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THE THEATRE OF TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER

Sophie Bush

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THE THEATRE OF TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER

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Sophie Bush

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For SJD

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER'S FLOATING IDENTITIES

Izena duen guztiak izatea ere badauke
Everything with a name exists
(Basque saying)

'I think the whole thing about being a writer is that you have a floating identity', Timberlake Wertenbaker told the journalist Hilary de Vries.[1] Suzie Mackenzie gained a similar impression of the playwright: 'In a sense, she might say, she has no country, no class, no culture. No language even. Or, to put it another way, what she has in the way of cultural inheritance, she has determined for herself.'[2] This book proposes that the fluidity and mutability of identity embraced by Mackenzie's statement and Wertenbaker's concept of a 'floating identity' has been a continuous feature of the playwright's life and work, both of which have resisted labels. This unwillingness to be categorised has, arguably, had an impact on the way Wertenbaker and her plays have been understood and critiqued, both in academic circles and amongst the press, with whom she has had, at best, an ambiguous, at worst, a fraught, relationship. This antagonism is another thread that runs through this book. Mackenzie's willingness to accept Wertenbaker's non-definitions is unusual, contrasting with some journalists' specific, almost objectifying descriptions of 'an attractive young woman of mixed French, English and American blood',[3] 'a striking, dark-haired woman'[4] or 'a mature girl of warmth and grace who happens to be a playwright'.[5] Such remarks, which seem to present Wertenbaker's profession as secondary to her nationality, even to her appearance, may explain, in part, her desire to self-determine.

Wertenbaker's career has spanned more than three decades, yet she has received far less scholarly attention than many of her

contemporaries. While her 1988 play *Our Country's Good* has been almost canonised through its wealth of awards, popularity with amateur and professional companies all over the world and long-standing inclusion on school and university syllabuses, many of her plays have not attracted the consideration they merit. This book attempts to counteract this phenomenon, highlighting the extent and quality of Wertenbaker's oeuvre, while still giving detailed analyses of her best-known plays. It provides a comprehensive overview that foregrounds the development of the work, drawing extensively on archive materials, and maintaining a constant focus on issues of production and reception.

Wertenbaker is anxious that scholarship on her work should not impose false limitations on its potential meanings. This, she suggests, is 'always a problem', 'because I don't write political plays as such. […] *Three Birds* – it's not a feminist play, and *After Darwin* […] touches on colonialism, but it's not [purely] about that. […] [S]ometimes people don't like it, because it's not saying what they want me to say'. She hopes that her work does not fit into rigid parameters and we agreed that her plays might benefit from more open examination.[6] Consequently, I avoid reading the work according to potentially restrictive theoretical frameworks, instead grouping plays chronologically to foreground Wertenbaker's career as a developing process that has both waxed and waned, in terms of critical commendation, if not in terms of quality. While I offer thematic links across the groupings, these are intended to retain a sense of fluidity, imbuing this structure with the same sense of mutability that is crucial to Wertenbaker's plays.

Chapter One explores the largely undocumented earliest stages of Wertenbaker's career and the plays she drafted before 1980. An account of the process by which she gained entry to the theatre industry, which reveals a series of opportunities and pitfalls, is followed by textual analyses of the unpublished (and frequently unperformed) pieces that date from this period. I split these works into three categories: those dealing predominantly with the personal and containing limited social or political reference ('The Third' and 'The Vigil'), those that are the most overtly political of Wertenbaker's

career, addressing topical issues such as the threat from nuclear power and the excesses of the Western, capitalist world ('This is No Place for Tallulah Bankhead', 'Near Miss', 'Act for Our Times', 'Breaking Through' and 'Second Sentence'), and a third group of three unfinished pieces ('Monads', 'Don Juan's Women' and 'Agamemnon's Daughter'), which begin to show the successful combination of the personal and political, and the playful interaction with the literary canon, for which many of Wertenbaker's later plays are known.

Chapter Two focuses on the years 1980 to 1985: a transitional period for Wertenbaker, during which she began receiving commissions, rather than always having to tout her work around 'on spec'. The majority of these productions were relatively small-scale and low-profile and she was often frustrated by having to tailor her writing to the specific requirements of certain companies. Towards the end of this period, she established stronger links with London's foremost new writing theatre, the Royal Court, and began to gain increased public recognition. I suggest that it was during this time that Wertenbaker's work was most focused on exploring gender and its relationship with identities, and I examine her persistent interest in 'women on quests'.[7] Issues of production and reception are discussed alongside textual analyses. I consider how far Wertenbaker identifies as a 'feminist', or 'woman playwright', and the relationship between this and her representation in the media. The key texts discussed are *New Anatomies* (1981), *The Grace of Mary Traverse* (1985), and the unpublished works 'Variations' (c.1981) and 'Inside Out' (c.1982).

The year 1988 was an important one for Wertenbaker, with almost simultaneous premieres of what remain her two most frequently performed plays (*Our Country's Good* and *The Love of the Nightingale*) by two highly regarded British theatre companies (the Royal Court and the Royal Shakespeare Company, respectively). In the years that followed, Wertenbaker received constant requests to sit on panels and committees and to be interviewed by everyone from broadsheet journalists to sixth-form students. She was commissioned for lucrative film and television work as well as plays, and was in such demand that she had to turn work down on a number

of occasions. Chapter Three focuses on this period in Wertenbaker's career, and her two plays of 1988, focusing on the dangers of the loss of 'voice', and the potential to regain it, which Wertenbaker links to self-expression through engagement with the alternative 'language' provided by the arts.

In Chapter Four, three contributing scholars and practitioners offer a range of international and professional perspectives on *Our Country's Good*. Firstly, playwright and academic Sarah Sigal discusses the challenges and rewards of the research, development and writing process employed by Wertenbaker and director Max Stafford-Clark in 1988. Secondly, theatre director Roger Hodgman recounts his experience of directing the play in Melbourne, considering the play's significance to Australian audiences. Finally, experienced teacher Debby Turner explores the play's educational value, offering a range of practical and reflective exercises for teachers and students. These essays highlight and begin to explain this play's far-reaching influence (in both geographical and interdisciplinary terms), throughout the theatre industry and the education system.

Chapter Five is concerned with Wertenbaker's turn-of-the-century plays: *The Break of Day* (1995), *After Darwin* (1998), *Credible Witness* (2001) and *The Ash Girl* (2000). All these texts have discussions about cultural identities at their core, raising questions concerning the effects of voluntary and forced cultural relocation, and the values and problems associated with remembering, discovering, abandoning or creating cultural histories. Alongside these recurrent concerns is a parallel strand that engages with ideas of reproduction and genealogy; Edward Said's theories of filiation and affiliation are valuable in illuminating the potential conversations between these two elements of the work.

Chapter Six discusses Wertenbaker's most recent work. After a brief consideration of *Arden City* (2008), *Jenufa* (2007) and 'The Laws of Motion' (2004), I focus on *The Line* (2009). I argue that this text positions the visual arts as a synecdoche for the arts in general and Wertenbaker's own practice of playwriting in particular. As this is a device Wertenbaker also employs in *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1991), I consider these two 'art plays' alongside each other.

This chapter begins to draw conclusions about Wertenbaker's oeuvre as a whole, her most pronounced and long-standing concerns, and the fluctuating shape of her career. Most visibly consistent amid her changing themes and styles is her optimism: a hope for the future, which she connects sometimes to the beauty of the natural world and sometimes to the human imagination and our capacity for pity and tenderness.

Into the Archive Alone

> [A]lthough I love working with actors and talking to them, in the end I have to write from my own insights and puzzlement; walk into the labyrinth alone.[8]

Wertenbaker's extensive, uncatalogued and barely discussed archive contains a wealth of research materials, including typescripts, press-cuttings, photographs and handwritten notes. Wertenbaker claims to have 'never rewritten a play less than 4 times. […] To me a play was like a prey one stalked. The writing and the rewriting was a closing circle around the play.'[9] The many stages of this process are clear from the multiple versions of her plays, which often change significantly over the course of their creation. The first chapter of this book, which discusses ten unpublished plays from the late 1970s, relies entirely on these drafts. Subsequent chapters are more focused on the 'final' published versions of texts, but make frequent consideration of the development and genesis of these plays.[10] A notable example of the value of such material is the existence of an article ('Women ex-prisoners: out of the closet and on to the stage') and an unpublished play ('Second Sentence') from 1979/80, which explore modern-day prejudices towards the prison community, foreshadowing sentiments expressed in *Our Country's Good* and demonstrating that this later play was a result of long-standing concerns, rather than a straightforward response to the publication of Thomas Keneally's novel *The Playmaker*.

Wertenbaker's professional correspondence is another valuable resource, which reveals much about her career development and

collaborations. As Judy Simons has noted, the 'expression […] of anxieties that beset writers over the processes of production informs our understanding of the genesis of a text and the problems surrounding it'.[11] The sequences of letters that flew between Wertenbaker, her agents, and potential producers and collaborators, disclose a succession of hopes, disappointments, successes and failures, discussed throughout the book. They also offer significant and, at times, unique insights into what Wertenbaker felt about her plays and those who produced them. When the academic Susan Carlson sent a draft of her book *Women and Comedy* (for which Wertenbaker had been interviewed) for Wertenbaker to approve, her assistant replied that Wertenbaker 'would like you to change *the* women's group to *a* women's group and she would like the word "suicidally" removed and replaced by *in despair*'.[12] These tactful alterations refer to the account Wertenbaker had given Carlson of her fraught relations with the Women's Theatre Group. Referring to the published text of Carlson's book, one can see that Wertenbaker's request was followed to the letter. The extremity of Wertenbaker's original statement has only resurfaced because a draft of the letter sent to Carlson is now accessible through the archive. Such correspondence reveals far more about the material conditions and political machinations behind artistic production than a published text or staged production can.

Despite the archive's potential, it is not a complete or authoritative documentation of Wertenbaker's career. While letters provide tantalising details about working conditions and inspirations, as a record they are manifestly incomplete. Additionally, we must remember that, to an extent, the letter is another category of performative writing. Julia Swindells considers that 'all autobiographical statements show some process of mediation between the subject and the author' and Simons suggests that 'the more we read others' diaries, the more we become aware of the diaries' fictive quality, and of the creation of a central character, established through an act of imagination as powerful as those responsible for stimulating writers' published works'.[13] Despite these caveats, Wertenbaker's archive retains great value for scholars, highlighting

the essentially collaborative and communal nature of theatrical production. The way playwrights are treated, or believe themselves to have been treated, by those with whom they work is something that often goes unrecorded by formal sources. Published texts give simple production credits, revealing nothing about the pleasures or difficulties of creation. Any traces of discontent or frustration are edited out of press releases and, if at all possible, out of the performances audiences and critics attend. Even theatrical histories, such as Carson's, often present tactfully edited accounts. In contrast, archival sources can appear tantalisingly uncensored. Yet uncensored they are not, certainly not in the case of a living writer who has chosen to include or withhold every element of this record. Once this acknowledgement has been made, the playwright's active role in the creation of that archive can be seen, not as a drawback, but a boon: another injection of their presence, shaping and breathing life into our picture of their profession.

Timberlake Wertenbaker

Wertenbaker was born in New York in the mid 1940s to Charles Wertenbaker, a foreign correspondent for *TIME* magazine, and Lael Tucker Wertenbaker, also a journalist. The couple returned to work in France with Timberlake and her elder brother shortly after her birth. The family lived in a small fishing village called Ciboure in the Basque region of France. Wertenbaker paints an idyllic picture of a childhood spent roaming the picturesque Basque countryside and buried deep in adventurous books, her favourite of which was Dumas's *The Three Musketeers*. 'I always had a hankering for adventure', she remembers, 'I identified with d'Artagnan, I liked the friendships he had.'[14] As discussed in Chapter Two, such literature had a deep impact on Wertenbaker, particularly when she realised that adventures were often limited to male characters. Although she initially learnt to read and write in English, she began to read in French at the age of four and briefly spoke Basque.[15] She appears to have identified as Basque, rather than French or American, during

this period and recalls that it 'was a shock to find out that I was not Basque'.[16] She was deeply affected by the political situation of the Basque people, attributing a life-long fear of being silenced to having witnessed the suppression of the Basque language and culture by the French government: 'The threat of the loss of language is one of the greatest threats. I grew up in the Basque country of France where the language was systematically eroded and destroyed so I feel very strongly about language.'[17] Wertenbaker admits that she was not fully aware of this suppression at the time, and found her village 'a great place to be', because of its lively culture, which was another source of influence. 'Basque country was theatre in itself, because it's a very verbal culture', she explains, 'you knew what was going on in the village, so there were endless stories and gossip.' Although too young to appreciate 'to what extent the Basques had an oral culture and how much poetry there was', she believes that 'even if you're in touch with that culture, you must sense that'.[18] Perhaps these early experiences of the theatrical as part of an intangible, living culture may have shaped Wertenbaker's desire to create plays that cannot be easily pinned down or defined.

Wertenbaker's continental schooling was another factor through which she 'got very hooked on theatre, because there really is a lot of theatre in French education'.[19] Her Basque surroundings, while theatrical in themselves, did not offer much opportunity for playgoing, but she 'read a lot of plays' from an early age. 'I don't know why', she recalls, 'I mean, [they were] just something that was in the library.'[20] This off-hand statement is typical of the way Wertenbaker describes many of her life and career choices. This habit gives the impression that she is keen to resist the idea that she was somehow 'born' to be a playwright, and perhaps demonstrates the same distaste for determinism that appears in much of her work.

In 1955, Wertenbaker's father died of cancer, a process graphically documented in her mother's 1959 book *Death of a Man*.[21] The family subsequently relocated to New York, a move with which Wertenbaker felt ill at ease. She describes her first experience of American life as 'terrible. Terrible and I hated it.' Torn from the freedom of a rural childhood and subjected to the pressures and

confinements of a major city, her sense of dislocation was profound. 'For me', she recalls, 'childhood is a world full of hope which does crack. For me it cracked when we left the Basque country.'[22] On a more positive note, New York offered far greater access to cultural events and the first two plays Wertenbaker remembers seeing there were *The King and I* and a French language production of Genet's *Deathwatch*. She recalls being 'absolutely fascinated' by the latter,[23] which she claims 'influenced [her] immensely'.[24] She has even suggested, with an uncharacteristic sense of determinism, that 'it's what made me a playwright. Or […] the combination of the musical and that, made me a playwright',[25] although she 'didn't think of going into [theatre], until much later'.[26] There is little about the style or content of either of these pieces that could be cited as a direct influence on Wertenbaker's playwriting, although *The King and I* does contain the trope (frequently used by Wertenbaker) of the play-within-the-play. What seems to have made the impact was rather her realisation of the power of the theatrical experience.

Aged 15, Wertenbaker returned to reading and writing in English. As with her physical relocation, she was not immediately comfortable with this change. 'I felt ill at ease in America with its brave, male, woodsman prose', she remembers, 'and didn't feel at home again until I discovered *Women in Love.*'[27] This comment suggests that the tone of the American novels, rather than their language, alienated Wertenbaker. Her bilingual upbringing ensured her comprehension of English texts, but she suffered a similar discomfort to Procne in *The Love of the Nightingale*, who is aware that even for those who 'speak the same language', '[t]he words are the same, but point to different things'.[28] The sense of trauma connected to the experience of cultural and linguistic dislocation is a recurrent theme in Wertenbaker's work, appearing prominently in *New Anatomies*, *Our Country's Good*, *Three Birds Alighting on a Field*, *The Break of Day*, *After Darwin*, and receiving its fullest treatment in *Credible Witness*. This theme, and the accompanying idea that hope and possibility can spring from these same dislocations, are discussed in Chapter Five.

Like many of her displaced characters, as a young adult Wertenbaker became, if not settled in, at least acclimatised to, her

surroundings. She remained in the United States to attend St John's College in Annapolis, which she describes as an institution 'run mostly by Germans who had left during the war. It was based on the philosophies of Plato. It was very odd.'[29] Much of Wertenbaker's work shows a great awareness of philosophical systems; '[I]t was Plato I really liked', she admits, citing the direct influence of 'the Meno in *Our Country's Good*'. Elsewhere, she is reluctant to suggest specific links between philosophical concepts and particular plays. 'I think all it did was to give me the courage to approach a difficult subject matter', she explains, 'a subject matter I didn't know very well, like when I was doing *After Darwin*. I mean, the theory of evolution is not that simple […], and I was a bit nervous of it, so it helped me to think about that.' However, she is also keen to highlight that 'everything [she] read had an influence'.[30]

Having gained her first degree, Wertenbaker began a Masters course in Russian at the University of Georgetown, before abandoning it as a 'waste of time'.[31] Lael Wertenbaker suggested her daughter become a diplomat, but Wertenbaker did not feel she had the required tact.[32] Having a talent for writing, she worked instead as a researcher for Dumbarton Oaks, before moving to Time-Life Books and a job as a caption writer. By the end of her twenties she was, in her own words, 'upwardly mobile in a well-paid, prestigious New York job'.[33] But while this employment kept her in 'beautiful clothes and expensive meals', after five years she was beginning to wonder whether there might be 'some other reason for being than producing captions at a snail's pace'. Frustrated with her profession, she struggled with the knowledge that she would never 'in the least be missed at my job', and that 'crowded tube, shops, streets, stores and offices all said that I was inessential'. These factors contributed to a general sense of dissatisfaction: 'I was suffering from a malaise common to people, like me, in their mid twenties […], who had a "good job", a "good life", all the external trappings of happiness […], without actual happiness'.[34] This situation has some parallels with that of Judith in Wertenbaker's 1978 play 'This is No Place for Tallulah Bankhead', but where Judith's malaise leads her to suicide, Wertenbaker's prompted a more positive course of action.

With the approach of her thirtieth birthday, Wertenbaker's restlessness pushed her to embark on an adventure she described as 'partly unjustifiable'. In 1975, she gave up her comfortable New York existence to become a stable-hand in Somerset. She had previously enjoyed a fortnight's holiday at these stables and had taken riding lessons in London and New York, but still lacked experience and justified her impulsive decision in distinctly irrational terms: 'I believe very much in fate and the intricate patterns it makes of our lives always fascinate me.'[35] Before finalising her plans, she 'consulted instead [of common sense] supernatural forces', which included her astrologer ('a lovely woman who had been my advisor in many things') and her Jungian analyst (who 'thought it would do me good and bring [me] in touch with an instinctive part of myself I did not know').[36] These comments reveal an interest in the mystical, reflected in a number of Wertenbaker's works, most notably 'Monads' and 'The Vigil' (discussed in Chapter One).

Working as a stable-hand proved a life-changing experience for Wertenbaker, which she began to write a book about. These drafts of 'A Year on Exmoor' contain further evidence that Wertenbaker was developing ambitions to write more than captions. They reference an unspecified novel that was rejected by an agency during this time, and a gothic novel about a girl working as a stable-hand, which Wertenbaker used to vent some of her grievances against her employer's more draconian attitudes.[37] However, there is no mention of Wertenbaker attempting dramatic writing at this stage and her Exmoor experience is presented as fulfilling in an aesthetic and practical sense, rather than a cerebral or cultural one. She describes being 'so off thinking and writing', a feeling that lingered into her return to city life. 'I went to the theatre last night', she records, 'I liked it. Could equally well have done without it. Was glad to leave.'[38]

Wertenbaker was keen to retain her Exmoor mentality and not 'fall back into the old person: slightly lethargic, lost'.[39] She complained that in city life 'we are not even confronted with ethics' and considered that 'when the glittering layers of life in a city are taken away, it reduces itself to Greed and passing the time'.[40] Expanding on what she termed 'the exhaustion of cities', she decried

> being surrounded by so much ugliness. A constant blocking of the mind, wishing to be somewhere else. Hence the exhaustion. […] How much damage to the soul, but to the body as well, does ugliness cause. As much damage as smoking, breathing chemicals. It corrodes the spirit, eventually the body. Plato was right. One must live with beauty. […] More so, it seems, than love.[41]

The importance of appreciating the natural world is a theme in several of Wertenbaker's plays, and is discussed in more detail in Chapter Six. I suggest that it was on Exmoor that Wertenbaker rediscovered the importance of the freedom and beauty she had enjoyed as a child in the Basque Country.

After a brief return to New York, Wertenbaker embarked on another journey, moving to the Greek Island of Spetse by the end of 1976. Here, Wertenbaker earned her living teaching French, but enjoyed a leisurely lifestyle of 'swimming, having all the time I wanted to write'.[42] In February 1977, she recorded being 'in Greece working on [the Exmoor book] and on some plays we are putting on here'.[43] This comment and the first draft of her play 'The Third' (dated 16 December 1976) are the earliest archived records of Wertenbaker's writing for the stage.

A Backdrop of British Theatre

Wertenbaker's earliest theatrical writings and the first productions of her work occurred on Spetse, but London has been home to the vast majority of her professional career, and its theatrical climate has been the major force with which she has had to contend during the last forty years. She began establishing herself as a London playwright in the late 1970s, a decade after theatre censorship had been famously abolished. It is unrealistic to suggest that there were no longer restrictions on the playwright's craft: internal censorship imposed by the governing boards of subsidised institutions was still, in some cases, as restrictive as the Lord Chamberlain had been and

'market pressure' exerted further influence. However, as Dominic Shellard has recognised, the end of censorship was a catalyst for other advances:

> [T]he fact that writers no longer had to submit scripts for time-consuming vetting introduced a revolutionising spontaneity to seventies drama. Productions could be mounted immediately, small collaborative groups were formed […] and new venues such as pubs, community centres, 'arts labs' and working men's clubs began to spring up to cater for the increasing demand. Whereas in London there were approximately half a dozen such venues in 1968, by the late seventies there were over a hundred, including the King's Head pub in Islington, the Half Moon in Aldgate, the Bush […], the Mall of the Institute for Contemporary Arts (ICA) and the Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs.[44]

Of these five venues, all but the Bush were crucial stepping stones in Wertenbaker's career.

In terms of opportunities for women, while Shellard comments that it 'would be hard to argue that during [the 1970s] female playwrights achieved the breakthrough they deserved in terms of widely acknowledged success',[45] the British theatre had begun to shift away from the 'male-dominated club'[46] it had been during the 1960s.[47] Caryl Churchill, whose first professional stage play *Owners* was produced in 1972, had by the end of the decade written some of her best-known works, including *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), *Vinegar Tom* (1976) and *Cloud Nine* (1979). Pam Gems also gained public recognition in this decade, producing her most famous work *Piaf* in 1978. Alongside these high-profile writers, the 1970s saw an increase in all female or women-centred companies, such as the Women's Theatre Group (est. 1973), Monstrous Regiment (est. 1975), Gay Sweatshop (est. 1975), Siren (est.1979) and Clean Break (est. 1979), all of which offered increased opportunities for female playwrights. Wertenbaker has emphasised how important it was to have female role models:

> Playwrights need models, and not just historical, but contemporary ones. I also believe women playwrights are helped by women models. Caryl Churchill has broken new ground for women by extending the boundaries of subject, Louise Page has reached previously undefined areas of memory and feeling. I have left these plays encouraged and thrilled and I am not the only writer grateful to the Court for having put them on.[48]

As well as the collectives whose principle motive was to challenge gender prejudices, other groups with alternative and/or ensemble working methods appeared around this time. One of the most notable was Joint Stock, established in 1974 by William Gaskill, David Hare, David Aukin and Max Stafford-Clark. The 'Joint Stock method', whereby cast, director and writer underwent several weeks of workshops to research and develop a text, has been much discussed and frequently emulated, not least by Stafford-Clark's subsequent company Out of Joint. There has been some criticism that these methods, particularly as employed by Max Stafford-Clark during his tenure as Artistic Director of the Royal Court, disadvantaged writers by acting as an 'implied attack on an old-fashioned model of the playwright writing a play and the theatre putting it on'.[49] Wertenbaker, however, enjoyed a strong relationship with Stafford-Clark and produced some of her most successful work in this way, as highlighted by Sarah Sigal's essay in Chapter Four on the development of *Our Country's Good*.

Despite its gradual democratisation, the theatre of the 1970s was still dominated by white men. All major theatres, including the Court, the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) and the National were run and programmed by men, a situation that Wertenbaker considered forced women playwrights 'to fight odds'.[50] The work of David Hare, Howard Brenton, David Edgar, Howard Barker, Trevor Griffiths and John McGrath defined a generation of British 'political' theatre (the narrowness of this definition perhaps contributing to the neglect of some of the politically engaged work of female playwrights, including Wertenbaker, in the next decade).

Outside feminist collectives, the position of women was rarely a prominent theme; the troubles in Northern Ireland, the questioning of 'British' national identity, the threat (and actuality) of terrorism, and the backlash of reductions in civil liberties (including internment without trial) provided much material for the subsidised sector, perhaps reaching their peak in Howard Brenton's controversial *Romans in Britain* (1980). Meanwhile, according to Billington, 'the best West End plays of the period revolved around one particular quality: *the emotional detachment of the English male* [*sic*]'.[51] As the decade ran into further trouble with the start of recession in 1974, strikes and rising unemployment contributed to a general sense of disillusionment and uncertainty, which permeated large swathes of dramatic writing.

In 1975, theatre subsidy had been frozen (meaning, as inflation rose, a reduction in real terms). This was a shock for many in the subsidised sector, who had lived through a decade of year-on-year grant increases. National institutions such as the RSC and the National Theatre had always required high levels of government funding, but as the overall budget dwindled, began to consume even larger shares. The Royal Court suffered from this, its difficulties reaching crisis point in 1983/4, when the Arts Council threatened to withdraw its subsidy altogether. Wertenbaker was among those who petitioned the Arts Council on its behalf and a national outcry, led by industry heavyweights such as Laurence Olivier and David Hare and the critic Nicholas de Jongh, contributed to the Court's reprieve.

While the 1970s had seen something of a move towards individualism, materialism and free market values, these ideas were pushed to breaking point during Margaret Thatcher's 1980s. Under what Billington describes as a 'culture of greed and social Darwinism' (elements of which Wertenbaker would explore in her 1998 play *After Darwin*), subsidy was reduced, not merely through financial necessity, but because the whole concept of government funding for the arts was questioned by those in power.[52] As Shellard describes, 'the stress on private enterprise and self-help meant that the notion of the state funding theatrical activity would be viewed largely with

suspicion'.[53] The extent of this was revealed in 1987 when the Tory Arts Minister Richard Luce remarked that 'the only test of our ability to succeed is whether we can attract enough customers'.[54] Cuts were not administered on an ad hoc basis, with particularly punitive measures taken on 'politically provocative companies such as Joint Stock and 7:84 […] that interrogated the administration in power'. In 1985, the government stated openly that 'the paucity of the drama grant had been partly due to the public opposition to its policies by [theatre] professionals such as Peter Hall', who was running the National Theatre at the time.[55] When, in 1986, the *Sunday Times* ran an article misleadingly alleging that Hall and Trevor Nunn (who was then running the RSC) had benefited improperly from the transfer of publicly funded productions to the commercial sector, Hall was suspicious that the attack 'might have been politically motivated, given his open hostility to government policy'.[56] At the very least, the incident demonstrated the power of the pervasively right-wing media.

While small political companies and regional theatres suffered the worst of the cuts, nowhere escaped unscathed. The Royal Court's Theatre Upstairs and even the National's Cottesloe went dark for months at a time. In 1986, the Cork Report discovered that large sections of British theatre only survived by being 'run like a glorified sweatshop'. Since 1971, both new work (considered risky) and classical revivals (that required large expensive casts) had declined, often being replaced by musicals or 'one set, small cast plays'. The report's modest recommendation that theatre subsidy could be supplemented with a tiny amount of the BBC licence fee was dismissed with 'patronising contempt' by Tory Arts Council Chairman Sir William Rees-Mogg.[57]

The commercial theatre, which had failed to create work to rival that of the subsidised sector in the previous decade, came into its own in the 1980s with a series of large-scale, home-grown musicals, designed to capture the growing tourist trade and appeal to the desire for escapism generated by the increasingly depressing social climate. Even large-scale subsidised institutions reached for a share of this business with epic adaptations (*Nicholas Nickleby*, RSC,

1980) and revivals of play cycles from Shakespeare (*The Plantagenets*, RSC, 1988), the Greeks (*The Greeks*, RSC, 1980 and *The Oresteia*, National Theatre, 1981) and elsewhere (*The Mysteries*, National Theatre, 1985). While it was hard for new writing to compete in this 'market', a number of playwrights challenged the tide of selfishness and acquisitiveness that characterised the decade. These included Caryl Churchill (*Top Girls*, 1982 and *Serious Money*, 1987), Sarah Daniels (*Masterpieces*, 1983), David Hare and Howard Brenton (*Pravda*, 1985). Additionally, new voices emerged to highlight the extremes of poverty and hardship that were the underside of 1980s materialism and Thatcherism, notably Jim Cartwright's *Road* (1986) and Andrea Dunbar's *The Arbour* (1980) and *Rita*, *Sue and Bob Too* (1982).

Several of Wertenbaker's most successful plays were produced in the 1980s, and the visibility of female playwrights continued to increase, particularly at the Royal Court, where Max Stafford-Clark (artistic director between 1979 and 1993) believed that 'it just happens that the most exciting and vital work is being written by women'.[58] As well as Daniels, Churchill, Wertenbaker and Dunbar, the 1980s saw significant contributions from Louise Page, Bryony Lavery, Charlotte Keatley, Winsome Pinnock, Clare McIntyre, Kay Adshead and April de Angelis, although this list should not disguise the fact that plays programmed, written, directed and reviewed by men still dominated British theatre.[59]

Several (male) critics have exaggerated the perilous condition of new writing at the end of the 1980s. Michael Billington records that, during this decade, 'although the stubborn and tenacious older writers nagged, criticised and questioned, the well [of new writers] looked in danger of drying up'.[60] Graham Whybrow, who became literary manager at the Court in 1994, remembers that 'by the beginning of the '90s there [was] widely perceived to be a crisis in new writing in the theatre'.[61] Although in the introduction to *State of Play* (a collection of papers drawn from David Edgar's playwriting conferences at Birmingham University), Edgar admits that 'reports of the collapse of new theatre writing in Britain had been greatly exaggerated', he praises the 'upsurge' he felt took place

in the 1990s. The 'main reason' Edgar cites for this increase perhaps reveals the attitude behind other critics' dismissal of new writing in the 1980s. Edgar claims that 1990s 'writers found a subject' in the form of 'masculinity and its discontents'. He considers 'the decline of the dominant role of men – in the work place and in the family' as 'probably the biggest single story of the last thirty years in the western countries'.[62] The confidence with which Edgar presents the male response to female empowerment as a subject of much greater importance than the progress made by women is quite remarkable. As the subjectivity of male experience is emphasised, that of women is almost denied, reduced to a phenomenon that (male) society must react to, as it would to the aftermath of a world war or political regime change. Wertenbaker spoke out against this male-centric approach to theatre history at one of Edgar's own playwriting conferences: 'When lazy theatre commentators say there was no theatre in the 1980s, they mean there was very little male theatre. In fact the 1980s saw an explosion of writing from women.'[63]

Contrastingly, new writing in the 1990s, particularly at the Royal Court, was 'dominated by a very defined male presence'.[64] Wertenbaker describes an influx of 'male violence [and] homoerotica', which made the decade 'not the most welcoming moment for women'.[65] Drama with openly gay themes had been growing in visibility since the formation of Gay Sweatshop in 1975, gaining higher profile with their 1979 production of *Bent*, starring Ian McKellen. The 1990s saw a noticeable increase in such work, including Kevin Elyot's *My Night with Reg* (1994), Jonathon Harvey's *Beautiful Thing* (1994) and Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* (1996). That Milton Shulman could respond to this trend with an article in the *Evening Standard* entitled 'Stop the plague of pink plays'[66] shows how necessary this work was, something of which Wertenbaker, who invested five hundred pounds in *My Night with Reg*, was surely aware. However, as her comments suggest, these plays focused predominately on the male experience of homosexuality.

Politically, the 1990s were an uncertain time. The anger of the poll tax riots turned into elation at Thatcher's resignation (1990), soon

tempered by continuing recession, the first Gulf War (1990 to 1991) and the unexpected re-election of another term of Conservative government (1992). Meanwhile, the collapse of Eastern European communism exacerbated the sense of doubt among British socialists and war ravaged former Yugoslavia. According to director James Macdonald, this last issue 'was a subject no British writer was tackling' until Sarah Kane's now legendary *Blasted* hit the Royal Court stage in 1995. Subsequently labelled 'in-yer-face' theatre, the play, which explores shocking and sexually violent themes and images, caused a storm of (largely negative) publicity but has since been recognised as a seminal work. Macdonald, who directed the play, claims it changed the rules of theatre, allowing writers to access 'the political entirely through the personal'.[67] While this may sound similar to the 'personal is political' mantra developed by feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, what Macdonald cites seems more akin to the individualisation and social fragmentation of Thatcher's 1980s. Stephen Daldry, the Court's artistic director during this period, saw the development as evidence of a more pluralist theatre in which '[o]pposition was going to come from a variety of different voices that might not be coherent'.[68] However, Graham Whybrow's description of '"gesture" plays, not "argument" plays', and their 'sceptical, angry, frustrated, disempowered' writers, reveals the impotence of such postmodern angst.[69] Billington summarises the mood of this generation of playwrights, for whom 'there were no ready-made Utopias and no grand narrative schemes. The best that we could hope to do was construct our own private dreams and tell each other stories.'[70] Wertenbaker was not immune to this atmosphere, commenting in 1991 that there was 'something intellectually despairing in the world, as if solutions no longer exist. […] [H]ow easy it is to block threat or compassion by increased cocooning of the senses and the mind'.[71] However, Wertenbaker's plays repeatedly sought to resist these trends, presenting art's ability 'to show, in detail, a few people with their aspirations and their frailties' as a vital antidote to such cocooning.[72]

If, by the 1990s, the left were struggling to envisage a better future, the right were more backward-looking than ever, viewing 'the arts'

through the distancing frame of the newly created Department of National Heritage.[73] Although the introduction of National Lottery grants in the mid 1990s proved useful to theatres long overdue a renovation, these funds were restricted to capital projects and did not benefit production work. This exemplifies the phenomenon, identified by Shellard, whereby 'the British nation prefers to invest in buildings rather than people'.[74] Wertenbaker recognised these ironies when she wrote to the Arts Council, asking them to consider a similar investment in playwrights:

> When, however, theatres are hoping – as they all are and the money is there – to get £2 million or more for new or refurbished buildings, the playwright becomes puzzled. It is like being given the money to buy silverware, with no money to spend on food. I understand the need to separate subsidy from lottery, but the playwright, who is neither a producing venue nor bricks and mortar, is rather forgotten in all this. Every year, fewer playwrights manage to survive on writing plays alone. […] I feel that if the Arts Council does not do something imaginative soon, in ten years […] you may have to call on lottery funds to instigate a search for the last surviving member of that rare species, the living playwright.[75]

After the initial euphoria of Labour's 1997 election victory, the theatre community was disappointed by no immediate increase in subsidy. It was not until the 2000 Boyden Report's revelation of the dire condition of the industry that things began to improve, particularly in the much beleaguered regions. Some institutions saw funding doubled, trebled or even quadrupled during the first five years of the twenty-first century. A greater emphasis was placed on inclusion, from increased funding for community arts, to the introduction of cheaper tickets at the National Theatre through the Travelex sponsored scheme. Theatre created by and for the United Kingdom's increasingly diverse communities also rose dramatically, with plays by Kwame Kwei-Armah, Debbie Tucker Green, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti, Tanika Gupta and many more gaining public recognition.

The decade saw a resurgence of explicitly political theatre, partially in response to the so-called 'War on Terror'. Verbatim theatre became an increasingly popular medium, perhaps suggesting the desire to capture the 'truth' behind events many felt the government and media attempted to disguise. While this could be seen to challenge the authority of the individual playwright more significantly than the collective script development of the 'Joint Stock method', some major playwrights adapted the trend, combining recorded speech with their own imaginings. Sometimes labelled 'docudramas', notable examples include David Hare's *The Permanent Way* (2003), *Stuff Happens* (2004) and *The Power of Yes* (2009), and Lucy Prebble's *ENRON* (2009).

Another dominant trend in post-millennial theatre has been towards immersive and site-specific theatre by companies such as Punchdrunk, Grid Iron and Zecora Ura/Para Active. Often heavily reliant on visual imagery and multi-media and frequently devised by an ensemble, rather than a single playwright, these practices have enchanted some critics and left others uneasy. Billington is among the sceptical. Having built his career around the 'belief that the health of the British theatre over the past sixty years has depended heavily on its dramatists and their ability to reflect the state of the nation', his concern is for the future of the straight play in a culture increasingly saturated by multiple media, many of which offer extremes of experience and/or participatory elements.[76] In an ideal world, the contemporary theatre could welcome all such projects, but with the current financial and political climate threatening a return to the conditions of the 1980s, the fear that site-specific or immersive spectacles will divert attention and funding from the less overtly dazzling craft of playwriting is understandable. In the Arts Council's 2011 funding review, Punchdrunk were one of the few organisations to receive a dramatic increase in funding.

Throughout the last four decades, Wertenbaker has remained committed to the 'straight' play, the theatrical medium and, specifically, to British theatre. After leaving Spetse, all her original stage plays premiered in the United Kingdom, the majority starting life in London and others first appearing in Brighton, Edinburgh,

Stratford, Birmingham, Leicester, Ipswich and Bath. Having fought her way into the male-dominated theatre scene of the 1970s, she came into her own during the beleaguered 1980s – producing, in 1988's *Our Country's Good*, a play which seemed to speak on behalf of the battle-weary theatrical community – only to fall out of fashion during the angry 1990s. The impression this somewhat simplified narrative creates is that, while Wertenbaker has embraced the concept of a 'floating identity' in both her work and her public profile, her dominant ideological concerns have fluctuated less obviously than the prevailing trends of the periods she has lived through.

CHAPTER 1

'GOOD ENOUGH TO GO ON': THE BEGINNINGS OF A PLAYWRIGHT

> I have had many ambitions as a writer, but only two have been all consuming. The first, at the beginning, was to write a play I felt was good enough to go on […][1]

Of the plays Wertenbaker drafted between 1976 and 1980, all are unpublished and the majority remain unperformed. Some are no more than a few loose scenes or a synopsis that was never developed. Wertenbaker claims to have been happy to 'forget about' these works, asserting that 'they didn't really matter'.[2] But, although these early plays may seem unimportant more than thirty years later, and following the success of many later works, they are of great significance to the study of the development of the writer and the interplay of themes and concerns throughout her career. Crucially, these formative works reveal the first things that Wertenbaker felt compelled to write about. While it is possible to view some of these concerns, or the treatment of them, as immature or of their time, other scripts and fragments of text reveal the genesis of ideas that resurface throughout her later writing. Furthermore, a number of these plays contain rich and engaging characters, devices and narrative elements, and some are so well developed as to present a real opportunity for future staging.

Wertenbaker did not receive her first commission until 1980. Although writing for commission offers more financial security than writing 'on spec', Wertenbaker has complained about having to write 'things for other people', because 'it's not exactly what you want to do'.[3] In contrast, her earliest pieces allowed her more freedom: the opportunity to be as didactic or as obscure, as experimental or as traditional, as she wished. In this light, her early plays

gain increased significance. For the purposes of my analysis, I divide these plays into three categories. The earliest ('The Third' and 'The Vigil', 1977) were written while Wertenbaker was still living on the Greek island of Spetse. It appears that Wertenbaker had been attracted to this island at least partially because of its connections to John Fowles's novel *The Magus* (1966).[4] Letters from this period reveal that Wertenbaker shared Fowles's interest in mysticism and the psychoanalytic practices of Carl Jung, and these influences are evident in her own writing. The plays Wertenbaker wrote on Spetse are chiefly concerned with personal and romantic relationships and contain limited social or political discussion. They are not naturalistic, follow non-linear narratives and, despite modern references, seem to exist in an uncertain temporal dimension.

A slightly later group of plays ('This is No Place for Tallulah Bankhead', 1978; 'Act for Our Times', c.1978; 'Near Miss', c.1979; 'Breaking Through', 1980 and 'Second Sentence', 1980), written after Wertenbaker left Greece, are situated more firmly in the modern West. They are, in some respects, the reverse of the Spetse pieces, being the most didactically political of Wertenbaker's career. They deal directly with topical concerns such as the threat from nuclear power and the excesses of Western capitalism. With the exception of 'Breaking Through', the pieces operate within real-time, one-location conventions and suggest a naturalistic performance style.

Outside these groupings are three unfinished plays ('Agamemnon's Daughter', c.1978; 'Don Juan's Women', c.1979 and 'Monads', c.1979) that set a precedent for Wertenbaker's later, more sophisticated works. These plays begin to show the successful combination of the personal and the political that define Wertenbaker's greatest plays, as well as demonstrating, as their titles suggest, the beginnings of her long-standing preoccupations with canonicity. It is not possible to locate all these works precisely as many drafts are undated, and it is sometimes difficult to tell if they have been developed over weeks, months, or even years. There is no record as to whether these texts began life on Spetse, but in the case of 'Monads', which is set on the island, the continued influence of this place and culture on Wertenbaker is clear.

Wertenbaker remembers her first experience of playwriting as an almost accidental step, which quickly had a huge impact:

> I was in Greece, and I was with some people in the theatre. […] [W]e were just sitting around actually, and just sort of decided to write this little play together, just for fun. I mean, it was just one of those afternoons. And I did then go home and […] sort of write this kind of monologue, and it just felt […] right, you know, it really did. And I've used that image before – I don't know if I've ever told anyone, but just like putting a hand in a glove. I mean, I just liked it.[5]

On Spetse, Wertenbaker's playwriting took two distinct strands. One she described as 'children's plays for the Greek kids: political: there's no water on the island because the tourists drink it all type of thing'.[6] There is little evidence of these plays in the archive. For adults, she wrote two one act plays, 'The Third' and 'The Vigil', which both premiered on Spetse in 1977:[7]

> There were some actors, […] I mean it was semi-amateur… and we put on the plays and there was a little audience – in English – there was a kind of ex-pat community there and that was great. And on the basis of these two short plays I sort of thought I was a playwright, you know, came to London waving my plays around, and that was it really.[8]

After leaving Spetse, Wertenbaker spent time in New York and the United Kingdom, before making a more permanent move to London in 1979. Correspondence between Wertenbaker and her first agents (the London -based Anthony Sheil Associates Ltd) shows that this move coincided almost exactly with her resolve to become a professional playwright.

In May 1978, Wertenbaker received her first staging outside Greece, when the King's Head Theatre Club produced 'This is No Place for Tallulah Bankhead' as a lunchtime production. This was not a huge break for Wertenbaker and attracted little attention in

the press. *The Stage*, although not overtly negative, thought the play 'would probably appear a more bitter indictment of a society which has produced both the CIA and napalm in the country of the author's origin'.[9] This comment highlights the play's status as the first work of an unknown playwright, still situated as an outsider to British theatre: someone yet to prove herself or be 'accepted'. The play does give away Wertenbaker's American background, with references to walking on Fifth Avenue and going for a milkshake.

Like many young artists, Wertenbaker was unable to earn a living from writing alone and had to support herself with a job at the Camden Plaza cinema. She writes that she was 'undergoing the most severe crisis of confidence I've had yet in my work. Very severe, rather cracking me, I feel very fragile, shattered, but – one goes on.'[10] Fortunately, she gained support from Verity Bargate, then director of the Soho Poly. Wertenbaker looked up to Bargate and valued her opinion, writing, 'how happy and excited I felt after seeing you and how grateful I am for your encouragement'.[11] Bargate found Wertenbaker valuable collaborators, such as Liane Aukin, who helped her develop 'Happy Ending' (later 'Case to Answer') and directed a rehearsed reading of it with the Half Moon Theatre Workshop. 'It went incredibly well', Wertenbaker reported to Bargate, 'It was extraordinary intuition on your part to have put me in touch with Liane – I like her very much and she was so helpful.' However, it was Bargate's help that Wertenbaker really needed, and the possibility of a production at the Soho Poly. '[O]bviously I keep hoping it will finally be done', she wrote, 'we had such a good time with the reading – but that play was written so much with your help and refusal to accept the early sloppiness that I feel it "belongs" to the Soho Poly. It's not just that of course, it's also the best theatre.'[12] Bargate's declining health was a temporary stumbling block for Wertenbaker's ambition. In March 1979, Wertenbaker's agent advised her to send the play elsewhere as the Soho Poly was 'in chaos' due to Bargate's absence. 'I know this is awfully unfair to you after waiting so long', she added.[13] However, a year later, the Soho Poly did produce the play (directed by Aukin) and Wertenbaker is adamant about the importance of Bargate's role in her career: 'I