

# Theatre radicals hit back at David Hare's 'clichés'

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The Merchant of Venice as set in kitsch Las Vegas by Rupert GooldPHOTOSTAGE

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The playwright Sir David Hare has been accused of wanting clichés on stage and deepening Brexit divisions after complaining that British theatre was being infected by European directors who were camping up and distorting classic plays.

He said that the move towards an over-aestheticised European theatre would be to the detriment of the state-of-England plays that he said were the strongest line in British theatre.

His comments were criticised by leading industry figures this week, who said that he risked legitimising xenophobia. He was also accused of wanting to stage “clichés intended to charm and calm and reassure”.

The debate on whether classic plays are being distorted comes amid some concerns about the “cult of Ivo Van Hove”.

The award-winning Belgian director is behind the modern interpretation of *Hedda Gabler* at the National Theatre, as well as controversial productions of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* and *A View From The Bridge*. His company, Toneelgroep Amsterdam, has a residency at the Barbican this year.

It also comes after the announcement of Emma Rice’s exit as artistic director at The Globe over concerns that her use of light and sound were at odds with its Shakespearean tradition.

Rice said this week that she would not be changing her methods during her last year in charge, and her colleague Matthew Dunster said that his forthcoming production of *Much Ado About Nothing* would dispense with the uninteresting “aristocrats in repose” context, instead setting it amid Mexican revolutionaries.

The playwright Jeffrey Sweet, who interviewed Hare for his forthcoming book *What Playwrights Talk About When They Talk About Writing*, said that more directors would be imitating Van Hove’s iconoclastic approach to classics because of his success.

He also criticised in *The Observer* Rupert Goold’s staging of *The Merchant of Venice* in a kitsch Las Vegas, which he claimed did not make sense.



Sie David Hare suggested that classic plays were being distorted REX FEATURES

This week the theatre world hit back. David Lan, the artistic director at the Young Vic, said that those who wished for plays to be “done straight” were crying into the wind.

“These are the alternatives,” he said. “A: stage a bunch of clichés intended to charm and calm and reassure or B: be alive to the contradictory realities of the moment when the play was written and the moment it’s being remade.”

He added: “Playwrights who long for their plays to be done ‘straight’ — why can’t the actors just sit on a sofa and say the lines — are crying into the wind.” Hare’s choice of the word “infected” in his comments about “theatre-makers . . . coming in [from Europe] and doing

director's theatre where you camp up classic plays and you cut them and you prune them around" were also criticised.

Duska Radosavljevic, the British-based theatre academic and author, said that Hare risked legitimising "swirling sentiments of xenophobia and nationalism" in Britain.

"At any other time it would have been enough to just roll one's eyes and move on," she wrote in *Exeunt Magazine*. "Not any more. Not at the time when the Home Office is slowly instigating a potential exodus of non-Anglo-Saxon professionals from its shores."

Hare, who is best known for his stage work but has also received two Oscar nominations for screenplay adaptations, said in Mr Sweet's book that he would feel less warmth for British theatre if "that directorial stuff" from Europe pushed out the British "state of the nation tradition". He said that Jez Butterworth's 2009 play *Jerusalem* starring Mark Rylance was the "last surpassingly successful play in that tradition".

This week, however, it was pointed out that the National Theatre has just finished a run of Hare's play *The Red Barn*, based on Georges Simenon's book, and is about to show *My Country; a Work in Progress*.

### **Courting controversy**

- Ivo Van Hove's production of *Hedda Gabler* at the National Theatre received enthusiastic reviews although the divorcing of the character from her 19th-century patriarchal society — accompanied by Joni Mitchell's *Blue* as a soundtrack — led Hedda, according to some, to be cast in a less sympathetic light.
- It had Ben Whishaw, Sophie Okonedo, and a live animal that looked like a wolf but Van Hove's Broadway production of *The Crucible*, set in a modern classroom and using theatrical tricks to show the "witches" flying, was felt by some to ignore the hysteria that was at the heart of Arthur Miller's script.
- Emma Rice's debut production at The Globe last year, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, saw characters change sex from the original text and an infusion of music from David Bowie to George Formby. Not everyone saw the wonder.
- Rupert Goold's *The Merchant of Venice*, was first performed in Stratford in 2011 and revived in 2014. Some thought the Las Vegas setting a nonsensical metaphor. Others said the casino culture was perfect for a dissection of greed and capitalism, with the casket scenes turned into a game show and the Jewish Shylock being denied access to golf clubs.