

**A Meta-criticism of Phyllis Nagy's Reception in London: What do the Critics
(Not) Want?¹**

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The intention of this paper is to discuss the issue of theatre criticism (note that I am referring to *journalistic* and not *academic* criticism) that occupies the minds of many playwrights and constitutes the most common methodological tool for researchers to reconstruct a performance, while also exploring the effect a certain playwright has had on the audience at different times. As we are all aware of by now, theatre criticism is by-and-large, a white, male and bourgeois institution with great power, setting the standards of what is 'high' and 'low' theatre. It pertains to the press, one of the Ideological State Apparatuses (I.S.A) "a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions" (Althusser 53). The Ideological State Apparatuses are carriers and formulators of the ideology of the subject; therefore, within this context, the power of the press resides in the construction of the public ideology and thus opinion and so is the power of theatre criticism.² Women playwrights are often the primary targets of attack or debasement by the critics since they refrain from their standards and, as a result, they are marginalized or dismissed.

There is a general agreement [among women playwrights] that their work is being marginalized [...] that national theatre critics not only frequently approach their plays with preconceived ideas, but that the current methods and criteria of theatre criticism are often inadequate. (Stephenson xi)

¹ This paper was presented at ATHE's 20th Conference in Chicago, Illinois on the 5th August 2006.

² Certainly, there is also another factor that has its own role to play; the reputation of a play can be constructed by word of mouth among the spectators regardless of the critics' reaction like in the case of Kane's *Blasted*.

Bearing in mind that the question “what do the critics (not) want” may be rhetorical, I will nevertheless embark upon a quick exploration of the reception American playwright Phyllis Nagy has attracted by the British press in relation to two of her plays both staged in 1995 at the Royal Court; these are *Disappeared* and *The Strip*. I firstly seek to probe the ways in which critical reception of Nagy’s plays reflects the critics’ biases towards women playwrights. Moreover, I intend to locate Nagy’s unique quality as a playwright in her resistance to categorizations and argue that this specific trait is responsible for the disparity among critical opinion regarding her work.

Nagy began her career on the London stage just before the rise of ‘In-Yer-Face’ or ‘Cool Britannia’ hype in theatre.³ She left New York in 1992 and came to live permanently in London where all of her plays (with the exception of two) have been produced in theatres like the Almeida, Watford Palace and foremost the Royal Court where she made her debut with *Weldon Rising* (1992). The outset of her career in London coincided with Stephen Daldry taking up the post of the Royal Court’s artistic director and promoting a series of new playwrights. She has also been staged in continental Europe, the States and Australia. In 1998, Methuen included her in its Contemporary Dramatists series and published the first volume of her work. Her plays include two adaptations, Patricia Highsmith’s novel *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (Watford Palace 1998) and Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel, *The Scarlet Letter* (Denver, 1994) and one translation, Chekhov’s *The Seagull* (Chichester Theatre Festival,

³ According to Aleks Sierz, the term ‘in-ye-face theatre’ signifies a drama that “employs shock tactics, or is shocking because it is new in tone or structure, or because it is bolder or more experimental than what audiences are used to”; overall, this type of theatre renegotiates “the relationship between audience and performers [...] disturb[ing] the spectator’s habitual gaze” (Sierz 4-5). For more see Aleks, Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).

2003). Also, her first original screenplay was turned into a film entitled *Mrs. Harris* (premiere at the Toronto International Film Festival, in September 2005), directed by herself, starring Annette Bening and Ben Kingsley.

While I was researching Nagy's plays I was struck by the lack of consensus amongst critics in terms of assessing her work. On the one hand, her work has been received with skepticism, characterized as 'incomprehensible' and self-indulgent; on the other hand, Nagy has found ardent supporters among critics that have greeted her as "a voice to watch",⁴ or "the finest playwright to have emerged in the 1990s";⁵ these are discrepancies that mark her as 'a love her or hate her' playwright. Dominic Dromgoole, in his account of contemporary playwrights in Britain, vividly encapsulates this argument by asserting: "Some writers you just can't get. Your friends, colleagues, family can praise them to the skies but the flavour just won't appeal. Phyllis Nagy is one of them for me" (214).

Moreover, I came across the following paradox: despite the fact that in her plays Nagy refutes authoritative discourses and resists gender binaries, in her interviews she actually replicates these binaries based on biological essentialism. When she talks about how women's *lateral* thinking functions she declares:

[W]hen women are at their best they tend to be structurally beyond any male dramatist. The mind at work is operating very differently. [...] Men have a need for closure and anal-retentive methods of reaching conclusions. Women don't. (*Rage and Reason* 21)

I chose to discuss the year 1995, which I believe is a landmark for Nagy's theatre. The same year that Kane inaugurated a new way of approaching dramatic writing,

⁴ Carole Woddis, *What's On* 16 Dec 1992 rpt in *Theatre Record* 12 (1992): 1490.

generating critical uproar with her play *Blasted*, staged at the Royal Court Upstairs, Nagy was found between two extremes: *Disappeared*, staged at Leicester Haymarket Studio,⁶ and transferred to the Theatre Upstairs at the end of June,⁷ won several awards and unanimous critical approval, something that catapulted her career. Yet, in the meantime, in late February, her most ambitious and complex play so far, *The Strip*, was staged at the Royal Court Downstairs,⁸ and received the vilest and most inimical reviews in her career.

In a nutshell, *Disappeared* has the form of a mystery novel and is about a young woman, Sarah Casey and a fraudulent impersonator of existing people, Elston Rump. Throughout the play, Sarah mysteriously vanishes and the primary suspect for her disappearance is Elston. The end is ambiguous; we never learn whether Sarah was actually murdered or disappeared out of her own will. When Charles Spencer from *The Daily Telegraph* saw the production of the play he exclaimed: “[y]oung playwrights don’t come much hotter than Phyllis Nagy” (162) admitting that he had done her an injustice in the past. He describes the play as a piece that “gets right under your skin” (162). Michael Billington from *The Guardian* declared: “I warm more and more to the work of Phyllis Nagy” (161). Simon Reade from *The Financial Times* said: “of the 1990s playwrights, Phyllis Nagy has the most exciting vision” (817). Overall, critics indulged themselves with paralleling the play to Antonioni’s film

⁵ Alastair Macaulay, *The Financial Times* 2 Mar 1995 rpt in *Theatre Record* 15 (1995): 161.

⁶ Directed by Derek Wax.

⁷ Directed by Nagy herself.

⁸ Directed by Stephen Pimlott.

*L'Avventura*⁹ and Kurosawa's *Rashomon*¹⁰ and her writing to that of Paul Auster and Gertrude Stein.¹¹

The Strip has been often and accurately described, borrowing a line from the play, as “a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle of a Jackson Pollock painting” (*Plays 1* 246)¹² highlighting the play's complexity and multiple layers in terms of structure and themes. It cannot be described in one sentence – not even a paragraph. It has a surreal and complex plot, constantly breaking down physical and mental borders; five American and five English characters that seem always on the move, mingle, and change places from England to the States to meet in the final scene in Las Vegas. *The Strip* is a difficult read on the page as well, echoing Nagy's assertion that “the bad plays are the ones that are very satisfying reads on the page, because then there's nothing to discover in rehearsal” (Armitstead, “It started with a Kiss” 12).

The Strip was received with great scorn by many critics who, on the whole, attempted to undermine Nagy's validity as a playwright, questioning whether she deserved to be staged at such a reputable venue such as the Royal Court Downstairs (this question was also asked in 1994 when her second play, *Butterfly Kiss*, was staged at the Almeida). Surprisingly, the most rabid review came from a woman; Maureen Paton in *The Daily Express* fiercely attacked Nagy stating that “[l]ife is too short to tolerate the kind of pretentious bilge found in Phyllis Nagy's wildly self-indulgent new play,”

⁹ In *L'Avventura*, a girl who is unhappy with her life, like Sarah, mysteriously disappears from a small island in South Italy and the whole film revolves around her lover's search for her. The end remains ambiguous and open-ended since it is never disclosed where she is and the cause of her disappearance.

¹⁰ In *Rashomon*, Kurosawa explores a murder from three different points of view, promoting the relativity of truth.

¹¹ All reviews are taken from *Theatre Record* 15 (1995): 161-162; 815-817.

concluding that it is a “ridiculous New Age freak show” (267). Paton wondered why such fine actors like Cheryl Campbell, Nicholas Farrel and Nicholas le Prevost should participate in this incomprehensible “farrago,” ironically commenting that “the employment situation in the profession must be worse than ever” (267). In *The Daily Mail*, Jack Tinker did not hide his bafflement and objection to Nagy’s rising reputation: “Phyllis Nagy may not be a name on everybody’s lips, even if everyone could pronounce it. Yet her reputation in the theatre seems to be growing in direct inverse ratio to her inability to tell a comprehensible tale” (267). He ironically stated that Pimlott directs this “utter tripe as if he knows exactly what it all means” (267). Also, Bill Hagerty in *Today* stressed that Nagy has been successful “only in this country [Great Britain].”¹³ Finally, Benedict Nightingale in *The Times* contended: “it left me feeling as if Nagy was playing computer games, and I could not join her because nobody had given me the password” (268).¹⁴

It is very challenging to juxtapose these two kinds of responses; on the one hand, *Disappeared* won the trust of the critics, the majority of whom were male, due to the portrayal of a sympathetic male character, with whom they could identify.¹⁵ Also, for the first time, all her characters are heterosexual.¹⁶ Moreover, despite the play’s non-linear structure and the lack of a *dénouement*, there is a stricter sense of causality - in contrast to her other plays - that facilitates the understanding of the events. Reviewers who in the past had complained about the uncertainty Nagy’s plays embrace now

¹² Specifically, this term has been reproduced in the reviews of Michael Billington (*The Guardian* 3 Mar 1995), Benedict Nightingale (*The Times* 3 Mar 1995) and Paul Taylor (“Sealed with a Kiss”, *The Independent* 28 Dec 1994).

¹³ She is often advertised under the rubric: “the best-known-unproduced-playwright-in America” (Nagy, *Plays* 1 ix).

¹⁴ All reviews are taken from *Theatre Record* 15 (1995): 266-268.

¹⁵ Indicatively, out of the 16 reviews for *Disappeared* from the *Theatre Record* only one was by a woman.

affirmed their liking of her craft of story-telling and hailed her as a great playwright. With *The Strip* on the other hand, she was immediately banished as the ‘other’ as it was a play that could not be effortlessly digested, and that defied their standards.

Phyllis Nagy reported:

[T]here was a critical comparison going on at the time of *The Strip* with a play by Nick Ward called *The Present*, which opened at the Bush at the same time. And all the reviews for *The Present* were about how weird, unfathomable and brilliant this play was, And for me? The opposite. (Nagy, *Rage and Reason* 21)

Therefore, what one can elicit from the above responses is that the critics’ seeking for closure and singularity of meaning, of a “password” in Nagy’s plays, signals their need for logos, rationality, teleology and authority, traits that allude to the institution of patriarchy. Elaine Aston very rightly contended that with *The Strip*, “Nagy primarily upset the theatre critics by making it virtually impossible for them to come up with their usual style of plot summary” (117). Moreover, Nagy has suggested that it is a typical reaction from the part of the critics to attack when they are faced with something that their minds fail to grasp for they feel threatened and insecure (Nagy, *Rage and Reason* 21). Elsewhere, she has commented on the need for art to be challenging and to elude passive reception; she says:

Literalism is attractive because it is immediately satisfying [...]. Reason tells us that it is only when we are comfortable with information that we can understand the information. [...] we have forgotten that truly dangerous art never seeks to be merely understood. It seeks to communicate, with all the mystery and danger that word implies. The literal, though sometimes dangerous, is rarely mysterious by definition. (Nagy, “Hold your nerve” 124-125)

¹⁶ Nagy had written another play, *Trip’s Cinch* (1994) with three heterosexual characters before *Disappeared* but was produced in England later, in 2002.

Nevertheless, elaborating exclusively on biological binaries and essentialist categories overshadows other issues. For example, we should not exempt women reviewers because they can prove equally bitter with male reviewers as in the case of Maureen Paton. What is more, we should not unanimously indict male reviewers either. On the contrary, we should also view the critics' reaction within the wider context of the *ideology* reflected by their agent of expression that is, the British press in the years 1990-1995. If we take a look at Nagy's consistent supporters we encounter *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *The Observer*, that is, the more liberal and open-minded press whose audience is more attuned to this kind of 'less conventional' theatre. At the other end of the spectrum there are newspapers such as *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Express* and *Today* that appeal to a conservative public. The kind of comments that question her status as a playwright because she has not been successful in the States or because of her Hungarian origin and hard-to-pronounce name clearly reflect an astonishingly narrow-minded, xenophobic, biased and conservative attitude that regards Nagy as an outsider on the London stage.

Finally, it seems that another of Nagy's features that can be deemed 'threatening' by critics is the difficulty of contextualizing her. The comparisons critics drew when assessing *Disappeared*, served as a tool to *validate* her work using the safety-net of categorization; her work is legitimate as long as it shares common denominators with something already explored and reproduced –mainly– by men. However, the fact that they compared her to non-British artists underscores her 'otherness.' I think that Elaine Aston and Michael Coveney would go along with the above argument; Aston has written: "it is the desire to resist categorization that might be argued is a signature

of Nagy's theatre" (*Feminist Views* 111). Michael Coveney, one of Nagy's staunchest advocates, highlights the uniqueness of her style and her liminal status by arguing:

She has not (obviously) been lumped in with the new laddish and loutish drama that has made such an impact in the wake of *Trainspotting*. Nor does she quite tally with the feminist writers of the Royal Court in the 1980s, many of whom bit the bullet on sexual politics, parturition and mother-daughter relationships without really challenging ideas of form and style. (Nagy, *Plays* 1 xi)

It is true, Nagy does not clearly belong to either camp; she does not employ an overtly feminist discourse in her plays, repudiating the whole domesticated women's theatre, the "wombic element in women's writing", because, according to her, this is the only type of theatre encouraged by artistic directors when it involves staging a play by a woman (Nagy, *Rage and Reason* 27). Her denouncing of feminist sisterhood however, does not imply a refusal to explore gender which I deem as one of her primary concerns. On the other hand, she also strongly objects to the "recent spate of laddism displayed in the arts" represented by plays such as Mamet's *Oleanna* or Welsh's *Trainspotting* that propagate a widely accepted resurgence of misogyny (Kenyon 7).

On the way to the new millennium, it seems that technically, "theatre is still predominantly run by men and commented on by men" (Heidi Stephenson, *Rage and Reason* ix) and Nagy is another case of a woman playwright who has been caught in the web of power relations between critics and women playwrights, indicted by some critics due to her gender, her origin and her writing. However, I believe that she has also profited from the positive criticism by certain reviewers who supported her work, and who in the majority are men and by her collaboration with Stephen Daldry and Stephen Pimlott; I think this last point reinforces the inevitability of women dramatists to achieve a certain status in theatre without the male establishment's

support. Nevertheless, as Foucault has argued in *The History of Sexuality Vol.I*, “power creates resistance” (95) and women playwrights’ tendency to explore new forms and aesthetics resists the critics’ power of circumscribing what is ‘acceptable’ in theatre. Hence, as an iconoclastic playwright, Nagy also enters this power structure.

One of the hallmarks of Nagy’s writing is the representation of fluid identities that liberates her subjects from phallogentric and hegemonic discourses. Regarding this last point on the ‘fluidity of identities’ Judith Butler has asserted:

Fluidity of identities suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualization, and it deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to essentialist accounts of gender identity. (Butler, “Gender Trouble, Feminist Theory” 338)

Therefore, this tendency to portray non-fixed identities is not only a means to resist the power structure between critics and women playwrights but derives from Nagy’s own refusal to be ascribed a certain identity, to fix herself in prescribed subject positions and her desire to recontextualize and reconstruct herself when she changes places of residence. She has argued:

I’ve always lived elsewhere from where I come from, and I’ve always been interested in living elsewhere and losing identity to a certain extent, and then replacing it with another identity or not. (Nagy, “Feature” 29)

Hence, I would argue that Nagy has managed to be both an ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ in British theatre. For some, she will always be marginalized as the ‘foreigner’, with a bizarre name despite the fact that she is English-speaking, who chooses to portray lesbian kisses on stage and who resists fixed identity categories as “instruments of regulatory regimes” (Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination” 13); for others she belongs in the 1990s generation of British playwrights, included in anthologies or

compilations on British theatre and praised as “the most interesting writers of the British theatre renaissance” (Armitstead 12).

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