How Violette
got widowed. There was a knock
on the door, and my mum went.
It was a telegram.
Her mother looked like stone.
Mum, looked like her face was
stone.

(sc.xii)

Not only is the actress required to snap from one mood to another, but she must also move into and out of the action, move from playing Violette to telling Violette's story, and, indeed, acting out the parts played by others in that story. "Like analytical cubism", suggests one reviewer, "it is all overlapping angles of vision, never describing but implanting ideas in depth."⁴² In a sense, the very moment of bereavement is frozen: in terms of reality, it is outside time. The intensity of Violette's grief is penetrated by the rapid switching of perspectives. She is the reporter of her experience and the victim of it. From the arrival of the telegram she is thrown to the bitterness of her confession; forward again to the long grey of mourning; back to memories of childhood. As she struggles to come to terms with her loss, the very pressure of her experience begins to turn grief to something approaching psychosis. Within this one speech is encapsulated Brenton's whole concept of characterisation as it is used in Hitler Dances. Aspects of personality and circumstance are set together, side by side, in a pot-pourri of ideas, emotions, events, experience. Each actress plays Violette.

Violette... doesn't come across as a complete consistent character. The audience might be confused by the Company swapping roles so often. But it's what Howard Brenton wanted - he didn't want us to present rounded character parts.⁴³

What Brenton is doing here is capitalising on the collective process to advance a developing notion of what human nature is and how best it may be represented on stage; once again, theory is being born of practice. The method here rejects Freudian psychology and its attendant theatrical representation:

As I see it, people are more volatile than Freudian psychology, Ibsenite plays, the medical and cultural model of the human mind we have, allow. Our resources are enormous and unpredictable. Consciousness is protean, chaotic....The chaos of our true nature is kept at bay for social reasons. That the world as it is can run we enter into a collective conspiracy... the volatility must be suppressed. History, politics, opinions, even what we tell ourselves we are, are perverted by what's demanded of us to get through the days, to get money, shelter, warmth, a bit of peace. There's a war between what people know they have to be and what they experience they really are. That war is the stuff of characterisation in my plays....(My characters') complexity is one of a process of struggle, against what's demanded of them, in a maze of incidents and predicaments, trying to understand what's happening to them moment by moment, the only constant the ferocity of their existence.⁴⁴

Violette, then, is a further development in that long line of protagonists - Christie, Wesley, Scott, Gorki - who attempt to pursue a direct course through the confusions of a disintegrating world. She is complex to a degree not previously seen; and that complexity is an indication of Brenton's growing wish both to broaden the range of his writing and to increase its penetration. Whilst the

part remains unique in his work in demanding the services of several actresses, the image of the human mind it presents and the means of that presentation prefigure the fuller characterisations of "British epic".

Theatrically, Violette's identity is shattered into fragments. As she moves through that "maze of incidents and predicaments" - her marriage, her bereavement, her time as an A.T.S. gunner, her recruitment, her mission - her character is moulded into various overlapping, often contradictory roles. What emerges at the end of the play is a Violette who is a twisted, deformed human being. The conflict - or "war" - between Violette's anarchic nature and the demands of society that she expresses that nature through certain inadequate, distorting outlets is resolved by the eventual sublimation of private impulses to public needs, as she accepts the role imposed on her:

And these were the thoughts of Violette,
and she became a heroine.

The process by which she becomes a "heroine" is a confusing, illogical one. As an A.T.S. gunner she is criticised:

Fancy officer, took me out. Said it wasn't
lady-like, lady-like to like it so, frying
jerry in the sky. Heinkels like Sardine
Cans chucked into the fire, inside nasty
jerry fish sizzle sizzle.

(sc.xiii)

Yet social criticism is replaced by social endorsement as Brigadier Badge, treating his female trainees with a gentlemanly courtesy, turns them into vicious killers.

The difficulties of playing so fragmented and complex

a character are considerable, even when the very idea of fragmentation is itself dramatised, made concrete, by the use of several actresses. Over the course of the play the character undergoes huge change, and if the possibility of an individual actress developing a conventional psychological interpretation is denied, then there remains the paramount need for the audience not simply to recognise a "new" Violette - that can be accomplished by a simple, identifying piece of costume - but to understand that her various manifestations are a key part of a meaning that is complicated but consistent. If the spectator is not to be lost, as Violette herself is, in the jumble of pressures, impulses, experiences and reactions that mould her character, he must be able to construct that consistency of meaning himself.

The key to coming to terms with the complexity of Violette's character is to be found in her theatrical relationship with the little girl, Linda. Indeed, the story of Linda, and of her friendship with Hans, which provides the first narrative of the play, is supplied by Brenton as the audience's touchstone for unlocking the whole work. The female cast of Hitler Dances all play Violette at some stage, just as all the men play Hans, but the character of the little girl is played solely by one actress throughout, creating a stability of identity that deliberately invites the audience to place Linda at the centre of its analysis of the play, to refer other characters and events to the personal story of this one central figure. Like Michele in

Gum and Goo (see Chapter One), Linda is an isolated character, driven by the barrenness of her social environment into the creation of strange, nightmarish fantasies peopled by "friends" of her own making (her "Boogjees": see scene ix), and her retreat into herself is seen to be the result of her inability to communicate with either her parents or her friends. As the other children argue about the game they are going to play, it is Linda, who, in a typical tantrum, refuses to play "War", wishing instead to play "Nurses":

LINDA (VERY ANGRY STAMPING HER FOOT): Stupid!
Stupid! I think that's jus'
stupid. War is stupid.

ALL STOP...

TONY: Stupid?

LINDA: Stupid.

TONY: Yeh.
 But war's not soppy, wet an'
shitty like nurses.

LINDA: Yeh but with war you get dead
 an' that's jus' stupid.

TONY: Yeh but gettin' dead's what it's
 all about. In' it?

LINDA: Yeh but you get dead, an' what's
 the game in that?

TONY: Yeh but you don't not get dead
 in war.

LINDA: Yeh but....

(sc.iii)

Her wild, anarchic imagination - her "volatility" - is characterised by a fascination for the sordid and the grotesque, and by a compulsiveness to act perversely. It is these two qualities which lead her to remain when the other children

run away in terror as the dead soldier their game has invoked begins to rise from his grave, and, later, to return to him with food and weapons.

On one level, Linda's relationship with Hans is a straightforward, often humorous observation of a friendship between a girl and an old man: he is bewildered by her teasing; she gives him a sweet; he tells her a story. Yet Hans has already been presented as a Nazi and as a representative of a bloody, nightmarish past, and as such, his relationship to Linda is more than a conventional, naturalistic one. As he represents the audience's past, so he represents Linda's: he is, perhaps, the most strongly-drawn and frightening of Brenton's "dirty old men" (see Chapter One, pp 52-54). Linda runs away from home to join Hans dreaming of her "Boogjee" world, and that is no coincidence. For Hans is properly an inhabitant of that sinister world of violence and deformity and is treated by Linda as such. Again, as in the first scene, the figure of the dead German soldier is as much a perpetuation of modern fascination as an historical reality. The implication of a sexual dimension to the Hans-Linda relationship reinforces the idea of the sordid, perverting influence of recent history on modern lives.

The story of Hans and Linda provides the thread by means of which the spectator can draw together his interpretation of Violette. Violette is an isolated figure whose search for a means of expressing her rebellious volatility lead

her into a nightmare world of distorted truths and violence. Like Linda, her frustration and confusion manifest themselves in sudden outbursts of ferocity and hatred. When Linda is teased by the other children for her adoption of Hans, she responds with a frightening intensity of hatred: "COLDLY, ODDLY, FRIGHTENING THE OTHER TWO LITTLE GIRLS. Bugger you./ PAUSE./Bugger you./PAUSE./Bugger you" (scene vii). Similarly, Badge's training of Violette twists her grief and anger, and produces an explosive outburst of violence:

TONY: Go on!
 Go on! Think of them, things to
 kill a man or maim!

CAROLE: Kettle!

TONY: Go on!

CAROLE: Kettle hot water in his face!

TONY: And!

CAROLE: Cheese grater 'cross 'is eyes!

TONY: And!

CAROLE: Potato peeler!

TONY: Potato peeler where!

CAROLE: Anywhere!

TONY: Potato peeler where!

CAROLE: Potato peeler...

HESITATES A SECOND. THEN COARSE,
WITH ALL THE OLD CRUELTY OF THE
PLAYGROUND.

CAROLE: In 'is doh dah - in 'is privates -
there there there - cut 'is willy
off.

(sc.xvi)

Moreover, as Linda's interest in Hans, who is dragging her with him in his futile mission to return to the Reich, begins to wane, and he tells her Violette's story, she is, at times, forced to play Violette in the enactment of the story. Once she rebels, as she "drops into occupied France" at the beginning of the mission:

LINDA: No!

...SHE BREAKS FROM THE PARACHUTE
(position), CROUCHES AS THE LITTLE
GIRL.

Hans Hans... Nasty story. You tell
me nasty story. Why you not tell me
nice story.

SHE THINKS.

'Bout... 'Bout... Heaven!

(sc.xix)

But the story about heaven seduces Linda back into playing Violette. The discrepancy between what she wants the world to be like, and the manner in which it forces itself on her as something entirely and horribly different, is an exact analogy for the process through which Violette is pushed. The two stories touch in an act of mutual interpretation; and the fact that Linda is herself playing Violette at the moment of touching enables Brenton to dramatise it rather than simply suggest or imply it. In this way the audience is provided with the bones, the skeleton, around which to build its analysis. At the end of the play, the technique is again called upon: the Violette story is pushed through to the moment of her death, but her death is

not actually seen; rather, the play cuts straight back into the first narrative, where Linda, again trying to escape from Hans, is finally killed by him. There are, of course, strong practical reasons for this: the debunking of the mythological Violette would run the risk of also undercutting her death, were it seen. By making the death Linda's, Brenton both avoids the danger and reiterates that, however twisted Violette may have become, and however much she may be seen to endorse the role society and history have forced upon her, she is ultimately as much a victim as Linda is. Both are essentially passive; their identities are as forcibly moulded as is Hans' in the first scene.

The central position that Linda occupies in the play affords the audience the opportunity to measure her consistency against the other characters - and types of characterisation - present in the piece. The tone is set particularly by the way Linda's relationship with her parents is presented:

AMARYLLIS AND CAROLE AS MOTHER,
SABIN AND KEVIN AS FATHER.
UP ON EACH OTHER'S SHOULDERS -
THEY LOOM UP OVER LINDA.

AMARYLLIS: Like - a - dirty - little - slut
- oh - dear.

HANDKERCHIEF.

LINDA: Don't, Mummy.

AMARYLLIS: Covered in mess.

LINDA: Don't, Mummy.

AMARYLLIS: Sopping in filth.

LINDA: Don't, Mummy.

FATHER LOOMS UP.

SABIN: Linda!

LINDA TURNS TO 'HIM'.

LINDA: Don't, Daddy.

FATHER STRIDES THROUGH THE SCENE .

SABIN: Linda, Mrs Hayman's little Carole, just along the road, says you've been taking sweeties from a funny old man.

AMARYLLIS: Going out of my mind. Sniff. Tug at my handkerchief.

SABIN: And your mother's going out of her mind.

(sc.viii)

The comedy of the scene of which this is the opening section lies in the parents' total inability to communicate with their daughter. Yet the means Brenton adopts to achieve that comedy have another purpose. The decision to create an appropriate discrepancy in height by putting actors on each other's shoulders - a joke, incidentally, repeated four years later in Epsom Downs - and the actors' inclusion in their speeches of their own stage directions are both, obviously, comic techniques. However, they are also pointers to the fact that, in the parents, the playwright has created characters of a different type from that of the little girl; most simply, they are parodies, but they are parodies that share the stage with a Linda, who, as has been seen, is

"real" and "believable". What this stylistic juxtaposition suggests is a dramatisation of the central theme of the work. How Linda's parents are characterised is defined not by naturalism but by their dramatic function in relation to their daughter; they are seen only in terms of the way in which they affect Linda. Their inability to communicate with her makes them two-dimensional, mere factors in the process that isolates Linda and makes her turn to Hans.

Again, this cross-refers to the Violette narrative. Potter, who recruits Violette, and Badge, who trains her, are both, to a certain extent, flat parodies:

BADGE AND POTTER, WITH GAME
RIFLES. BADGE SULLEN.

TONY: Bag a bird, Potter.

KEVIN: I don't like to Sir.

TONY: Regimentation of the beast.
That's what it's all about.

REALISES POTTER'S SPOKEN.
HE STARTS.

You don't what?

KEVIN: Our family have never liked
killing little birds Sir.

What is significant about Badge, however, is his awareness that he is playing a role, a role defined by the needs of history:

TONY: I know I am a parody of myself.

HE HICCUPS.

Pardon.

But back here in 1942, there is a war on.

(sc.xv)

Moreover, he endorses, even embraces, the necessity of subsuming himself into the part required of him:

TONY: There is a war on!

 (STUTTERS): D...D...D...
I have great hopes of it!
.....

 That personal defects, little
personal defects m...m...may
go to the wall!

 And a new era be ushered in.
And true fellowship will begin,
and barbarism depart.

LINDA (ASIDE): Says the poor old fool quoting
Winston Churchill.

(sc.xv)

Like Violette, Badge's humanity has been twisted and perverted into the mere fulfilment of social requirements; the private has been lost to the public. Throughout the second narrative, characterisation is determined by the precise roles individual figures are required to play as they take their part in the overall structure of the argument. For example, there are several Germans in the play, but the type of characterisation applied to them is not consistent: it ranges from outrageous parody to near-naturalism. Violette's capture is presented as a spoof -

TONY: Adventure story!
Our scene, occupied France,
Our heroine, Violette.

(sc.xx)

- and so the soldiers searching for her are the kind of cardboard German fanatics one would expect:

GOOSE STEP. EXTREME PARODY.

KEVIN: Ein Englander Terrorist landed.

CAROLE: Jawohl donnerundblitzen zieg
 heil.

KEVIN: Ludwig Van Beethoven Eine
 Kleine Nachtmusik!

CAROLE: Zieg!

KEVIN: Ja!

(sc.xx)

At the other end of the scale, however, Brenton takes pains to ensure that Keiffer, Violette's S.S. interrogator, is as far from parody as possible: he is the representative of the very real, deadly seriousness that underlies the glamorous public façade of heroism:

AMARYLLIS: You're sick. You...

SHE SEARCHES FOR THE WORD.

Defile things.

SABIN: Silly bitch.

FAST, CLOSE TO HER.

Oh Vi, there's no 'magnificent
gesture' that can't be defiled.
Mucked. Messed. Believe me,
Miss Heroine, all pure. The
hero, hung over the fires, in
the cellar of the Avenue Foch,
blind and silent.

(sc.xxiii)

Nonetheless, it would be a crude over-simplification to suggest that, in Hitler Dances, characterisation is either "real" or two-dimensional. Whilst it is true that, like Christie, Linda presents a relatively stable, constant identity in the midst of a series of characters who are engaged in the playing of various roles, it is not true that those characters are mere figures from a cartoon, or

crude satirical sketches. However much Brenton deflates the fear and awe in which figures from history are held, he never undermines the seriousness of the play's debate. All the characters are integrated fully into the play's pattern of meaning. I have already suggested that Linda's behaviour - her naivete, innocence; her wilfulness; her nightmarish fantasy - is the central model to which Violette is referred; but it is also true that similar links are made between Linda and the other main characters. The technique the writer adopts to achieve this is a refinement of the bathos technique used in Heads and Christie. The sudden, unexpected penetration of the flat, public face of character not only humanises that character, but places him in relation to the little girl and consequently into the interpretative structure of the play. For example, Hans:

You see, really I had a very good time when I was a kid. Sewed my uniform myself, wouldn't let my mother do it. And my badges, I was so proud I'd sleep with my badges on my pyjamas, and with a little torch look at them, under the sheets, when all the rest of the house was asleep...

(sc.i)

Potter displays all of Linda's naivete:

I was 'the intellectual at war.'
An Idealist. Locke, Berkeley, Hume would roll the Panza divisions back into the Rhine. Kierkegaard, Aquinas, Kant bomb the German Chancellory. Oh how superior the conduct in war, of a man who knew Wordsworth's Prelude by heart.

(sc.xiv)

Most noticeably, the technique is used on Badge:

...when I was eight years old, tootsied up the stair. Been strictly forbidden to, but did.

Took off my little shoes, and tootsied up. To where my mother was...

A SLIGHT STUTTER.

P...poorly.

Turned the door knob.

Saw one side of her bed, yellow flowers. Other side of her bed, nursie big fat nursie, with great white wads of stuff in her hands....I saw mother, with her nightie open and hanging on her chest like a rotten pear. Upside down rotten P...P...Pear.

AT ONCE OUT OF IT.

(sc.xvii)

These are specific moments, apparently thrown at random into the middle of a scene breaking the flow of the action. The sudden change they require of the actor is often reinforced by a light-change, or in the example above, by a weird hissing noise made by the rest of the company. The effect is to lift the speech out of the narrative, to alienate it from the thrust of the action, and thereby to invite the spectator to make the cross-reference. In another kind of play such moments would remain within the action, and would perhaps work as subtext. Here, the "subtext" is itself dramatised, and the bones of analysis, as well as the action, are presented on stage for the audience to build its interpretation around. Always at the heart of that interpretation is the model of the child, its energy, imagination and volatility twisted to violence and hatred by the constrictions

and cruelties of surrounding authority.

These patterns of mutual cross-reference are not, however, confined to character. The same principle influences the order and arrangement of scenes, the very structure of the play. The theme which binds these moments together is that of game-playing; as links are forged between Linda's character and Violette's, Badge's and the rest, so they are made between the children playing their game, and the motivation behind and nature of war. The theme is established in scene three, where the children play their war game. In the middle of the scene, as the "children" rush screaming in excitement around the stage, Brenton suddenly freezes everything:

LIGHT CHANGE.
SHADOWS AND DARK, AND ALL IN
SLOW MOTION.
A STYLISATION OF THE GAME.

AMARYLLIS: My mum says her first dad, not
my dad, but her first hus-band...
died in the war. Of shrapnel.

GENTLY TOUCHES HER STOMACH.

There.

SPREADS HER ARMS.

Each member of the cast then relates his or her own experience, ending with:

CAROLE: Me I was a blitz baby. Orphaned.
Not that my mum and dad got
bombed. No, it was terror. One
bad night they gassed 'emselves.

HANDS INTO RIBS, MOUTH DISTENDED...
AND SPREADS HER ARMS.

SONG.
SUNG BY THE COMPANY, WITHOUT MUSIC.

Put his photograph away
Lay it face down in a drawer
Take it out on Remembrance Day
In loving memory of a war.

Down in the dungeons seven feet deep
Where old Hitler lies asleep
German boys they tickle his feet
Down in the dungeons seven feet deep.

Immediately, the real game begins again; the slow stylisation is played off against the frenetic energy and speed of the real version. The dramatic statement embodied here is that the children's game perpetuates the very historical reality that it pretends to be; and it produces, finally, the resurrection of Hans. Even within a scene, the two worlds touch, and as their inter-relatedness is shown, the message of the play is forged.

This scene is the central point of reference for the many game-images that recur throughout the play. Potter's recruitment of Violette includes a play-fight to the tune of "Oranges and Lemons":

SHE FLIES AT HIM, PUTS A
POWERLOCK ON.

KEVIN: My leg!

CAROLE: That's the point, it's on the
leg!

KEVIN: You're a very strong girl.

CAROLE: We're an athletic family. My
mum can lift the dining-room
table with one hand.

KEVIN: Eh, people are looking at us.

CAROLE: Oh yeh.

SHE LAUGHS. THEY UNTANGLE, STAND....

(sc.xiv)

As has already been seen, Violette's training by Badge includes another, though more vicious, mock-fight:

TONY: You Miss! Stamp on me balls!

CAROLE: Me?

TONY: A-one-two, stamp on me balls
a-one-two....

(sc.xvi)

Again, the two narratives play across each other in a critical process of mutual comment and analysis. Moreover, it is significant that the training sequence is introduced as a piece of traditional music hall, for the notion that the theatre is itself a form of playing is also present throughout the play:

SABIN: Ladies and gentlemen...

KEVIN: At enormous cost...

SABIN: For you...

KEVIN: Here...

SABIN: Tonight...

KEVIN: Mr Tony Rohr...

SABIN: Will now do his...

KEVIN: Brutal English Officer...

SABIN: Brutal training routine...

KEVIN: Thank you

A DRUMROLL.

TONY AS BADGE BOUNDS FORWARD.

(sc.xvi)

In the opening scene of the play, Hans refers to the "great show" of the Third Reich, invoking the great mass spectacles of Hitler's Germany, with its innate sense of propagandist

theatre, and Brenton takes the idea literally. In one very important sense the whole second narrative of the play operates as a "play-within-a-play"; and the formal announcements, the constant swapping of parts, the visible costume-changing are all a deliberate display of the mechanics of theatre which serve to remind the audience that, like Linda, it is quite simply being told a story, a story that is brought to life on stage. As Violette drops into France, her part is being played by Linda, and she can, if only briefly, reject her "casting" in the little play as she earlier rejects the playing of the war game. With this sort of thematic build up, the final confrontation between Violette and Keiffer becomes a grotesque extension of the games, theatrical and juvenile, that recur throughout the play. Keiffer repeatedly implies to Violette that they are both playing a game:

It's a rather amusing situation. I'm rather excited by it. A stereotyped situation, like a dance, I trained as a dancer. Always been musical....

(sc.xxiii)

He is conscious, too, that their confrontation will ultimately be seen as the kind of titillating theatre or cinema parodied earlier in the play:

SABIN: Nazi Gestapo torturer. Victim.
After the War, torturer and victim
will be seen as something sexy.

VIOLETTE, VEHEMENTLY.

AMARYLLIS: That's just nasty.

SABIN: There'll be a trade. Like antiques.

Nazi thumbscrews, collectors'
pieces.

AMARYLLIS: You're sick, just sick.

SABIN: You and I, Vi, will give people
a sexy thrill.

(sc.xxiii)

Keiffer is well aware of the role he is publically playing:

Perhaps in the 1960s I'll be arrested in Buenos
Aires. Grey, fat, ugly. The newspaper photographs
will reflect 'steely blue eyes.'

(sc.xxiii)

Indeed, he interrupts his interrogation thus:

Etcetera etcetera his words pour out over
the gagged girl.

SILENCE.

SABIN LOOKS UP AT HER. SLOWLY HE YAWNS,
THEN KEIFFER'S TALKING AGAIN....

(sc.xxi)

The idea that both characters are simply the protagonists
in a play is dramatised throughout the scene. Keiffer's
awareness that he is playing a role sets him apart from
the other characters in the play; in a world of children,
he is, in a sense, the only adult.

It is, however, important to realise that the close
collaboration between writer and company which evolved
Hitler Dances produces an integration of the two narratives
which goes beyond the formal organisation of scenes. The
script - and, in particular, the tight specificity of the

stage directions - requires that its actors import their own means of linking the narratives. The most striking example of this is to be found in a simple, recurrent gesture: as the children's war game suddenly breaks into the stylised sequence, the stage directions ask for a slow spreading of the arms; an invocation, perhaps, of the crucifixion. That gesture occurs again as Hans completes his resurrection, and again when he strangles Linda at the end of the play. Yet it is also implied elsewhere in the piece: Violette's parachute drop is dramatised on a darkened stage, and how else to play a parachutist other than by holding the arms aloft? Similarly, the simplicity of the movement means that it can be called upon by an actor almost at will: as a gesture of jubilation, perhaps, by the recruited Violette; or of surrender and submission as she is captured and interrogated. It is part of the precise control present in the final text that space is allowed for actors to include their own contribution to illuminating the structural cross-reference by which the argument of the play stands or falls.

Many of these points, individually, do not carry the precise, detailed weight of the dialectic; often, they simply produce "sparks" in the audience's imagination, rather than an opportunity for rigorous analysis. Yet collectively, they provide a careful structural organisation of "moments", which become the lynch-pins of the audience's analysis, its personal involvement in the argument of the play.

In many ways, Hitler Dances is quintessentially a play of the Fringe. The scale, the method of production, the kinds of theatre technique invoked all reflect not only Brenton's earlier work, but also his debt to the theories and practice of Fringe theatre generally. Like the Portable work, the stylistic violence of the play is to some degree an end in itself: aids location of expectation, a "disruption" of the "spectacle" of conventional theatre. Yet out of that there begins to emerge another theatre, richer and more complex in character and story and, above all, seeking a more positive, if still uncomfortable, contact with its audience. Hitler Dances is a summary and the pinnacle of Brenton's Fringe work; it is also the progenitor of his neo-Jacobean epic theatre.

CHAPTER FIVE

MAGNIFICENCE : 1973

In his Preface to Plays: One, Brenton gives the following account of the kind of public theatre he began to develop in the early nineteen-seventies:

With Magnificence, and more fully with Weapons of Happiness, I was aware that I was trying to write a kind of Jacobean play for our time, a 'British epic theatre'.

In retrospect, these are the principles. The characters, like William Blake's poems, go from innocence to experience. The stories are journeys of discovery. The characters change radically. Their past is rarely referred to, what is of importance is their present. The writing has few 'secondary lines'. Julie Covington, who played Janice in Weapons of Happiness, said playing it was like opening a furnace door - your time comes, you open the door and blaze, then shut it. There is no 'edging up' to a revelation of a character as there is in, say, Ibsen. The scenes of the play are windows, opened at crucial points along the journeys of the characters, which show turning points in their lives and struggles. Each scene is written and should be played as a little play, in its own right, with its own style - some have asides, some do not, some are internal and psychological, others are group scenes with naturalistic settings. These differences should be emphasised, not smoothed over, therefore the stage should be wiped clear before each scene, a scheme of design Hayden Griffin* calls 'the magic box'. Disunity between the scenes will only help, not hinder. The end of the play is to be 'open', a gift for the audience - something for them to fall out over and keep warm with, while they're waiting for the bus home.¹

It is not untypical of the writer, however, that he immediately goes on to under-cut himself:

*The designer of Weapons of Happiness.

But, but... that is in retrospect. And, therefore, bullshit. I had no programme, only a drive to 'get more on to a stage' and to do it by ripping off the Jacobean in some way. It was an instinctive approach that seemed to be right - it fitted the stories I wanted to tell. I have never come across any general theory that is of any practical use to we who actually make plays and shows. Of course, after you've made them, you can invent theories two-a-penny.²

In fact, Brenton has never been entirely confident about giving precise definitions of his "British epic theatre". In general terms he cites, in an article in the Performing Arts Journal,³ Hare's Plenty, Griffith's Occupations, Edgar's Destiny, and his own collaboration with Hare, Brassneck, as examples of plays which are "big, in cast, staging, theme and publically declared ambition (they do want to change the world, influence opinion, enter fights over political issues)". More specifically, he offers from his own work Magnificence (1973), The Churchill Play (1974), Weapons of Happiness (1976), Epsom Downs (1977), and The Romans in Britain (1980), as well as Brassneck, as examples of plays which conform to one definition of epic,⁴ although

I'm not sure whether the big stage plays I've written since 1973 are pure epics. Measured against the Brechtian, received idea of an epic they are far from being 'pure epics'. But then the notion of a form in the theatre being pure I view with great suspicion.⁵

Clearly then, the whole notion of a "British epic theatre" is one that needs to be treated with some caution. Taken at its broadest, the term may be useful for labelling a fairly loose grouping of writers. The more precisely one

seeks to apply it, the more problematic it becomes, even with regard to Brenton alone. The plays listed above are in many respects very different from each other, and, as has been seen, Hitler Dances, too, subscribes to some, at least, of the "principles" listed in the Preface to Plays: One.⁶

However, it is equally clear that, by 1973, Brenton is beginning to develop concrete ideas about the structure and character of a brand of theatre which is "public" in content and style, and that Magnificence plays a key role in the evolution of that theatre. Providing that - as Brenton himself suggests - it is understood that it is not intended as a rigid formula, the account the writer offers in his Preface is a useful yardstick against which to measure the importance of that role.

Magnificence is,⁷ for Brenton, a crucial play in two distinct but ultimately closely linked ways. First, it is the play in which, five years on, he attempts to come to grips fully with the events of May 1968 which so influenced both his personal and his artistic politics. Its subject is the legacy of the "événements": the despair of a defeated alternative culture and the pressing questions raised about viable courses of political action. Second, it is the play which takes Brenton into the mainstream of British theatre. "Measure for Measure" may have been the writer's

first main billing in a large theatre, but the production of Magnificence by Max Stafford-Clark, on the main stage of the Royal Court in June 1973, must, realistically, represent best what most commentators describe as the major turning-point in Brenton's career: his move from the "poor" to the "established" theatre. Whilst, as has been seen, such a view is not entirely accurate, it is clearly true that Magnificence must stand as the first of the many full-length plays, commissioned by and performed in the country's leading public theatres, which have been responsible for establishing Brenton as one of our leading dramatists. What gaining access to the Court's main performance space means for Brenton, in terms of financial, technical and human resources, public exposure and critical attention, is in some ways hard to under-estimate. Both for the writer personally, and for the generation he represented, Magnificence marks the first full-scale attempt to carry what had traditionally been the concerns and techniques of the Fringe on to a major public stage: a key step - to quote Brenton from another context - in "forging a brand new public theatre out of what had been learnt in the small theatres".⁸ It is in this light, as an experimental and transitional piece, that what is an exciting but deeply problematic play must be judged.

A synopsis of the play's plot, as Bull suggests, reads very much like a scenario for a typical Portable project.⁹ A cast of ten play eleven parts through eight scenes, with

an interval after scene three. It takes the characters who begin the play - Will, Cliff, the pregnant Mary and her partner Jed, and the newcomer to the group, Veronica ("good, middle class children" all)¹⁰ - some time to get on stage to initiate the action. As would-be "political squatters", they have considerable difficulty in breaking into their squat, the "DIRTY ROOM EMPTY BUT FOR A MOUND OF OLD NEWSPAPERS IN THE CORNER" which confronts the audience. Voices off, punctuated by assorted bangs and footsteps, worry about the smell and argue about how best to get in. The inside door knob falls off. Even when they finally enter, through a window, and prepare their squat, the clarity of their aims and their competence in achieving them are, at the very least, questionable. The scene moves to the exterior of the house, where a bailiff, Slaughter, whose brutality has already made him the subject of press investigation, and a nervous young constable - the "private" and "public sector" of authority - wait to evict the squatters. That eviction comes in the play's third scene when violence erupts and Mary loses her baby, having been kicked in the stomach by Slaughter. The first half of the play ends with Jed gaoled for nine months, to emerge "Honed down. Pure. Angry" and, like Violette before him, vengeful.

It is Jed the revenger, and his advocacy of terrorist reprisals against the ruling class, to whom the remainder of the play belongs. Disconcertingly, it is in the world of that ruling class, however, that the second half of

the play begins. As with the opening of the play, the audience is kept guessing. The scene is the Cambridge College garden of Babs, an ex-cabinet minister; and the only apparent connection with the world of the play's first half is Babs' fear of "Maoist Undergraduates, lurking in the bushes". It is not until the end of the play that the real connection emerges: Alice, Babs' guest and former lover is, as a current minister, Jed's target for assassination. The obsessive hatred that now characterises Jed isolates him from the group. Cliff and Veronica reject his tactics: Mary is ignored, the disillusioned and drug-addicted Will coerced into helping. Jed traps Alice in his Home Counties garden, but the assassination attempt seems to fail as the bomb refuses to explode on cue. It only does so by accident when Jed throws it down in frustration. The play ends with both characters dead and Cliff speaking Jed's epitaph.

Magnificence is the play in which Brenton engages fully for the first time with contemporary political issues, although "conventional left politics" are left "completely out of account".¹¹ Rather, it "was written to try to resolve the author's confusions about the nature of revolutionary action";¹² as such, its concerns are with the aftermath of 1968, with smashed idealism, the failure of the alternative culture and the emergence of the terrorist.

The play's long first scene serves to articulate both the romantic idealism - at times, almost euphoric in its intensity - and the fatal vagueness and division of a generation of young radicals. One of the first things the squatters do when they finally get into their squat is to spray-paint "AnarchyFarm" on the wall, and their actions throughout the scene display both the raw energy and vigour of the anarchist and his lack of organisation and discipline. Indeed, their predominant characteristic as a group, even as the squat begins, is their disunity. For much of the scene the stage is held by Will and Veronica: the tension between them wavers uneasily between niggling and open hostility. At the same time, Mary sits calmly sewing a banner to hang from the window, whilst Jed and Cliff move in and out of the scene, quietly laying in provisions for the squat. The group's political aims are not clear. Veronica sees their squat as a protest against homelessness; for Will, it is a more general and symbolic act ((to Veronica): "Doing our 'umble best, Ma'am, to wreck Society"). Their incompetence is laughable. Their attempts to give pamphlets to two old ladies watching their break-in are rejected, and it is the later return of the old ladies that prompts the building of a barricade. The spraying of revolutionary slogans on the walls serves only to underline the inward-looking, self-congratulatory nature of their actions: they even pose for photographs in front of their graffiti. As a group, they are divided, self-conscious, flip and incompetent.

Yet there is also within the group a genuine and positive vision of and commitment to radical change. It is present in the slow, quiet preparations of Jed and Cliff, and it is present in the passion of the interchanges between Will and Veronica. It is Will whose energy gives the scene its excitement and emotion. His is the exhilaration and sense of celebration of the early days of 1968, and his language is that of the alternative culture: "...a dirty room. Yeh a dirty room. But to me, the promised land. All manner o' birds and beasts at play in the revolutionary pastures." This kind of sentiment is very much redolent of the situationist-inspired slogans of the "événements" - "under the cobble-stones is the beach"¹³ - and the connection is developed later in the scene with Will's attack on Veronica. She arouses his suspicion and anger first because she is a latecomer to the group, but more importantly because she makes documentaries for the B.B.C.:

You TV skulls! Like a plague of locusts upon every hopeless good cause in sight....
Chomp chomp. Adventure playgrounds, free contraceptive clinics, school-room abortion service, chomp chomp....

Will's suspicion goes beyond doubting Veronica's commitment - does her participation in the squat end when she returns to her job? - to a more general fear that, via Veronica, his vision and anger will be absorbed into and made "acceptable" by a cultural hegemony represented by the medium of television.

Will's fears are not without force. But neither is

Veronica's persistent questioning of his idealism and emotionalism, of what she perceives to be an essential childishness in his disregard for the reality of the outside world. She distrusts his simple-mindedness, his liking for the easy slogan:

VERONICA: What messages shall we... Flash
 upon the night sky?

WILL: Something simple.
 (GRANDLY.)
 'Seize The Weapons of Happiness.'
 (CHANGE)
 'Ere that's not bad. Where's the
 aerosol?
 (WILL TAKES THE PAINT SPRAY FROM
 VERONICA AND WRITES 'WEAPONS OF
 HAPPINESS' ON THE WALL.)

VERONICA: Alright. Alright. What are they?
 (A PAUSE. WILL WRITING.)
 'The Weapons of Happiness.' What
 are they?

WILL: 'Alf a brick through a window?

VERONICA: Is that all we have to offer?

Significantly, however, Veronica herself can offer little more, beyond a general plea for clear-headedness: the answer to her question is something that comes to preoccupy much of Brenton's future work, receiving its fullest consideration in the 1976 play which takes the slogan as its title and which again deals with the painful struggle of a group of politically inarticulate young people to determine an effective course of action.

The conflict between Will and Veronica is not so much resolved as overtaken by a surge in the nervous, rather self-regarding excitement that has never been entirely

absent from the scene. The whole group is drawn into the organisation of their supplies, as provisions arrive and are ordered on stage:

(...SUDDENLY TINS ARE FLYING THROUGH THE AIR AND THEY'RE ALL LAUGHING.)

(VERONICA:) Condensed milk.

JED: Baked beans.

VERONICA: Corned beef.

JED: Baked beans.

VERONICA: Irish stew.

ALL: Baked beans.

The scene has suddenly become a game. But where the games in Gum and Goo and Hitler Dances have their sinister aspect and literally evoke a darker reality, this game is simply an escape from reality. Mary confirms the essentially child-like innocence of the whole undertaking. It is she who has taken on a mother-role in the group, sewing the slogan on their banner; whose own mother has helped in preparing for the squat; and it is she who most neatly captures the spirit of what is at heart an "adventure":

MARY: Like when I was a kid. We hid in a tree house. You know, few old planks, nailed up together, up in a tree. On the Common. Got smashed up, o'course. Doll's house. And tough kids came running from all over, to smash it up. But we hid up there for a while. And dogs came up, at the foot o' the tree, an' barked at us. We planned to live up there forever.

This is very much the kind of fairy-tale fantasy of Mary's

namesake in Gum and Goo, or of Linda in Hitler Dances. The subsequent throwing-away of the ladder from the window is less to do with preparing for a siege than with simply confirming the group's detachment from the outside world and its escape into what Jed later calls their "...little Wendy House of good intent" (sc.iii), with its neat piles of tins and its inward-facing slogans. It is also an idyll rudely and comically shattered at the very end of the scene by the unexpected emergence from the pile of newspapers of an old man. One of Veronica's "real" homeless people, he is baffled to find himself now locked in his "home".

Brenton's intentions in the first scene of Magnificence are not simply to pour scorn on the naivete and incompetence of dissident youth: indeed, there is both a genuine affection for the characters running through the scene and, more importantly, a quiet but steady affirmation of the necessity of idealism. Rather, he is concerned to use the ingenuousness of the group to throw into sharp and bitter relief the vicious brutality of its eviction from the squat ten days later in the play's third scene. By the beginning of that scene, the occupation has already degenerated into a squalid though still good-natured affair: the excitement of scene one has given way to a relaxed if rather sordid domesticity. The sequence of events leading to the eviction and the loss of Mary's baby is plotted with great care by Brenton. The arrival of the evictors outside produces a variety of reaction in the group, again emphasising its division.

The rapid growth of hysteria as Veronica recites from the Thoughts of Mao and the Bailiff's men batter on the door is silenced only when the Bailiff and the young constable gain entry.

(...THEN THE CONSTABLE SEES THE CALOR GAZ-STOVE, WITH THE SOUP COOKING ON IT.)

CONSTABLE: Better have that out. Fire hazard.
 (HE KNEELS AND TURNS THE CALOR GAZ-STOVE OFF. FROM THIS ACTION THERE SPRINGS THE INCIDENT IN WHICH MARY LOSES HER CHILD. THE CONSTABLE STANDS, AND STEPS BACK INTO WILL. THE CONSTABLE FALTERS, AND GOES DOWN ON ONE KNEE. WILL KICKS HIM ONCE, AND BACKS AWAY WITH A CURIOUSLY APOLOGETIC GESTURE. THE CONSTABLE GRABS WILL, AND PULLS HIM. WILL FALLS OVER MARY. SLAUGHTER KICKS MARY NOT WILL. SLAUGHTER IMMEDIATELY REALIZES WHAT HE'S DONE.)

SLAUGHTER: No. No. No.

I quote the sequence in full to indicate the care Brenton takes to show how the violence of the eviction stems more from accident than design, and how it is Slaughter's reaction that is responsible, in the end, for that violence. Will's "attack" on the young constable is scarcely provocation (again, there is a hint of the child here, in that his action has the quality of a "dare" about it, a sense of him doing what he somehow feels young radicals "ought" to do to policemen). Although Slaughter's retaliation misses its aim, it is the speed and viciousness with which it is delivered that is emphasised, and his horror at kicking Mary is born more of a fear of further public exposure than of any real

concern for her. Bull describes the wider point Brenton is making with this sequence, and, indeed, with the whole first half of the play:

For Brenton, the significance of France in 1968 was not that it heralded a new revolutionary dawn - indeed quite the reverse. A new generation of young radicals were 'kicked awake', made to see behind the broken screen of the grotesque spectacle that is public life.¹⁴

This is for Brenton the crucial question raised in Magnificence: what political solutions remain for a generation of utopian dreamers smashed by a vicious repression?

The second half of the play, set some nine months later, finds the young squatters, as a group, disintegrated. Mary's preference for homespun domesticity as an escape from reality is intact ("Don't wanna talk about it....Don't wanna. Won't....Want some tea?" (sc.vii)), whilst Will's idealism has decayed into a grotesque, drug-raddled parody of itself: "Oh to be black, in black leather, on a black motor-bike, in the blackest night, Jean Genet on my pillion and my brain rotting away..." (sc.vi). The weaknesses that were always inherent in his position now dominate; he retains his love of gestures and slogans, but they have become empty of significance. He wears a Che Guevara shirt, but

...Could be Marilyn Monroe on there, or
Benny Hill...
...Mickey Mouse. Steve McQueen. Apollo
moon landing. Stars an' stripes. Hammer
an' Sickle....

(sc.vi)

The remaining three - Veronica, Cliff and Jed - retain varying degrees of political commitment, but it is Jed, newly released from prison and bent on vengeance, whose anger and passion take over the remainder of the play.

Jed represents in many ways the culmination of one strand of Brenton's writing: in him the evolution of the hero/revenger comes to its peak. His lineage can be traced back through the twisted, vengeance-obsessed Violette - like Jed, bereaved and channelling her grief into hatred - and the blind, fixated heroes like Scott and Christie, to the odious Skinny Spew. I identify Jed as the apogee of these figures because, although similar characters recur in later plays (notably Jimmy Umpleby in The Churchill Play, and Ken in Weapons of Happiness), in those plays they remain part of and are contained by a larger group: this refusal to allow such figures to continue to dominate their plays is, as shall be seen, significant for Brenton.

Jed's closest stage ancestor is Paul in "Fruit". But where Paul's passion for revenge is purely personal and largely instinctive, Jed's, though born of his own tragedy, is part of a wider and more clearly understood political struggle. Emerging from gaol, he is confronted by a vision of Lenin who, complete with "HEROIC GESTURES" and a stage flooded "WITH RED, AWASH WITH BANNERS AND SONGS", makes out the classic Marxist-Leninist case for a carefully planned and engineered mass revolution. Although some of Lenin's aphorisms sit easily with Jed's anger - "A noble proletarian

hatred for the bourgeois 'class politician' is the beginning of all wisdom" - Jed generally rejects Lenin's position:

Yeh but Vlad! Not got much here for you,
 Vlad! Little bit of hate. Dangerous intent .
 In my pocket somewhere, here, screwed up bit
 o' paper. Morsel of contempt. What I do
 with it Vlad? Help you out, little bit,
 little bit o'spite?

(sc.v)

Unable any longer to believe in the efficacy of a mass movement, Jed takes the terrorist's path, his aim inspired by the situationist notion of effecting a major disruption of the bland face of public life, of exposing the reality behind the sham:

JED: Went to see a terrible film once.
 Carpet-baggers. With Carole Baker.
 Right load of old tat, going on up
 there on the big silver screen.
 Boring, glossy tat, untouchable
 being on the silver screen.

And there was this drunk in the
 front row. With a bottle of ruby
 wine. And did he take exception to
 the film, he roared and screamed.
 Miss Baker, above all, came in for
 abuse. Something about her got
 right up his nose.

So far up, that he was moved to chuck
 his bottle of ruby wine right through
 Miss Baker's left tit.

The left tit moved on in an instant,
 of course. But for the rest of the
 film, there was that bottle-shaped
 hole.

(WITH A JAB OF HIS FINGER.)

Clung. One blemish on the screen.
 But somehow you couldn't watch the
 film from then.

And so thinks...

(WITH A BOW)

The poor bomber. Bomb 'em. Again and again. Right through their silver screen. Disrupt the spectacle. The obscene parade, bring it to a halt! Scatter the dolly girls, let advertisements bleed... Bomb 'em, again and again! Murderous display. An entertainment for the oppressed, so they may dance a little, take a little warmth from the sight, eh?

(HE LAUGHS.)

Go down into the mire eh? Embrace the butcher, eh?

(A SILENCE.)

Think on't.

(sc.vii)

What is critical about this speech is the target Jed identifies in it: his action is not one component of a wider Marxist-Leninist strategy ("Work upon a granite theoretical foundation, legal and illegal, peaceful and stormy, open and underground, small circles and mass movements, parliamentary and terrorist" (sc.v)), but an individual's action, fed by personal frustration, and designed to puncture public~~ly~~ly the sanctity of public life. Moreover, even if the intended assassination victim, Alice, had - at least at the time of the squat - some governmental responsibility for housing, Jed chooses him at least as much for his symbolic value as for any actual connection with the events of the play's first half. Alice has already been identified by Babs (in scene four) as representative of the new style, media politician, pre-packed for public consumption like "Bloody breakfast cereal. Sunshine wrapper.

Threepence off. Worthless gift inside...". Babs - ironically, like Jed - loathes Alice for the smug manipulation of his public image, an image designed to mask a dangerous reality:

Ah silky, you are silky. It's all in the throat. On television your honeyed words have a silicone effect. Coating the tube with a silvery slime. You are a politician. You have never had a political thought in your life...

And, Alice my dear, you are a fascist. Oh I don't mean jackboots and Gotterdammerungs. You are a peculiarly modern, peculiarly English kind of fascist. Without regalia. Blithe, simple-minded and vicious...

(sc.iv)

Brenton resurrects here the distinction first drawn in Measure between the fading, paternalistic High Tory and the rising new "English Fascist", and that he does so is further evidence of his determination to carry his work further into the domain of contemporary political life. For Jed, however, the specifics of Tory party history are irrelevant: he is concerned simply with Alice's participation in "the obscene parade". Both the manner and the place of the attempted killing confirm where his preoccupations - or obsessions - lie. His chosen weapon is neither the rifle of the cool professional political assassin, nor the axe of the psychopath: it is a bomb, a "STRING OF GELIGNITE ... ARRANGED ROUND A SACK" (sc.viii), and tied around Alice's head. Its function is not simply to kill the individual, but to destroy his image; the two-dimensional, bland image that smiles from the T.V. screen. The location of the

attempt - Alice's garden - is also significant. . It lies in the heart of England, and it is the "Englishness" of its ordered, manicured beauties - the rhododendrons have been force-fed to create a second flowering - that makes it the ideal place for Jed's revenge. As in Revenge, Badges, and the television thriller Dead Head (1986), the countryside is, for the disaffected city-dweller, foreign territory, made all the more alien by its being the preserve of the ruling classes. For Jed, the garden, like its owner, belongs to a deep-seated and deeply-fraudulent myth of public life: that English society is bound together by a commonly-held vision of an idyllic "little England". This is the England in which Hepple and MacLeish played out their archaic conflict, and the war-time version of which Hitler Dances parodies so ruthlessly.

JED: ...Late, late summer, musky smell
 from the fucking rhododendrons.
 An English garden with its English-
 man. Done at last. Done. Oh Mr
 I am deeply in contempt of you.
 All of you...Your nails, hair,
 little bits. And your mind. I
 am deeply in contempt of your English
 mind. There is blame there. That
 wrinkled stuff with the picture of
 English Life in its pink, rotten
 meat....

(sc.viii)

Alice's personal "civilised humanism" (Bull)¹⁵ is rejected by Jed as part of the process of obfuscation by which the English "society of the spectacle" maintains its grip:*

* Alice's character will be discussed more fully later: see p251.

...I am deeply in contempt of your fucking
humanity. The goo, the sticky mess of
 your English humanity that gums up our
 ears to your lies, our eyes to your
 crimes...I dunno, I dunno, what can a...
 What can a... DO? To get it real. And
 get it real to you. And get at you, Mr
 English Public Man, with oh yeh the
 spectacle, the splendour of you
 magnificently ablaze for the delight and
 encouragement of all your enemies....

(sc.viii)

It is this kind of rhetoric, replete, like so much
 of Brenton's earlier work, with images of physical corruption
 and decay, that sweeps the play along. The revenger's
 disgust and revulsion toward his victim, and the theoretical
 framework of situationism, combine to make Jed's voice
 the most powerful in the play. And yet even as Brenton,
 for the first time, fully finds that voice, he questions
 the validity of what is being said.

Events themselves under-cut the "heroism" of Jed's
 action. The sense of absurd incompetence which dogs the
 squatters in scene one resurfaces in the final scene to
 mock the "purity" of his revenge: not only does his bomb
 fail to explode (he has been supplied with the wrong kind
 of fuse), but his victim has been demoted, and is no longer
 responsible for government housing policy. Even as a symbol,
 Alice proves disarmingly human and at times, almost chatty,
 despite the tension. Like Violette, Jed finds the "magnificence"
 of his gesture being defiled. In this context, the eventual
 accidental explosion of the bomb, born of simple frustration
 - "The gelly. Oh why, why couldn't, just once... Couldn't it

be real?" - is no more than a moment of grotesque and horrific comedy. For Brenton, this has become

the inevitable consequence of that kind of action... undisciplined, anarchic bombing versus a collapsing middle class. The streets run with blood and politically there's no one to pick up the pieces.¹⁶

This stands in stark contrast to his position at the end of "Fruit", where nothing contradicts the argument of the bomber. Indeed, the old syndicalist's justification for bombing - "On the other hand, while we're waiting for the Thames to run red, and all that, we can get on" - is precisely the line Jed takes against Lenin. Magnificence moves the argument on from that: the bomber's action is shown to be futile, his political position untenable.

The main agent for questioning the usefulness of Jed's chosen course of action is Cliff. It is he who speaks Jed's epitaph:

Jed. The waste. I can't forgive you that.

(A PAUSE.)

The waste of your anger. Not the murder, murder is common enough. Not the violence, violence is everyday. What I can't forgive you Jed, my dear, dead friend, is the waste.

(sc.viii)

Jed's anger, for Cliff, would have been better put to use in

Work, corny work, with and for the people. Politicizing and learning from them, everyone of them. Millions. O.K. O.K. come a time you'll have to go out there. (SHARP GESTURE, HIS FINGERS AS A GUN.) But only with the people, as a people's army, borne along by them. You know all

this, Jed, we've worked together... You know you are, right now, there... A nothing. Zero. A crank with a tin box of bangs.

(sc.vii)

It is worth noting in both these speeches that neither the righteousness of Jed's anger, nor the morality of political violence is questioned. It is Jed's tactics that Cliff rejects, tactics that have become nothing more than "some fucking stupid gesture", an issue of personal revenge rather than political struggle. Even the degenerate Will finds in Jed an unrealistic romanticism different from that of the first scene only in degree.

Just maybe it's easier, sittin' in a cell.
Having visions, Armageddons two a penny.
Chalk 'em up on your ball an' chain, eh?
Lurid scenarios.

But it's very hard, for us down in Hounslow...
No not hard, that's insulting to you. Dreary.
Dreary, day in day out. The jungles of
Bolivia seem rather far away. Keeping a
correct political point of view is something
of a chore.

(sc.vi)

There may well be a large element of self-pity in Will's argument here, but he does identify the crucial weakness in Jed's political position: that the cell which nurtured his terrorism is as inward-looking and remote from daily reality as the squatters' room had been. The rejection of Jed's politics of the "magnificent gesture" in favour of the more pragmatic tactics of continuing argument and organisation represented by Cliff is not an easy step for Brenton. As Bull suggests, what happens in Magnificence

is "a hard-won rediscovery of the politics rejected by his early work".¹⁷ Moreover, Cliff's alternative ("corny work") is, at this stage in the author's career, offered only as a general approach: it is not until later- notably, in The Churchill Play - that Brenton is able to articulate more fully a brand of political activism which can genuinely match the ferocious anger of the bomber.

If I imply here that the play ultimately belongs to Jed despite Brenton's intentions, then that seems to me a reasonably fair assessment of it. Cliff, potentially Jed's most powerful critic, is simply too silent:

I did realise it too late and the structure of the play is badly marred because of it, but the person who's carrying the wisdom of the play is the boy Cliff. His knowledge of what's going on and what to do about it and his sense of the tragedy involved is very strong, but he disappears from the play. He doesn't occupy a central scene.¹⁸

That central scene, the opportunity to argue against the course of action represented by Jed, is given instead to Will, and, although some of his arguments are telling, his general dissoluteness deprives him of the moral weight necessary to counter Jed effectively. Indeed, it is he who helps Jed with the bombing. Hence

There were ideas in the play which were just not getting a voice and in fact these were the ideas I believed in. So I wrote an epilogue. I had this man come forward and say exactly what I felt about it. It's a very puny ending.¹⁹

Brenton's comments here indicate the difficulty he experienced in writing the play. As shall be seen, he was never entirely

satisfied with it: there is a sense in which he seems never quite to have been in full control of his work. To some extent the problem must devolve upon the fact that Magnificence is, in many ways, new territory for Brenton: its address of contemporary issues involves him for the first time in writing about people of his own generation, background and aspirations:

One of the difficulties of Magnificence was that there was a huge personal element in it and that it was written about people exactly my age whose minds bear similar shapes to mine and my friends'... and whose language is very like how we speak. Therefore, the authenticity of it has to be hammered out very accurately, because it's so close and, in a sense, more painful. So it was much more difficult to write.²⁰

The point regarding achieving "authenticity" in the writing will be discussed later, but the "painful" proximity of the play to the writer's own experience can be treated separately to account for what Bull describes as "the sense that Brenton was being pulled in two directions at once."²¹ For, however his political thought may have been developing - "I suppose Cliff, in the play, speaks for me"²² - his sympathies, at least in emotional terms, remain with the bomber:

There are precious things about Jed - his ferocity and his conviction and his allegiances are admirable. A tragedy is involved because he takes a wrong direction, as one could oneself so easily. I could find myself in the streets with a bomb in my hand sometimes. One's feeling of rage gets terribly unreasonable.²³

In endorsing Jed's anger, idealism and romanticism and

rejecting the way he uses them, Brenton creates a tragic figure to whom an audience can respond only with emotional sympathy. The under-written nature of Cliff's character deprives him of the authority required to make his final coda the rational critique of Jed's actions Brenton wants; indeed, it encourages what Brenton calls "the end-of-the-Mother Courage syndrome, in that an audience's sympathies rush, like water downhill, towards the person who speaks the most..."²⁴ In terms of Brenton's own belief in "messages first", then, Magnificence loses its way.

Magnificence represents a further expansion of the topography of Brenton's writing which arises both from his "natural" development as a writer and from the need to fill the larger public space. The play's debt not just to the Portable plots of "Fruit" and "Skin Flicker", but even to the story of Skinny Spew, is quite clear: and an understanding of Brenton's earlier work is a valuable aid in investigating his intentions here. However, it is neither fair nor accurate to see Magnificence simply as a glorified Portable play transposed on to a more formal and larger stage. It is not simply a question of, as general surveys of the writer's career tend to imply, Brenton making a step "sideways" from Fringe to mainstream theatre. It is a question of moving from one kind of theatrical space to another;²⁵ from one kind of audience to another; from

the anarchy and experiment of the Fringe to the tradition and institution of the Court; from a poor theatre to a (relatively) well-resourced one.²⁶ Brenton himself makes the comparison:

It's like getting hold of a Bechstein, hitting a really superb instrument, when all the time you have been shouting about a penny whistle, or a mouth-organ. You realize how powerful the instrument is, and varied, and how much fun.²⁷

Brenton is speaking here two years after the event, but there is still a sense of exhilaration in his comments.

Yet it must be remembered that, however experienced a Fringe writer he had become, he was in terms of the established theatre still an apprentice, and the pressures placed on his writing by the larger space must be seen as considerable. These pressures are not of finding an entirely new language to suit the new theatre - of becoming an "establishment writer" - but are of finding ways of carrying forward what had been learned in the Fringe into the new context: of deploying, experimenting with and testing old ideas and techniques in the new, more "public" theatre (and even, as shall be seen, challenging some of the assumptions of that theatre). In this sense, Magnificence may be seen as a companion piece to Hitler Dances, insofar as it is a transitional, exploratory play, working towards defining the parameters of the neo-Jacobean, "British epic" theatre. Hitler Dances had already gone some way along this path whilst staying, in actual terms, within the poor

theatre.* Magnificence has its public stage, and with it both the opportunity to further the evolution of the new public theatre, and its attendant problems.

Some, at least, of those problems arose from what was a difficult and arguably damaging writing and production history. In 1971, Brenton asked Gaskill to revive Revenge on the main stage. Gaskill refused, but, largely on the strength of the success of Revenge commissioned Magnificence as part of his continuing commitment to the "second wave" of new writing. (The time-scale is worth noting here. The play's writing covers a period which also saw the production of, notably, "A Sky Blue Life" (November '71), Hitler Dances (January '72) and Measure (September '72). These three plays all share fundamental thematic concerns with Magnificence: in particular, increasingly clear manifestations of the influence of situationism and heroes who are "wrong" ("A Sky Blue Life" and Hitler Dances); the revenger (Hitler Dances); and the growth of "English Fascism" (Measure). What this suggests is less the notion of Brenton's work developing from play to play in a logical, linear progression, more the idea of a period of creative activity out of which a

* Even here it may be argued that the demands made by Hitler Dances on lighting were already more than the majority of Fringe venues could manage, and were really more appropriate to the technical resources of the established theatre.

number of linked but varied, exploratory pieces is distilled. Brenton himself refers to his plays as "condensations of several things that have worried or interested you, or got under your skin";²⁸ the concept of a number of ideas for plays sharing the same gestation period and sparking off each other comes to be adopted as an important method of work for Brenton, especially in the making of Weapons of Happiness where, as with Hitler Dances, a single play was formed by making two apparently unconnected stories collide.) For reasons already intimated, Brenton found Magnificence difficult to write: the first version was "too short", a second, "fatter", but with some over-writing.²⁹ The play was finally submitted to the Court in June 1972, as Brenton accepted the offer of the Artistic Committee to become Resident Dramatist.

Brenton's acceptance of the post of Resident Dramatist was born very much of his desire to learn about the public theatre. The position was an open one, salaried, to be held for a year, and flexible in its use. Brenton, like Hampton (1968-69) and Hare (1970-71) before him, read scripts sent into the Court; but he also ran weekly meetings of unproduced writers, reviving the type of practice first represented by The Writers' Group a decade before. His prime reason for taking the post was, however, because he "wanted to study the operation of a larger theatre... (understand) the workings of a larger space and even how to run a large theatre...".³⁰ Moreover, he also took the

opportunity to talk to and argue with writers and practitioners of the older generation; in this sense, what a year at the Court meant for a writer of Brenton's background and experience was a chance, formally and informally, to broaden his theatrical education considerably.

At the same time, however, the uneasy relationship that had always obtained between the writer and a number of the "old guard" did not ease with his appointment.* His reputation as a "controversial" dramatist - born largely of the Portable plays - led to his being regarded with distrust, a distrust that cannot have been mitigated by Gaskill's production - albeit independently of the Court - of Measure. The extent of the antipathy may be gauged by the fact that, according to David Hare, "one artistic director said (Brenton) should be taken out and buried in a hole in a field."³¹ The submission of Magnificence did nothing to improve the situation; according to the writer, his play was "kicked around like a football". From his point of view, the Court's reaction to producing the play ranged from nervous reticence to downright hostility, and, inevitably, he felt the pressure. There was, in the first place, no absolute guarantee the play would be staged at all; as Hare points out, "All resident dramatists in this period had their plays rejected: it became a feature of the job."³² Moreover, Brenton lost his greatest ally at

* See Chapter One for the origins of the relationship.

the theatre when Gaskill finally left shortly after the play's submission. Oscar Lewenstein took over as Artistic Director in July 1972; his was the nervous reticence Brenton felt. Lindsay Anderson wrote two letters to Brenton explaining his dislike of the play, a dislike apparently founded on stylistic grounds. According to Stafford-Clark,³³ recently appointed Resident Director, Anderson's dislike rubbed off on the Court's permanent staff and stagehands. Ironically, Brenton wanted another of the "old guard", Anthony Page, to direct; his 1972 production of Hedda Gabler had been much admired by the writer. Page, however, remained uncommitted, and further disputes arose over his replacement (Lewenstein could not accept David Hare; Brenton refused Pam Brighton). Of the Court house writers, David Storey suggested re-writes, the majority of which Brenton rejected. Edward Bond, who had been present when the play was originally commissioned, supported its production vigorously. The crisis came in December 1972, when Lewenstien offered Brenton first a Sunday night with décor production, then a run in the Theatre Upstairs. Brenton refused both options.

In retrospect, Brenton feels that these difficulties were to some extent of his own making if only because, in his "innocence", he "showed the play around too much". The "messiness" (Brenton's word) of the play's passage to the main house can only have exacerbated the problems he was already having with the writing; Stafford-Clark indicates the writer was "reluctant" to undertake further

re-writes. In fact, problems were to some extent eased by the eventual appointment of Stafford-Clark as director, bringing for Brenton the benefits of working in a proven creative partnership. Further, a gap appeared in the main house bill when, owing to Anderson's film commitments, the planned production of David Storey's Cromwell was put back seven weeks. Both its "slot" and its budget were split between David Williamson's The Removalists and Brenton's Magnificence. The play finally opened, on the main stage, on the 28th June 1973.

Given so tortuous and difficult a production history, it is perhaps hardly surprising that it takes the young squatters so long to force their way on to the stage and start the play: one feels Brenton is having his own bitter joke here. Indeed there runs throughout Magnificence a kind of personal subtext concerning the invasion of the Court's main performance space by a young writer from the Fringe. The presence of that subtext is heralded by the manner in which the squatters finally gain their entrance: Brenton's stage directions insist that the window they climb through should be made of real glass. The smashing of that glass is not just an emphatic way of arresting audience attention, but, as a sudden shattering of the stillness and relative quiet that have so far faced the audience, a situationist's response to the respectful hush of the established theatre's auditorium. Thereafter, audience expectation of a "typical" Royal Court (main house) production is consistently subverted: the

deployment of a wide variety of styles (often in unexpected juxtaposition), of asides, of different types of set and of no set, of large stage effects, even of coloured light, belong to an overt and (literally) spectacular theatricality that is typical of the writing of Brenton but hardly of the writing of Osborne, Storey and (pace Early Morning), Edward Bond. Moreover, the very choice and presentation of subject challenges the tradition of the "Royal Court play". Bigsby fairly identifies (inter alia) Magnificence as a "natural analogue in 1970s drama" of Osborne's Look Back in Anger;³⁴ each piece may be seen as the "angry young man" play of its generation. Certainly, as the naming of the characters implies, Brenton deliberately reproduces in the relationship between the volatile Jed and the quieter Cliff at least the broad outline of the relationship between Osborne's Jimmy and Cliff. But Jimmy is scarcely a candidate for the Angry Brigade: nor could it be fairly said of Jed that "it was not the injustice of his society which angered (him), but the vacuousness of his own life."³⁵ To this extent, Jed's death is for Brenton a mute criticism of Jimmy's self-indulgence; Magnificence, a challenge to the perceived parochiality of Osborne's play. In fact, one contemporary reviewer suggests with force that Brenton's Jed most specifically invokes another Osborne character.

Brenton

might have given the protagonist the name of Jed in order to rescue a political point of view, a character-type and even a generation

from the jaundiced clutches of John Osborne. Where West of Suez had offered nothing but ignorant, panicky loathing for a Jed made to shriek incoherent threats about pigs being barbecued in their own ordure, Magnificence would show us a Jed with social conscience and reforming zeal, as well as a justifiably bleak opinion of his elders.³⁶

It would, however, be clearly wrong to see Brenton's usurptions^α of the norms of Court tradition and house style simply as private gibes at the theatre's expense. For one thing, Brenton, for all the difficulties of his relationship with the Court, retained a strong sense of respect for the theatre: "It shows some courage in what is said to be an orthodox and middle-aged and safe theatre to appoint me, first, and to put my play on."³⁷ Neither should the doubts he did have about the theatre as an institution, with its "dead hand of tradition", be confused with his appreciation of the value of the public space it contained: the expansion of his writing to fill that space and continue the development of the new "British epic" theatre is the first and overwhelming priority, the "disruption" of traditional expectation simply a useful tactic.

The point may be illustrated by examination of the play's first scene. As several commentators have noted, the scene is written as a piece of "honed-down naturalism" that is reminiscent of Royal Court house style: the careful plotting of the social dynamics of the group, and the counterpointing of dialogue and physical action are not unlike, for example, the early work of Edward Bond. The scene is not

written as a parody, however; any under-cutting of the expectations invoked comes with the sudden change of style in scene two (see below). Rather, Brenton is undertaking experiments of his own, within the framework of existing conventions.

The scene is the first of its kind to appear in Brenton's work and, from one point of view, remains unique: it marks a first attempt to move away from writing about individuals to writing about groups, and in style it is the closest Brenton comes to a fully naturalistic mode. Of course, there are a number of examples of groups - usually of children - in earlier plays, and as has been seen, there are strong connections between these gangs and the young people in Magnificence. These earlier manifestations of the group motif, however, are largely two-dimensional in presentation, and are designed to provide a particular context from which more complex and rounded individuals escape or are exiled. The concerns of that individual then become the concerns of the play; see, for example, Mary in Gum and Goo. The first scene of Magnificence is shaped not around any one individual, but around the group in toto. Brenton's intentions here are very much bound up with his desire to find wider reference points for his work in political terms whilst at the same time discouraging his audience from attaching itself too closely to any one figure. This, of course is precisely what happens with Jed as the play progresses. Even with Jed, however, Brenton was trying to counter the

"hero syndrome" insofar as

the so-called hero is wrong. Now, part of the humanist structure of plays, is the assumption that the person with whom the audience spends the most time, and with whom the playwright spends most time, is right. But I tried to write a play where he was manifestly wrong, and it's a tragic wrongness, because his passion is right but his actions were ill-judged and romantic.³⁸

As has been suggested, the audience's ability to judge Jed's "wrongness" is compromised by a too-silent Cliff, and the play becomes simply Jed's tragedy, its "humanist structure" intact. Brenton had encountered much the same difficulty with Gorki in "A Sky Blue Life" (see Chapter Three), and after Magnificence the usurp[^]_^tion of the hero convention as a tactic for challenging audience assumptions about his plays becomes for Brenton less important than exploring further the kind of more complex and positive interaction with the spectator begun in Hitler Dances.

The shaping of scene one of Magnificence around a group of people gives Brenton the opportunity to explore a writing style that lends itself readily to argument and counter-argument. To a degree, his motives here are again born of doubts regarding the "humanist hero". To internalise a debate about political issues within the mind of a single figure is to run the risk of psychologising that debate, of making issues of politics issues of character: "How can you write a dialectical play which isn't some absurd psychological mish-mash about one man?"³⁹ That he should choose to "externalise" the dialectics, to make the debate overt

by staging it between a number of individual characters, indicates what kind of relationship with the audience Brenton is intent on. No one character in the scene is obviously central or obviously "right". Indeed, the two figures who come to represent the essence of the play's argument, its two "sides" -Cliff and Jed - are, in this scene, the characters with the least to say: in fact, they are virtually silent. As suggested, the dominant characters, at least in terms of argumentativeness, are Will and Veronica, and they hold positions of equal strength (or perhaps, given subsequent events in the play, equal weakness). It is important to note here that Brenton's method, whilst appealing to his audience's critical and judgemental faculties, does not deny outright the possibility of empathy. Will's countering of Veronica's more cool and rational criticisms may ultimately be fatally woolly in its emotionalism, but it has also a genuine energy and innocent idealism of which the audience must have a sense if Veronica's questionable commitment is to be highlighted. It is equally important to realise that the debate is neither purely verbal nor wholly enclosed by the room in which it occurs. Brenton dramatises it by showing the audience, through the physical actions of the characters, the efficacy of the positions they hold. This goes beyond general statements, such as that made by the spraying of slogans on inner walls, to the detail of how the squat is prepared. In this way, what the audience sees qualifies what it hears. The steady

thoroughness of Cliff - building the barricade off-stage - and Jed - checking and laying in provisions through the window - shifts the scene's balance of power away from the more verbose Veronica and Will, neither of whom are particularly useful in actually organising the squat; the former helps Mary with her banner only under duress, the latter, though willing to aid Jed, is easily side-tracked into argument. It is both ironic and appropriate, however, that it is Mary who most holds the attention: visually, her stillness and quiet diligence in sewing the banner make her the centre of much of the scene, and serve to question from its start the value of the group's action.

The jigsaw of verbal and physical interchanges built up is not, then, simply a description of a group of characters to be set before an audience without comment: contained within the description is an analysis, a critique, of the group's motives and aims, challenging the audience to question what it sees. Indeed, the scene is structured around that critique. There are, as Brenton recognised, dangers in such an approach; dangers of being schematic and formulistic: one can

end up with a play that's a bare-bone parable and that's scoring its points by theatricality. That's what can happen to a play which has a political argument or a social argument. I think then that you get on very dangerous ground.⁴⁰

Brenton, in fact, felt that this was precisely the trap into which "Skin Flicker" - again, a piece about a group of people and their politics - had fallen: "though artistically

it was neat, in terms of getting anywhere near the real world it was far too linear, two-dimensional."⁴¹ The solution Magnificence finds is an increased variety, depth and sophistication of characterisation and interaction between characters: a greater "reality" in the presentation. This is the "authenticity"* that Brenton had to "hammer out" (see above): the pressure he felt on his writing was the need to achieve a synthesis between arguing a particular case in a scene and at the same time making an undistorted representation of reality:

the author's mind, the authoreal boot, is very heavily imprinted on the proceedings... (so)... for an audience to know whether it's true or not, you've got to open it out to constant tests. Is this real or not? Did that actually happen? And that's also your own test on such a scene.⁴²

In a sense, this is no more than a truism for any writer of integrity who has a "message"; what makes it important to note here is that it marks Brenton's recognition of the need to adapt his writing to suit his "expanded" subject matter. Grounding a play in a reality that an audience can verify - or "authenticate" - from its own experience is a crucial element in the creation of a new public theatre of political and social argument.

It is the importance of showing the relation of the

* It is perhaps worth noting that Brenton uses the word here in its general application, rather than in the specific existentialist usage described in Chapter Three.

political to the social that makes the matter pressing: Brenton's own analysis of the political weaknesses of the squatters is presented as being indistinguishable from the reality of their social lives. The point can be made with reference to the figure of Veronica. From the first entrance, she is identified as a newcomer to the group ("JED PUTS HIS ARM ROUND MARY", but "VERONICA STANDS CLOSE TO CLIFF"), and an outsider. For the greater part of the scene, she is separate, nervously lighting cigarettes, turning her back to the centre of the action. Without her, the group has a "natural" social balance: Jed and Cliff, the workers, Mary, the mother-figure, Will, the spirit (or "will"?). Veronica's presence, her persistent doubt, endanger the group's unity. Even as the tension eases with the food-throwing game (quoted above), Veronica is still seen to be apart from the rest. Indeed, the sequence may be seen as a social ritual, an attempted initiation of the newcomer into the group; one thinks of the ritualistic aspects of the games in Hitler Dances. What Brenton is presenting here is the carefully observed operation of inter-personal relationships in a state of stress; the operation of a social dynamic that is common in every-day life. But the stuff of those relationships is as political as it is social: Veronica as social outsider and as political critic are inseparable; Will is defending social as well as political ground. As one contemporary commentator suggests, The strength of Magnificence is that the

political tensions flow through the play,
 through everything each character does.
 They aren't just objectively imposed
 on the action.⁴³

The key moment then is when Veronica is pressured into pushing the ladder away from the window at the end of the scene: at that moment, she has to make her commitment to the group by making her commitment, despite her well-founded doubts, to its political action. (Ironically, it is Jed, soon to tear himself from the group, who passes the responsibility to her.) The political and the personal are thus fused into one reality, and it is this breathed, lived reality that, in the final scene, Jed wants to "get" to "Mr Public Man" Alice. That political and social life are indistinguishable is not a new notion: it is a basic tenet of much leftist political thought. But the crucial point here is that Brenton does not simply assert it, but offers a living demonstration of its reality for the audience to judge; and an appreciation of it enhances an understanding of the full ferocity of Jed's actions later in the play.

Brenton's mapping of the socio-political dynamics of the group is, as has been suggested, a development of his interest in the games the children play in his earlier work. Indeed, the tin-throwing sequence is placed in the scene in part to heighten the sense of game-playing - "let's-make-a-Wendy house" - that is present throughout. However, the intention is not simply to question the motives of the players, but to draw attention to how character, in game

and daily life alike, is subject to and conditioned by the rules and regulations of social interaction. The technique is perhaps most successful in The Churchill Play and Weapons of Happiness, where football and cricket respectively are offered as metaphoric models of the less overt but more complicated social processes of the groups that play them. Whilst Magnificence arguably does not achieve the clarity of intent present in the later work, its role in fleshing out the raw dynamics represented by the early children's games is crucial, particularly as that fleshing out is not simply a matter of presentation, but also a function of Brenton's broadening vision.

The fuller and more complex exploration and representation of the squatters' group in scene one finds an analogue in scene four - which begins the second half of the play - with the account of the last meeting of Babs and Alice. Again, the scene is the first of its kind in Brenton's work, giving the sort of satirical, faintly farcical view of the private lives of public men that recurs in later plays. As representatives of the authoritarian upper classes, Babs and Alice share with their predecessors (for example, Badge in Hitler Dances, the Labour Minister in "Fruit") a sense of physical decay and disease which reflects their moral corruption. Unlike those earlier figures, however, they are not largely two-dimensional in presentation, but more complete and detailed figures. Brenton points out that "Jed's action can't be explained or justified by giving

him cardboard figures to knock down."⁴⁴ The extra dimension given to the characters is not, however, composed of accumulated irrelevant psychological minutiae, but arises from a careful and critical analysis of the kind of mentality which is forged by the interaction of private and public forces.

With Babs and Alice as with the young squatters the personal and the political are fused together. Earlier representations of the authority figure in Brenton's work pierce the flat public face with the bathetic insight into private humanity; here, as the conversation glides effortlessly between political and private matters, the two cannot be separated. The means by which the playwright makes this clear is the personal relationship between the two men. Their brand of homosexuality is less a loving relationship than a mutual wallow in decadence and a means of exercising personal power, to the extent that it is a little surprising when hints of a genuine tenderness slowly emerge. Ultimately, however, the subject of the scene is power, and it is Babs who makes the equation between the self-serving thrills of his sexual and his political appetites, in a memorable image:

What do they do with Ex-Cabinet Ministers, who are queer and dead? There should be some.. Splendid event, should there not? Some massive ceremonial. A number of masturbatory images rise up. Ten thousand working men, jeering sweetly... The mind wanders... But the Ministry of Works would foul it up. Terribly butch lot. Commit some grave error of taste. Nude Guardsmen riding bareback... The mind wanders, appalled.

(sc.iv)

His original sexual attraction to Alice may have been genuine - "...he was young and golden in the heyday of his youth. And once he deeply moved me " - but now he has an equally physical loathing for Alice's new plastic image, for his tinted "Elder Statesman" hair, and his repugnance is as much for Alice's new politics as it is for Alice's new appearance. It is Babs' perception of the contrast between his own waning career and Alice's rising star that has brought about the meeting. Unable to do anything about the changed balance of power in their political lives - the High Tory supplanted by the new "English Fascist" - Babs seeks to re-assert his old status in their personal relationship, even to the extent of using the revelation of his own imminent death as an emotional lever on Alice. That he bungles his announcement and fails to procure the desired effect is Brenton's means of denying him audience sympathy: what the spectator is left with are questions about the kind of mentality that sees even terminal illness as an arena for the exercise of power and establishment of dominance. Babs is as unwilling to relinquish his personal hold on Alice as he was to relinquish political power ("No, I did not go gentle into the House of Lords"): in both private and public spheres, power is his *raison d'être*, and in both it has corrupted.

What is seductive about Babs is his easy wit, his apparent honesty and vulnerability. The same is true of Alice in his confrontation with Jed in the last scene.

He shows a quite extraordinary self-control. He is able to remain articulate, even compassionate as his life is threatened, and exudes a diffident courage that cracks only occasionally. Over the course of the scene he succeeds in turning the tables on Jed, almost literally disarming him. That he can achieve this is due partly to his political experience. Jed's actions, his language, betray him: Alice has been briefed about "the politics of gesture"; he has seen, as it were, the film "Skin Flicker", and his knowledge of situationist theory, revealed with deceptive casualness, makes the "magnificence" of Jed's revenge commonplace. But it is also due to his whole experience of life; to his background, his education, his class. What Jed is faced with is a figure for whom the exercise of power, personal and political, is natural, a daily occurrence. Alice can deploy his war experience to explain to Jed why his bomb fails. More generally his easy articulacy, his mastery of language, can successively challenge, absorb, confuse, undermine and deflect the simple "purity" of Jed's "message". Like Tony in Badges, Jed is unprepared for the refusal of the enemy to remain safely two-dimensional; but what disarms him is less a simple revelation of Alice's vulnerable humanity than Alice's own skill, in extremis, at presenting that vulnerability as part of struggle to gain dominance. In terms of a genuine human contact and communication, the two are almost literally "worlds apart".

The notion of the characters inhabiting separate worlds is an important one, and, as has been seen, is an integral part of the play's meaning. The difference between the worlds is emphasised stylistically. The naturalism of the play's first scene stands in marked contrast to the near-surrealism of Alice and Babs' world, whilst the second scene is strongly reminiscent of Brenton's earlier work in that it has very much the feel of a cartoon. In terms of stage-picture, the audience is presented in the first half of the play with action taking place in the recognisable squalor of a derelict room, and then in front of a drop cloth on which is painted the street outside that room.⁴⁵ For the second half, there is no set at all: only props and lighting effects are used to give a sense of place. The faint, elegaic other-worldliness of Babs' Cambridge existence is established by "DAPPLED SUNLIGHT", periodically darkening, and by a recurring "LANGUID MUSICAL SCALE ON A XYLOPHONE" (scene iv). This deliberate collision of styles arose from the kind of laboratory - method of writing described earlier (see Chapter Three, p.147):

I want to write about the old men who use a very elegant language, so I go straight into it. I don't worry about the style of the play or anything, just aim to get the truth of those men speaking to each other. Then have a policeman and a bailiff - go into that. Don't worry about the world of style: write, and if it's truthful, they'll hold and act off each other.⁴⁶

It is worth emphasising Brenton's approach here. Again, style is allowed to arise from content, rather than be

imposed on it. The naturalism of scene one evolves from the need to detail the reality of the squat, to demonstrate the fusion of personal and political into a single lived experience. The slight surrealism of scene four is born of the artifice of the old men's language and of their manipulative dealings with each other, and of the privilege of their world. "Style" is defined simply as that which communicates a sense of truthfulness most clearly. But it is also true that new meanings can arise from this process of the writer "following his nose": the separate worlds created, the "little plays" (p.209) within the big play, themselves articulate a truth about social reality. Brenton does not need to assert the huge gap between Jed's world and Alice's: the very means of writing demonstrates it.

The sophistication with which Brenton manipulates style in Magnificence indicates the extent to which the play moves beyond the Fringe work: in the Portable plays, the juxtaposition of different styles is largely a question of unpredictable, confrontational "aggro" effects. It is also dependent on a particular view of what the stage is, of how theatrical space can be used. Again, Brenton's model is the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage:

I think one of the glories we've lost in the arsenal of the playwright is to use different styles completely... the old playwrights had verse, rhyming verse, sonnets, broken blank verse, prose and songs. When it was fitting that someone spoke in prose, they went into it. And when it was fitting that a lover spoke in a sonnet - they went into it. I wanted with Magnificence to claim that freedom.⁴⁷

What this kind of stylistic flexibility and "freedom" means for Brenton in 1973 is the introduction to the established stage of techniques and methods first used on the Fringe. Again, this entails going against Royal Court tradition, at least as the writer perceived it:

Because of the fierce nature of the writing... a neutral space was not going to work for us... that is, the kind of stage evolved by Bill Gaskill and the designers he has worked with, which is a very cool neutral area which says 'stage' and really doesn't change.... That degree of coolness doesn't really follow the nature of the writing. You need the stage to be expressive on your behalf... we're talking about a hot, expressive (stage).⁴⁸

What Brenton means by an "expressive" stage is best illustrated by the way the play uses lighting. The general Royal Court convention of white light, left on throughout a play, is discarded in Magnificence: instead, the use of blackouts signals not simply the structural division between scenes, but a possible transformation of the space itself. As in Hitler Dances, lighting may be used naturalistically, as daylight, or, in the form of a single spot-light in the darkness, to focus audience attention on the internal workings of a character's mind, his "internal space, internal thoughts" (see Chapter One). The stage may be a representation of a real place, then a "psychological" space, as it becomes for the audience watching Jed in all the heat of his psychosis:

True story from London Town. I got nine months in prison, got hooked. Hooked up, strung up, all up, right up there. Speed.

On speed. A dangerous and proscribed drug.
 Sir and Madam. To the scandal and
 enlightenment of lost souls, freely
 circulating in Her Majesty's prisons. The
 speedy brain rotter, activator of the dark,
 the mighty mover, the killer action.

(A PAUSE.)

And nine a.m., one clear day... Came out
 the little prison door in the big prison
 door.

Released.

Honed down.

Pure.

Angry.

(sc.iii)

Here, light is used quite literally to "open a window" (p.209)
 on Jed's story. There is no single stylistic coherence
 in the way lighting is designed: it is used as it is needed.
 Speaking about a similar use of spot-lighting in Weapons
 Brenton argues that it is

legitimate to say 'only this is important,
 this man is trying to speak about his mind,
 he is trying to tear his mind apart at this
 point, and if we're going to get to that
 mind we've got to blank out things about us;
 so it's legitimate to change the lighting,
 damp down other people around him, put a
 follow spot on him - things which are meant
 to be anathema to the way things have been
 staged... in the sixties.⁴⁹

The roots of this technique, as has been hinted, may be
 traced in the very early Fringe plays. But what the Royal
 Court's stage gives Brenton, with both its greater technical
 resources and its "moral force", is the opportunity to
 develop the expressive qualities of his theatrical space

much further. The "window" opened on Jed as he emerges from gaol is such that his mind becomes the stage, his thoughts, dialogue; another figure is introduced, and an inner argument becomes external:

(...THE STAGE FLOODS WITH RED,
AWASH WITH BANNERS AND SONGS.)

JED: Vlad?

(THE EFFECTS GROWING.)

Vlad?

(LENIN APPEARS AT THE BACK OF THE
STAGE. HE MOVES THROUGH HIS
HEROIC GESTURES. A WIND MACHINE
BLOWS A GALE ACROSS THE STAGE.
MARY, CLIFF, AND V STAND STOCK
STILL THROUGH THIS PASSAGE.)

What do you make of it, Vladimir
Ilyich?

(sc.v)

Such a scene is typical of many in the later work; one thinks especially of Weapons of Happiness. All are characterised by a daring theatricality which seeks a powerful, even bewildering impact on the audience, and which often works through bizarre juxtaposition. In Weapons, the mind of the old communist, Josef Frank, conjures up the figures of dead comrades, even of Stalin himself, in a collapsing South London crisp factory. Sequences like these go beyond the exploration of an individual's psyche: they become the means of invoking wider issues of history and politics, of fusing past and present, public and private, into a single theatrical reality.

This, then, is what Brenton means by "forging a brand

new public theatre out of what had been learnt in the small theatres". It is not simply a question of introducing asides, effects, explosions or coloured light on to the mainstream stage. Rather, it is a matter of evolving a new theatricality from the immediacy, the intimacy and the fierceness of the Fringe; of expanding and enriching characterisation, style and stagecraft to fill the physical, social and even the moral space of the larger established theatre. Magnificence is by no means wholly successful in this. In Brenton's own judgement it is a hybrid play, half of the Fringe, half-epic.⁵⁰ Yet in that sense, it is perhaps a play he "needed" to write: throughout his career he has, as has been suggested, sought always to learn from his work. Amongst the most important lessons learned has been the understanding that

You set up the scaffolding for the job under construction. Each time you have to re-invent the scaffolding.⁵¹

NOTES TO INTRODUCTION

1. Peter Hall's Diaries: The Story of a Dramatic Battle, ed. John Goodwin, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1983, p.49.
2. Discussions of the controversy and its repercussions may be found in Richard Beacham, "Brenton Invades Britain: The Romans in Britain Controversy", Theatre, vol.12, no.2 (Spring 1981), pp.34-37; Catherine Itzin, "Sex and Censorship: The Political Implications", Red Letters : A Journal of Cultural Politics, no.13 (Spring 1982), pp.5-12; and Bernard Weiner, "The Romans in Britain Controversy", Drama Review, vol.25, no.1, pp.57-68.
3. John Bull, New British Political Dramatists, London, Macmillan, 1984, p.30. This contains valuable chapters on Brenton and on the general political and cultural background.
4. Interview with Ronald Hayman, New Review, vol. 3, no.29 (1976), p.57.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler (interviewers), "Petrol Bombs Through the Proscenium Arch" (hereafter referred to as Petrol Bombs), Theatre Quarterly, vol.5, no.17 (1975), p.5. This is, to date, the fullest published interview with Brenton, and it offers useful insights. It is also

included in New Theatre Voices of the Seventies, ed. Simon Trussler, London, Eyre Methuen, 1981. In a taped interview with the present writer (University of Sheffield, 10 November 1981), Brenton re-affirms the views expressed in Petrol Bombs. Petrol Bombs also provides some biographical material, and covers much, though not all, of the work up to 1975. It is supplemented by Tony Mitchell (compiler), "Theatre Checklist No.5: Howard Brenton", Theatrefacts, vol.2, no.1 (1975), pp.2-9. Other basic biographical information may be found in Who's Who in the Theatre: A Biographical Record of the Contemporary Stage, 16th ed., ed. Ian Herbert, London, Pitman, 1977, p.436; and in Contemporary Dramatists, ed. James Vinson, London, St. James Press, 1977, pp.112-15. This last includes a brief critical survey of Brenton's career to 1974 by Jonathan Hammond.

8. Petrol Bombs, ibid.
9. Op. cit., n. 4.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Petrol Bombs, op. cit., n.7.
15. Ibid., p.6.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., p.5.

18. Op.cit., n.4, p.58.
19. See Jonathan Hammond, "Messages First: An Interview with Howard Brenton", Gambit, vol.6, no.23 (1973), p.32.
20. Petrol Bombs, op. cit., n.7.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Sheridan Morley, "The man behind the Lyttleton's first new play", Times, 10 July 1976.
24. Op. cit., n. 4, p.58. Hayman's interview provides Brenton's fullest statement of his feelings towards Cambridge. The "notable exceptions" to his general experience of lecturers were F.R. Leavis and George Steiner. Leavis was "eminently visitable and immensely kind", although Brenton "never understood what he was on about." Steiner "was the only person who would talk to us about Freud, Marx, Goethe. I mean, this was meant to be the greatest teaching of literature, the humanist cradle, and you could go three years without hearing a word said about Marx or Goethe. Except Steiner."
25. Ibid.
26. I am grateful to Howard Brenton for providing me with typescripts of these plays, none of which is published. All three typescripts are rehearsal copies. "Winter, Daddykins" and "It's My Criminal" are in good condition: the former carries a few annotations, apparently by one of its actors,

whilst the latter shows evidence of some editing and a little re-writing. The typescript of "Ladder of Fools", however, is rather more difficult to decipher. Whilst there is no obvious re-writing as such, many lines have been cut and some then reinstated. Several speeches have been moved from their original location and edited in elsewhere; a long central section has seemingly been cut altogether. The script is heavily annotated, examples ranging from instructions to actors to crude design sketches. Beyond a clear division into two parts, it is not possible to say with certainty exactly how many scenes the piece was divided into, though there are clearly discrete sequences of action. Whilst, then, one cannot be wholly sure of what was finally performed, Brenton's intentions are reasonably clear.

27. Petrol Bombs, op.cit., n.7, p.6.

28. Peter Ansorge, "Underground Explorations No.1: Portable Playwrights", Plays and Players, vol.19, no.5 (February 1972), p.16.

29. Ibid.

30. Op. cit., n. 23.

31. Ibid.

32. Op. cit., n.28.

33. Petrol Bombs, op. cit., n.7, p.6.

34. Ibid.

35. Op. cit., n.23 .
36. Op. cit., n.4, p.58.
37. Op. cit., n.28.
38. Op. cit., n.23.
39. Petrol Bombs, op.cit., n.7, p.6.
40. For an account of the origins and aims of Sunday night productions at the Royal Court, see Terry Browne, Playwrights' Theatre: The English Stage Company at the Royal Court, London, Pitman, 1975, p.37.
41. Eric Shorter, Daily Telegraph, 22 August 1966.
42. Nina Hibben, Morning Star, 23 August 1966.
43. B.A. Young, Financial Times, 23 August 1966.
44. Op. cit., n.41.
45. Op. cit., n.40.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. See Robert Cushman, "Playwright for Today", Observer Magazine, 16 November 1975, p.18.
2. Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler (interviewers), "Petrol Bombs Through the Proscenium Arch", Theatre Quarterly, vol.5, no.17 (1975), p.8.
3. I am grateful to Howard Brenton for providing me with a typescript of the 1966 version of "A Sky Blue Life", and to Philip Roberts for a typescript of the 1971 (performed) version.
4. I am grateful to Howard Brenton for providing me with a typescript of the play.

Subtitled simply "play in three acts", "The Plague Garden" is written to be performed on a bare stage by a cast of ten. The action is set in medieval and modern Italy, in the garden of the title. Each actor takes a part in both periods.

The first act, of four scenes, is set in the plague-stricken Italy of 1348. In an atmosphere of suppressed violence, fear, suspicion and superstition, two vagrants meet a group of frightened lady aristocrats. With the help of a Duke and the remnants of his court, all escape the city and take refuge in a country villa. In the villa's gardens the characters, presided over by the Duke, engage in frantic and ludicrous rituals of pairing-off and copulation

that parody the conventions of "courtly love". The act ends with one of the characters being infected by the invading plague.

Act Two, comprising two scenes, moves to the present where, in the same garden, another group of characters is trapped in a maze of sexual manipulation and intrigue. One of them, the mysterious Luber, plans to build a funfair in the garden, but only after satisfying his interest in the history of the duke and his court by holding an archaeological dig. The owner of the garden, her husband, her "live-in" young lover and a group of American tourists are enjoined to help.

The five scenes of the last act move between the two periods and finally fuse them together. In 1348, the plague has taken hold in the garden and one by one the court succumbs. Even as they die, however, they continue their games of inventing faintly pornographic stories, stories which make no acknowledgement of the horrors of the garden. In the present, Luber forces his helpers to participate in a fancy-dress charade which, unintentionally, comes to parallel the events of 1348. Here, however, the rituals of courtship turn to violence and culminate in the group rape of the garden's owner. The play's last scene returns to 1348 and the revelation of the death of all the characters.

5. Tony Mitchell (compiler), "Theatre Checklist No.5: Howard Brenton", Theatrefacts, vol.2, no.1 (1975), p.3.

6. See Terry Browne, Playwrights' Theatre: The English Stage Company at the Royal Court, London, Pitman, 1975, p.100.
7. Op.cit., n.2, pp.6-7.
8. Ibid., p.7 .
9. For a fuller account of the history and aims of the Brighton Combination, see Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968, London, Eyre Methuen, 1980, pp.320-29. Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain, ed. Sandy Craig, Ambergate, Amber Lane Press, 1980, also contains useful information, placing the group in the wider context of Fringe, alternative and community theatre.
10. Op. cit., n.2, p.7.
11. Jonathan Hammond, "Messages First: An Interview with Howard Brenton", Gambit, vol.6, no.23 (1973), p.25.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Op. cit., n.2, p.6. See also Introduction.
15. "Gargantua" is unpublished. I am grateful to Philip Roberts for providing me with a transcript of the play. Some sources (e.g. Contemporary Dramatists, ed. James Vinson, London, St. James Press, 1977, p.113) give 1969 as the year of production of the play. Brenton's comments in Peter Anson, "Underground Explorations No.1:

Portable Playwrights" (hereafter referred to as Portable Playwrights), Plays and Players, vol.19, no.5 (February 1972), p.16, strongly imply, however, not only that the play preceded Barrault's 1969 version, but that it also preceded his own Gum and Goo of January 1969. 1968 therefore seems the likelier date, although Brenton himself cannot be entirely sure (taped interview with the present writer, University of Sheffield, 10 November 1981).

16. Op. cit., n.2, p.7.

17. Ibid., p.6.

18. Michael Billington, "London Avant Garde: Who? What? Where?", Plays and Players, vol.17, no.9 (June 1970), pp.20-21.

19. Ibid., p.20 (Billington).

20. Ibid., p.21.

21. Portable Playwrights, op. cit., n.15, p.16.

22. Op. cit., n.1, p.16 .

23. Brenton quoted in Barry Kyle, "Howard Brenton workshop", W.H. Smith/R.S.C. Youth Festival, Stratford-upon-Avon, 27 October 1982, p.1. The workshop comprised a discussion between Kyle and Brenton, illustrated by scenes from his work performed by R.S.C. actors. A transcript of the workshop is available from the R.S.C., and it is to that which this and subsequent page numbers refer.

24. Op. cit., n.11, pp. 25-26.

25. Op. cit., n.23.
26. Howard Brenton, Gum and Goo, in Plays for the Poor Theatre, London, Eyre Methuen, 1980. This is a minor revision of the first edition, which appeared in Howard Brenton, Plays for Public Places, London, Eyre Methuen, 1972. See Bibliography.
27. Portable Playwrights, op. cit., n.15.
28. Author's Note to Gum and Goo, op. cit., n.26.
29. Portable Playwrights, op. cit., n.15.
30. See Brenton's comments in the brief production history of the play, op. cit., n.26.
31. See Stages in the Revolution, op. cit., n.9, p.324.
32. Ibid. (Noel Greig and Jennie Harris.)
33. Op. cit., n.18, p.21.
34. Op. cit., n.2, p.7.
35. Op. cit., n.28.
36. Op. cit., n.2, p.7..
37. Howard Brenton, Heads and The Education of Skinny Spew in Plays for the Poor Theatre, op. cit., n.26. Of the trilogy, only Skinny Spew is divided into scenes. Quotations from the plays are therefore referred to by page number, including, for consistency, Skinny Spew.
38. These and subsequent comments by Jo Taylor are taken from a taped interview with the present writer, University

of Sheffield, 19 June 1981.

39. Op. cit., n.2, p.7.

40. Op. cit., n.23, p.2.

41. See, for example, J. Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970.

42. Nonetheless, it is worth pointing out that the play has been performed in schools in the United States as an educational piece illustrating the problems faced by handicapped children. The producer, Betty Xander, contends that the play "says more in thirty minutes than 5,000 lectures" (letter to the present writer, 17 March 1983).

43. John Bull, New British Political Dramatists, London, Macmillan, 1984, p.30.

44. Peter Ansorge, Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain, London, Pitman, 1975, p.7.

45. Interview with Philip Roberts at The University of Barcelona, 25 January 1982. I am grateful to Dr Roberts for making a tape recording of the interview available to me.

46. Brenton's comments here are taken from an unpublished interview with Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts in London on 14 January 1978. I am grateful to Mr Hay and Dr Roberts for giving me access to what is a rich and valuable source.

The interview - hereafter referred to as Hay and Roberts - prompted Brenton himself to re-cast parts of it and to publish it as "Answering Ten Questions", Performing Arts Journal, vol.3, no.3 (Winter 1979), pp.132-141.

47. Hay and Roberts, ibid.

48. Ibid.

49. Plays: One is due for publication in November 1986.

I am grateful to Howard Brenton for providing me with a draft of the Preface.

50. Michael Billington, rev. of Heads and The Education of Skinny Spew, Plays and Players, vol.17, no.7 (April 1970), p.51.

51. Op. cit., n.43.

52. Op. cit., n.23, pp.1-2.

53. Op. cit., n.2, p.6.

54. Hay and Roberts, op. cit., n.46.

55. Op. cit., n.23.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. The events of May 1968 in Paris come to play an increasingly important role in Brenton's career, as will be seen. Accounts of those events are available from a number of histories; I have found Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, French Revolution 1968, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968, to be most useful.
2. Quoted in Robert Cushman, "Playwright for Today", Observer Magazine, 16 November 1975, p.16.
3. Useful discussions of the influence of the "événements" on the new writers and on the British Fringe generally are to be found in: Catherine Itzin (hereafter Itzin), Stages in the Revolution : Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968, London, Eyre Methuen, 1980 (references throughout); Dreams and Deconstructions: Alternative Theatre in Britain, ed. Sandy Craig (hereafter Craig), Ambergate, Amber Lane Press, 1980, esp. pp.14-20 (balances the influence of 1968 with independent indigenous developments on the Fringe); and, most useful, John Bull (hereafter Bull), New British Political Dramatists, London, Macmillan, 1984 (esp. Chapter One).
4. Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler (interviewers), "Petrol Bombs Through the Proscenium Arch", Theatre Quarterly, vol.5, no.17 (1975), p.20.
5. The history, policy and philosophy of the Royal Court Theatre are described in Terry Browne (hereafter

Browne), Playwrights' Theatre: The English Stage Company at the Royal Court, London, Pitman, 1975. Useful material may also be gleaned from At the Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage Company, ed. Richard Findlater, Ambergate, Amber Lane Press, 1981. I am also particularly grateful to Philip Roberts for allowing me access to the typescript of his The Royal Court Theatre, to be published by Routledge and Kegan Paul in November 1986. This last has provided me with detail unavailable in the published accounts.

6. Interview with Philip Roberts at The University of Barcelona, 25 January 1982. I am grateful to Dr Roberts for providing me with a tape recording of this interview.

7. See Browne, op. cit., n.5, pp.84-5.

8. For an account of alternative theatre in America see Theodore Shank, American Alternative Theatre, London, Macmillan, 1982. The American Fringe largely made its influence felt in Britain through the work of individuals like Jim Haynes, Charles Marowitz and Nancy Meckler: references to their work can be found throughout Craig and Itzin, op. cit., n.3. Of particular use is Peter Ansorge, Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain, London, Pitman, 1975, pp.22-37 (hereafter referred to as Ansorge).

9. Reported by Max Stafford-Clark in an interview with Philip Roberts, University of Sheffield, 21 February 1985. Again, I am grateful to Dr Roberts for making a recording of the interview available to me.

10. Howard Brenton, Revenge, London, Eyre Methuen, 1970.
11. Ansorge, op. cit., n.8, p.5.
12. Op. cit., n.4, p.8.
13. Ibid.
14. Taped interview with the present writer, University of Sheffield, 19 June 1981.
15. See Browne, op. cit., n.5, p.84.
16. Op. cit., n.2.
17. Op. cit., n.4, p.8.
18. Quoted in Peter Ansorge, "Underground Explorations No.1 : Portable Playwrights", Plays and Players, vol.19, no.5 (February 1972), p.16.
19. Oleg Kerensky, The New British Drama: Fourteen Playwrights since Osborne and Pinter, London, Hamish Hamilton, 1977, p.209.
20. Itzin, op. cit., n.3, p.193.
21. Ansorge, op. cit., n.8, p.6
22. Ibid.
23. Leslie Halliwell, Halliwell's Film Guide, 2nd ed., London, Granada, 1979, p.102.
24. Ansorge, op. cit., n.8, p.6.
25. Unpublished interview with Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts, London, 14 January 1978.

26. Brenton explains exactly how Normington's skill changed the script, and he pays tribute to the actor's ability, in a note in the stage directions which establish the final scene of the play (op. cit., n.10, p.48).

27. Op. cit., n.4, p.8.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. The history of Portable Theatre has been reasonably well documented. Ansorge (op. cit., n.8, pp.1-21), Bull (op. cit., n.3, esp. Chapter Two) and Itzin (op. cit., n.3, esp. pp.187-98) all offer useful accounts of the group's origins, philosophy etc., whilst more valuable material is to be found in Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler (interviewers), "David Hare. From Portable Theatre to Joint Stock... via Shaftesbury Avenue", Theatre Quarterly, vol.5, no.20 (1975-1976), pp.108-15 (hereafter referred to as Hare), as well as in the major interviews with Brenton. See Bibliography.

31. See Browne, op. cit., n.5, p.101.

32. Interview with Ronald Hayman, New Review, vol.3, no.29 (1976), p.56.

33. Hare, op. cit., n.30, p.113.

34. Ibid., p.109.

35. Quoted in Itzin, op. cit., n.3, p.189.

36. Hare, op. cit., n.30, p.109.

37. Op. cit., n.4, p.10.
38. Op. cit., n.18.
39. John Grillo, "An Excess of Nightmare", Gambit, vol.6, no.23 (1973), p.19.
40. Itzin, op. cit., n.3, p.189.
41. Ibid.
42. Howard Brenton, Christie in Love and Other Plays, London, Eyre Methuen, 1970. (Christie in Love is also published in Plays for the Poor Theatre : see Bibliography.)
43. Op. cit., n.18.
44. Ibid.
45. John Russell Taylor, "British Dramatists: The New Arrivals. The Dark Fantastic", Plays and Players, vol.18, no.5 (February 1971), p.26.
46. Author's Production Note to Christie in Love, op. cit., n.42. This note offers quite detailed advice regarding Brenton's intentions in the play, together with instructions for production. All future quotations about the set, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from here.
47. Bull, op. cit., n.3, p.34.
48. Ibid.
49. Op. cit., n.45.
50. Op. cit., n.46.
51. Bull, op. cit., n.3, p.35.

52. Op. cit., n.46.
53. Op. cit., n.4, p.8.
54. Quoted in Barry Kyle, "Howard Brenton workshop", W.H. Smith/R.S.C. Youth Festival, Stratford-upon-Avon, 27 October 1982, p.2.
55. Op. cit., n.46 .
56. Ibid.
57. Op. cit., n.4, p.8. At this early stage in his career Brenton's feelings about Brecht are at the very least ambivalent. Indeed, in the same interview he goes on to describe himself as an "anti-Brechtian" (p.14). It is not, perhaps, until the translation of The Life of Galileo in 1980 that Brenton's sentiments turn to wholehearted admiration (see Translator's Note in Bertolt Brecht, The Life of Galileo, trans. Howard Brenton, London, Eyre Methuen, 1980) though it is at least arguable that a play like Weapons of Happiness (1976) begins to show traces of Brenton's absorption of Brechtian ideas.
58. Ansorge, op. cit., n.8, p.5.
59. Op. cit., n.4, p.9.
60. Op. cit., n.54.
61. See, for example, Michael Billington, rev. of Christie in Love, Plays and Players, vol.17, no.9 (June 1970) p.48.
62. Op. cit., n.18.

63. Bull, op. cit., n.3, p.36.

64. Op. cit., n.18.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. John Russell Taylor, "British Dramatists: The New Arrivals. The Dark Fantastic", Plays and Players, vol.18, no.5 (February 1971), pp.24-27.

2. Ibid., p.24.

3. Michael Billington, "London Avant Garde: Who? What? Where?", Plays and Players, vol.17, no.9 (June 1970), p.21.

4. Op. cit., n.1, p.26.

5. "Fruit" is unpublished. I am grateful to Howard Brenton for providing me with a typescript of the play.

6. Michael Billington, rev. of "Fruit" (and of "What Happened to Blake"), Plays and Players, vol.18, no.2 (November 1970), p.49.

7. Unpublished interview with Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts, London, 14 January 1978.

8. Brenton, quoted in Jonathan Hammond, "Messages First: An Interview with Howard Brenton", Gambit, vol.6, no.23 (1973), p.27.

9. Ibid.

10. See, for example, the figure of Hammett in Hare's 1972 play, The Great Exhibition (London, Faber, 1974).

11. Quoted in Peter Ansorge, "Underground Explorations No.1: Portable Playwrights", Plays and Players, vol.19, no.5 (February 1972), p.16.

12. The key situationist text, which outlines the theory in full, is Guy Debord, La Société du Spectacle. The edition to which I have referred was translated and published by the Black and Red Printing Co-operative, Detroit, 1970. Further material, and some historical context, is provided by Debord in his Preface to the Fourth Italian Edition of "The Society of the Spectacle", trans. M. Prigent and L. Forsyth, London, Chronos Publications, 1983. The history of the "événements" generally is given in Patrick Seale and Maureen McConville, French Revolution 1968, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1968; whilst the most useful consideration of the influence of May 1968 on the new writing in British Fringe theatre is that found in John Bull, New British Political Dramatists, London, Macmillan, 1984 (hereafter referred to as Bull).

13. See Catherine Itzen and Simon Trussler (interviewers), "Petrol Bombs Through the Proscenium Arch", Theatre Quarterly, Vol.5, no.17 (1975), p.10.

14. Bull, op. cit., n.12, p.13.

15. Op. cit., n.11.

16. Peter Ansorge, Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain, London, Pitman, 1975, p.7.
17. Op. cit., n.8, p.26.
18. Op. cit., n.11, p.18.
19. Op. cit., n.13.
20. Op. cit., n.8, p.26.
21. Hare quoted in Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler (interviewers), "David Hare. From Portable Theatre to Joint Stock... via Shaftesbury Avenue", Theatre Quarterly, vol.5, no.20 (1975-1976), p.112.
22. Op. cit., n.8, p.26.
23. Howard Brenton, Wesley and Scott of the Antarctic or What God Didn't See in Plays for Public Places, London, Eyre Methuen, 1970. The plays are prefaced by an Author's Note from which the description of Wesley here is taken, as are all subsequent details concerning the spaces, costumes, etc., unless otherwise indicated.
24. Op. cit., n.13, p.12.
25. Taped interview with the present writer, University of Sheffield, 19 June 1981.
26. Op. cit., n.7.
27. Op. cit., n.13, p.12.
28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., p.20.

31. The Mickery Theatre opened near Amsterdam in 1965 and moved into the city in 1971 having created a near-continuous programme of international Fringe theatre, including the major British groups.

32. Howard Brenton et al., Lay By, London, Calder and Boyars, 1972. "England's Ireland" is unpublished. I am grateful to Howard Brenton for providing me with a typescript of the piece.

33. Op. cit., n.8, p.30. In fact, as Brenton goes on to explain later in this interview, the journalists had left to cover the suspension of proceedings of the Northern Ireland government at Stormont. (This places the genesis of "England's Ireland" in c. March 1972.)

34. Op. cit., n.8.

35. Op. cit., n.16, p.51.

36. Op. cit., n.13, p.16.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. Ibid.

40. Op. cit., n.21.

41. Ibid.

42. Ibid.
43. Op. cit., n.13, p.16. Brenton discusses the stylistic features of these plays more fully in the Gambit interview (op. cit., n.8, pp. 29-30).
44. Ibid., p.18. Brenton himself suggests Lay By has this kind of status.
45. Op. cit., n.21.
46. Tony Mitchell (compiler), "Theatre Checklist No.5: Howard Brenton", Theatrefacts, vol.2, no.1 (1975), pp.7-8, has fuller accounts of the plots of the two plays, whilst I have found Bull, op. cit., n.12, pp.39-40, 46-49, to hold the most useful discussions of the plays.
47. Op. cit., n.7.
48. Op. cit., n.13, p.18 (Brenton).
49. Ibid. This is an extract from a fuller account by Brenton of his anti-humanist position, in which he discusses further his views regarding the humanist in the theatre (citing David Storey and Cromwell as examples), and touches more briefly on the differences between Western and Eastern humanism more generally.
50. Op. cit., n.21, p.113.
51. Op. cit., n.16, p.52.
52. Benedict Nightingale, "Fair Partisans", rev. of "England's Ireland", New Statesman, vol.84, no.2168 (6 October 1972), pp.484-85.

53. David Hare offers a brief but amusing account of the episode in "Time of Unease" in At the Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage Company, ed. Richard Findlater, Ambergate, Amber Lane Press, 1981, pp.139-42.

54. Op. cit., n.8. Brenton continues: "If only we could get our hands on a touring theatre, even finally to re-open the Howard and Wyndham theatres to the real world. Whether we'll ever be able to do that or not, I don't know, but there's an element of scepticism as to whether we ever will." I offer this as further evidence of Brenton's determination to make his work more "public". Moreover, as one commentator points out, throughout his career Brenton has sought to establish permanent homes for Fringe theatre groups with whom he has worked. In addition to this (abortive) plan for Portable, there was the idea of creating a writer's theatre at the Combination in 1969 (see Chapter One); of housing the 1975 play "Government Property" (see Chapter Four) in a theatre of its own in London, and of buying the Round House for the Joint Stock Theatre Company in 1977 (see Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968, London, Eyre Methuen, 1980, pp.191-92).

55. Op. cit., n.21, p.113.

56. Op. cit., n.8. News reports of the banning of "England's Ireland" in 54 English theatres, were carried in the Dublin Sunday Express of 8 October 1972 and the Belfast Newsletter of 9 October 1972.

57. Hare makes a number of observations about his relationship with Brenton in the Theatre Quarterly interview (op.cit., n.21, pp.109, 112-13), whilst Bull, op. cit., n.12, pp.60-62, makes a brief general comparison of the two writers.

58. See Brenton's comments about Edgar, op. cit., n.8, p.31. The role played by Tony Howard in the writing of A Short Sharp Shock! is confirmed by Brenton in a taped interview with the present writer, University of Sheffield, 10 November 1981.

59. See Roland Rees, Director's Note to Howard Brenton and Tunde Ikoli, Sleeping Policemen, London, Eyre Methuen, 1984, p.7. Further material on the background to this collaboration may be found in Malcolm Hay, "Foco Novo", Plays and Players, issue no.384 (September 1985), pp.10, 12.

60. "Skin Flicker" is unpublished. I am grateful to Howard Brenton for providing me with a typescript of the play. The plot synopsis here is reproduced in the Theatre-facts "Checklist", op. cit., n.46, p.6.

61. Op. cit., n.13, p.18. It should be recognised that this interview, and a number of other sources, have "Skinflicker". "Skin Flicker", however, is what appears on the cover of the typescript of the play, so this is the form I have preferred.

62. See Brenton's comments, op. cit., n.8, p.29: "'England's Ireland' was much more contained because we were more experienced about the group tensions that happen."

63. Op. cit., n.8, pp.30-31.

64. Indeed, not surprisingly perhaps, the influence of May 1968 was felt most on film, of all the arts. See, for example, Sylvia Harvey, May '68 and Film Culture, London, British Film Institute, 1978.

65. Bull, op. cit., n.12, p.25.

66. "A Sky Blue Life" is unpublished; I am grateful to Philip Roberts for providing me with a typescript of the play.

67. Op. cit., n.7. All subsequent quotations of Brenton are from this source.

68. See Maxim Gorki, The Lower Depths, trans. K. Hunter-Blair and J. Brooks, London, Eyre Methuen, 1973. The original stories may be found in Maxim Gorki, Through Russia, trans. C.J. Hogarth, London, Dent, 1921.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968, London, Eyre Methuen, 1980, p.188.

2. Quoted in Jonathan Hammond, "Messages First: An Interview with Howard Brenton", Gambit, vol.6, no.23 (1973), p.31.

3. The point may be demonstrated by reference to

Brenton's work in the 1980s. The decade began with what is his biggest and most ambitious play, The Romans in Britain, produced on the country's premier stage: the Olivier Theatre in the National. The National also commissioned and produced two translations (of Brecht's The Life of Galileo and Büchner's Danton's Death, 1980 and 1982), and staged Pravda, the collaboration with David Hare, in 1985. In 1981 Brenton produced Thirteenth Night for the Royal Shakespeare Company, and, in 1983, The Genius for the Royal Court. Outside the established London theatre, he wrote Bloody Poetry for the Foco Novo Theatre Company, a piece produced at the Haymarket Theatre in Leicester in 1984. Also for Foco Novo he collaborated with Tunde Ikoli on Sleeping Policemen (1983), a play which toured on the Fringe. An earlier collaboration, A Short Sharp Shock! (with Tony Howard; 1980), was originally planned to open simultaneously in a variety of venues, professional and amateur, across the country. Brenton's idea was to increase the play's impact by giving it the stage equivalent of a "network release" (taped interview with the present writer, University of Sheffield, 14 November 1981). In fact, only two venues were able to produce the show simultaneously; the Theatre Royal, Stratford, East London and - a student production - the University Drama Studio, Sheffield. On television, Brenton has had produced "Desert of Lies" (1984), and Dead Head, a four-part serial, 1986. The pattern of diversification continues: at the time of writing, Brenton is working on a full-length

film, provisionally entitled "The Eleventh Crushing" (letter to the present writer, 10 June 1986).

4. Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler (interviewers), "Petrol Bombs Through the Proscenium Arch", Theatre Quarterly, vol.5, no.17 (1975), pp.10-11.

5. "Government Property" is unpublished. I am grateful to Howard Brenton for providing me with a typescript.

6. Unpublished interview with Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts, London, 14 January 1978.

7. Brenton quoted in John Bull, New British Political Dramatists, London, Macmillan, 1984, p.51.

8. As Bull (ibid.) indicates, "Government Property" was the progenitor of a series of linked pieces. In addition to The Churchill Play (1974), which was itself revised for its revival by the R.S.C. in 1978, the original radio script was enlarged and adapted for production on the stage in Denmark in 1975. Attempts to stage this production in Britain came to nothing (see Chapter Three, n.54). Further, United Artists commissioned a film script after a producer had seen The Churchill Play. The film, "Rampage", was never made. In the Hay and Roberts interview (op.cit., n.6), Brenton describes the story of his screenplay as "Candide-like"; it was "about people who had got away from such a camp and their journey across England."

A brief comparison between "Government Property" and The Churchill Play shows that whilst the former does not

have the prisoners' play which gives the latter its title, several characters are shared, including the Army figures Ball, Baxter and Thompson. The story of the Irishman, Convery, told by Peter Reese in Act One of The Churchill Play, is dramatised as part of the radio play's action. The position of guilty, agonised complicity held by Dan and Doris Archer in the radio play is passed to Captain and Mrs Thompson in The Churchill Play.

9. "Lushly" is unpublished. I am grateful to Howard Brenton for providing me with a typescript of the play.

10. Tony Mitchell (compiler), "Theatre Checklist No.5: Howard Brenton", Theatrefacts, vol.2, no.1 (1975), p.7.

11. Op. cit., n.6. In a taped interview with the present writer (University of Sheffield, 15 November 1980), Brenton enlarges on his doubts about writing for television. He responds to the charge that as a socialist writer one must attempt to reach a mass audience, by pointing out the problems of censorship that can arise, and by suggesting that, unlike a theatre audience, "a television audience doesn't see itself collectively... the television audience actually is one or two or three people in their front room".

12. "How Beautiful with Badges" and "Measure for Measure" are unpublished. I am grateful for access to typescripts to Philip Roberts (Badges) and Howard Brenton (Measure).

13. Bull (op.cit., n.7, pp.37-40) offers useful comments on Brenton's treatment of the countryside in this play and

in the early part of his career more generally.

14. Op. cit., n.2, p.28.
15. Ibid.
16. A fuller account of Brenton's adaptation of Shakespeare's plot is given by Bull, op. cit., n.7, p.46.
17. Op. cit., n.2, p.28.
18. Op. cit., n.6.
19. Op. cit., n.4, p.16.
20. Peter Ansorge, Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain, London, Pitman, 1975, p.52.
21. Howard Brenton, "Answering Ten Questions", Performing Arts Journal, vol. 3, no.3 (Winter 1979), p.135.
22. Howard Brenton, Hitler Dances, London, Eyre Methuen, 1982. Parts of my commentary here have already appeared in my introduction to the published play.
23. Characters in the play are given the names of the original cast.
24. Op. cit., n.6.
25. Op. cit., n.4, p.14.
26. I am grateful to Philip Roberts for providing me with a typescript of the play. The revisions Brenton made for publication are minor, and usually concern clarifying punctuation. The major change involves the excision of a

number of stage directions addressed to specific members of the company. Some sense of this kind of personal informality does perhaps linger in the published text.

27. For the background to the La Mama group, see Ellen Stewart, "Ellen Stewart and La Mama", Drama Review, vol.24, no.2 (June 1980), pp.11-22.

28. Op. cit., no.20, p.51.

29. Quoted in Ronald Hayman, "Double Acts", Sunday Times Magazine, 21 March 1980, p.26.

30. Quoted in Peter Ansorge, "Underground Explorations No.4: War Games", Plays and Players, vol.19, no.8 (May 1972), p.61. This contains very useful material on the Traverse Workshop Company, much of it concerning Hitler Dances.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., pp.14, 16 (Costello).

33. Ibid., p.16.

34. Ibid., pp.17, 61 (Costello).

35. Ibid., p.16.

36. See Leslie Halliwell, Halliwell's Film Guide, 2nd ed., London, Granada, 1979, p.145.

37. Op. cit., n.30, p.16.

38. Ibid., p.14 (Costello).

39. Op. cit., n.4, p.14.

40. Op. cit., n.6 .

41. Ibid.

42. Cordelia Oliver, rev. of Hitler Dances, Plays and Players, vol.19, no.6 (March 1972), p.53.

43. Op. cit., n.30, p.61 (Hayman).

44. Op. cit., n.21, p.133. As Brenton indicates elsewhere in this piece, his anti-Freudian stance owes a debt to existentialism. The key notion is that of "authenticity". The existentialists' model of the human mind rejects all forms of determinism, arguing instead that the individual's destiny is in his own hands. Acceptance of this fact allows "authentic" existence: the individual becomes the source of all value, and the key qualities of life are moral honesty, creativity, sincerity and total inner conviction. Any course of action is justified if predicated on these qualities. A useful summary of these ideas is to be found in Margaret Drabble (ed.), The Oxford Companion to English Literature, 5th ed., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1985.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1. Howard Brenton, Preface to Plays: One. Plays: One is due for publication by Eyre Methuen in November 1986. This is the first major collection of Brenton's work. It is to include:

Christe in Love, Magnificence, The Churchill Play, Weapons of Happiness, Epsom Downs and Sore Throats. I am grateful to Howard Brenton for allowing me foresight of his Preface.

2. Preface, ibid.

3. Howard Brenton, "Answering Ten Questions", Performing Arts Journal, vol. 3, no.3 (Winter 1979), pp.132-41.

4. Ibid., p.135. The definition offered here is rather more formulistic than that in the Preface (op.cit., n.1): "...I had these notions of an epic - 1) a play that is many scened, the short scenes choosing precise windows in a story; 2) the 'windows' have to be authentic, to ring true; 3) and at the same time they must be part of an argument, one illustrating the other, progressing to a conclusion that is believable, in the simple sense of 'men and women would do that' and also be clear in intent for 4) it is the message of a play that comes first and last."

5. Ibid. It is also worth noting that in the unpublished interview with Malcolm Hay and Philip Roberts, London, 14 January 1978 (hereafter Hay and Roberts) that prompted Brenton to produce his piece for the Performing Arts Journal, the writer is less sure about the "epic" status of one of his plays: "...I don't think The Churchill Play is really an epic play. I was on to something else there which I've not really quite sorted out."

6. Nor should it be assumed that the evolution of his

"public theatre" dominates Brenton's thinking to the exclusion of all else in 1973. As has already been suggested, "going public" entails most a diversification of work, designed to reach as many audiences as possible. Hence the first half of 1973 sees three pieces written for Fringe audiences, pieces very different in kind and intent: "A Fart for Europe", co-written with David Edgar in January; "The Screens", an adaptation of Genet, in March; and "Mug", produced in June.

I have been unable to trace a copy of "The Screens". It was produced at the Bristol New Vic Studio by Walter Donohue, director of "A Sky Blue Life" and "How Beautiful with Badges". According to Tony Mitchell ("Theatre Checklist No.5: Howard Brenton", Theatrefacts, vol.2, no.1 (1975), p.9), Brenton's adaptation was a "compression of Genet's play for its British première, cutting it down from a work for thirty to forty actors playing 97 parts into a three-hour version for six men and three women, playing thirty parts."

I am grateful to Howard Brenton for providing me with typescripts of "A Fart for Europe" and "Mug".

Both, in their different ways, are occasional pieces.

"A Fart for Europe", as its title implies, was an immediate satirical response to the festivities organised for entry to the E.E.C. in 1973. A variety of styles are deployed, including pastiche versions of King Lear and Greek tragedy. Two trendy young businessmen, Peter Uxbridge

and Nick Sutton-Cheam, provide a "vision of a new Europe" ("except for Albania, Andorra, Austria, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Finland...") that is a paradise of profiteering, greed and consumerism. They dispense with the banalities of the "advantages of European culture" in favour of taking the opportunity to crack down on left-wing industrial and political activity. Against them is set the activist Lev, who ends the play with a direct call to action:

We're in there. What can we do. Look forward. If you're in a union, see that your branch demands the admittance of the French Communist C.G.T. and the Italian Socialist C.G.I.L. into European union federations... forge links with European workers in your industry. Aggravate the loopholes in labour law. And next time there's a miners' strike, make sure the lights go out all over Europe.

Whereas Fart was produced in the Theatre Upstairs, "Mug" was written for a non-theatre venue: an Inter-Cities Conference in Manchester entitled "More Power to the People". It is a very short play, shorter even than the trilogy pieces. "THE PLAYING SHOULD OFTEN BE LOUD, DELIBERATE AND FRONT ON TO THE AUDIENCE." Set on Clapham Common, it is the story of a confrontation between an old Fisherman and a young Mugger, one of Brenton's violent urban gangsters. The play satirises the jargonising of sociology and of the "issue" documentary on television for their failure to supply adequate analyses of the causes of social violence. As is typical of Brenton, the old man is seen as a teacher for the vicious young mugger, though his advice is only general:

You want a' learn who yer real enemies
are, lad. That's what you want a' do.

Together, these diverse pieces provide, in the year of Brenton's first production in the mainstream theatre, a useful demonstration of his belief in "drumming on the pipes" (Hay and Roberts, op. cit., n.5); in finding as many outlets for his work and tailoring his writing to them.

7. Howard Brenton, Magnificence, London, Eyre Methuen, 1973.

8. Quoted in Catherine Itzin, Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968, London, Eyre Methuen, 1980, p.192.

9. John Bull, New British Political Dramatists, London, Macmillan, 1984, p.50.

10. Preface, op. cit., n.1.

11. Op. cit., n.9, pp.14-15.

12. Preface, op. cit., n.1.

13. Quoted by Bull, op. cit., n.9, p.13.

14. Ibid., p.14.

15. Ibid., p.50.

16. Quoted in an interview with Ronald Hayman, New Review, vol. 3, no.29 (1976), p.57.

17. Op. cit., n.9, p.50.

18. Op. cit., n.16.

19. Ibid.
20. Quoted in Jonathan Hammond, "Messages First: An Interview with Howard Brenton", Gambit, vol. 6, no.23 (1973), p.29.
21. Op. cit., n.9, p.15.
22. Quoted in Dusty Hughes, "'Disrupt the Spectacle. The Obscene Parade, Bring it to a Halt!'", Time Out, 22 June 1973, p.22.
23. Op. cit., n.16.
24. Catherine Itzin and Simon Trussler (interviewers), "Petrol Bombs Through the Proscenium Arch", Theatre Quarterly, vol. 5, no.17 (1975), p.18.
25. As has been seen (p.68), difficulties of transferring from a Fringe to an established space could be sufficient to militate against productions moving even within the same building in the case of the Court's Theatre Upstairs and its main stage.
26. The point may be made in purely financial terms. The production costs of Magnificence (as shall be seen (p.238), low for a main house play) were £5,664 (given in At The Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage Company, ed. Richard Findlater, Ambergate, Amber Lane Press, 1981, Appendix Two. Hereafter referred to as Findlater.) Portable's Arts Council grant for the 1971-72 season - the season of Lay By - was £8,000 (given by Peter Anson, Disrupting

the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain, London, Pitman, 1975, p.2.

27. Op. cit., n.24, p.10.

28. Hay and Roberts, op. cit., n.5.

29. Brenton, taped interview with Philip Roberts at the National Theatre, London, 28 February 1985. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent comments by Brenton are from this source. I am grateful to Dr Roberts for allowing me access to the interview.

30. See Terry Browne, Playwrights' Theatre : The English Stage Company at the Royal Court, London, Pitman, 1975, p.100.

31. "Time of Unease", in Findlater, op. cit., n.26, p.141.

32. Ibid.

33. Taped interview with Philip Roberts, University of Sheffield, 21 February 1985. Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent comments by Stafford-Clark originate here. I am grateful to Dr Roberts for allowing me access to the tape.

34. C.W.E. Bigsby, Contemporary English Drama, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies 19, London, Edward Arnold, 1981, p.21.

35. Ibid.

36. Benedict Nightingale, "Jed-Propelled", rev. of Magnificence, New Statesman, vol.86. no.2207 (6 July 1973),

p.257. One also wonders if Brenton's original preference for Anthony Page was not born in part of a determination to strike at the heart of what one commentator (Dusty Hughes, op. cit., n.22, p.23) called the "Storesborne" tradition. By the late 1960s Page had largely taken over from Tony Richardson as the Court's main Osborne director, reviving Look Back in Anger in 1968. Moreover, Page's Hedda Gabler, so admired by Brenton, was in a version by Osborne.

37. Quoted in Browne, op. cit., n.30, p.101.

38. Op. cit., n.24.

38. Brenton quoted by Hammond, op. cit., n.20, p.32.

40. Hay and Roberts, op. cit., n.5.

41. Op. cit., n.20, p.24.

42. Hay and Roberts, op. cit., n.5.

43. Hughes, op. cit., n.22.

44. Ibid.

45. Brenton describes the drop cloth as "a cartoonish representation of the front of a house at night and that was because you had two rather music-hall-like characters in front of it... the comic scene between the bailiff and (the constable) is broadly written and it will prosper if you present it in front of a strange cloth which has a quasi-comic design on it."

46. Op. cit., n.24, p.13.

48. Hay and Roberts, op. cit., n.5.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid .
51. Preface, op. cit., n.1.

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- in Plays: One, 1986.
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None of the above is available for performance.

5. "A Sky Blue Life: Scenes after Maxim Gorki", written 1966-1971.
6. "Gargantua", adaptation of Rabelais, written 1968.

7. "Fruit", written 1970.
8. "Government Property: a play for radio", written 1972. Not recorded.
9. "How Beautiful with Badges", written 1972.
10. "Lushly", television play, written 1972.
11. "England's Ireland", collaboration with Tony Bicat, Brian Clark, David Edgar, Francis Fuchs, David Hare, and Snoo Wilson. Written 1972.
12. "Measure for Measure: A Comedy", adaptation of Shakespeare, written 1972.
13. "A Fart for Europe", collaboration with David Edgar, written 1972-1973.
14. "Skin Flicker", film, written 1972-1973.
15. "The Screens", adaptation of Genet, written 1973.
16. "Mug", written 1973.
17. "Jedefrau", written for the Mozart Festival, Salzburg, Austria, 1974. Unperformed.
18. "Government Property", re-casting and expansion of radio play (see above) for stage, written 1974-1975.
19. "Rampage", film, written 1974-1975. Not made.

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