

## The 20th Century English Drama

### The New Theatre: John Osborne, Christopher Fry, Samuel Beckett, John Arden, Arnold Wesker

The New Theatre in the 20th century marks some significant developments in the domain of the English drama. Apart from the short-lived attempts by T.S. Eliot and Christopher Fry to bring about a renaissance of verse drama, theatre in the late 1940s and early 1950s was notable for the continuing supremacy of the well-made play, which mainly focused upon the comfortable middle class. In 1956 John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* signalled the start of a very different dramatic tradition. Taking as its hero a furiously voluble working-class man and replacing the staid mannerliness on the stage with emotional rawness and social rancour, *Look Back in Anger* initiated a move that came to be called the 'kitchen-sink' drama.

Arnold Wesker, in his politically and socially engaged trilogy, *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959), and *I'm Talking about Jerusalem* gave further impetus to this movement. Also working within this tradition was John Arden, whose dramas employ some of Bertold Brecht's theatrical devices. Arden wrote historical plays like *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959), *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* (1964) to advance radical social and political views and in doing so he provided a model that several later left-wing dramatists were to follow.

An alternative reaction against the drawing-room naturalism came from the 'Theatre of the Absurd'. Through increasingly minimalist plays from *Waiting for Godot* (1953) to such stark brevities as his 30-second-long drama, *Breath* (1969), Samuel Beckett used characters pared down to basic existential elements and symbols to reiterate his Stygian view of the human condition. Irish dramatists other than Beckett also exhibited a propensity for combining comedy with something more sombre. The most recurrent subject matter of their drama during the last decades of the 20th century was a small-town provincial life. Playwrights like Brian Friel, Tom Murphy, Billy Roche, Martin McDonagh, and Conor McPherson drew effectively on this theme.

Playwrights who had much in common with Arden's ideological beliefs and his admiration for Brechtian theatre maintained a steady output of parable-like plays dramatizing the radical left-wing doctrine. Their plays explore an uncompromising insistence on human cruelty and the oppressiveness of the capitalist class and unequal social structures.