Too theatrical by half?
The Admirable Crichton and Look Back in Anger

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There is no doubt that British theatre has been very important to the development of British cinema, and – the input of television in general and Channel 4 in particular notwithstanding – it remains so, as a quick glance at the number of film adaptations from stage plays from the 1980s and early 1990s testifies. This is clearly the case in the 1950s, not least because a great many films have their origins in the theatre. I estimate that of the 1,033 British films of the 1950s listed in David Quinlan’s British Sound Films, some 152 were based on stage plays. However, the provision of source texts is not the only issue, and this figure should be set alongside the 330 films in the decade that were based on novels and short stories, the 18 that came from radio and the 22 adapted from television. If theatre seems more important than other media to the cinema of the 1950s, then it is partly because there are deeper connections, and it is worth reminding ourselves of some of these.

The institutions of theatre and cinema were, by the 1950s, bound to each other. Many of the dominant personnel of the cinema – actors, directors, technicians and writers – had backgrounds in the theatre. Even such luminaries of the period as Kenneth More and Dirk Bogarde began as stage actors. (More began in variety before moving into films via the legitimate theatre and Bogarde worked in both provincial repertory theatre as well as the West End before becoming a screen actor.) However, it was not a relationship between equals. Theatre occupied a higher cultural status than film, lending it a credibility and legitimacy that was needed by a medium conscious of its inferior status. This was particularly apparent in the attitude of many stage actors towards their screen work (the physical proximity of...
the major film studios to the West End meant that it was possible to film
during the day and still be on stage in time for an evening performance), and
a certain opportunism was tolerated, even encouraged. As David Thomson
has noted, ‘for eminent actors of the English stage, some films are allowed
like holidays. Lord Olivier can appear in clinkers so that his little ones can be
provided for.’ In addition, theatre and its products functioned as signs for
‘Englishness’ in a post-war culture pervaded by a deep unease about an
encroaching ‘Americanisation’.

There are also interesting parallels between the institutions of cinema
and theatre in the decade and there is a way of relating the history of both
media that emphasises this. The production of both plays and films, for
example, derives from a tension between the ‘mainstream’ and the ‘indepen-
dents’, who, whilst not being free from commercial pressures and compro-
mises, sought to create room for manoeuvre within their respective industries:
Rank and ABC have their equivalent in Stoll-Moss, and Woodfall and
Bryanton have theirs in the English Stage Company at the Royal Court
Theatre and Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East. Some
of the leading figures in the new theatre often emerge at the centre of
independent cinema; for example, the director Tony Richardson (see below)
is central to both ‘New Waves’, was one of the key figures in Woodfall
Films and directed both stage and film versions of John Osborne’s Look
Back in Anger (in 1956 and 1959 respectively) and the film of Shelagh
Delaney’s A Taste of Honey (1961).

Running alongside these parallel institutional histories are converging
histories of forms once, but perhaps no longer, dominant, in which realism is
foregrounded. In these histories, theatre and cinema occupied a kind of
wasteland for most of the 1950s, limited in their artistic ambition and social
reach, confined to the lower-middle-class parochialism of Ealing comedy on
the one hand and the torpor of upper-middle-class country-house drama on
the other. In this version, rescue came in the form of working-class realism
(though earlier in the decade for theatre than for film), which extended the
social basis of both media, whilst at the same time challenging staging and
filming orthodoxies. Against this, there is now a revisionist history (currently
stronger in film studies than in theatre studies, though perhaps not for much
longer) that has sought to re-evaluate hitherto marginalised genres, texts
and practitioners. In film history, this is evident in the recent interest in
melodrama and fantasy shown by Pam Cook and others and in the current
high status of the work of Powell and Pressburger. In theatre history, this
has been paralleled by a reconsideration of the once despised Terence Rattigan
(of interest because of the gay sub-text to his plays) and a re-evaluation of
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the crucial ‘moment’ of 1956; here, there is a sense that the real ‘turning point’ in post-war theatre was the first production of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* in 1955 rather than of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* a year later, and that the once denigrated drama of the late 1940s and early 1950s was of much more aesthetic and social value than the post-Osborne generation allowed.4

However, despite these important aesthetic and institutional connections, the relationship between film and theatre in the period – and beyond it – is not without its paradoxes and tensions. To explore this it is necessary, for a while, to go outside the 1950s, and away from film history, for film criticism and theory has been churlish about the theatrical in cinema; indeed, the inferiority felt by the film industry towards the theatre noted earlier is markedly absent. In theatre criticism, to note that a play is ‘cinematic’ is often to find something interesting in it, to point towards its ambitions, especially in the narrative (where ‘cinematic’ sometimes refers to disruptions to the causal chain of conventional naturalist plotting, or a more overt use of montage) or use of space (where it may denote a more fluid use of multiple fictional locations). ‘Cinematic’ may also refer to overt theatrical references to film genres (see, for example, the plays of David Hare).5 In film criticism, however, ‘theatrical’ is nearly always a term of abuse. The need of film theorists to slough off the associations with the theatre has been an essential aspect of some versions of cinema’s history; as Susan Sontag has observed, ‘the history of cinema is often treated as the history of its emancipation from theatrical models’.6 This has led to some curious and untenable judgments about the ‘essential’ differences between theatre and film (many of which Sontag has usefully and thoroughly demolished) and to the term ‘theatrical’ acquiring largely negative associations.

The resistance to the ‘theatrical’ is evident in the case of stage-to-film adaptations, where a refusal to reshape spatial and narrative structures, to move the camera through the door of the box set/studio out into the world beyond, is usually considered stagey and too reliant on the limitations of the time/space conventions of theatre. However, criticism of theatricality in cinema goes beyond this. To be ‘theatrical’ on the screen might mean (in no particular order) all or some of the following attributes. It often suggests an over-reliance on the ‘word’, the residue of the literary text, which is privileged over the visual image. ‘Theatricality’ may connote a style of acting that seems scaled towards the open spaces of a theatre auditorium rather than the enforced intimacy of the camera; more generally, it suggests an ‘artificiality’ in performance (judged against the criteria of realism, that is), which is largely unconscious and the result of bad habits rather than a
self-reflexive intention (although, at a tangent to this discussion, it is interesting to note how artifice, the potential for self-reflexivity in theatre, has defined the theatrical in a more positive sense in much postmodern cultural theory, and in a way that is not restricted by the literary bias of the well-made play).7 ‘Theatrical’ may also mean ‘flatness’ in the depiction and construction of space, as if the camera is afraid to move through the fourth wall and interrupt an established environment. Connected to this, ‘theatrical’ is sometimes used to describe the lack of an integrated mise-en-scène; that is, a mise-en-scène where location is merely a backdrop to the action, rather than being pulled into, and motivated by, the character and narrative (although why this should be considered ‘theatrical’ is not clear, as the activation and integration of the theatrical environment is as essential to a successful theatre performance as it is to a film, even if the means by which it is achieved are different). Finally, ‘theatrical’ also connotes a preference for studio over location, and a reliance on a shooting system that is dominated by the mid-shot and discrete and minimal editing.

That these attributes of a theatricalised cinema are always to be avoided is open to debate, as is the corollary that the shedding of all connections to a theatrical aesthetic will somehow allow a ‘pure’ cinema to emerge.8 Clearly, there is a great deal that might be said about this use of the theatrical, not least that it seems to refer to the text-based, illusionist/naturalist well-made play, performed behind a proscenium arch. (It is ironic that such a conception of the theatrical should be mobilised in film theory when theatre practice since the mid–1950s has resolutely moved away from the dominance of the literary text, has frequently jettisoned verisimilitude in theatre design, even in the staging of naturalist plays, and has often abandoned the proscenium — and indeed the entire theatre auditorium — entirely.)

Although there is no space here to develop these arguments further, it is worth pointing out that, although ‘theatrical’ in this usage refers primarily to aspects of film style, the term is also complicated by contextual factors. By the 1950s, theatrical habits are in reality a dominant form of studio filming, and it is a moot point whether the kind of practices outlined above are to be thought of as theatrical at all. Also, in a transposition of the term from the aesthetic to the social and cultural planes, ‘theatrical’ also connotes a particular kind of middle-class, socially restricted film, carrying the same kind of associations that ‘well-made play’ or ‘West End’ have in the theatre. To reject this sort of theatricality, like rejecting naturalism in the theatre, was often to make a gesture towards realism. Whether on the formal or cultural level, it is often around realism that the theatrical seems the most problematic.
The issue of theatricality, then, cannot be separated from questions of context, convention and genre. Yet, despite the low status of the theatrical in film, it will form an important part of the argument that follows that while the theatrical, in its many senses, may be damaging to the ambitions of one kind of film, it can be acknowledged and celebrated in another kind of film. It is best to explore these matters in relation to particular examples, and we shall turn now to two film adaptations, conceived in different genres, from the latter part of the decade: *The Admirable Crichton* (US: *Paradise Lagoon*), directed by Lewis Gilbert in 1957 from the play by J.M. Barrie written in 1902, and *Look Back in Anger* directed by Tony Richardson in 1959 from John Osborne’s play of 1956.

*The Admirable Crichton* is about the family and servants of a nondescript aristocrat with democratic pretensions, Lord Loam (Cecil Parker), who find themselves shipwrecked on a desert island, at which point the eponymous Crichton (Kenneth More), being the only member of the party with any practical know-how, becomes the ruler of the community. Both play and film are, therefore, comedies of social reversal; Crichton, the butler, champions the established social order, whilst his employer, the aristocrat, pontificates about the coming egalitarian society. On the island, the status quo is undermined, and Crichton, ‘the guv’nor’, almost marries Lord Loam’s eldest daughter. However, the social order is rapidly restored when, as the wedding service is about to take place, they are predictably rescued. Crichton becomes the butler once more, leaving the family to assume the glory for ensuring their communal survival.

In what ways, then, might *The Admirable Crichton* be considered theatrical? The casting provides some evidence, especially in the film’s use of character actors such as Cecil Parker and Martita Hunt (Lady Brockenhurst) familiar from both stage and screen (Kenneth More was by this time already an established film star.) There is also the issue of fidelity to the play text. Lewis Gilbert remarked in interview that the film was ‘freely adapted’ from Barrie’s original, largely as ‘a vehicle for Kenny More’. By the standards of the period, the film is a fairly free adaptation, with the island sequences shot on location. However, the film keeps, to a large extent, the main events of the play’s narrative, many of its jokes and much of its important dialogue. The main alterations to the narrative are to do with an explicit recognition of its star’s particular talents and an implicit acknowledgement of the film’s new social and generic context.

The action is transposed to 1905, presumably to allow for a little fun at the expense of suffragettes, with whom one of Loam’s daughters becomes
unwittingly involved. Also, the narrative is given an altogether sunnier ending (in recognition of the film’s status as a comedy with an unambiguously happy resolution), in which Crichton, having found some pearls on the island, settles for a maid (Diane Cilento) and goes off to get married and start a business and a family. There is no such magical resolution in the play, which concludes with an uncomfortable impasse: Crichton, still the mouthpiece of conservatism, faces the young woman he almost married across the gulf of privilege and social difference.

These differences notwithstanding, the similarity between the two narratives might also be considered part of the film’s theatricality and it is interesting to note that the film reproduces the main locations of the play with only minor additions; it centres on Lord Loam’s stately home (interior shots, staged in a studio) and the island (shot on location). In one sense, the film does what films often do with a stage play, which is to ‘open out’ the action, representing on screen what can only be retold in dialogue on stage (the shipwreck) and suggested indexically (the stockade standing in for the whole island). Certainly, the island sequences seem the more ‘filmic’, relying on flexible and varied shooting strategies: there is, for example, plentiful use of close-up, mid-shot and long shot, and the camera moves in and around the location, creating a sense of fictional space that reflects the castaway’s growing sense of the island as a South Sea idyll.

Lewis Gilbert was primarily a director of action films such as Reach for the Sky (1956), Carve her Name with Pride (1958) and Sink the Bismarck (1960), and it is not surprising that the island scenes seem the furthest away from the theatricality that characterises the interior sequences. It is in the scenes in Loam Hall that we can see the deadening effect of theatrical habit refracted through dominant studio practices. Typically, the interiors are shot front-on, with the camera positioned at one (fixed) side of the space. When the camera moves, it is normally only on a line parallel to the ‘back wall’, simulating the fourth wall so integral to proscenium-arch theatre. There is a scene early on in the film (and the theatrical term ‘scene’ seems particularly appropriate, since it comes from the play) in which Lord Loam organises a tea party in order to ensure that his servants, his daughters and their suitors can meet on equal terms. The scene is shot on a flat plane, and the camera seems reluctant to cut into the space, to enter these interior spaces and reshape them. The actors are similarly filmed from the front, often in mid-shot and in small groups, with the camera moving only minimally to focus and select what it wants us to pay attention to. The acting styles seem to match this reproduction of a theatre staging technique. In one vignette, Lord Brockenhurst, a would-be suitor to Mary, is seated on a settee alongside a
maid, having been instructed to converse with her ‘as equals’. The scene is shot from the front in a single take, the embarrassment of both characters projected as if to the back of the Drury Lane theatre (this is, in fact, an example of an inappropriate acting style combining with a characteristic 1950s tendency to see working-class characters as comic grotesques).

However, these interior sequences reveal another kind of theatricality, which is more conscious in the film, and which is offered as a source of knowing pleasure to the audience. The film is aware of its status as a ‘film of a play’, and it is not too fanciful to suggest that this awareness is part of the film’s appeal to a popular audience. The Admirable Crichton has an interesting relationship to another, earlier film based on a stage play from about the same historical period, Oscar Wilde’s The Importance of Being Earnest (directed by Anthony Asquith in 1952). The Admirable Crichton does not signify ‘theatre’ in the way that Asquith’s film does in its opening sequence, but it offers an interesting intertextual reference to one of Wilde’s most famous characters. In Barrie’s play, Lady Brockenhurst, Mary’s prospective mother-in-law, appears only in the last act, where she is brought in to interrogate the castaways about their conduct on the island. In Gilbert’s film, she is in many of the scenes set in England, including the tea party. As played by Martita Hunt, Lady Brockenhurst’s dress, vocal and gestural mannerisms and her effect on other characters all refer us to Wilde’s Lady Bracknell, immortalised by Edith Evans five years previously. Martita Hunt’s performance undoubtedly gains from this cross-referencing to a theatrical and now cinematic icon, and, through the lingering gaze of the camera, which allows her to dominate the frame, the film seems to ask its audience to take pleasure in the recognition.

An awareness – indeed celebration – of the theatrical in The Admirable Crichton also governs the design of the interiors. Lord Loam’s house, and especially the hall and the ballroom, are composed rather like stage sets. This is partly because the filming strategies ensure that we only see three walls, which in the case of the hall are ‘opened out’ into an approximate V-shape, as it might be on stage. However, it is also (taking the hall as our example again) because the walls are obviously painted, in two senses: they are covered with paintings and murals, which have the effect of connoting an artifice that seems at odds with most representations of Edwardian stately homes, and they are clearly ‘painted’, often with exaggerated detail and with the use of colours that catch the eye. These scenes have several layers of connotation: we are being referred, on the one hand, to a theatrical genre, the country-house play, familiar in the 1950s as it had been half a century earlier; on the other, we are being asked to enjoy the idea of the theatrical-
as-artifice, which in turn helps to locate the play as a comedy, something which the dominant acting style clearly indicates. The credit sequence (which has no counterpart in the play) brings both the theatricalised comedy acting and the use of setting together in a wordless pantomime, in which the audience follow the servants as they move, under Crichton’s stern supervision, from the kitchen to Lord Loam’s bedroom via the hall, bringing the lord his morning tea.

At the end of the decade, with realism once more on the agenda, we can trace a rather different and antagonistic attitude towards the theatrical in film. The repression of theatricality is evident in our second example, Tony Richardson’s film of *Look Back in Anger*, and this is an essential part of its claim to realism. There is a paradox here: on the one hand, Richardson – and others – were attempting to create the same kind of appeal (and success) that the new realism had achieved in the theatre, and, as was indicated earlier, many of the source texts for New Wave cinema were stage plays. ‘It is absolutely vital’, Richardson argued, ‘to get into British films the same sort of impact and sense of life that … the Angry Young Man cult has had in the theatre and literary worlds.’ However, this was achieved by an active, if only partly successful, removal of any sense of the theatrical in the film versions of Osborne plays in the name of cinematic realism. This was particularly apparent in Richardson’s version of *The Entertainer* (1960) in which a highly theatrical device (playing the music-hall routines of the central character, Archie Rice, ‘out front’ and treating the theatre audience as if it were the audience at one of Archie’s second-rate variety shows) is ignored, the songs and gags being naturalised into a seamless realist fiction.

*Look Back in Anger* was not conceived as the ‘film of the play’ in a simple sense, and this is indicated by the fact that the screenplay was by Nigel Kneale (although Osborne is credited with supplying additional dialogue). The avoidance of signifiers of the theatrical was not, however, simply a matter of film ‘style’ (just as realism is never simply a matter of technique in film or theatre), but was connected to the film’s awareness that it was essential to acknowledge a new social and cultural context.

Richardson’s film adopts the usual strategy of opening-out the narrative in a highly systematic way. The play is famously set in a single playing-space, a drab Midlands garret, and focuses on a narrow set of characters and their interaction (Jimmy Porter, his wife Alison, their lodger Cliff, Alison’s friend – and Jimmy’s temporary lover – Helena and, briefly, Alison’s father). However, little of the film’s action remains within the Porter’s seedy bed-sit. The film opens, not in the flat, but in a jazz club/pub. As the narrative progresses, locations only mentioned in the play are represented directly on
screen; we follow Jimmy and Cliff to the street market where they run a
sweet stall; we see Jimmy attend the funeral of Mrs Tanner, the mother of
his oldest friend; we accompany Jimmy on a visit to the run-down repertory
theatre where Helena, an actress, is currently performing; the narrative con-
cludes in a railway station.

One effect of Richardson’s narrative strategy is that we see a lot more of
the society that Jimmy famously rails against, and which remains offstage in
the play. Indeed, there is an almost documentary impulse in the film (and in
most other films of the New Wave), indicated in the way in which the camera
frequently dwells on the environments before introducing the characters
and picking up the narrative. The street market, for example, is filmed as if it
were of interest in its own right, rather than being the location for the next
development in the plot. These sequences carry a particular weight in the
film, acting as guarantors of the truth of its depiction of social reality. This is
the epistemology of naturalism, in which reality is ‘captured’ rather than
created on screen, its mere presence serving to authenticate the veracity of
the fiction that surrounds it. In the theatre, naturalism often relies on the
same epistemology – that what is observed and plausibly recreated must
necessarily be real and ‘true’ – yet is unable to observe or recreate very much
of the society it engages with. In professing a freedom from the limitations
of stage naturalism, the film of Look Back in Anger exercises the right of the
cinema to show, as well as refer to, the contemporary world in which it is
located, a right, which this film – like other New Wave films – wears like a
medal.

There is another effect of this kind of cinematic realism that is important
to this argument. Opening out the narrative has the effect of diffusing the
claustrophobia of the play. Look Back in Anger sits easily within the dominant
conventions of the European naturalist tradition, its single playing space
(albeit a lower-class bed-sit rather than a bourgeois drawing-room) func-
tioning as an embodiment of the forces of determinism that constrain the
characters that inhabit it. The room becomes a trap, as Raymond Williams
suggested, for Jimmy Porter just as surely as it did for Ibsen’s Nora in A
Doll’s House.11 Claustrophobia is both a tangible aspect of the immediate
events of a naturalist drama of this sort and a metaphor for social and moral
constraints. The restless prowling of Jimmy Porter around his room, hemmed
in by a life that he does not know how to change, is all but gone from the
film; inaction is turned into action.

Certainly, Jimmy as played by Richard Burton is a much more active
hero than is suggested by the play. In this sense, the casting of Burton in the
lead role, which was much criticised at the time, is entirely appropriate.
There is little of the Angry Young Man about Burton’s performance. He is instead much more of a 1960s liberal intellectual hero, with an appeal to a market beyond the United Kingdom. The reconceptualising of Jimmy Porter evident in Burton’s portrayal was not an unplanned consequence of the film’s rejection of its theatrical roots, but an indication of the makers’ awareness of a new audience and a new social context. There is a deliberate internationalising of the play’s essentially provincial British atmosphere in the casting of Burton, who had been familiar as a Hollywood movie star since *The Robe* (1953). Internationalisation is indicated by the introduction of a ‘race’ theme, absent from the play. In the film, Jimmy and Cliff unsuccessfully defend an Asian stallholder, who is forced off the market by the racism of the other traders. This is recognition of racial intolerance as an issue for Britain, in the wake of the first waves of post-war immigration (the first so-called post-war ‘race riots’ had occurred in Notting Hill in 1958). It was a theme that also echoed abroad, especially in the USA in the context of the emerging civil rights movement. The film has, in addition, a more deliberate appeal to the idea of an international ‘youth’ – and it was in the hands of the new, young audience (in its late teens and twenties) that the fate of British cinema was said to reside. This is evident in the prominence given to Jimmy’s jazz trumpet playing which is not seen in the play and the sequence in a jazz club with which the films begins: it is crowded with young people, male, female, black and white. The strategy is particularly apparent in the overt sexuality of both Burton’s Jimmy and Gary Raymond’s Cliff. The latter is a ‘cuddly bear’ of a character in the play, whose friendship with Alison is non-sexual. In Richardson’s film, he is more recognisably a late 1950s/early 1960s type, a single, sexually active (and sexually attractive) refugee from the provinces (Wales), who has pictures of women on his bedroom walls and boasts of his sexual conquests.

There is an interesting addendum to our main argument that is worth considering here. The play is full of the kind of camp linguistic by-play that, as Michael Billington has pointed out, is part of the sub-culture of the provincial actor to which the young Osborne belonged. Jimmy and Cliff swap music-hall jokes, charged with sexual innuendo, and indulge in the opening of a ‘front-cloth’ comedy routine. Camp, whatever else it may be, is self-consciously artificial and ‘theatrical’, connoting both ‘performance’ and the feminine/homosexual. After his death in 1994, Osborne’s one-time collaborator, Anthony Creighton, ‘outed’ him as a closet bisexual; if true, it might make the relationship between Jimmy and Cliff the central one of the play. However, this simply does not emerge as an issue in the film, since the dialogue removes much of the play’s theatrical jokiness, and the conjunction
of the theatrical and the homosexual is effaced by the overt – almost aggressive – heterosexuality of both Burton and Raymond.

The suppression of the theatrical was an essential part, therefore, of the realism of the New Wave in cinema (although this was for social and historical reasons as much as aesthetic ones). However, the confident embrace of a new realism allowed for the return of artifice in another form and the documentary/naturalist intention referred to above was accompanied by an aesthetic/poetic one. ‘Poetic realism’ became the dominant form of the realist New Wave, although it did not, significantly, mean a reappraisal of the theatrical. ‘Poetic’ meant in this context a style of shooting that ‘aestheticised’ the object of attention, that drew attention to itself as ‘cinematic’, and which also allowed a personal signature. There was a ‘poetic realism’ in the new theatre, too, notably in performance, which signified the emergence of a new kind of ‘theatricality’, especially in theatre design.¹³ Yet, as the example of The Admirable Crichton shows, the realist aesthetic, however it is qualified, should not be allowed to monopolise the cinema’s relationship to the theatrical. Perhaps the first step towards remedying this would be recognition that the theatre need not be a leaden weight dragging film away from its destiny; that in certain circumstances theatricality can be creatively appropriated.

Notes

3 See, for example, Pam Cook (ed.), Gainsborough Pictures (Cassell, 1997).
4 See Dan Rebellatto, 1956 and All That: The Making of Modern British Drama (Routledge, 1999). The introduction contains a very useful summary of the main aspects of this revisionist position.
7 See, for example, Steven Connor, Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary (Blackwell, 1996).
8 This is also Sontag’s conclusion; see ‘Film and Theatre’.