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# British theatre is on its knees — and TV has struck the final blow

The writers awarded Emmys for *Succession* have turned their backs on the UK stage. Add the effect of cuts and the pandemic and it's clear the art form is dying

Richard Morrison | Thursday January 18 2024, 7:00pm, The Times

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Just up the road from where I live in north London is a theatre called the Kiln. It used to be the Tricycle Kilburn and I am one of thousands who regret it changed its name. Why? Because as the Tricycle it became nationally famous for its “tribunal dramas” — stagings based on the verbatim transcripts of public inquiries such as the Stephen Lawrence inquiry and the Saville inquiry into the Bloody Sunday massacre. Recreating these real events in a dramatic context had a huge impact, especially when they transferred to bigger theatres, as they invariably did. They showed what a powerful tool drama can be when historic injustices need addressing and redressing.

I'm sure every reader of this column is aware of the latest example of that: Gwyneth Hughes's superb, horrifying drama *Mr Bates vs the Post Office*. In four hours it achieved what two decades of impassioned campaigning had failed to do: administer a kick up the complacent backside of the British establishment so jolting that an act of parliament to put right the wrongs inflicted on hundreds of sub-postmasters was promised within days of the drama ending.

But there was, of course, one big difference between *Mr Bates* and the Tricycle's tribunal dramas. *Mr Bates* was conceived and developed as a TV drama, not a stage play. Indeed, it's impossible to imagine it having one hundredth of the impact it achieved if it had been done in a theatre. Maybe 20 years ago, when the Tricycle plays were in their heyday, but not today. Is anybody — let alone our soulless government's ministers — likely to be shocked into action by anything presented on stage these days?



MyAnna Buring as Marina Litvinenko in *A Very Expensive Poison*  
MARC BRENNER/THE OLD VIC

The increasing irrelevance of theatre, at least as a way of influencing the national conversation, has many causes and many consequences. One big consequence was spelt out this week in *The Stage* newspaper by the theatre commentator Lyn Gardner. She notes how many rising playwrights are deserting the theatre for TV, film or streaming networks such as HBO and Netflix. There is, she asserts, an awful lot of talent turning its back on the live stage.

A distinction needs to be made here. Some outstanding British dramatists, such as Hughes, have always been TV-orientated. Her career stretches back to writing episodes for *The Bill* and *Silent Witness* in the 1990s. Similarly, if you look at the (largely British) writing team for *Succession* — HBO's brutal media moguls saga that has just won a hatful of Emmys — you find that Jesse Armstrong (its creator), Tony Roche and Georgia Pritchett also cut their teeth in TV, on programmes such as *Peep Show* and *The Thick of It*.

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But the *Succession* “writing room” also included Lucy Prebble, who definitely honed her talent in the live theatre with powerful fact-based stage dramas such as *Enron* and *A Very Expensive Poison* (about Alexander Litvinenko's assassination) until she was snapped up by HBO. Let's hope Prebble can straddle both worlds as successfully as Jez Butterworth, who won early fame for his hard-hitting “state of the nation” plays, then turned out scripts for the James Bond and Indiana Jones film franchises, and is now back in the West End with a new stage play, *The Hills of California*, opening next week.

I certainly don't blame writers for going where the money is. And screenwriting is (at that exalted level anyway) vastly more profitable than writing a stage play. The latter would earn you about £11,000 for months of rewrites and hassle, compared with the £100,000-plus that you might make rewriting on a Hollywood script. As Prebble told *The Times* [four years ago](#), the money she earned from *Succession* actually subsidised the months of unpaid research she needed to write *A Very Expensive Poison* for the Old Vic.

But money is not the whole story. British theatre is in a dreadful state. Those theatres not facing closure because of local authority budget cuts or cracks in their concrete are struggling to attract audiences for anything except musicals and famous plays featuring famous actors.

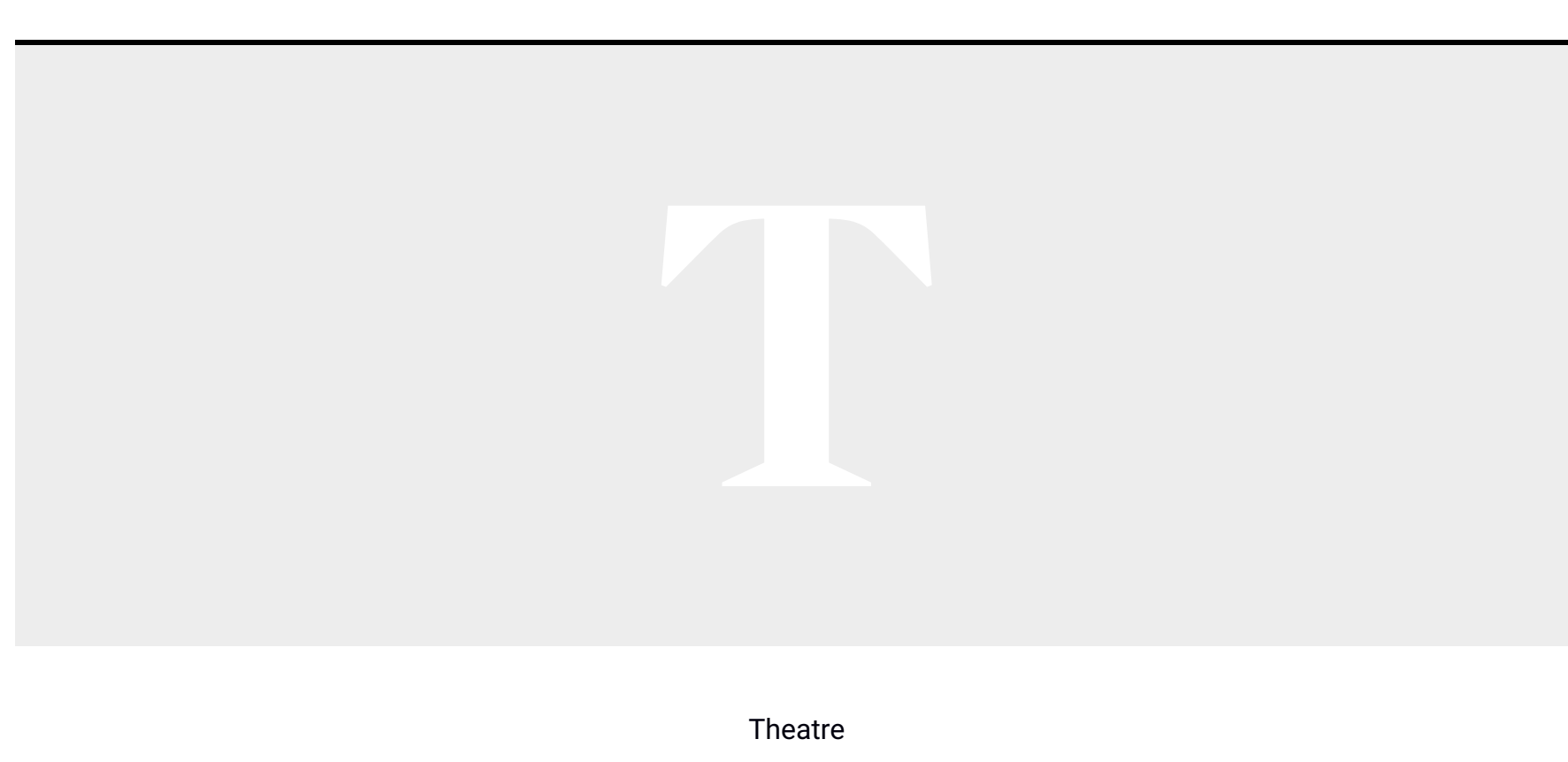
Even the Royal Court in London, once one of the world's great powerhouses of new drama, has revealed in its annual report that it used more than a third of its £2.23 million reserves in the past year to offset losses on its productions. Consequently it urgently needs to “seek new business models and incorporate more commercial work”. In other words, it needs to play safe. Putting on any new drama is a risk and, right now, no theatre can afford any production to fail.

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On top of that, subsidised theatres also face the hassle of getting Arts Council approval for new dramas, which means those dramas have to tick any number of “diversity” boxes that don't seem to include “entertainment value” or “dramatic excellence”. Even writers who have several successful stage dramas to their name find themselves submitting new plays then waiting months or even years for a subsidised theatre to stage it. Or, worse, their script will be “workshopped” into an unrecognisable pulp of its former vitality, then not staged at all.

In terms of audience reach, of course, the stage hasn't been the dominant medium for drama since the first commercial screenings of “talkies” in 1923 and the arrival of TV soaps 30 years later. But until recently live theatre always retained its cachet as the place where serious playwrights made serious statements. Rattigan, Pinter, Stoppard, Coward — they all wrote successful movie scripts but they were steeped in live theatre, which is where they did their greatest work.

Then the streaming giants began throwing huge dollops of money and screen time into producing highly watchable dramas, the TV networks were forced to compete, the pandemic compelled everyone to stay at home — and voilà! Within a single decade Britain's 500-year-old tradition of nurturing new stage plays has been brought to a shuddering halt. Arguably we still produce the world's best dramatists. But if you want to enjoy their work, the theatre is the last place you would look. All you will find there is an art form dying.



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