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Non-Standard Forms of Contemporary Drama and Theatre
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Edited for the society by Ellen Redling and Peter Paul Schnierer
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E.R. P.P.S.

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PETER PAUL SCHNIEFER

Introduction:
The Outline Round the Cut

It does not take a crossword enthusiast to see that form is the central part of performance. This centre position is more than just the inescapable consequence of theatre’s *causa formalis*: matter necessarily requires shape, and to restate that for the stage would be trivial. The only meaningful approach to form in the theatre goes beyond the individual instance: No play can be conceived without rules, and no play-acting can be entirely devoid of conventions. Even the most revolutionary theatre event needs something prior to it that it can revolutionise in the first place.

Yet literary critics have shown a marked reluctance to deal with the question of form other than in historical terms. Form to many is something that needed to be overcome, that existed before theatre became modern, relevant, contemporary. In these schemas - theories would be too grand a term - form is the last vestige of the hollow, the crumbling shell awaiting the wrecking crew. And the wrecking crew arrives reliably: the ethical turn of post-war drama did away with interwar frivolities, kitchen-sink dramatists exposed the shallowness of the well-made play, political playwrights radicalised the angry young men, postmodernists destroyed the certainties of the orthodox, in-yer-face theatre jerked the metadramatists out of their complacency, and so on, down the decades. It is time to pause and consider the repetitive structure of these revolutions, if such they be. Every succeeding wave claims to have
done away with the tyranny of form over sincerity, and every wave in turn becomes the target of the same charge. May one not be forgiven for suspecting that form, the conventional restraint upon posterior material, cannot be got rid of? Norman Cameron, in one of his sonnets, speaks of the tenacity of the devil’s form: “Boast you have cut out evil; but / What is the outline round the cut?” The same seems to be true for form: Whatever removes that evil takes its place.

Critics have tacitly accepted this: While descriptive morphology, the synchronic study of forms, is a practically unacceptable term outside biology, the history of dramatic form remains within the pale. As long as forms are superseded, they are available as objects of study; diachronic literary morphology does not go by this name, of course, but is practised freely under the name of dramatic or theatre history. No critical anguish is caused by labels such as “The Age of Melodrama,” by the many companion anthologies that package “farce,” “heroic drama” and other templates.

The essays assembled in this volume all acknowledge this. They are attempts to supplement the diachronic with the synchronic, not to replace it. Nothing would be less sensible than to negate the results of decades of enquiry; the suspicion of form, after all, is not an aberration but has its roots in a reaction against form’s apotheosis in modernism. But that reaction needs to be historicised in itself.

Two complementary, wide-ranging surveys introduce and conclude a dozen essays more concerned with the specifics of single phenomena - one hesitates to use the term “play” for many of these text clusters, verbatim protocols, kinetic installations and other formal experiments. None of these contributions attempts a classification or a synopsis of non-standard forms. This is due, of course, to constraints of space as much as to a paradox: How can one classify deviations? Yet there is a third, more insidious reason for the lack of a morphology of deviant forms: they may well be deviant only in their futile attempt to overcome the old. The outline remains: almost every time, amid the presentation of the outrageously - and occasionally merely oddly - new there is a sense of an old presence, one that is as tenacious as Cameron’s devil and as form itself: The well-made play seems never to have disappeared.
Graham Saunders demonstrates this for the 1990s, John Bull includes the decades before. Together they frame a debate that will have to continue, even more thoroughly and profoundly: Is the well-made play really a historically finite phenomenon, a form that flourished for a century or so, or does it not rather emplot a desire for structure, coherence and closure that goes beyond the bourgeois requirements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries?

These questions lead towards a temptation to which none of the contributors to this volume give in: once a formal literary phenomenon has been shown to be resilient, immune to profound social change, it is close to literature’s equivalent to apotheosis: the translation to genre, mode or technique. Little energy is spent on an ideological critique of the sonnet, the elegiac or the dactyl; the pièce bien faite still exercises the critic’s passions. Norman Cameron concluded, resigning from the project of secularisation: “Smite and declaim and cut away; / There he was, and there he'll stay.” We need not be quite as final, but the essays in this volume, torn between the welcome to the new and the acknowledgement of the old, are not yet the last words on the well-made play: its obituary will have to wait.
On 11 December 1896, Alfred Jarry’s *Ubu Roi* opened at the Theatre de L’Oeuvre in Paris. Following a riot in the theatre, it proved to be the only performance and the play did not grace the stage again until 1908, after the playwright’s death. Amongst the audience was Arthur Symons, who later wrote a penetrating if devastating review of the play in the *Saturday Review*. He opened with a firm distinction between the aesthetic and the historical significance of the event. Whilst the play was “of little importance in itself, [it] is of considerable importance as a symptom of tendencies agitating the minds of the younger generation in France” (rpt. Symons 371). I will come back to this distinction later for, notwithstanding his obvious distaste, Symons gives us a very detailed account of what exactly it was that was different about the performance:

Jarry’s idea in this symbolical buffoonery, was to satirise humanity by setting human beings to play the part of marionettes, hiding their faces behind cardboard masks, tuning their voices to the howl and squeak which tradition has considerably assigned to the voices of that wooden world, and mimicking the rigid inflexibility and spasmodic life of puppets by a hopping and reeling gait. The author, who has written an essay, “De l’Inutilité du Theatre au Theatre,” has explained that a performance of marionettes can only suitably be accompanied by the marionette music of fairs; and therefore the motions of these puppet-people were accompanied from time to time, by an orchestra of piano, cymbals, and drums, played behind the scenes, and reproducing the note of just such a
band as one might find on the wooden platform outside a canvas booth in a fair. The action is supposed to take place 'in Poland, that is to say, in the land of Nowhere'; and the scenery was painted to represent, by a child's conventions, indoors and out of doors, and even the torrid, temperate, and arctic zones at once. Opposite to you, at the back of the stage, you saw apple trees in bloom, under a blue sky, and against the sky a small closed window and a fireplace, containing an alchemist's crucible, through the very midst of which (with what refining intention, who knows?) trooped in and out these clamorous and sanguinary persons of the drama. On the left was painted a bed, and at the foot of the bed a bare tree, and snow falling. On the right were palm trees, about one of which coiled a boa-constricor; a door opened against the sky, and beside the door a skeleton dangled from a gallows. Changes of scene were announced by the simple Elizabethan method of a placard, roughly scrawled with such stage directions as this: ‘La scene represente la province de Livonie couverte de neige.’ (ibid. 372f)

I have a particular reason for using this famous theatrical event (an event that more particularly than usual includes critical reactions to the performance) as a starting point for my argument. I said before that Symons makes a conscious distinction between an aesthetic and a historical response from the outset, and I want to turn to the latter. He talks of it as “the first Symbolist farce”: “It has the crudity of the schoolboy or a savage: what is, after all, most remarkable about it is the insolence with which a young writer mocks at civilisation itself, sweeping all art, along with all humanity, into the same inglorious slop-pail” (ibid. 374). For Symons, then, *Ubu Roi*’s chief significance is that it is, as a model of irrationality, in deliberate opposition to what he understands as civilisation, and he later makes the explicit connection with earlier events in France.

In our search for sensation we have exhausted sensation; and now, before a people who have perfected the fine shades to their vanishing point, who have subtilised delicacy of perception into the annihilation of the very senses through which we take in ecstasy, a literary Sansculotte has shrieked for hours that unspeakable word of the gutter which was the refrain, the ‘Leitmotiv’ of this comedy of masks. (ibid. 376f)

Symons’ reference back to the sansculottes of the French Revolution, via its associations (for him) with mob rule, violence, anti-intellectualism and anarchy, is both predictable and historically problematic. Predictable, given that the spectre at the feast of virtually all political discourse in the nineteenth century was that of revolution;
problematic in that, amongst other things, *Ubu Roi* is a grotesque satire on notions of kingship. So, the play can be associated with the terrible memories of the French Revolution as, in Symons’ words, “the gesticulation of a young savage of the woods” (ibid. 375), but equally, through its subject matter and its shattering of past theatrical conventions it could be associated with the notion of revolution in a quite different way.

Symons was not alone in applying the concept of savagery to the play. He was accompanied to the first night by his friend, the poet and playwright W.B. Yeats. His account is less detailed than that of Symons, but gives a clear sense of the audience as divided into opposing camps fully intent on effectively fighting out their differences.

Feeling bound to support the most spirited party, we have shouted for the play, but that night at the Hotel Corneille I am very sad, for comedy, objectivity, has displayed its growing power once more. I say, after Stephen Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau, after Puvís de Chavannes, after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God. (W.B. Yeats 348f)

It is hard not to make the connection with a poem that Yeats wrote almost exactly twenty years later, “The Second Coming” (January 1919, but first published 1920), where the poet laments:

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,

And concludes with a very Ubuish question:

And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (Albright 235)

In his book *Jarry: Ubu Roi*, Keith Beaumont detailed three accusations that were made against *Ubu Roi* by spectators and critics in the aftermath of the outrageous performance (Beaumont 9-11). The first focused on the play’s “alleged” vulgarity and obscenity. Secondly, perhaps in view of the political atmosphere of the time, critics condemned the play and its performance as the theatrical equivalent of an “anarchist” bomb attack and as an act of political subversion. The third accusation levelled against the play and its performance was that they in no way
constituted a “serious” piece of literature or of theatre but rather a gigantic hoax.

One hundred and twenty years later, Jarry’s play is still frequently performed, but it has long since run out of the capability of either arousing the kind of passionate hatred and partisanship that it did in 1896, or perhaps even of being taken as representing a moment of significant change: après Ubu la deluge, the Savage God! In his comments, Yeats notes the wielding of the lavatory brush, a deliberate debasement of the symbols of majesty which might in turn relate to Ubu’s opening word in the play, reasonably translated as ‘shit.’ It is true that much of the reaction, both for and against, the production was a result directly of the creation of kind of innovatory theatrical techniques that Symons lists and that opposed the conventions of the well-made play. However, although the furore was, in other words, directly related to the shock of the theatrical new, it was also quite evidently a response to its attack on the niceties of conventional bourgeois discourse as best represented in that well-made play format. For questions of theatrical practice can never be unfettered from their ideological roots.

But, it is possible to make a different kind of connection between Ubu, lavatory brush and all, Symon’s invocation of the sansculottes and Beaumont’s second point, that the play could have been read as an act of political subversion: that its depiction of Ubu as barbaric, cruel and despotic might be taken, in the revolutionary spirit of France a century earlier, as an attack on the institution of kingship, or indeed on any form of imposed rule. That is to say that, in the spirit of the connection I have just made, that this is a play that is not only revolutionary in its attack on previous theatrical practice but in its ideological heart. Such a reading might bring us nearer to the world of the contemporary. For, after all, in mid-1950s Britain not many critics were intent on hailing what was supposedly a theatrical revolution. Well, whatever it was, in hindsight — and actually also at the time — no-one could have thought that, even if the new plays were in some way revolutionary in their opposition to the existing drama, this sense of violent change could be linked to some larger ideological superstructure. I am reminded, irresistibly, of the title of an important critical work by Katherine Worth that was published in 1972: *Revolutions in Modern English Drama*. If
you were to read the book backwards, as it were, you might well think
that, in her praise of Edward Bond's work she too conceived of the new
drama in terms of a total break with the past. She opens her final chapter
by claiming that Bond “offers the most massive demonstration that a
new theatre is forming around us,” and concludes it, and the book, by
arguing that “It seems appropriate to end my discussion of recent drama
on this high note of audacious innovation by a playwright who seems
almost certain to be foremost among the shapers of the modern English
tradition” (Worth 168, 186). This is not exactly revolutionary in its
claims, but it does suggest that in the work of this playwright, at least, a
clear break with the past is discerned and a possible route to the future is
posited. In other words, a progressive, developmental model of theatrical
change is on offer. However, this stands in stark contrast to the
words of her introductory chapter where she explains carefully just what
she means by invoking the notion of revolution. Here she argues, and
surely correctly, that “the newness of postwar and especially of post-
1956 playwrights has been overstressed, that much of this drama does
not make a violent break with the realist
tradition, as words like ‘revolu-
tion’ which have been used of it often suggest.” So, what then does she
have in mind in thus entitling her book? She is quite clear: “the revolu-
tions of my title are the Yeatsian kind, the turns of the wheel that bring
up the past continually in new forms” (ibid. vii).

Suddenly, we are back with “The Second Coming” which, though it
closes with a vision of the Ubu-esque ‘savage god’ slouching towards
Bethlehem to be born, had opened with an invocation of the gyres that
promise endless repetitions of history. Now, as it happens both of these
motifs are versions of essentially the same cyclical model of histori-
cal/cultural development: one that for us is inexorably tied in to notions
of renaissance (rebirth), and in its most simplistic form can be exampled
by a rough rehearsal of an early eighteenth century formulation that the
entire history of philosophy consists of footnotes to Plato.

Yeats’ invocation of the savage gods thus can be taken as a recogni-
tion – for him at least – that the notion of an avant-garde and a return
away from a golden age and a descent to one of barbarity can be linked.
However, Symons’ argument also relies by implication on another and
opposing historical model. What makes the idea of calling up the spectre
of the French Revolution and relating it to Jarry’s play so despairing for Symons is that this possibility of a return to the past goes against the dominant contemporary ideological construction of history. Throughout the nineteenth century, the idea of revolution as a prime instigator of change had been opposed by an elaborately constructed set of theories that sought to establish the model of evolution – with its implication of a developmental process, moving steadily from the barbaric towards civilisation – as the chief agency of change. It was a construction that readily embraced Darwin’s ideas, not as an originator of theories of evolution, but as a scientist whose ideas were already being explored in the disciplines that would eventually lead to the would-be scientific discipline of Sociology. Evolution, then, offered an alternative to both of the other models to which I have previously referred, revolution and the quasi-renaissance cyclical view of history.

When applied to the theatre, or indeed to other areas of cultural practice, however, there were severe problems, the like of which lead to the extreme degree of distress afforded to Symons. Far from tracing a steady evolution, Ubu appeared to demonstrate for him a retreat from that steady progress towards civilisation, in terms that embrace both the general territory of the barbaric savage gods and the particular political terror of revolution. “That strange experiment […] shows us,” he argues in a rationalisation, “that the artificial, when it has gone the full circle, comes back to the primitive” (Symons 375). The play may then serve as an example of what lies buried in humanity waiting to get out, rather than necessarily indicative of a return to an age of barbarity.

Nor should we be surprised at such a reaction. Consider, in our own time, the kind of hostile critical reaction that greeted, for instance, Sarah Kane’s Blasted – of which Nick Curtis wrote in the Evening Standard (19 January, 1995), “the final scenes are a systematic trawl through the deepest pits of human degradation”; or earlier Edward Bond’s Saved, the first night of which was recalled by one audience member in ways that make the link between past and present even more telling:

I’ve always felt the stories of the opening of Ibsen’s Ghosts and the first performance of Stravinsky’s The Rites of Spring to be exaggerated romance […]. That night in the Royal Court I came to believe in their veracity. There was verbal interruption and abuse in the course of the play, and there was the odd
physical punch-up at [the] interval and afterwards. (Richard Wherrett, qtd. in Hay 1)

So, we are faced with a whole series of famous theatrical moments that, if only metaphorically, can be described as ‘revolutionary,’ and that were and are associated by what we would probably wish to describe, as conservative critics, as barbarous, “a systematic trawl through the deepest pits of human degradation,” or whatever. These ‘hot spots’ will have many and differing reasons for their appearance, and may find no more specific a definition than that which sociology can offer for revolution itself, as an over-determined phenomenon. Nor will the moment necessarily be marked by a single event, as it then appeared to be in 1956, but really was not, with Osborne’s Look Back in Anger. And certainly, there were many critics who found this play offensive, though not in the Sarah Kane league. Now, there may be theatre audiences who still have such a reaction to Blasted; it is just possible that there are those who have such a reaction to Saved; but Ubu Roi, The Rites of Spring and Ghosts? I don’t think so. As I claim in my essay “The Development of British Mainstream Theatre 1945-1979,” “yesterday’s avant-garde is tomorrow’s mainstream.” In other words, we could construct a simplistic model predicated on the notion that what causes offence at a given moment will be accepted later. Thus the shock of the word “bloody” in G.B. Shaw’s Pygmalion will become by the 1950s the musical My Fair Lady with Eliza’s loud appeal to the jockey at Ascot racecourse to “shift your bloomin’ arse” meeting only with superior smiles from the stalls audience.

It is in this sense that Mark Ravenhill has acknowledged a debt of gratitude to Sarah Kane for weathering a tirade of abuse that allowed for the acceptance of his own work in a smoother manner. David Hare’s character Arthur summed up the way in which history brings about changes in sensibility in his play Teeth ’n’ Smiles (1975): “One day it’s a revolution to say fuck on the bus. Next day it’s the only way to get a ticket.”

Of course, Hare’s character is actually referring to Cambridge University in the late 1960s, but it is not difficult to see that the claim has a far larger potential range of reference. Although, as it happened, saying “fuck” was not the way to get a ticket for the Ravenhill play: it was nec-
necessary to apply to the Royal Court box office for a ticket for “the shopping play.” However, Hare’s construction allows for the assertion of something much larger than a simple shifting audience sensibilities process. Its implication is not that what was forbidden one day becomes accepted the next: rather that there is an essential relationship between the two events that has its roots in the dangerous, taboo, or whatever essence of what I have called, not entirely for the sake of convenience, an avant-garde.

Earlier Symons had touched upon yet another possible model of development. He had written of the intention of Jarry’s *Ubu* to “be a sort of comic antithesis to Maeterlinck; as the ancient satiric play was at once a pendant and an antithesis to the tragedy of its time.” By ‘antithesis’ here, Symons means little more than ‘in conscious opposition to,’ but if we take the term and use it in its more properly dialectic context, we might find a construction of *Ubu* in terms of a synthesis, rather than an antithesis. Let me take an example of the process from a little later, the context this time being genuinely revolutionary.

After the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, there was an immense outpouring of ground-breaking work. It did not, of course, come entirely out of the blue, and theatrical activity prior to the revolution could be seen as in parallel with, supportive of or, even, a part of the agency of the revolution. However, to take but one example: Mayakovsky’s *Mystery Bouffe*, directed by and, to a considerable extent, the creation of Meyerhold. Without considering it in any proper detail, it is comparatively easy to observe that the piece derives from two related – but frequently opposed – performance traditions: that, as its title suggests, of the re-enactments of the Old Testament and Gospel narratives and, in this case, particularly that of Noah’s Flood; and the more straightforwardly popular performance practices drawn from the circus, slapstick and other physical manifestations. Again, crudely, the first can be allied with a conservative *status quo*, the second with more potentially radical and, certainly, proletarian, activity. Here, the two elements can be regarded as thesis and antithesis, and the revolutionary work – and I here use the term ‘revolutionary’ without apologies, the play qualifying in terms both of its subject matter and in the novelty of its form – the new revolutionary work, the synthesis.
I realise that in evoking the notion of a dialectical model of development, I can be only too easily tempted into a simplistic empirical demonstration of its workings. My example from Soviet Russia may well be just that. Obviously, there were more than just two straightforwardly identifiable forces involved. However, the general tenor of the argument holds good. A process of fusion can be seen to have taken place.

There is, though, a clear difference between the example I have just cited, where it would not be unreasonable to discover a working model of Marxist dialectics, with the triadic relationship pointing always forward to the revolution and to the revolutionary: a clear difference between that and the overall development of post-war British theatre where, if a dialectical process can be evidenced, it is one that might be thought to turn Marx’s dialectics on its head just as Marx had done to Hegel’s in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. “The Marxists have shown us how to change the world,” a member of the liberal mainstream might argue, “but our job is to analyse it.”

The terms of this relationship can be constructed in a number of different, though related, ways. Here is the playwright Howard Brenton drawing on situationist theory to present a more vivid account. It comes from his *Magnificence* of 1973, the most important, if not the best, political play of the early 70s. Jed, the terrorist figure, describes a moment from his past, a moment that had significantly taken place in an arena of public performance, specifically a cinema:


And there was this drunk in the front row. With a bottle of ruby wine. And did he take exception to the film, he roared and screamed. Miss Baker above all, came in for abuse. Something about her got right up his nose.

So far up, that he was moved to chuck his bottle of ruby wine right through Miss Baker’s left tit.

The left tit moved on in an instant, of course. But, for the rest of the film, there was that bottle shaped hole.

(With a jab of his finger.)
Clung. One blemish on the screen. But somehow you couldn’t watch the film from then.

Jed wishes to advance this series of events as a vindication of his deployment of situationist theory – that the spectacle can be disrupted –

And so thinks... The poor bomber. Bomb ‘em. Again and again. Right through their silver screen. Disrupt the spectacle. The obscene parade, bring it to a halt! Scatter the dolly girls, let advertisements bleed... Bomb ‘em, again and again! Murderous display. An entertainment for the oppressed, so they may dance a little, take a little warmth from the sight. Eh? (Brenton 52)

However, as Brenton well knew, the process works in two ways. The film continues, affected but not destroyed; the oppositional strategy can be contained. That this sense of the possibility of an ideological movement in two opposing directions should be manifested in this key passage is particularly significant in that it is the most overt deployment of situationist theory in a play that started life apparently embracing the ‘alternative’ politics of the late 1960s but concludes with a clear rejection of them.

The point can be further illuminated by reference to Point Blank Theatre’s 2004 production of Operation Wonderland, a play that deliberately looks back to Magnificence, and in which the disruption of the spectacle is made explicitly (and without the arguable ambiguity of Brenton’s play) to connect with the reconstruction of a fresh consumerist spectacle. In a world in which the Disney Park-like Wonderland comes to stand as a metaphor for the entire contemporary consumerist and programmed state, a worker in the theme park plans to blow up the entire thing. His very name, Jed, is a deliberate recall of Brenton’s play, and he is rapidly disabused by a co-worker:

At the end of the day you blow a fucking great hole where Wonderland used to be and they’ll fill it with remembrance popcorn and flickering star lights and shrines where blue fairies work around the clock to heal broken hearts and shattered limbs... They’ll let off a thousand red star balloons in memory of the dead and clean up on sympathy and compliance across the world. Christ, Jed, that’s if anyone even believes that the explosion is real. They’ll edit the highlights and slap them in a promotional feature... One spectacular simulation of terror that’ll have them queuing for years. (Tomlin 67)
It is not, then, that the act of violent opposition – whether it be political or cultural activity - has to be opposed for the good of the status quo or, to put it in its cultural context, the mainstream. Rather, that the status quo, the mainstream, depends for its very survival on the fact of that opposition. The smashing of the spectacle becomes an essential part of the spectacle and of its perpetuation. For, without the threat of the new, of a freshly constituted avant-garde, the mainstream would wither and die, as the British theatre was in severe danger of doing prior to the events at the Royal Court Theatre, the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, and elsewhere, in the second half of the 1950s. As in Operation Wonderland, so in the real world – whatever that difference might be – there has to be a perceived and identifiable threat to order to necessitate the increased surveillance proceedings, the increased intervention, activities that are in the larger common good. And if you were to make connections between this model and recent events involving fictitious weapons of mass destruction and the invasion of Iraq, this would be scarcely coincidental.

For the mainstream theatre has a political as well as a cultural function: indeed, ideologically, the two areas can not be separated. The process of absorption, assimilation, or whatever, can be seen most easily in the world of rock and associated music, where the continuing advancement of technology makes that process of bringing, say, a watered-down version of punk into the mainstream chart arena much quicker than for other cultural mediums; but that same technology is then available to a next generation of as-it-were punk rebels to make their own new statement, a new statement than can then again be taken up and made suitable for mass commercial consumption. This is, of course, a very particular example and one, furthermore, that can only be seriously considered post the development of a mass popular culture that can increasingly be defined in pan-global capitalist terms. The situation is not always or automatically as equitable when discussing theatre. What is so essentially different is the historical context: the contrast between a theatre bent on serving the cause of the revolution without – at least at that time – any reference to external market forces, and a modern theatre that is caught between the twin economic imperatives of public funding and more straightforward market forces. Now, I am aware that
the dichotomy is not quite as simple as this, and that market forces do in fact impact on the subsidised arena, that area most associated with the creation of an avant-garde, as well as on the non-subsidised. So that when a popular and populist musical revival of *My Fair Lady* opens at the National Theatre, it is to the mutual benefit of both sectors, the National Theatre deriving considerable income from the transfer to the commercial theatre; and in turn the commercial theatre, in this instance the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, being guaranteed a sure-fire, long-running income spinner without any of the financial risks attendant on putting such a mammoth venture into rehearsal for themselves.

And this is, of course, the real difference between my example from the Soviet theatre and the situation in modern and contemporary British theatre. Where the former had been politically driven, the latter is shaped by the forces of capital. So, to revert to my previous invocation of the spectacle, the more usual version of the dialectical relationship is one in which it is the thesis and not the antithesis that appears to offer the serious possibility of change. It is the function of the mainstream to produce a synthesis by essentially defusing the political (that is to say, oppositional, confrontational, etc) potential of the current avant-garde.

Let me briefly illustrate the point with reference to the man who has been easily the most successful contemporary British playwright – Alan Ayckbourn. His career in the theatre actually began in 1957, just two years after the first British production of Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, and one year after Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*, and the first visit to London of Brecht’s Berliner Ensemble. I have written elsewhere about the tangled relationship between these three conflicting versions of avant-garde theatrical strategy, and will not elaborate on it here.¹

But Ayckbourn was, himself, working in an extremely unusual theatrical environment: the theatre-in-the-round at Stephen Joseph’s Library Theatre at Scarborough. From what is usually thought of as a key moment in the history of the postwar theatrical avant-garde Ayckbourn was, then, employed in just about every capacity, including eventually that of playwright. He embarked on it with a very good working knowl-

¹ Cf., for example, Bull, “Looking Back at Godot.”
edge of what would be acceptable to an English seaside holiday audience (the Library Theatre only being active in the summer months then), and furthermore with an acute sense of the battle-ground around him. He recalled how Stephen Joseph relied on him to “keep his box office afloat” whilst his colleague David Campton was allowed to develop what he called “his less commercial style” (qtd. in Watson 36). What this less commercial style amounted to was a key part in creating what was then known as “the comedy of menace,” with Pinter amongst its early members, a style and a mode drawn from the European absurdist tradition.

It comes as little surprise that as Ayckbourn began to develop as a playwright, he should find himself attracted to absurdism as a lens through which to observe the domestic world that was to preoccupy him so much. His first play under his own name, *Mr Whatnot*, came in 1963. On its transfer to London the following year, *The Times* reviewed it under the heading “Theatre of Ridiculous.”

I have talked in *Stage Right* of the way in which absurdism as it permeated Eastern European theatre took on a more sinister mode, the invaded rooms being threatened by representatives of political control. But even in Britain, early examples displayed strong elements of the oppositional: consider, for instance, Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* and, obviously, plays such as *The Lunatic View* and *Four Minute Warning* (both 1960, the generic sub-title of the former, “A Comedy of Menace,” being subsequently appropriated to describe this particular branch of absurdism), the work of Ayckbourn’s colleague David Campton. However, fairly quickly the stridently anti-bourgeois (and in the case of Campton at least more generally anti-establishment) stance was softened by the warm embrace of a well-made play tradition that had supposedly been killed off by the late 1950s ‘new wave.’ And in this move, no-one was more important than Ayckbourn.

Ayckbourn’s roots were in traditional British theatre – the world of drawing-room comedies, farces and crime thrillers – and the obvious contemporary avant-garde threat to this version of domestic representation was the theatre of the absurd. In Ayckbourn’s hands the well-made

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2 On this, see John Russell Taylor. But also note Taylor’s qualification of the sense of its ‘fall’ in his conclusion.
play tradition of, in particular, the drawing-room comedy gathered in to itself the potentially opposing forces of absurdism, and the reviving frisson of elements of an avant-garde theatre. In so doing, he effectively reconstructed a genre in such a way as to reanimate it and to ensure its perpetuation.

The timing is significant. His first real breakthrough came with *Relatively Speaking* in 1968, at exactly the same moment as the generation of playwrights that I have written about in *New British Political Dramatists* – Brenton, Edgar, Griffiths, Hare, McGrath, etc. – embarked on what looked increasingly like a concerted attempt to take over British theatre. So, if we recall that in 1976 the first especially commissioned play to be performed in the new National Theatre complex in London was Howard Brenton’s *Weapons of Happiness*, then it should also be remembered that within one year the first Ayckbourn play, *Bedroom Farce*, was being directed there by Peter Hall. There could scarcely be a more pointed example of the sense that a struggle for possession of the National and the major subsidised arenas was underway. Brenton had seen his occupation of the theatre as a conscious invasion of mainstream territory, talking of the production as “an armed charabanc […] parked within the National walls” (qtd. in Morley). In contrast, Ayckbourn expressed surprise that Peter Hall should have invited this “rather jolly play” (qtd. in Watson 113) into the same theatre space. That the Ayckbourn play, rather than the Brenton, should go on to become the very first transfer from the National to London’s commercial West End makes the significance of the ideological division the more apparent.

As Ayckbourn’s career progressed, we can trace a continued assault on the conventions of the domestic comedy. The almost constant given was that an audience was offered at the outset a seemingly traditional set that would later reveal a usage that defied its supposed straightforwardness. For example, in *How the Other Half Loves* (1970) the single set incorporated furniture from two different rooms (“smart modern reproduction” for that of the boss and his wife, and “more modern, trendy and badly looked after” for a lesser employee and his wife), a single set on which, in the play’s defining moment, two separate dinner parties, both involving yet another couple even lower down the pecking order, held on consecutive evenings take place simultaneously. Or later, in
1979, in *Taking Steps* the action took place in a one-storied house made to act as a two-storied house in the narrative; whilst in his National Theatre premiere, *Bedroom Farce*, events moved between three bedrooms in three different houses all of which were placed alongside each other on stage.

To these we can add many more: *Absurd Person Singular* (1972), with three consecutive Christmas parties set in the kitchens of three separate houses – a strange twist on “kitchen-sink drama”; or *The Norman Conquests* (1973), where the complete narrative can only be pieced together by attending three different self-contained plays running in the same time dimension but situated in three adjoining locations. What all these various staging tactics insist upon is two-fold. Firstly, through the central placement and deployment of the house, they argue for the supremacy of the domestic unit, the nuclear family, etc. But secondly, through the differing destabilisations of the house, they predicate an uncertainty about the efficacy of the family unit. For, indeed, his comedies are littered with unhappy wives, disgruntled husbands and marriages that would frankly be better broken.

It is not only that this is a reconfiguration of the use of the room that draws from both the mainstream tradition of the well-made play and the avant-garde mode that opposed it. It specifically denies, in its reconstruction of the mode, any larger political resonance; other, that is, than an intense interest in the minute workings of rank and status in the English middle classes (matter close to the hearts of its audiences), and a general sensibility that gestures towards feminism without ever moving its female characters beyond the role of victims. These are individual disasters, tragedies if you will, and if they suggest that the institution of marriage is fraught with difficulties, and the very real possibility of unhappiness, then it is only the presentation of the argument and not the argument itself that is novel. It was only later that Ayckbourn, as a result of his experience of the Thatcher years, began to consciously politicise his use of the set in ways that never moved him beyond a liberal democratic stance but, as a result, began the slow erosion of his position as chief reanimator of the mainstream and chief subverter of the avant-garde.
In 1983 he had already offered an allegorical state of the nation play, *Way Upstream*, in which the ship of state drifts under disputed leadership towards Armageddon Bridge: and in 1987, working from Thatcher’s infamous rejection of the concept of society and the supremacy of family, he wrote and produced *A Small Family Business* set in a single multi-occupied house at the National Theatre. Although he has continued through illness to produce new work, from this point his significance in the nation’s theatre was beginning to fade; for, not only were the 1980s most notable for new writing by young women writers addressing feminist and quasi-feminist issues – something that Ayckbourn sought to come to terms with in his 1985 play *Woman in Mind* – but a new avant-garde was preparing to up the stakes once more. Usually dated from the first production of Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995), its first stirrings are actually much earlier but, like so many culturally ‘hot’ moments before, it created a critical furore and, to a lesser extent, public controversy. In a way the very title of Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking* (1996) says it all: the desire to shock is incorporated with the necessity for consumption. Once again, the mainstream would re-group, take from the opposition what was necessary for perpetuation. That in so doing it would take with it some of the shock tactics of the latest ‘new wave’ is, as always, an essential part of the exercise.

That the new mainstream product should bring with it at least something of the discomfort of its host is essential, but just as *Ubu Roi* no longer retains its power to shock, so too things move on elsewhere. Peter Hall offered Ayckbourn a National production as a result of being persuaded to attend a performance of his *Absurd Person Singular*. Ayckbourn records the director’s reaction thus: I think he was quite impressed: he found it quite dark, and more interesting than I think he suspected it might be” (qtd. in Watson 160). Eighteen years later, the then Artistic Director, Richard Eyre, invited Patrick Marber to present his first play *Dealer’s Choice* (1995) at the National. Like its successor, *Closer* (1997), it won the annual *Evening Standard* award for best comedy. There is not space enough to elaborate the point but what a comparison of the two plays would reveal is the extent to which *Dealer’s Choice* differs from *Closer* in that the latter is far more obviously drawing from the shock tactics of the latest manifestation of the avant-garde.
What it would not so immediately reveal is the extent to which Closer, like Absurd Person Singular before it, is a play, currently perceived of as being in possession of a degree of ‘darkness,’ that will be embraced into a mainstream theatre, ready, in the due course of time, to be replayed – like Ayckbourn’s play - as a no longer disturbing satire on the sexual mores of its time.

Works Cited

Subtractive Forms and Composite Contents: Martin Crimp’s *Fewer Emergencies*

In recent years London audiences have had the chance to witness Martin Crimp’s more cryptic writing on stage at the Royal Court Theatre on two occasions: In 2002 the short piece *Face to the Wall* opened at the main, Downstairs, venue, while in 2005 *Fewer Emergencies* was presented at the more intimate Upstairs theatre. This production included *Fewer Emergencies, Face to the Wall*, with which it was originally published in 2002 but not staged at the time, as well as the premiere of a text called *Whole Blue Sky*. In print each of these texts is shorter than fifteen pages, while their stage duration is approximately twenty minutes or less. In all three pieces the time and place are unspecified and the characters unnamed. The way in which the plots unfold is equally unconventional, as the characters do not experience any of the events that are recounted on stage. Instead, they simply narrate, exploring versions of a contemporary reality marked by class struggle, racial conflict and outbursts of violence. In this paper I will discuss this collective version of *Fewer Emergencies* tracing the political nature of the play, which rests with the use of techniques of estrangement and alienation that more than compensate for the lack of overt shock tactics.

My title calls the play ‘subtractive’ in terms of its form. I mean to say by this that in this text Crimp removes elements that have come to be taken for granted in the theatre, as he deducts something from character development, establishment of a locale, or even linearity of plot. The text marks a distinctive turn towards theatrical minimalism, which ultimately works to render the play highly effective on different levels.
Therefore, I will begin with a clarification of the term ‘political’ in terms of this specific play, placing it in the wider context of contemporary political theatre. Following from this, I will refer to ‘estrangement’ or ‘defamiliarisation’ and ‘alienation’ or ‘distanciation’ rooted in the formalist and Marxist traditions respectively, so as to trace the ways in which these concepts or effects coalesce in Crimp’s play. My references to the play in performance will concentrate on the Royal Court 2005 production, directed by James Macdonald.

Speaking of subtractive forms and composite contents I am examining the ways in which a play, elliptical in terms of its form and notably distanced from its subject matter, manages to present before spectators a landscape of contemporary society and politics so complete that no other naturalistic or social-realist play measures up to it. However, I wish to clarify what the term ‘political’ denotes when employed to describe Fewer Emergencies. To suggest that a play is political, when it comes to Crimp, indicates that it steers clear of agitprop, verbatim theatre or docudrama, while still offering incisive critique. Although the text makes statements and assumes an ideological stance, there is a significant degree of impediment of perception. This necessitates the spectators’ conscious involvement and a process of decoding rather than one of facile consumption of ideas.

In an article devoted to political theatre, critic Michael Coveney cites different examples of the genre, ranging from the most representative to the less obvious (Coveney n. pag.). According to Coveney, political or engaged theatre in Britain has become synonymous with Howard Brenton, David Edgar, David Hare and others (ibid.). This is the norm, which does not, routinely, incorporate a play like Fewer Emergencies. After all, as Crimp himself has suggested, “[. . .] what I’m trying to do is create art, so if I’m trying to write a play, first and foremost, is what I’m trying to do” (Theatrevoice n. pag.). However, he also adds, “I think that at the same time it’s impossible to avoid the radiation of current affairs” (ibid.).

A crucial point of Coveney’s is that political theatre must not reduce itself to being part of the dominant theatrical institutions (Coveney n. pag.). The term ‘institutions’ remains open for examination and I would define it as relating purely to the form and content of what the wide-
spread notion of political theatre represents today, at least within the United Kingdom. As I previously suggested, this tends to be verbatim theatre, docudramas and social realism. *Fewer Emergencies*, with its exploratory and even experimental form is clearly differentiated from the norm through its unfamiliar representational mode. Therefore, when I use the term ‘political’ to refer to *Fewer Emergencies* I am indicating a play which incisively handles current affairs while maintaining its artistic quality and boldly experimenting with form in order to achieve a greater impact on audiences. If political theatre has taken a turn towards the mainstream through the pursuit of shock, then *Fewer Emergencies* remains unorthodox because it operates through aftershock, lingering in the spectators’ minds long after the performance is finished.

Before proceeding I find it useful to consider how *Fewer Emergencies* was received by the critics when it was staged in London in 2005. Different reviewers found echoes between the subject matter of the play and contemporary, real-life events, such as the Columbine or Dunblane school-shooting tragedies (Gardner, Marlowe, Cavendish 1146-47). It is even suggested that the characters’ ambiguous tone during their narration might be that of “an official inquiry into a Columbine-style massacre” (Marlowe 1146). The disquieting nature of the play is commented upon by most critics and attributed to its topical affinities. This is also interestingly phrased: “perhaps Crimp is dramatizing the eerie feeling you sometimes have that someone out there is imagining your life,” writes John Peter (1146). Or even: “[…] [Characters] talk in a disturbingly detached manner of a world characterized by both public and private acts of violence” (Marlowe 1146). This parallel between domestic and social aggression is a crucial element of the play since, as in other plays by Crimp, acts of private violence function as mirrors for the brutalities of the outside world. Finally, as one reviewer observes, in *Fewer Emergencies* “contemporary politics are concealed but still bubble under the surface” (Jones 1147).

In order to address the importance of form in Crimp’s theatre, we must understand his position in 20th and 21st century playwriting, which, I would argue, is generally characterized by separation or division. This analogy is more effective if we conceive it visually. In this case, we could imagine two columns: One of these would bear the designation ‘artistic’
theatre and the other 'socially engaged' theatre. In the first group there would be names such as Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard and so on. In the opposite column we would find David Hare, Howard Brenton, Edward Bond and others of a similar approach. The problem with groupings such as this, however, is that they do not account for crossover activities. That is, if we were to acknowledge the indisputable existence of two strictly diverging playwriting traditions, we would utterly fail to provide explanations for plays and playwrights that seem to use both traditions. We would also not be able to account for the work of those playwrights who are not easily 'categorisable'. For example, where exactly would we classify the plays of Howard Barker, Caryl Churchill, Mark Ravenhill, Sarah Kane and, of course, Martin Crimp? I conclude, therefore, that although it is an illusion to deny the current acceptance of two playwriting traditions, it is also a grave oversight not to recognize their more than frequent convergence. It is only by acknowledging this fact that we can fully and convincingly account for the work of playwrights whose writing cannot possibly carry a designated label, especially since it continues to be evolving in different directions, remaining challenging for audiences in the United Kingdom and overseas.

Despite being a recent work, Fewer Emergencies has enjoyed a rich staging record. Face to the Wall, one of the three pieces, was first featured as an accompaniment to Jon Fosse's Nightsongs at the Royal Court Theatre Downstairs in 2002. Fewer Emergencies was not staged in London in 2002 and remained only a printed text in Britain until 2005, when James Macdonald's production took place with the addition of Whole Blue Sky. Before this, however, Face to the Wall and Fewer Emergencies were staged in Paris, at the Théâtre National de Chaillot in 2004 (Paquien 14). The same year saw another production at the Schaubühne in Berlin, this time only of Fewer Emergencies (Weniger Notfälle, Schaubühne n. pag.). After the 2005 Royal Court production of Whole Blue Sky, Face to the Wall and Fewer Emergencies as the collective Fewer Emergencies, a production of this version followed in early 2006 in Vienna, at the Kasino am Schwarzenbergplatz (Weniger Notfälle).
were also stagings in Athens, Glasgow and Melbourne later in 2006.\(^1\) There is, indeed, a justification as to why \textit{Fewer Emergencies} transcends cultural borders with such ease and it is purely owing to the political topicality of the play, as it deals with concerns whose urgency is not locally bound. By negotiating issues such as social class, civic repression and aggression, as well as urban conflict/rioting, the play asserts its relevance.

However, my primary focus for this paper is the unconventionality of form and, consequently, I am interested not only in what the play negotiates, but in how it goes about doing so. The three playlets in \textit{Fewer Emergencies} are arranged in narrative dialogue between a small number of unnamed characters, three in \textit{Whole Blue Sky} and \textit{Fewer Emergencies} and four in \textit{Face to the Wall}. In the London production the actors, two female and one male, with the addition of a second male actor in \textit{Face to the Wall}, remained on stage throughout, simply changing positions on the set. The latter was markedly minimal and consisted of white desks and chairs, the only objects inside the white cube which the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs was made to resemble. The plasticity of the space allowed this theme to be expanded to the seating area of the auditorium. Built amphitheatrically, this was also white, facing the actors directly opposite, separated from the stage only by the slightest of distances, which was diminished by the sense of flowing space enhanced through the colour scheme.

Written in the form of brainstorming, or perhaps, recollection of experiences, the play features events which are described, rather than occur on stage. The use of the simple present as the vehicle for narration throughout the text creates a temporal ambiguity: The tense can be used to denote present, imagine the future and/or give a vivid account of the past and we cannot determine whether the characters are speaking of actualities, impending scenarios, or events recounted as having transpired. We are also unsure as to whether the characters are building the frame of a film or even a play, or, indeed, whether they are exploring the facets of a story taken from the daily news in an attempt to rationalise it.

It is these artistic devices at work in Crimp’s text that are crucial for cultivating defamiliarisation.

Rather than referring to Shklovsky’s “Art as Technique” which has famously articulated his position on the matter of estrangement, I wish to consider his brief articles which focus directly on the theatre. Language, in terms of the utterance and its carried meanings, is the key factor for estrangement in Fewer Emergencies and it is interesting to trace the extent to which this is also a consideration for Shklovsky. In his texts, Shklovsky argues against the “decline” of the word, writes about the effectiveness of a theatre which may not be characterized by “movement in general,” but thrives on “verbal dynamic” and suggests: “The word, the self-sufficient word, is dear to the people” (Shklovsky 85). From this perspective, speech is prioritised and language is elevated to the position of the most crucial element in a text. As Shklovsky maintains:

Every art has its structure – that which transforms its material into something artistically experienced. This structure finds its expression in various compositional devices: in rhythm, phonetics, syntax and plot. A device is something that transforms non-aesthetic material, imbuing it with form, into a work of art. (86)

In Fewer Emergencies sentences are intricate, with phrases being initiated by one character and completed by another. Still, the audience does not receive this as merely unmindful chatter, but, rather, as a well-tuned performance. The detailed narration and copiously selected words demand the spectators’ attention, as nothing of what is described is presented on stage, but exists as visualisation in the audience’s imagination. Therefore, the carefully selected language is imbued with the use of diligently orchestrated speech, stylised as appropriate so as not to blindly mimic natural conversation, but to maintain its artistic direction, inviting the audience to demystify the spectacle. Regarding form and content in the theatre, Shklovsky writes: “[…] the artist always proceeds from the device conditioned by the material” (93). The ‘material’ in Fewer Emergencies is the depiction of individual compromise and self-commodification before capitalism and social class; this is where the political identity of the text lies. The device is the one examined above and the effect on a theatre audience is one of estrangement.
Shklovsky’s aforementioned proposition indeed seems to be echoed in Brecht’s essay “On Experimental Theatre.” Here, Brecht provides the argument for the development of an innovative theatre, which will redefine the social role of art, inviting the audience to become more engaged with the play, and ultimately, more engaged on a civic level (130-35). For Brecht, experimental theatre is not to be regarded as a fixed, stale form, but as something to be constantly revisited and amended (ibid.). Only then can the alienation effect be achieved, with the audience being constantly surprised, rather than knowing what to expect from the avant-garde and after a certain point accept it passively, bereft of any judgement. Debating the pertinence and role of the theatre in contemporary societies in another related text, Brecht argues that “[…] the present-day world can be reproduced […] in the theatre, but only if it is understood as being capable of transformation” (275). There seems to be, therefore, a cause and effect relationship: If the play aims at alerting the audience to a stagnant social landscape, it must do so by employing unexhausted forms in order to communicate the idea that change is truly possible. Locating the actual influence of Brecht’s theory today, Elizabeth Wright suggests that “[…] Brecht’s enormous effect has to be seen on the level of a continuing formal invention, […] particularly as regards the question of stage dialogue, traditionally the raison d’être of drama” (113-14). This suggestion is certainly relatable to Crimp’s play, which I will proceed to explore in more detail.

The first piece that we see on stage in Fewer Emergencies is Whole Blue Sky, which explores the story of a woman who, after marrying and becoming a mother at a young age, finds herself living the suburban stereotype of affluence, fulfilling all the necessary conditions for “A picture of happiness” (Crimp 10). This construction of familial bliss, however, does not correspond to reality, as the marriage is only maintained by convenience, the child is afflicted by psychological problems, the woman is repressed and the man develops an unspecified suspicious activity of some kind, extramarital or illegal, since he “gets up to things” as the text enigmatically mentions (ibid.). The following extract relates the woman’s reasons for staying in her marriage:

2 So you’re saying she’s still there?
1 Still where?
Vicky Angelaki

2 She hasn't left the house?
1 Left? No. Why? Because of the things he gets up to? Why? No. Why should she? Look at the floors. Look at the walls. Look at the way the dining table extends and extends. On summer evenings it extends and extends right through the French doors and out under the Blue Atlas Cedar. Small lamps hang in the branches and everybody's laughing: the doctors and nurses, the butchers and the musicians who have become their friends: work friends, boating friends, friends from school – parents – traders and craftspeople with exceptionally rare skills – the very same people in fact who designed and built then polished with their own hands this ever-lengthening table where everybody sits under the blue tree and laughs in a boisterous but good-natured way – I stress good-natured way – about all those things that make life worth living. Of course she's still there. Of course she is.
1 Leave? Why should she? (Crimp 13)

The lifestyle of the couple, as the extract from the play demonstrates, is representative of middle-class or even *nouveau-riche* attitudes. The narration begins with brief sentences and continues with increasingly longer ones, relying on metaphor. When spectators hear of “this ever-lengthening table” (Crimp 13), they do not dismiss it as an actual object, but understand it as an allusion to the commodification of the individual by the goods-producing system which s/he believes exists to serve his/her needs. What *Whole Blue Sky* is suggesting is that, in fact, the system operates in the opposite way. When the spectators learn that the people who sit at the table are the same ones who worked in building it, they are invited to see through the misconception that the acquisition of commodities comes at only a financial price. In a Brechtian sense, what Crimp’s distanciation accomplishes here is to present the circle of production and consumption under in different light and through an innovative method, so as to focus the audience’s attention on the reality of the situation. As Roland Barthes, who engaged with Brechtian representational techniques, might describe this effect in the context of this discourse, Crimp’s play unmasks “the spiritual contagion of economic alienation, whose final effect is to blind the very men it oppresses as to the causes of their servitude” (138). The detrimental side-effect of this ‘servitude’ is unhappiness, so when the audience, shortly after the extract quoted above is spoken on stage, hears the words “money”, “property” and “family” repeated as the ingredients of happiness (Crimp 15), the irony is abundant. The isolation and echoing of the words, placed
out of context, ultimately seeks to alienate the spectators’ customary perception of them. The quintessential effect of *Whole Blue Sky*, then, is the deconstruction of the widely projected idea of happiness as purchasable. The text ultimately works to invalidate the justification of sacrificing individuality for materialistic purposes.

When *Face to the Wall* begins after *Whole Blue Sky*, the only changes made are the actors’ stage positions and the light design: The previous piece opened in a cold neon blue, while this one begins with set and characters immersed in deep red. If *Whole Blue Sky* acquires its political identity by exposing and even attacking today’s class system, *Face to the Wall* and *Fewer Emergencies* ascertain their political nature by making more specific allusions to events that have shaken contemporary societies and which can be identified by an audience.

In *Face to the Wall* and *Fewer Emergencies* the alienation effect is established through a more tangible method and in discussing this I would like to refer to Terry Eagleton’s *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, so as to better understand this process. Here, Eagleton describes the theatre of distanciation in highly interesting terms:

> The play itself, far from forming an organic unity which carries an audience hypnotically through from beginning to end, is formally uneven, interrupted, discontinuous, juxtaposing its scenes in ways which disrupt conventional expectations and force the audience into critical speculation on the dialectical relations between the episodes. (61)

This proposition holds particular relevance to Crimp’s play as *Whole Blue Sky* sets the tone for a penetrating critique targeted at social class and then *Face to the Wall* and *Fewer Emergencies* become even more specific. *Face to the Wall* narrates the story of a school shooting, a shocking event painfully relevant to a contemporary audience’s reality. *Fewer Emergencies* speaks of a child locked alone inside a house while a riot is raging outside. Even though they are dramaturgically processed, these are issues that seem to be taken directly from front-page news, evidence of a society in crisis.

Returning to Eagleton’s observation, *Face to the Wall* and *Fewer Emergencies* adhere to the pattern of breaks in action and different art forms which combine to orchestrate an effect. In *Face to the Wall*, the
characters begin their narration from the moment the shooter enters the school:

1 Yes? says the receptionist, What can I do for you? How can I help you? Who did you want to see? Do you have an appointment?
2 He shoots her through the mouth.
1 He shoots her through the mouth and he goes down the corridor. (Crimp 25)

Later in the play the narrators focus not on the man’s criminal actions, but on his quotidian lifestyle, which seems entirely ordinary:

3 How’s his job?
1 His job is fine – well paid and rewarding.
3 And his wife?
1 Is charming and tolerant.
3 And how are his children?
1 His children are fine. […]
3 And how is his beautiful house?
1 Increasing in value daily – well constructed and well located – close to amenities – […]. (Crimp 28)

Opening with the graphic narration of the man’s violent outburst, Face to the Wall surprises spectators, who must process what is described as happening without being given a prior indication that this is what the narration is leading up to. That is, the piece begins with the crucial event rather than easing its way into it. Starting at the climax and following it with an anti-climax, Crimp’s text pursues a reverse order. This is a technique of establishing distanciation through form since it cancels the anticipated temporal order of the events narrated, negating the audience’s customary ways of viewing. Face to the Wall, therefore, deducts something from the form of the well-made play, but it more than compensates with its content.

That Face to the Wall is political is attested to not only by its thematic involvement with social class and the desperation and aggression which, in this case, go hand in hand with the bourgeois, but also by the fact that the terrifying expression of this angst is not entirely a matter of fiction, but one of reality. News of school massacres, carried out in different locations and by armed individuals of different social profiles, has been presented to the public with disturbing frequency during the last decade. In any case, the severity of the incidents that are alluded to in
the play seems to be dictating the formal method that is followed for their depiction: In the literal sense of the word there is not an actual depiction of the events, as, unlike much contemporary political theatre, Crimp does not resort to docudrama. There is no enactment, only visualisation in our mind’s eye, and this stems from the narration. Moreover, Crimp incorporates the use of song, through *Twelve-Bar Delivery Blues*. The first person singular in the song is a postman, who at one point in the narration merges with the shooter character. This is a representative segment from the song:

Woke up this morning
Heard my son call
Turned away from the window
Turned my face to the wall.
Daddy daddy, he said to me
Daddy daddy, I’ve BROUGHT YOU YOUR TEA.

Son, I told him,
Your poor daddy’s dead
There’s another person
Come to live in his head.
Son son, your daddy’s not well
Son son, your DADDY’S A SHELL. (Crimp 34f)

The postman, described as desperately miserable in his everyday life, decides by the end of the song that he has no choice but to make no deliveries that day (Crimp 35-36). In the London production the song was performed *a cappella* by the fourth, male, character, who only appeared in *Face to the Wall*. Therefore, through a leap in time, the text moves to the morning of the school shootings, shortly before they take place, conveying the mentality of the middle-class – man – turned – murderer through a blues song. This is of course in agreement with Eagleton’s mention of ‘different art forms’ in one and the same play. Crimp’s innovation rests with the use of the unexpected blues singing, a music style that suits the overall mystifying and subdued character of the performance, but also clashes with it as regards narrative form. The fact that the shooter’s innermost thoughts are presented through this song is particularly important. This is a seemingly simple, bare song. However, what it achieves is to present a complicated mental state
through a mode of narration that prevents the audience from dismissing such violent behaviour as a case of psychopathy. Once again, spectators are caught off-guard: They are forced to engage with the spectacle. Remaining passive is not an option or even a possibility. The audience is made to address and assess this disturbing incident, a direct side-effect of the internal malfunctions of ostensibly prosperous societies.

_Fewer Emergencies_, after which the whole play is named, is the last piece in order of performance and again, it is brimming with political topicality. Continuing the critique of social class, this text explores the catastrophic repercussions of barriers between social groups, depending on higher or lower income. Crimp has referred to Polly Toynbee’s book _Hard Work: Life in Low-Pay Britain_ in a discussion of the play and it is true that knowledge of this work illuminates _Fewer Emergencies_ in general and the specific playlet in particular. Briefly put, Toynbee’s book, researched through real life situations, relates the perspective of minimum wage earners facing social and financial struggles, concluding that the upwardly mobile and those at the bottom of the earning pyramid represent highly distinct social strata, far removed from each other. In the chapter which investigates housing segregation in the same London borough, Toynbee asserts: “In every big city rich and poor live […] close together yet far apart, managing to be almost unaware of each other in their parallel space” (19). This is a most salient observation when it comes to _Fewer Emergencies_. Here, the characters narrate the story of a young boy, perhaps the son of the family in _Whole Blue Sky_, or perhaps not. The boy is locked inside his house for safety, while his parents are enjoying a day of sailing. The family’s house is in a safe neighbourhood, where

1 Things are looking great. Things are improving. […] The trees are more established, they’ve kicked out the Mexicans, […] [and] the Serbs, people are finally cleaning up their own dog-mess, nice families are moving in.
2 Italians and Greeks?
3 Greeks, Italians, nice Chinese.
1 Nice Somalis, nice Chinese, really nice Kurds, really nice families who clean up their own dog-mess and hoover the insides of their cars. And what’s more they’ve identified the gene – no – correction – they’ve identified the sequence – that’s right – of genes that make people leave burnt mattresses outside their homes and strangled their babies.
This extract highlights the central concern in *Fewer Emergencies*, which, like *Hard Work*, comments on the changing face of societies, where the rise in income for certain categories in the work force has indicated a new phase of urban planning. This, in turn, might be considered a catalyst for the social and spatial ghettoisation of those with lower incomes. Issues such as this have, of course, generated consequences, such as protests and even rioting by members of the underprivileged groups, reported in the mass media. In *Fewer Emergencies*, a similar event seems to be unfolding in the quiet neighbourhood described above, while the boy is locked inside his house:

1 Cars are being – exactly – overturned and burnt. […]
2 I thought things were improving.

1 Things *are* improving – less rocks are thrown – less cars completely overturned – less shots fired – there are fewer emergencies than there used to be – but all the same, there’s an emergency on right now. It’s on right now. And I’m sorry to say that one of those shots came through the kitchen window and caught poor Bobby in the hip. (Crimp 46f)

When Bobby’s parents phone, he does not answer. They are worried, but they begin to sing so as to alleviate their concern. The song is only performed as music, begun by character number three with the remaining ones eventually joining in (Crimp 49). While the song continues, lights gradually fade. The characters resume their narration of Bobby’s experience and, eventually, darkness spreads inside the theatre. Voices are audible, but the audience can no longer see the stage or the actors and, soon after, the play concludes.

The political topicality of *Fewer Emergencies* necessitates a distancing technique, which will draw the spectators’ awareness to the severity of the situation. As in *Face to the Wall*, here, too, there is singing. On the climactic moment of the play, when the boy is trapped, the parents are blissfully ignorant and social order is being challenged, the audience is not offered catharsis, but a suspension of action and a feeling of uncertainty. This enhances alienation, as spectators are left to ponder on the events narrated and on their relation to everyday life, examining the root of such insurgence.
On the stage, this last piece resembled installation art. There was gentle music, a golden-green light and meticulous actor placement, with one female character now sat on the desk surface and the other two in more relaxed positions as well. Therefore, the atmosphere is not tense, but the events narrated are dramatic. Ultimately, the purpose of such methods is to juxtapose these elements, focusing the spectators’ attention on the issues negotiated on stage, achieving a lasting effect through a genuine engagement with the problematics of modern societies. Of course, audiences, as citizens, form an integral part of this reality.

To conclude, Martin Crimp’s Fewer Emergencies constitutes a true case study of innovative contemporary political theatre, achieving its political identity through its topicality and the enthralling way in which it handles matters of current affairs. I have argued that by not sacrificing the artistic for the political or vice versa, Fewer Emergencies employs techniques of estrangement in its form so as to achieve alienation in performance. The fact that before the beginning of all the texts in Fewer Emergencies Crimp only uses the adjective ‘blank’ to describe the time and place where they unfold is not a sign of detachment. As I have shown here, this spatiotemporal indication far from renders Fewer Emergencies non-referring when it comes to recognizable contemporary situations. On the contrary, the play maintains a strong link to reality. It does not, however, seek to represent it through verbatim theatre and, therefore, it pursues a more open form, although its content remains specific. The fact that Fewer Emergencies does not use the methods traditionally followed in political theatre, be that agitprop, shock techniques, or docudrama, does not reduce its political nature. In fact, this approach succeeds in refreshing the existing tradition and allowing new material to claim a position in the canon, thus preserving literary and artistic norms ever renewable and innovative rather than fixed and stale.

When, in 1998, a number of playwrights were asked which of their colleagues is best at making drama out of a crisis, Sarah Kane offered Martin Crimp’s name and supported her choice by saying: “His work doesn’t scream for attention, but he’s one of the few genuine formal innovators writing for the stage. He’s constantly refining his language to find more accurate theatrical expression, marrying rhythm and skill with real beauty. His precision compels” (Egan n. pag). Fewer Emergencies is
a prime example when it comes to the constant refinement of a technique for the purposes of greater precision, because Crimp’s theatre is far from vague. We need to subtract in order to become specific. The everyday must be ‘made strange’, so that it might be evaluated afresh, awarding sociopolitical reality the attention that it is properly due. The characters whose lives are narrated in the play seem to have leapt out of the statistics page: Steady employment, peaceful marriages, comfortable living and the average amount of children. Still, there is something dark, disquieting, aggressive and violent behind all this. There is something disturbing and dangerous and, as Fewer Emergencies seems to suggest, it could be brewing or even unfolding just as we sit in the theatre auditorium.

Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature


Kill the Author, Kill the Auteur:
Rebecca Prichard’s *Yard Gal*

The 20th century will remain in theatre history as the age of interminable experimentation with theatrical form on the page and the stage at an equal ratio. With the gradual autonomization of performance the old tension between author and director for control over the theatrical text has become a deadly but still unresolved struggle. Theorists and practitioners have been going round in vicious circles announcing deaths but also resurrections. Directors devise their own texts or adapt for the stage poems and narratives; playwrights stretch the dramatic text to its limits; performers promote the primacy of their own corporeal textuality.

In earlier years one could easily pinpoint the handful of writers who strove to burst open textual drama to theatrical metareality. The French surrealists, Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, Heiner Müller and others have been pioneers in that they imbued their writing with the complex dynamics and the conflicting tensions generated in the process of stage production and reception. In the meantime, the majority of dramatic writers continued to write in the relative isolation of the room. Today no such “innocent” insularity in playwrighting is permitted any longer. Lehmann’s influential *Postdramatic Theatre* has sent out an ominous warning “best not to ignore” (Etchells, qtd. in Lehmann 10). Ignore what? Performance has set its own rules for the stage and digital technology has invaded the bodied theatrical space. Writers are obliged to
respond to the new masters of the spectacle and antagonists of dramatic theatre if only for their own survival.

For the British stage of the late 1990s Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) perhaps best epitomizes the playwright’s attempt to readjust his/her role in today’s theatre situation by offering a set of scenarios with a number of uncast spoken lines to a “company of actors” to play with. Likewise, Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis* (1999) is an asymmetrical piece consisting of monological and dialogical units, poetic lines and lists of words and numbers in disarray, where the only segmentation is that of silences and where there are no clues as to number of actors or stage directions (with the exception of an ambiguous one-word parenthetical indication on p. 15: “looks”).

Such texts are clear in their readiness to accept and collaborate with the new working principles of postdramatic performance and the hyperstage. In my paper I want to talk about more ambivalent texts, which only pretend to be “postdramatic” by endorsing some of the new conventions of “immediacy” introduced by performance theatre and the logic of the electronic image. Is the new illusion of reality that such plays produce perceived by the audience or are the spectators caught in the game of virtual reality, to which they have been habituated by the media culture? If the latter is the final effect, does not this practice of simulation actually bring back the playwright as a powerful simulator/mythmaker; a virtual trickster of the stage?

As a case for study I am proposing Rebecca Prichard’s *Yard Gal*, a play that premiered to general critical acclaim at the Royal Court Theatre in 1998. The text was commissioned by the Clean Break company and was written after the writer spent several months at a women’s prison, where she conducted a theatre project with the female prisoners, listening to the women’s stories and helping them to adapt their own pieces for performance. Field work and workshops are frequent prerequisites of contemporary writing for the theatre but do not necessarily determine the form of the resulting playscript. Aleks Sierz, in *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, draws attention to the particular structure of the play and suggests affinities with Samuel Beckett, Caryl Churchill and Sarah Kane in its writing style and with Jerzy Grotowski, Augusto Boal and Peter Brook in its staging tactics (Sierz 226-28). Such cursory references may
be helpful on an introductory level but for the demanding reader they
rather blur the originality of Prichard’s stage strategies. In this respect,
an inquisitive glance at the London reviews of the time gives a better
overview of the play’s virtues and the degree of their critical apprecia-
tion.

Prichard actually conflates the dramatic with the staging aspect of
her text by inserting the performance process as the basic and pervasive
dramatic metaphor of her play. One could claim that experimental plays
like Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) and Stop-
pard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) have done this
before – which in a sense is true. However, in these by far earlier dra-
matic writings it becomes clear that the actors/characters are trapped in
the teleological structure of a pre-given text; that they are subject to the
dictatorship/tyranny of a writer/text (Artaud 124; Derrida 236). On the
contrary, the opening assumption in Prichard’s play is clearly post-
dramatic. Two performers, Boo and Marie, freed from any obligation to
a pre-arranged authorial or directorial scheme, get ready to present to
the audience episodes from their own harsh life experience as members
of the contemporary British underground youth culture.

According to Lehmann’s definition, postdramatic theatre does not
propose “a representation but an intentionally unmediated experience of
the real” (Lehmann 134). What happens during the performance is a
“self-presentation” or an “auto-transformation” of the performer (134
and 137). Earlier in the century and in a similar vein, Artaud (and his
explicator Derrida after him) stressed the uniqueness and non-
repetitiveness of the actor-audience somatic co-presence in the theatrical
event.

This condition precisely forms the setting of Prichard’s play: a total
collapse of the barrier between action in life and acting in the theatre as
performance. Boo and Marie’s presence on stage also “presences”1 recol-
clected fragments of their lived experience as they keep coaching and

1 Stanton B. Garner explicitly states that “Instead of presence, the theatre asks to
be approached in terms of presencing: theatrical phenomena are multiply embodied,
evoked in a variety of experiential registers, refracted through different (and some-
times divergent) phenomenal lenses” (Garner 43).
prompting each other to “tell the story” and to “do the play,” thus slipping interminably from narrating to showing and vice versa:

**Boo** Threse she had enuff tattoos. Pictures everytin’. I just have my name. Simple see ‘Boo’. My real names Bukola. But that’s what everyone calls me, ‘Boo’, see.

**Marie** Show them the one on your arse as well.

**Boo** Fuck you man. I ain’t sitting up here to be made a fool of you know.

**Marie** We sitting up here to tell a story innit.

**Boo** Don’t start ramping with me or I will just go.

**Marie** Tell them about Deanne. (Prichard 8, my emphasis)

This “presencing” takes on different forms. The predominant one is a pseudo-dialogue, very Beckettian in style, which camouflages a narrative given in alternating lines by the two protagonists directly to the audience, while occasional tag-questions to each other and short affirmations or negations assert the traditional dialogical form:

**Boo** Sabrina was kriss weren’t she.

**Marie** Yeah.

**Boo** She go out with like five men at once, and she tief the livin’ amount of clothes.

**Marie** She wear hipsters –

**Boo** Leggings –

**Marie** Halter tops with sequins –

**Boo** And she always look good innit.

**Marie** Yeah.

**Boo** She was skinny but all she eat was chips. Chips for –

**Marie** - Breakfast, chips at night.

**Boo** She was a chip.

**Marie** But her legs go right up to her bum din’t they.

**Boo** And higher. (Prichard 12)

Other formal features of the spoken text are long monological pieces (either internal asides or external narratives) addressed to the audience and letters, presumably written to each other but read out to the audience (in an epistolary form which possibly bears echoes from Pinter’s similarly structured *Family Voices*). The narrative discourse of the two girls is based on a free range of subject positions – and therefore, also, of potential impersonations on stage. This freedom of subjectivity is maintained mainly through an utmost fluidity in the use of personal and pos-
sessive pronouns which creates a constant shift in perspective and inter-subjective alliances:

**Marie** I took the piss out of your shoes on the first day of school. We always knew who the kids from care was at school, ‘cos they come in a big orange bus with ‘London Borough of Hackney’ on. And we used to throw shit at them and take the piss. But then me and Boo have a fight and we been best mates ever since.

**Boo** Yeah.

**Marie** Best mates from time.

**Boo** Yeah.

**Marie** We go everywhere together and we done everything together innit.

**Boo** Tha’s right. (Prichard 10)

Beyond the performative aspects of speech, theatricality is constituted on the sensory level through the following forms: on the level of acting, through the demonstration of simple movement, the impersonation of other (including each other’s) voices and the brief enactment of scenes in a Brechtian fashion; on the level of stage arrangement through six, fairly Beckettian, minimal changes in the position of the two chairs (the only props required) on which the protagonists sit throughout the performance. The spatial scheme is roughly designed as follows:

1. **Marie and Boo sit on stage staring at the floor avoiding the audience’s stare** (i.e. frontal position, E.S.). (Prichard 5)
2. **They drag the chairs further apart, and sit on them with their backs to each other.** (Prichard 29)
3. **Marie sits withdrawn, as Boo continues with the story.** (Prichard 36)
4. **Boo drags her chair slightly apart from Marie.** (Prichard 49)
5. **Marie and Boo sit opposite each other as if they were on a visit.** (Prichard 51)
6. **They face the audience again, sitting apart.** (Prichard 54)

It is remarkable how space and things seem to be at the absolute disposal of the characters/actors for arrangement and use. Boo and Marie handle the natural space they inhabit simultaneously as performance space just as they use the chairs both as functional everyday objects and as stage props. Additionally, all this mixed life-and-stage activity is framed by the performers’ changing moods; it depends on their eagerness or their reluctance to start, to sustain and to conclude the play and on their anxiousness to select the right episodes for presentation:

**Marie** Don’t start throwing a moody Boo.
Boo I ain’t.
Marie Don’t start showing me no bad face.
Boo Piss off you cow.
Marie Don’t start rampin’, we gotta do this play. Don’t even go there.
Boo Well tell it then, it’s your play, ‘yard gal’.
Marie Fuck you.
Boo Tell them who else is in the posse.
Marie Ask nicely.
Boo Tell them about Sabrina. (Prichard 11)

Apparently the characters/actors have taken full responsibility in a performance show, where their double involvement in affect and effect manifests the process of “self-presentation” and “auto-transformation” that Lehmann indicates as basic features of postdramatic theatre.

Whether in or out of role the performers appear to be in full command of the situation, both in terms of verbal utterance and stage action, presumably having done with all other external authoritarian intervention in their performance. Both author and director seem to have been killed. One can be reminded of the self-reflexive situation in Pirandello’s farcical Six Characters in Search of an Author and in Beckett's subtly ironic Catastrophe. However, in these plays the existence, albeit precarious, of author/director is acknowledged, within the text, in a witty metatheatrical game of struggle for authority. On the contrary, the working hypothesis in Prichard’s play is that these two arch-enemies of the actor’s liberty and power control have been evicted and authority has passed solely to the performers, who establish their own realm of domination. Sierz’s reading of the play marks “a Beckettian valediction” (228) in the ending lines, “Marie: Can we go now? Boo: Can we go?” (55). In my view, although the girls’ concluding utterances continue to have the existential ambience of Vladimir and Estragon’s last words at the end of Waiting for Godot, what gains priority in Prichard’s play is the desire of the performers to end the show; to release themselves from any further obligation to the audience – a gesture that attests to their complete power over the setting up and the running of the performance event.

Does Yard Gal then fulfill Artaud’s wish for the liberation of the theatre from those reptiles called playwrights (Artaud 45); from the theocracy of the written text, as Derrida further elaborated on the Ar-
taudian thesis (Derrida 235)? Furthermore, does the play also respond to the subsequent wish for the liberation of actors from the tyranny of directors, as articulated by critic Richard Hornby in retaliation to the cleansing proposal of Artaud and Derrida (Hornby 356f)? If one is prepared to step out of the boundaries and the charms of textual analysis and is also to inquire into the history of the play’s writing and stage production, how can one account for the paradox of a doubly parented text that claims anonymity and denies its origins: Rebecca Prichard’s authorship and Gemma Bodinetz’s direction? Crimp’s Attempts on Her Life does not disclaim author and director as existing entities; on the contrary, it assumes their presence and function for the realization of the play. The paradoxical – almost self-mocking – strategy in Prichard’s play is precisely that it pretends to eliminate these essential theatre paragons and that it skilfully camouflages itself as an experiential, unmediated performance piece – the equivalent of a TV reality show.

How did the audience react to this sham, stage “reality show”? Did they stay detached as in any pre-designed performance text that assumes some degree of emotional and/or mental cooperation on the part of the spectators but not necessarily their corporeal interaction? Testimonies from the first production indicate that several spectators got personally involved and addressed the characters/performers, giving them advice for their difficult situation (Sierz 228). Based on this evidence of an in situ actor-audience interaction, Sierz suggests Augusto Boal’s “forum theatre” as the underlying technique in the structuring of the play (227). However, the text, as conceived by the writer, does not make room for a “forum theatre” situation where audience members are invited to replace actors and do the scene again. If in actual performance Yard Gal turned somehow participatory in acting terms, this should not be seen as a preset authorial or directorial target but as pure spectatorial initiative, whose affective motive should be sought in the use of another related

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2 Most London reviews paid a high praise to the quality of Prichard’s writing and Bodinetz’ direction for the success of the Royal Court production.

3 Alastair Macaulay of the Financial Times was the only reviewer to sense fully the tight rope on which Prichard dexterously conducted the aesthetic form of the play and to appreciate the control of the result.
method. I would suggest as more befitting another technique that Boal used in his theatre system – the one he termed “rehearsal theatre” (as opposed to “spectacle theatre,” Boal 142). It seems to me that a preliminary workshop/rehearsal is the underlying assumption at the opening of *Yard Gal*, as the characters/performers – according to the introductory stage direction – “Psych each other out as to who will begin the play” (5) or as, further on, they discuss the aptitude of alternative stories in their show repertory for their audience. In another respect, one could also borrow conditionally yet another Boal term, “invisible theatre” (143), to qualify Prichard’s play since it intentionally suppresses its pre-arranged, closed form of representation.

Could, therefore, *Yard Gal* be seen as a true specimen of postdramatic theatre, of corpo/real presencing, or has Prichard found an efficient performative style, to resurrect - under pretext - herself as the author and Gemma Bodinetz as the director of the piece, compromising with an invisible position behind the scenes, which, after all, has always been the traditional position of both these theatre functionaries (author and director) since the theatre’s early beginnings? In an age when the immediacy of live performance pushes mediators of all kinds to non-existence and the visuality of the media is concomitantly based on the principle of elimination of the means of mediation, under this double exigency of “disappearance” Prichard has cleverly constructed her own version of authorial and directorial disappearance. Through this strategy of an illusionistic performance theatre author and director are not only rescued from death and oblivion but they come back, forcibly though invisibly, with a fully controlled political piece on the cruelty of the youth culture of the margins, whose strong impact on the audience is ensured by the faked state of non-mediation; the pretence of non-manipulation of the spectators.

In the early 1990s Adrian Page’s *The Death of the Playwright?* set out to explore “the extent to which the playwright can be resurrected” (3). Prichard has given a practical answer to the question by wittily playing upon the new conceptual and aesthetic principle, the contradictory duet of corporeality/virtuality, which helps her disguise as “postdramatic” an otherwise conventional three-act play, by masquerading its author and director as the phantoms of the scene.
Kill the Author, Kill the Auteur: Rebecca Prichard’s Yard Gal

Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature
In August 1991, the tension that had been gathering over the years between the majority of African Americans (mostly of Caribbean origin) and the minority of Hasidic “Lubavitcher” Jews in the Crown Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn exploded into race riots. The outbreak of hostilities was triggered by an accident in which a seven-year-old black boy was killed and his elder sister injured when a car traveling in the cavalcade of the Lubavitcher Grand Rebbe went out of control and hit the two children. Three hours later, a twenty-nine-year-old Hasidic student who was visiting from Australia was surrounded by a group of black youths and stabbed to death. What followed were four days and nights of serious rioting, and for years these incidents divided Crown Heights even more, especially ten years later, when the Federal Appeals Court ruled that the two African Americans who had been convicted in 1997 for having stabbed the Jewish student had not received a fair trial, because the judge had improperly manipulated jury selection on the basis of race and religion.

That an event of this kind that was to command national newspaper headlines for some time, quite apart from its many social repercussions, also provided excellent material for documentary drama had earlier been demonstrated by *Execution of Justice* (1984), Emily Mann’s successful play about the Harvey Milk affair, the shooting of the San Francisco mayor and police supervisor in November 1978, and was to be confirmed later by the various plays about 9/11. Anna Deavere Smith became interested in the Crown Heights riots soon after the event, when
she was invited by the theatre director George C. Wolfe to contribute to a festival of performance artists in November 1991 at the New York Public Theatre, for which occasion she was looking for a suitable project. She went to the Crown Heights neighborhood and succeeded in interviewing various members of both the black community and the orthodox Lubavitcher Jews (Martin 469). From these interviews she created the “Crown Heights Brooklyn, August 1991” section of *Fires in the Mirror*, a play of hers that features some more interviews dealing with the problems of identity and difference.

Smith had begun to rely on interviews very early on in her project *On the Road*, which she started in 1982 and which was to comprise a whole series of performances. Beginning by approaching strangers on the streets of New York with a tape recorder and the offer, “I know an actor who looks like you, and if you give me an hour of your time, I'll invite you to see yourself performed” she acquired plenty of experience over the years through her collecting of material for the project, designed to explore the relationship between language and behavior of people and their character. This helped her in Crown Heights to get people talking and expressing their emotions in the tense situation after the clash.

Regarding the chosen form of a solo performance for her play, it has to be said that when she began the project *On the Road*, she had been thinking of working with several actors, and even started an acting workshop with this in mind. Yet spending a lot of energy on collecting funds and organizing the work, she soon found that with her exceptional gift for mimicry and her ‘white’ looks as an African-American woman she was well equipped to convincingly present the authentic words, speech rhythms, gestures and body language of the various characters of different races and genders alone.

With her solo rendering of passages from the interviews she had conducted and her mimicking of the manner of speech and behavior of ac-

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1 This paper is based on the text of the original New York production as published by the Dramatists Play Service.
tual people while still retaining an identity of her own as a performer, she came to develop a new variety of performance art. Her documentary performances were quite different from the conceptual ones organized by Stuart Sherman and Laurie Anderson in the 1970s and the more autobiographical versions presented by David Cale, Lenora Champagne, Del Margolin, Tim Miller and Holly Hughes in the 1980s when this art form was emerging. And although there were also performers like Ethyl Eichelberger, Penny Arcade and Eleanor Antin who presented other characters drawn from life or the imagination, it was quite a different matter when the spoken texts came from interviews with the incorporated persons who existed outside the theatre and who – as in the case of “Crown Heights Brooklyn, August 1991” – related to an event of public import and much wider significance.

More than most other art forms, performance art relies on the unifying presence, personality and individual resources of the performer, especially in the case of a self-created solo performance. The particular resources possessed by Smith were already in demand when she started interviewing a greater number of people either directly related to the chosen event or likely to be able to give a valuable commentary on the theme or problem the event had foregrounded. She has stressed that what is of utmost importance at this stage of her work is listening, something that sounds so banal that it seems hardly worth mentioning. Yet it must have been an ability sufficiently underdeveloped for her to be asked by the NYU School of Law to teach a course on “The Art of Listening.” Richard Schechner has composed a veritable eulogy on her extraordinary gift to make people speak to her and to intensely study them while they are doing so:

[...] even in their rage, fear, confusion, and partisanship, people of every persuasion and at every level of education and sophistication opened up to Smith. Why?

Because she – like a great shaman – earned the respect of those she talked with by giving them her respect, her focused attention. People are sensitive to such deep listening. Even as a fine painter looks with a penetrating vision, so Smith

Herbert Grabes

looks and listens with uncanny empathy. [...] Smith absorbs the gestures, the tone of voice, the look, the intensity, the moment-by-moment details of a conversation. (64)

Given the fact that her whole project *On the Road* has been devoted to exploring the relationship between language, behavior and character, such intense dedication to the way people express themselves comes as no surprise. How far she gets by listening closely she has described in this way:

I can learn to know who somebody is not from what they tell me, but from how they tell me. This will make an impression on my body and eventually on my psyche. Not that I understand it but I would feel it. My goal would be to – these words are funny and probably, in print they sound even worse – become possessed, so to speak, of the person. (Martin 51)

Having in this way come quite a way toward knowing who somebody is, Smith selects the passage from the interview she will render in her performance, which is usually - and in *Fires in the Mirror* without exception – the uninterrupted monologic speech of the person interviewed. “I try to find a section,” she has explained, “I don’t have to interrupt. The performance is much more difficult if I’ve created chaos in their frame of thought. I’d rather have a section in which their psychological through-line is reflected in language. Everybody does it. I just wait” (Martin 40). The result is a degree of coherence in the presentation of any one character that makes it appear as a complete performance in its own right.

Smith’s acute listening skills and precise observation together with her great talent for mimicry obviously lead to a stunningly close imitation of how the persons she selected have spoken and behaved during their interviews. In delivering their words verbatim in speech rhythms that sound authentic and by convincingly reproducing the iterative contours of their gestures and whole body language she is able to conjure up in her performance the appearance of a great variety of extremely different historical personalities. The *New York Times* has therefore called her “the absolute impressionist: she does people’s souls” (Martin 52), and I would underline the first half of that statement, but feel somewhat uneasy regarding the second part. Rather than ‘doing souls,’ Smith does what she herself describes much more carefully as “I become the ‘them’
that they present to the world. For all of us, the performance of ourselves has very much to do with the self of ourselves. That’s what we’re articulating in language and in flesh – something inside as we develop an identity” (Martin 57).

It must also not be overlooked that quite apart from the heightening in her performance of effects that are held to be typical of race, religion, social position, and gender, the mirroring of idiosyncrasies by itself tends to easily approach parody or more often than not reveals something that will damage people’s self-image. For all the aesthetic and social quality of Smith’s documentaries, I therefore fear that not many of those individuals who have agreed to give her an interview and granted their consent that it be used in her work, would do so again after having seen themselves doubled in the mirror of her performance. They may feel too much like a bug or butterfly pinned to the board of a botanist for close inspection and exhibition, and what comes to mind is Antonin Artaud’s metaphor of the “Theatre of Cruelty.”

This all the more so as what Smith highlights is the extent to which most of the subjects she presents are heavily ‘subjected’ by a collective racial, religious, gender and class identity. This already becomes clear in the very first section of *Fires in the Mirror*, which is significantly titled “Identity.” Still very close to the position taken by Smith in her role as a solo performer of many different characters is the mediating view of the African-American playwright, poet and novelist Ntozake Shange, who is presented first, and some of her lines are well worth quoting:

> I am part of my surroundings
> and I become separate from them
> and it’s being able to make these differentiations clearly
> that lets us have an identity
> and what’s inside our identity
> is everything that ever happened to us. (11)

Yet the two impersonations that follow reveal an unreserved identification of the individuals with the respective values, prejudices and life style of the religious or racial community to which they belong. Thus the “Anonymous Lubavitcher Woman” who comes next is obviously unable to become ‘separate from her surroundings’ in terms of the rules of the group of orthodox Jews to which she belongs. In a section am-
Herbert Grubes

biguously called “Static,” she talks about an unpleasant situation in which she did not dare to turn off the loudly blaring radio her baby had inadvertently switched on, because, as she says,

[…] just like with the static,
it was blaring, blaring
and we can’t turn off,
we can’t turn off electrical,
you know electricity, on Shabbas. (13)

And if somebody should come to think that her heavy dependence on the “we” of the group has something to do with her being just a very religious housewife, the subsequent encounter with the impersonation of the well-known theatre director George C. Wolfe, who was at that time the organizer of the New York Shakespeare Festival, shows that linking oneself to a collective identity does not necessarily have much to do with social station and intellectual resources. It proves to be even stronger than critical self-reflection:

My blackness does not resist – ex – re –
exist in relationship to your whiteness.
(Pause)
You know
(Not really a question, more like a hum. Slight pause.)
it does not exist in relationship to –
it exists.
I come –
You know what I mean
Like I said, I, I, I
I come from –
it’s very complex,
it’s confused,
neurotic,
at times destructive
reality, but it is completely
and totally a reality
contained and, and,
and full unto itself. (18f)

The strong influence of collective identity on individual members of a group becomes noticeable throughout, regardless of the display of any individual features. The impression that both the African-American and
Jewish persons incorporated by Smith seem to be inescapably caught in the net of emotional ties to their respective racial or religious community becomes even stronger when narratives of victimization and of a woeful, more distant or recent past are foregrounded in the section immediately leading up to the one dealing directly with the events in Crown Heights. This section, called “Seven Verses,” features memories of collective and individual suffering on both sides of the ethnic divide that are painful enough to create mutual compassion. Yet what the audience sees itself confronted with instead is a competition about which side has suffered most, and though the narrated events are atrocious enough to make any attempt at a theodicy appear futile, what is added is a competitive argument about who, Muslims, African-Americans or Jews, are really God’s chosen people.

The unmistakable emphasis on difference becomes more empirically founded when we reach the contradictory accounts of the fatal accident and its circumstances that triggered first the killing of the Jewish student and then the riots in Crown Heights. Thus Rabbi Joseph Spielman, who comes first in this section, is shown playing down any aggravating misbehavior on the part of members of his fold by stressing the violent character and strong anti-Semitism of the African Americans in the neighborhood and by diverting attention to the stabbing of the student. Soon after this, an “Anonymous Young Man” from the African American group (which makes up ninety percent of the population in that part of Brooklyn) gives a lively eye-witness report heaping blame on the Jewish driver of the swerving car and on a private Jewish ambulance for having caused the death of the young black boy, a report significantly stopping short of what happened later and therefore not even mentioning the murder of the Jewish youth. In the TV version, this impersonation is combined with that of the Rabbi and a third one, that of the Reverend Canon Doctor Heron Sam, to bring out the contradictions even more, and this is one of the more significant indications of the media change.

How deep the resentment goes on either side that turned a lamentable accident into a spark that lit the fuse for retaliatory killing and days and nights of serious rioting, is revealed in some more general com-
plaints such as that raised by the Executive Director at the Jewish Community Relations Council:

To hear in Crown Heights –
and Hitler was no lover of Blacks –
“Heil Hitler”?
“Hitler didn’t finish the job”?
“We should heat up the ovens”?
From Blacks?
Is more inexplicable
or unexplainable
or any other word that I cannot fathom.
The hatred is so
*deep seated*
and the hatred
knows no boundaries. (96)

What we hear from the other side are complaints about the preferential treatment of the Jews by the authorities and their arrogance, as expressed, for instance, by the black activist Sonny Carson, who says, with restrained fury:

And the Jews come second to the police
when it comes to feelings of dislike among Black folks. (111)

And it is just getting intolerable for me to continue to watch
this small
arrogant
group of people continue to get this
kind of preferential treatment. (112)

Much more extreme is the language of the notorious Al Sharpton, who, after having complained that “Blacks do not have equal protection under the law” and “there’s a whole media distortion / to protect them [the Lubavitchers],” finally gives vent to his anger by saying,

I won’t tolerate being insulted.
If you piss in my face I’m gonna call it piss.
I’m not gonna call it rain. (122)

While this may have given some idea of the range of the language employed, no attempt at ekphrasis will be able to conjure up the visual impression of Smith’s performance art to a comparable degree. Fortunately there exists a TV adaptation of *Fires in the Mirror* filmed in 1993
as part of the “American Playhouse Series” on PBS from which one can get some impression of the kind of performance devised and carried out by Smith. However authentic her mimicry may appear, the presence of herself as an African-American woman who is solo-performing is what lends her piece its genuine character and quality as a special form of theatrical art. In her own words:

What has to exist in order to try to allow the other to be is separation between the actor’s self and the other.

What I’m ultimately interested in is the struggle. The struggle that the speaker has when he or she speaks to me, the struggle that he or she has to sift through the language to come through. Somewhere I’m probably also leaving myself room as a performer to struggle and come through. (Martin 52)

One notices this doubling effect of a kind of performance that is both mimicry and quotation at the same time, especially regarding the truth value of what is rendered: while it comes across well enough that all the historical persons incorporated are absolutely convinced that what they say is true, Smith’s slightly hyperbolic acting style, though not really parodic, clearly marks a distance between the performer and the performed and thus counteracts the impression that the conflicting truth claims are shared by herself. The very few props she used in the stage version further indicate that her documentary performance only ‘quoted’ the historical persons existing outside the theatre, including their various versions of the truth. As Carol Martin reports, she “performed barefoot in a white shirt and black pants. Sitting in an armchair, or at a desk, donning a yarmulke, or a cap of African Kelte cloth, or a spangled sweater, Smith brought her 29 subjects to the stage to speak their own lines” (Martin 45).

Beyond being a significant feature of the aesthetic of Smith’s performance theatre, this relativizing effect is of utmost importance for the political impact of the play. I quote Carol Martin again: “The Authority of one group over another, of one individual over others, is undermined by the presence of Smith through which so many voices travel” (Martin 45). What is more, the essentialism underlying the differential construction of racial or religious identity that characterized the ‘politically correct’ emphasis on ‘difference’ in the USA towards the end of the last century is undermined by the demonstration that such identity is largely
an effect of discourse and performance. The dire necessity of giving up such essentialist positions is openly voiced by the well-known political activist and scholar Angela Davis, who says in the play that she would think

that race has become, uh,
an increasingly obsolete way
of constructing community
because it is based on unchangeable immutable biological facts
in a very pseudo-scientific way,
 alright?
[...]
So when I use the word race now I put it in quotations.
Because if we don’t transform this ... this intransigent rigid notion of race,
we will be caught up in this cycle of genocidal violence
that, um,
is at the origins of our history. (42f)

There remains the essentialism of religion, especially when, as in the case of Judaism, it is connected with that of race. One wonders how long it will take until the idea gets around that it can be rather insulting to assume that a divine being might be less tolerant than even fallible human beings at their best can be.

Yet the relativizing of difference as effected by the play would not be enough in any case. As Susan Stanford Friedman has argued in her essay on “Border Talk,’ Hybridity, and Performativity. Cultural Theory and Identity in the Spaces between Difference,”

the fixation on “difference” prevalent in the United States as a foundational principle in theorizing identity tends to obscure the liminal space in between difference, the border space of encounter, interaction, and exchange, the space of relation and the narratives of identity such relations engender. (1)

It is all the more important to her that in the “imaginary space of a public theatre (video or book), the liminal in between differences comes
into being,” and the “contradictory poetics underlying Smith’s performative play with identities encompasses both a visionary hope for healing connection and testimony to real division” (1).

Richard Schechner with his fondness of ritual theatre even speaks of “Smith’s shamanic invocation” because the “simultaneous presence of the performer and the performed” in her work is held to have a healing effect on her audiences who “learn ‘to let the other in,’ to accomplish in their own way what Smith so masterfully achieves” (64). There remains only the task of luring those into the theater who are most in need of such healing. And as this may have proved rather difficult, the TV adaptation was quite valuable after all. Unfortunately I cannot discuss it more completely now, for though it makes for an experience rather different from a live performance in the theatre, Smith’s performance style survives the change in medium rather well.

Works Cited

Primary Literature


Secondary Literature


The dramatic form of *Exquisite Pain* (2005), a recent production by the leading British performance group Forced Entertainment, can be regarded as non-standard in several respects. First of all, the performances of Forced Entertainment are so different from ‘conventional’ plays that they have been championed as an example of post-dramatic theatre. Since theatre and drama have at all times tested the limits of dramatic rules and conventions, this label is more suited to emphasise that post-dramatic theatre goes beyond an Aristotelian model of action-centred, plot-driven drama than to suggest a categorical break with drama in general. As earlier shows of Forced Entertainment, *Exquisite Pain* once again does not rely on a plot-driven structure; instead, as I attempt to show in the following, it can be described as a story-driven performance. Drawing on trauma theory, this essay will explore the gradual transition from ‘unstory’ to story in *Exquisite Pain*. The performance exhibits a second unusual feature: In contrast to all previous works of Forced Entertainment, it was not devised from scratch by the company’s artistic director Tim Etchells and the company members, but adapts an already existing text in a surprisingly cautious manner. This text is part of a multi-media installation by the French conceptual artist Sophie Calle, entitled *Doleur exquise* (*Exquisite Pain*). Therefore, Forced Entertainment’s *Exquisite Pain* is remarkable in yet another respect, since it transforms a museum exhibit into a theatrical event – in times of abounding novel and film adaptations in the theatre, this is still an uncommon form.
of theatrical adaptation. Paying particular attention to questions of media transfer, I will in the following paragraphs first analyse the installation before taking a closer look at its adaptation by Forced Entertainment.

Sophie Calle has become famous for her innovative projects which blur the boundary between fact and fiction, sometimes in collaboration with writers such as Paul Auster in the project *Doubles-jeux (Double Game)*. Using real-life experiences and their ‘bodies of evidence’ – for example, photographs, diary entries or interviews – not only as inspiration, but also as material for her art, Calle elicits the artful from everyday life or, vice versa, regulates her experiences according to her artistic principles.¹ For example, in her famous project *La filature (The Shadow)* she asked her mother to hire a private detective who followed Calle, unaware of the fact that she knew of his presence. Eventually, she displayed the detective’s photographs and his report together with notes she took during the surveillance. With this project and throughout her career, she has developed a specific “genre which is neither ‘auto-fiction’ nor photo novel, but rather [offers] innovative criss-crossings of factual narratives with fictional overtones, accompanied by photographic images” (Macel 21; cf. also Franzen, Gratton). Calle herself prefers the label ‘narrative artist’ (cf. Gratton 157, Heinrich 17) and, given the importance of writing and storytelling for her projects, this seems an appropriate term.² Not only do oral narration and written documents play an eminent role in her works of art, but many of her projects are also turned into books that come closer to illustrated novels than to exhibition catalogues.³ Accordingly, Forced Entertainment became first inter-

¹ Cf. Calle’s comment that obedience plays an important role in her projects, since she has to follow the rules which she determined in advance (qtd. in Stech 212).

² Stech notes that Calle preferred teaching literature to arts at the Ecole des Beaux Arts (211).

³ The importance of words and writing was maybe most striking in Calle’s project *Fantômes (Ghosts)*, in which descriptions by the museum staff replaced the paintings that had been displayed. In an interview Calle claims to be searching for a writer who can offer her a scenario she can enact – Paul Auster had denied Calle’s invitation to do so: “Eines Tages würde ich gern einem Buch gehorchen, das eine
Forced Entertainment’s Adaptation of Sophie Calle’s Exquisite Pain

ested in *Doleur exquise* (*Exquisite Pain*) when reading Calle’s book rather than seeing the installation.

In *Exquisite Pain*, Calle deals with a particularly painful experience of her early thirties. At that time she was living with M., her father’s friend, whom she, if we can trust her memories, had been in love with since she was a small girl. When she was granted a scholarship to travel through Japan for three months, her lover warned her that he would not remain faithful for such a long time span. Calle nevertheless entered on her artistic project, while looking forward to their reunion, planned for January 1985 in New Delhi. When she finally arrived, however, she had to learn that M. had abandoned her for another woman. Unusual for Calle’s work which tends to protect neither the artist’s own privacy nor that of friends and strangers, it took her more than fifteen years until she finally dared to turn this experience into a work of art. *Exquisite Pain* was first shown in a survey of the artist’s work at the Centre Pompidou in 2003, entitled *M’as-tu vue* (*Did You See Me*).

The installation of *Exquisite Pain* is divided into two parts. In its first part, “Before Unhappiness,” Calle assembles 92 tokens from her journey to Japan and her work there, which are arranged as a ‘countdown to unhappiness.’ The series of framed photos, letters that Calle wrote and received, train tickets, and other souvenirs begins with a Polaroid taken during her last evening in Paris, which is rubber-
stamped with red ink as “92 days to unhappiness” (cf. illustration 1). Some of these tokens are accompanied by a brief text explaining their significance and recounting Calle’s travel tales as well as her increasing yearning for M. However, she also reports, or at least hints at, several love affairs with men she met on her journey. Formally, the installation is hence one of the more recent examples of Calle’s characteristic working method which interconnects real-life experience and artistic creation as well as image and text. Through this interconnection, the ‘narrative artist’ invites audiences to identify the ‘narrator’ or persona as it emerges from the installation with Calle as its creator; this congruence of author and narrator (or of artist and persona) is, however, unsettled by various devices. When I speak of ‘Calle’ in the context of this installation and its theatrical adaptation, I am referring to the artist’s persona as it is evoked in *Exquisite Pain*.

The final picture of the installation’s first part and of the book that accompanied it, stamped “1 day to unhappiness,” displays the telegram Calle received on her arrival at New Delhi airport. The telegram says: “M. can’t join you in Delhi due accident in Paris and stay in hospital. Please contact Bob in Paris. Thank you” (cf. illustration 2). In the installation’s second part, entitled “After Unhappiness,” Calle attempts to come to terms with this experience of having been abandoned. She does so by telling and retelling the story of her arrival in New Delhi and the lonely night she spent at the hotel room, anxious that M. had had a serious accident. When she finally reached him via phone, she learnt that he had only been in hospital because of an infected finger and that the actual reason for the cancellation of his flight was that he had met another woman. It is this experience which causes Calle’s eponymous exquisite pain, which both the installa-
tion and the publication that accompanied the exhibition explain to be a medical term for “acutely felt, pin-point suffering” (Calle 9). In the second part of the installation, she repeats the story of this night with slight variations. In contrast to the varied pictures of the first part, the second part uses only one photograph again and again: the red telephone of Calle’s New Delhi hotel room, through which she learnt at 2 a.m. that M. had left her. The exhibition thus creates a pattern which the table of contents of the published text reproduces as a ‘calendar of unhappiness’ (cf. illustrations 3 and 4).

Much in the same vein as the first part of the installation, Calle places the versions of her story beneath these images; this time, however, they are not written on paper but stitched on linen. In this respect, the German title of the installation, *Stechender Schmerz*, is even more appropriate. Calle explains that the incessant retelling of the story helped her to overcome her pain:

> [W]henever people asked me about the trip, I chose to skip the Far East bit and tell them about my suffering instead. In return I started asking both friends and chance encounters: – “When did you suffer most?” I decided to continue such exchanges until I had got over my pain by comparing it with other people's, or had worn out my own story through sheer repetition. The method proved radi-

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4 The exhibition was shown in Berlin’s Martin-Gropius-Bau in winter 2004.
Christina Wald

cally effective. In three months I had cured myself. [...] [T]he exorcism had worked [...]. (202f)

Here she describes a similar pattern of appropriation via repetition and narration to that which Sigmund Freud developed in his theory of traumatisation.5 Freud argues that traumatic repetition compulsion, which makes the subject reproduce aspects of the trauma, generally entails two different but intersecting modes of repetition, namely acting out and working through. According to Freud, the acting out of the traumatisation enables the traumatised subject to develop belatedly the affect that was not aroused by the traumatic experience, because a trauma is so overwhelming that it does not allow intellectual and emotional processing at the time (cf. “Remembering,” “Erinnern”).

While re-enactments of the traumatic experience can offer its ‘experiencing’ in the sense of ‘going through it emotionally,’ they can also be unconscious attempts to master the traumatic experience, to work it through. In contrast to the mimetic reproduction of the trauma which is characteristic of acting out, its working through implies a modification of the reproduction. In a creative move, it turns ‘pathology’ into a semi-conscious act which attempts the mastery of the traumatisation. Thus, paradoxically, working through allows for a gradual liberation from the repetition compulsion through the very mechanism of repeating, albeit repeating in a slightly different manner. According to Freud and Breuer’s theory, the entire process of working through requires both repeating and remembering in a verbal form (Laplanche and Pontalis 488f), and, of course, their idea of a talking cure is based on this healing potential of speech and narration. Freud and Breuer assume that the affective recollection and acknowledgement through verbalisation can relieve the trauma’s symptoms by deactivating its harmful impact: “the psychotherapeutic procedure which we have described [...] brings to an end the operative force of the idea which was not abreacted in the first instance, by allowing its strangulated affect to find a way out through

5 Calle mentions this link to Freud’s therapy in an interview: “Das ist wie auf Freuds Diwan, sprechen, sprechen, um es auszuscheiden” [It is like on Freud’s couch: talking, talking in order to eliminate it] (qtd. in Stech 220).
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speech” (*Studies* 17; cf. *Studien* 97). They specify that in order to secure the success of their cathartic method, “the patient [should] describe [...] that event in the greatest possible detail and [...] put the affect into words” (*Studies* 6; cf. *Studien* 85).

Calle’s installation (and its adaptation by Forced Entertainment) displays both features of traumatic repetition compulsion. Acting out her trauma, Calle excessively repeats the traumatic moment of having been abandoned. In that regard, the red telephone seems to serve as a trigger signal, which arouses the sensual reality of the night in the hotel room and allows for the reliving of the night as if in a flashback. Accordingly, the installation’s turning point, the passage from Part I to Part II, offers a detailed re-creation of the hotel room, not merely as an image but as a life-size reconstruction. Thus, spectators can participate in the mimesis of the trauma, in the re-creation of the traumatic moment in greatest detail possible. As a part of this mimetic re-creation, Calle’s stories initially quote and paraphrase the telegram text as well as the telephone communication without interpreting them: “But at the airport they handed me this message: ‘M. can’t join you […].’ […] He picked up the phone and said: ‘I wanted to come and explain a few things to you.’ I replied: ‘Have you met someone?’ ‘Yes-’ I spent the night staring at the phone. I’d never been this unhappy before” (204). One day later, she repeats almost verbatim: “As I was boarding they handed me this message: ‘M. can’t join you […].’ […] As soon as he picked up the phone I knew it was over: ‘I wanted to come and explain a few things to you.’ ‘Have you met another woman?’ ‘Yes.’ […] I sat on my bed for hours, staring at the phone” (206). In the same manner, the subsequent entries repeat parts of the telegram and phone call and dwell on Calle’s paralyzing fascination with the telephone.

The fact that Calle begins to talk about her experience only five days after this incident and that she stares at the phone, seemingly unable to come to terms with the phone call, indicates that the experience, typical of a trauma, is so overwhelming that it cannot be grasped emotionally and intellectually at the time of occurrence. Instead, it becomes – in Freud’s and Breuer’s words – a ‘strangu-
lated affect’ and resists being accounted for in a coherent way after the event. The traumatic event is not possessed knowledge which could be narrated; on the contrary, it itself possesses the subject (cf. Caruth 5). Calle’s obsession with the event is highlighted by the 35 images of the red tele-phone set up in a row. The table of contents (reproduced above) makes this fixation even more obvious, as it contrasts Calle’s diversified travel pictures and tokens with the monotonous, obsessive repetition of the same moment (cf. illustration 5). This visual fixation is reflected by the formulaic beginning of all entries ‘after unhappiness’: “X days ago, the man I love left me.” Likewise, their ending always mentions the red telephone.

Complementarily to these features of acting out, the installation also displays aspects of working through. It demonstrates the diminution of the pain in the course of its narration and renarration, since the thread that Calle uses, initially white on black linen, becomes greyer and greyer until it is eventually black, and thus barely visible on the black surface. Her story has worn out its impact; it has become less and less significant (cf. illustrations 6 and 7).
In addition, the narration becomes increasingly dense. The first image is accompanied by a full-page report of pain, which includes many details of Calle’s arrival and the night in the hotel room. Moreover, it provides background information such as when and where Calle saw M. for the first time (“He was a friend of my father’s. I’d always had a thing for him”; 204). The second report likewise offers a brief version of their love story from its very beginning (“I used to dream about him as a little girl. He was so handsome. At thirty I managed to seduce him. For our first night I wore a wedding dress”; 206) and recounts the events of the night in Delhi, but the text is already one line shorter than the first story. Fifteen days after the night in the hotel room, Calle becomes aware of the cathartic aim of her project of repetition: “I hated that accursed journey. But I don’t want to talk about it. He’s the one I want to talk about. Until I’m up to here with him. Disgusted. He’s the one I have to get rid of” (218). Further on she acknowledges that narration and plot did not only play a decisive role in her dealing with the aftermath of the separation, but had also shaped her anticipation of the reun-
ion and thus might have contributed to the causation of her exquisite pain: “I had wanted this love story, he let it happen. I could have spared myself this pain” (232). She asks herself, “Would it have hurt so bad if I hadn’t spent three months building up the romantic scenario of our reunion, if there hadn’t been this expectation, this excitement of the prospect of seeing him again?” (244). Thus, Calle indicates that the countdown to the reunion, the installation’s first part, might not only have been the time before her unhappiness, but also a reason for it; the two parts of the installation are not only connected temporally, but also causally.

It takes her eleven stories until she can begin to liberate herself from her past. Although her present is still dominated by her fixation on the trauma, a future without M. eventually becomes possible. In her entry after 22 days, she claims that life with M. “never really suited me. Sooner or later I would have let it go. But he was quicker. He didn’t give me time to leave him first” (224). Nine days later, her story ends with, “Next time, I’ll take one who loves me” (232). Four days and one story later, she can perceive the comic potential of her incessant repetition of the events in hotel room 261 at the Imperial Hotel, New Delhi, when she acknowledges that M.’s excuse for cancelling the flight, an infected finger, is “almost comical” (234). The fact that the medical term for M.’s infection that was caused by a splinter is called “felon,” a synonym for villain, makes his affliction appear as an almost hysterical symptom that converts a psychic ailment into a physical one. Another three days later, she repeats that the infected finger was “funny,” but makes clear that this is only her impression in retrospect. Back then, “I wasn’t amused, not yet. Heartbroken, stunned, I spent the rest of the night in that room 261 of the Imperial hotel with my eyes on the red telephone” (240). Five days later, Calle begins to see that her incessant recantation is “absurd” (244) and seven days later, she is able to objectify her experience: “A banal love affair with a pathetic ending. Nothing more” (248). But also nothing less, one is tempted to add, since it takes Calle 49 more days and thirteen more stories to eventually overcome this loss. Her insight that her own story is only a variation of the ever-repeated human story of abandonment does not forestall its hurtful emotional impact: “It’s an ordinary story, yet I had never suffered so badly before” (250). She re-
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peats this acknowledgement nineteen days later, still unable to overcome her pain (cf. 256). It is only after 91 days that she laconically concludes, “That was all. Not a lot. I’ll get over it” (266). The next entry is the first to break with the ritualistic pattern of repetition, since it does not open with the “fetish-sentence” (Bois 39) of all other beginnings: “X days ago, the man I love left me.” Instead, it abandons the confessional mode for simple summary: “It’s the same story, except that it happened 95 days ago” (267). After 98 days, Calle repeats her formulaic confession in the past tense, now speaking of “the man I loved” (my emphasis); she finishes her short entry with “Enough” (272, emphasis in the original), and, finally, the entry for the 99th day is empty, except for the photograph of the telephone and the number “99” (274).

The series of Calle’s narrations displays the gradual transition from the unfolding plot to the unfolding story. The complementary aspects of the trauma’s actualisation, acting out and working through, have alternatively been conceptualised in terms of ‘unstory’/plot versus story.6 The difference between the unfolding plot, or the ‘unstory,’ which repeats the pain, and the unfolding story that provides relief can, as Ruth Leys suggests, alternatively be grasped through the terms mimesis and diegesis (2000). The working through/diegesis of trauma belongs to the conscious, psychic and intellectual processing of trauma. The formula that the “unfolding story brings relief, whereas the unfolding plot induces pain” (van der Kolk and van der Hart 177; Langer 175) epitomises the assumption that the intellectual and emotional processing of a trauma via its verbalisation is an effective technique of re-membering and de-fragmenting the subject’s life story which has been shattered by trauma. The transformation of Calle’s account of the night in the hotel room shows that it develops from a mimetic account, an unstory with direct quotes and many insignificant details, to a story. It is part of Calle’s healing process that she realises the ‘story-ness’ of her experience, its conventional pattern of an unhappy love story: “A banal love affair with a pathetic ending” (248), “an ordinary story” (250). As she is able to objectify her experience, as she is able to transform it into a

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6 According to Showalter (225), the term ‘unstory’ was first used by Lawrence Langer in Holocaust Testimonies (39).
causally and temporally ordered story and can even comment on this story and its narrator self-reflexively and self-ironically, she has softened the painful impact of the event.

As part of this healing process, of the increasing ability to distil a story and to objectify it, Calle compares her own experience of utmost pain to the tales of other people. The second part of the installation not only reproduces Calle’s reports but also assembles accounts by friends and strangers who shared their moments of exquisite pain with her. These stories, placed in between Calle’s, are likewise accompanied by an image. Since the images often display or stand in for that which is lost (such as the lover reduced to a voice on the phone in Calle’s case), they often serve as fetishes of mourning (cf. Marcus 16). As Nancy Princenthal observes, the arrangement of the stories in the exhibition also forms such an image of loss: Their positioning as diptychs resembles repeated pairs of twin beds, with the two images as pillows and the texts as blankets. This impression is reinforced by the fact that the stories are stitched on sheets: a black one for Calle’s story, a white one for the stories of her acquaintances (cf. illustration 8).

Although degrees of suffering may be hard to compare, the juxtaposition of these bedfellows decisively weakens the impact of Calle’s own accounts. It does so for two reasons. First, the structure of the installation invites the spectators to compare each of Calle’s repetitions to a new story by someone else. Due to this pattern, the fresh stories have more impact than the only slightly varied report of Calle. Second, many of the experiences are more devastating than Calle’s unhappy love story,

\[7\] Princenthal notes that most of these photographs were taken by Calle years later, while some were contributions of the respective story’s narrator.
Forced Entertainment’s Adaptation of Sophie Calle’s Exquisite Pain

since they entail tales of suicide, severe illness and death. In this respect, the second meaning of the term ‘exquisite pain’ becomes more important; Calle’s incessant repetition of her love story increasingly appears as an egocentric, narcissistic and exhibitionist mode of self-fashioning. As Willie White puts it, Calle’s persona seems to “luxuriate in unhappiness” (4). This impression is reinforced towards the end of the exhibition, when one contributor refuses to make his painful memories public:

Even if I had some fresh flesh of unhappiness, I wouldn’t give it to you. A few things happened in the past but decency forbids that I tell you. It would be overdoing it to turn them into a story. Some people have a gift for unhappiness. I don’t. Is that because I have this system of indifference, an ironic disposition? I would have liked to have been more unhappy, then the world would have been more real to me, I’d have felt my existence more intensely. But I’ve never been in a state of total unhappiness. I hope one day to really suffer. To go deeper. My story hasn’t happened to me yet. (233)

This account, accompanied by a pictureless frame, emphasises not only the relentless exhibitionism and arousal of voyeurism (‘fresh flesh’) involved in Calle’s autobiographical art, but also points out that suffering results from the interaction of the severity of the event with the reaction towards it. Calle seems to have, as she highlights by the insertion of this story, an extraordinary ‘gift for unhappiness’ which she exploits to gain fame and to entertain her spectators. 8 Both the artist and the audience seem to be fascinated by displays of pain because they intensify the experience and make ‘the world more real.’

Through the comparison of her story with those of others, Calle has to concede after 90 days, “As suffering goes, nothing special. Nothing worth harping on about” (264). She thus doubly exploits the stories of others; not only does she make them public, include them into her work of art, but she also uses them to overcome her pain. As Princenthal points out: “The disequilibrium is meant to be part of her cure; in the rather ruthless economy of ‘Exquisite Pain,’ the suffering of many be-

comes balm for one.” In addition to the comparison of the stories’ content, their formal differences are significant, too. In contrast to Calle’s initially mimetic ‘unstories,’ her accounts which actualise the past situation and the pain connected to it, the other events are told in the past tense; their narrators have already succeeded in fully transforming them into stories.

The awareness of spectators that Calle stylises her experience as an ‘exquisite’ form of suffering also pertains to the comparison of the two parts of the installation. Having witnessed the wealth of her travel impressions in the first part, one wonders how Calle could have neglected all these memories and only told her friends (and audiences) of the one night in Delhi once she was back in France. As part of the audience, one feels slightly deprived of many interesting stories, especially since they seem to contain acts of unfaithfulness on Calle’s part which are totally neglected in her reaction to M.’s confession of infidelity. In the theatrical adaptation of Calle’s *Exquisite Pain*, Forced Entertainment takes Calle’s above-quoted decision to “skip the Far East bit” seriously and presents only the second part of her installation.

*Exquisite Pain* seems to offer particularly suitable material for Forced Entertainment, because the installation contains many of the stylistic and thematic concerns which have become characteristic for the work of the collective, such as storytelling and the exchange of stories, a fascination with the confessional and the device of repetition. Furthermore, the mood of Calle’s text agrees with the melancholic atmosphere of Forced Entertainment performances which is characterised by a “language of loss” (cf. Malzacher and Helmer 18). Stylistically, *Exquisite Pain* nonetheless departs from previous performances of the group, as the show is not characterised by spectacular imagery, simultaneous action, direct audience addresses and involvement, an unusual treatment of the theatre space or the like, but reduces theatre to an absolute minimum. A female and a male performer alternately read out Calle’s stories and those of the other contributors. They do so in minimalist scenery, consisting only of a blue neon writing “exquisite pain,” two tables with chairs and two monitors behind them, which display the images that accompany the stories. The performers (in the version I saw, Claire Marshall and Robin
Forced Entertainment’s Adaptation of Sophie Calle’s Exquisite Pain

Arthur) wear everyday clothes, and there are no lighting or sound effects (cf. illustration 9).

In contrast to visiting the installation, the audience of Forced Entertainment’s performance cannot browse Calle’s stories and skip the repetitive parts; the show “does not allow short cuts” (Rieger 2). Whereas the Raumkunst of Calle’s exhibition allows busy spectators to transform the visual experience into mere information (cf. Lehmann, Postdramatisches Theater 341), the aspect of Zeitkunst in the theatrical performance forces audiences to listen carefully to each story. Audiences have to witness the full circle of Calle’s talking cure – rather than being able to pick up only the thrilling or entertaining details from the tablets in the installation, they have to experience the length and slow development of each narration. This increases the awareness for both the ‘sheer repetition’ envisioned by Calle and the slight differences between the stories, which are gradually transformed from a mimetic plot to a diegetic story. Accordingly, White’s portrayal of the reception of the audience in the theatre resembles a job description of a psychoanalyst:

As an audience member you become involved and strangely complicit in the woman’s storytelling. Again and again you run through the script from the last version in your head, comparing it to the words you are hearing spoken, looking for the detail that will make sense of her unhappiness and how it came about. (4)
Thus, the oral narration of the stories can, on the one hand, heighten the hermeneutic pleasure involved in finding the psychological ‘key’ that will help explain and possibly cure Calle’s suffering. On the other hand, the utmost concentration on the spoken word and the incessant repetition of Calle’s story for more than two and a half hours can also transgress the border of the audience’s interest; in the performance I saw, there was already laughter during the third entry and clapping when the actress read the entry after forty days faster and with bored distance. These reactions indicate how ambivalent the theatrical device of repetition is. While it initially raises the audience’s awareness and concentration and can have a comic effect, it can also, when continued, become an act of challenge or even aggression towards the audience. By denying entertainment through the stimuli of variety, diversion and change, repetitions on stage require an effort from audiences and make them aware of the (slow) passing of time; they effect, as Hans-Thies Lehmann puts it, “a crystallization of time” (Postdramatic Theatre 156).9

Given the minimalist and concentrated staging of Calle’s text, the few onstage actions gain immense importance. This concerns, for example, the relationship of Calle’s stories and those of others. The auditory, subsequent reception of the stories in real time reinforce the contrast between Calle’s obsessive love story and the often more drastic other stories, especially since the performers listen to each other and in a few moments comment non-verbally on each other’s stories: Every gaze and every guarded smile indicate how their stories affect each other or fail to do so. Thus, the performance re-creates the alleged origin of the installation (Calle talking to others) in a more experiential manner than the tablets in the exhibition; it does so, however, in a rather unemotional and detached manner.

A second example regards the issues of authenticity and fictionality of Calle’s allegedly biographical art. When the actress reading Calle’s texts at one point (reading the entry 28 days after the break-up) turns to the monitor behind her and looks at the photo of the red telephone, one wonders whether she has become aware of the artistic potential of her suffering or whether she is checking on the performance of suffering that she is reproducing for artistic means. This doubt of reliability, which already concerns Calle’s persona as it comes to the fore in the installation, is thus transferred to the stage performance. It also affects the perception of the other stories: Looking at the photographs (again, audiences are forced to contemplate the accompanying images that are shown on monitors for a longer time than they probably would do when walking through the installation) and hearing the stories, the significance of the motifs only gradually becomes clear. For example, the story after Calle’s fifteenth entry relates the death of a grandfather, accompanied by an image of two screws, one with a broken head. Towards the end of the story, the narrator informs us that the heads of the screws that closed the coffin had to be broken off “so that no one could ever open it again. A quick, decisive act. Like saying: I accept. Worse than the last look” (219). In the meantime, one searches for the connection of word and image and wonders whether the image authenticates the story as body of evidence or whether it is the other way around, as the narrator, or possibly even Calle herself, may have invented a story to accompany the photograph.10

Regarding the unreliable and playful pose of the artist’s persona, the teasing title of Calle’s exhibition Did you see me? is also a question raised by Forced Entertainment. After having seen the performance, we do not know Calle any better. Neither has the company included text passages that would explain, justify, or ridicule Calle’s behaviour and thus create a round character, nor does the acting fill the gaps or soothe

10 This blurring has also been typical of the devised performances that the company staged before Exquisite Pain; as Etchells stresses in various interviews, “the borders between the real and the unreal are constantly being eroded” (“Dirty Work” 45) in contemporary society, and therefore the differentiation between “the real and the playful” (Fragments 62) cannot be stable in their performances either.
the contradictions of Calle’s persona as emerging from the installation. Instead, almost with the detachment of a newsreader, the actress presents the stories without creating a psychological character.11

The decision to explore traumatisation beyond the context of a coherent plot and psychological character analysis differentiates _Exquisite Pain_ from the majority of contemporary plays and performances dealing with traumatisation.12 Forced Entertainment is interested in the principal mechanisms of traumatisation and the idea of a talking cure rather than in their potential individual impacts on a character’s psyche and biography. Both thematically and stylistically, the performance is preoccupied with discerning an essence, with laying bare a core, to the point of abstraction. Accordingly, Tim Etchells describes _Exquisite Pain_ as a methodical scrutiny, as the distillation of a “mathematical and psychological essence” (“A Note on _Exquisite Pain_” 1). He perceives the attempt at utmost reduction as a continual development rather than a break with earlier shows of Forced Entertainment, since their more recent projects such as _The Voices_ (2003) abandoned the earlier “mega-mix method” of 1990s productions like _Marina & Lee, Emanuelle Enchanted_ and _Club of No Regrets_ in favour of “a more focused approach; taking one thing, one language, one element, and then pursuing it to its ultimate end logic” (qtd. in Heathfield 78).

The performance comments on this stylistic and thematic concentration on ‘one thing,’ namely on story-making in the context of trauma. The installation’s self-reflexive mode of narration discussed above, which increasingly acknowledges the significance of storytelling and narrative clichés for the trauma’s occurrence and its cure, is accompanied on stage by moments of theatrical self-awareness. Through these metatheatrical comments, the performance reflects on its potential for a progressing action with almost melodramatic moments of emotional climax and, at the same time, on its refusal to stage such conventions.

11 Again, this technique agrees with the company’s earlier work, which understood the self as “no more (and no less) than the meeting-point of the language that flows into and flows out of me [i.e., the self]” (Etchells, _Fragments_ 102).

12 For an analysis of plot-driven, psychologically realist plays dealing with issues of traumatisation, see my reflections on ‘Trauma Drama’ in Wald 2006 and 2007.
Thus, Calle begins to imagine her night in the hotel room as a highly emotional “scene:” “88 days ago, the man I love left me. The scene was played out on January 25, 1985” (262). Eight days later, she transforms her experience into a combination of an author’s note to a play and a brief review, which comments on the lack of dramatic quality:

96 days ago, the man I love left me.
Time: January 25, 1985, at two in the morning.
Place: room 261 of the Imperial Hotel in New Delhi.
Action: break-up over the phone.
Distinguishing mark: the hero’s infected finger.
Title of the work: The Felon.
The rule of the three unities was observed, but the lines were poor, the ending borché and the plot banal. (270)

The subsequent story of an anonymous contributor employs likewise a theatrical metaphor to describe his sense of alienation and of loneliness, which resembles the atmosphere and plot of a farce:

It’s the story – no need for names here, it’s the staple fodder of farce – of a man who leaves and a woman who is left behind. […] The action begins at ten in the morning and is all over by noon the next day. It starts indoors and ends outdoors. In between, the man has methodically packed everything that belongs to him, […] hoping that something will happen, that she will say something. But the scenario doesn’t pan out as desired. […] Suddenly, the door slams and we are in Act II. This time, there’s no audience. […] I am totally lost. (271)

While these straightforward remarks envision a (deficient) form of plot-driven drama, be it melodramatically serious or farcical, other parts of the stories adopt a metatheatrical meaning only in performance. These instances seem to comment on the challenges inherent in a theatre which abandons progressive action as well as psychologically realistic characterisation and acting. Thus, one wonders whether one of the stories, the account of a suicidal youth who waits in vain for his lover, does not apply to the performance as well; whether the incessant repetition of Calle’s stories are not also “a ritual of nothingness,” “absolute prostration, total inactivity, a black hole” (235). When the final story describes how the “dramatic intensity slowly wanes, replaced by fatigue and a stiff back” and has its narrator “wonder when it will end” (273), the performance ironically comments on its hardly bearable pattern of repetition and lack of action.
Through its adaptation of Calle’s installation, Forced Entertainment thus offers a new, reduced version of its non-standard theatre. Rather than creating theatrical equivalents of the aspects of Raumkunst in Calle’s installation (such as the audience’s chance to move freely, the detailed re-creation of the hotel room, the presentations of material forms of memory), the performance focuses on the aspect of narration, of Zeitkunst, and even these narrations are rendered in a restrained, low-key manner. Etchells sees this minimalist staging as a form of faithfulness to the original:

[W]e now felt compelled, for the first time, to ‘do’ a text. And it was clear too that most of what we would need to ‘do’ would consist of exercising restraint. There is something so perfect about the declension of the Exquisite Pain text that our strongest desire was, and remains, to let it be there as simply as possible; unfolding, taking both its time and its toll in what may be the least theatrical but most effective way we can muster.

Given this regard for the ‘perfect’ original text, even at the cost of theatrical vitality, Exquisite Pain, notwithstanding its post-dramatic quality, shares a concern of script-based theatre in its most conservative form. It might be this unusual amalgamation of unconventional and traditional qualities that has resulted in the ambivalent reviews of Exquisite Pain, ranging from Lyn Gardner’s immense praise for this “heaven-sent” production in The Guardian (“It is so pure there is something quite magnificent and quite unendurable about it”) to Dorothea Marcus’s much less enthusiastic review in the taz, who did not see more than a tiring reading in the show.13

While I am writing this essay, Calle’s latest work, Prenez soin de vous (Take Care of Yourself), is displayed at the Venezia Biennale as the official French contribution. Once again, Calle deals with the experience of being abandoned. Rather than working through the experience of splitting up via e-mail by repeating the story herself, this time Calle offers the raw material of her pain to others. She has invited more than one hundred women, among them artists and celebrities such as Jeanne

13 “Auf der Bühne geht das Schillern verloren: Es ist eine bald ermüdende Lesung vom Unglück anderer Menschen, das uns, obwohl wir direkt dabei sitzen, schon nichts mehr angeht” (Marcus 16).
Moreau, Laurie Anderson and Leslie Feist, but also experts such as a UN official in charge of women’s rights, a fortune-teller and a psycho-analyst to read and analyse the e-mail. This project, which once again connects repetition and difference, unstory and storytelling, the private and the public, will possibly offer new inspiration for Forced Entertainment. Or maybe it will attract other performance groups or playwrights to explore alternative forms of adapting visual art – thus, staging conceptual art may gradually become a more diversified and a less unusual strategy of contemporary theatre.

Works Cited


Bursting the Confines of Form:  
The Wooster Group’s Work-in-Progress

During the past thirty years the Wooster Group, the American performance company led by Elizabeth LeCompte, have been developing a vast work-in-progress which substantiates the shift from the notion of discrete art objects, finished works and genre/boundaries to that of (inter)text(uality). In fact, this pluriform shift is but one among many marking the transition from modernism to postmodernism which Ihab Hassan for convenience’s sake at one point presented schematically. Several of these shifts pertain to the Wooster Group, like the de-emphasizing of hierarchy, mastery and logos, narrative and grande histoire, hypotaxis, transcendence, totalization, origin and cause, presence, centering, root and depth, in favor of anarchy, chance, anti-narrative and petite histoire, parataxis, immanence, fragmentation and deconstruction, the differential trace, absence, dispersal, rhizome and surface. Granted, this differentiation between what Hassan has called the conjunctive and closed form of modernism and the disjunctive and open anti-form of postmodernism is relative since the poles of the dichotomies “remain insecure, equivocal [...] differences shift, defer, even collapse; and inversions [...] abound” (Hassan 267-8). This is evident in the reassertion of form and design despite the increased importance of chance. As a result, the Wooster Group’s work-in-progress is one whose parameters are constantly renegotiated in accordance with the company’s non-identity politics.
The first three productions – *Sakonnet Point* (1975), *Rumstick Road* (1977), and *Nayatt School* (1978) – revolved around the artistic coming of age of fellow founding member Spalding Gray as he worked through the traumatic suicide of his depressed mother. For LeCompte, whose formal sensibilities filtered and structured her partner’s life experience like found material, these productions initiated a similar emancipatory move away from Richard Schechner’s Performance Group, in the margins of which she was carrying out her fledgling directorial activities, no matter that the press tended to credit Gray with her framing vision.\(^1\) Given their relative unity these productions were subsequently grouped as the Rhode Island trilogy, named after the places featured in the titles, which are all connected to Gray’s private history. Ostensibly, then, the first three-some was “completed” by the framing “trilogy” – a term usually reserved for a sequence of literary or musical works – and by Gray’s discovery of the performance/lecture format he would rely on during the rest of his career.

Beginnings and endings not only coincided but were doubly marked before being undone once more. In the Fall and Winter of 1978 the Rhode Island pieces were presented together, first at the Mickery Theatre, Amsterdam (Sept. 19 - Oct. 29) and then at the Performing Garage, New York (Dec. 8 - Febr. 4, 1979). During the latter retrospective, the Wooster Group also began rehearsals for a new work, *Fathers and Sons*, which came to be known as *Point Judith*, a work whose status was subsequently qualified as “(an epilog).” At the time of writing, the parenthetical term, “epilog,” had been dropped from the chronological survey on the company’s website, a move some may criticize as a rewriting of theater history. But LeCompte repeatedly made clear that history (like her own work) consists of many micro-stories and that no one has exclusive rights to the narrativization of the performing arts. Thus she is known to have questioned Schechner’s version of the so-called death of the

\(^1\) “I always had illusions that people saw the woman who was making the work. They didn’t. They saw Spalding. When Foreman and Kate [Manheim] work, no one assumes that Kate wrote those lines. But the way I set Spalding up, and because he’s male and I’m female, I would find people thinking that he conceived of the structure, that he wrote the lines” (qtd. in Shewey).
the avant-garde. More recently, the company posted on their website a "correction" to a New York Times article in which Nell Casey on the occasion of a tribute to Gray presented his early career as independent of the Wooster Group. Either there are many origins or none.

Conversely, endings are seldom final. The séance-like retrospective, Left-Over Stories to Tell, (briefly) raised Gray from the dead through the actors reading selections from his work. Similarly, the "epilog" of Point Judith deferred the double closure of the trilogy and first retrospective, besides initiating a renewed opening onto the life, from which that trilogy had emerged. After all, epilogues are not simply concluding sections but liminal tailpieces – external, peripheral, metatheatrical forms, Manfred Schmeling has called them (12) – in which the audience is eased out of the performative realm and back into the larger reality. For this reason epilogues in the strict sense are direct addresses, like Gray’s monologues, the first of which, Sex and Death to the Age 14, took place at the Performing Garage from April 20 - June 2, 1979. True, his narrativized recollections and anecdotes seldom established the kind of fictional illusion from which audiences needed to be removed more or less violently. Neither do the non-psychologically acted performances of the Wooster Group, which since the first trilogy have frequently relied on direct address and the lecture format – most recently in Who’s Your Dada! (2006). While the official start of Gray’s solo career seems to have warranted labeling Point Judith an epilogue, he kept performing with the Wooster Group through 1985, in early rehearsals, public showings at the Garage, and on tours. Still, that the term “epilog” was dropped may also be related to its Greek roots, connecting the concept

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2 Left-Over Stories to Tell was co-organized by Kathleen Russo, Gray’s widow, and Lucy Sexton, a performance artist and fund-raising consultant, and staged from May 31 to June 4, 2006 at New York’s PS 122 and from June 14 to June 18, 2006 at UCLA’s Freud Playhouse.

3 The hour-long Who’s Your Dada!, consisting of readings from Dadaist manifestos by Tristan Tzara and Hugo Ball, live video, Dada poetry and music, was staged on the occasion of the 2006 summer exhibit on Dadaism at New York’s Museum of Modern Art.

4 See the Wooster Group’s correction of Nell Casey’s New York Times article on their website.
to literature and reason, which the Wooster Group construes as even broader constraints than the conventions of specific forms. *Point Judith* and *Nayatt School* are indeed anti-logocentric deconstructions of Eugene O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Cocktail Party*. For all that, the formal tag remains appropriate since “epi-legein” means “to say in addition” and the last word can never be spoken.

As an ironic case in point the next Wooster Group production was called *The Last Act*, a title later prefaced by *Route 1 & 9*, the numbers marking the extremities in a numerical sequence. On the one hand, the production included videotaped excerpts from the last act of *Our Town*, that classic of American drama in which Thornton Wilder arguably showed us, rather beautified and idealized, “the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying” (Act 1, qtd. in Rich). As in the Rhode Island trilogy, private and public lives intersected when, during the development of *Route 1 & 9*, LeCompte’s father died of cancer and she became pregnant. The production also included Ron Vawter’s videotaped reconstruction of an educational film in which Clifton Fadiman gives a stilted analysis of Wilder’s play, meant to install an authoritative interpretation. Vawter thereby simultaneously reframed and delegitimized the lecture format developed by Gray, just as Gray himself, misguided in Frank Rich’s assessment, “derailed” *Our Town* by reusing out of context his autobiographical persona for the Stage Manager in the Lincoln Center’s 1988 revival of the play, directed by Gregory Mosher. But even without Vawter’s deadpan irony or Gray’s alleged “flipness,” any representation of an earlier representation (whether reconstruction, reframing or revival) is bound to expose,

5 Fadiman was a non-academic writer, whose *Reading I’ve Liked* (1941) and *The Lifetime Reading Plan* (1965) taught generations of non-educated people how to read the classics and whose intellectual prowess and ideals of cultural uplift feminist literary critic Carolyn Heilbrun as a Columbia University student greatly admired, despite his writings’ underlying misogyny. Which goes to show that the Wooster Group carefully selects its targets for parody.

6 Says Rich: “Much as one may have enjoyed Mr. Gray’s *Terrors of Pleasure* and *Swimming to Cambodia*, their blasé TriBeCa hipness belongs to another planet than that of *Our Town*. Accordingly the critic dubbed its revival, “Swimming to Grover’s Corner.”
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to whatever degree, the means by which representations are created and regimented in the service of certain views, like Wilder’s universalizing of provincial America. On the other hand, the Wooster Group’s radical deconstruction of Our Town caused such an uproar that their theater might be shut down. The Wilder Estate had refused the rights to the play and the New York State Council for the Arts threatened to cut back funding on account of the blackface, which made Route 1 & 9 (The Last Act) look like LeCompte’s “Last Stand,” as Don Shewey put it. This acute prospect of an ending, set against Wilder’s more nostalgic mourning, led to the June 1982 retrospective, grouping (The Last Act) with the earlier (epilog).

Fortunately for theatre history the company survived. Route 1 & 9 became the first part of a second trilogy, The Road to Immortality, which would eventually include L.S.D. (…Just the High Points…) (1984) and Frank Dell’s The Temptation of St. Antony (1987), the one combining, amongst others, Michael Kirby’s rewriting of Arthur Miller’s The Crucible with a record album by Timothy Leary, the Harvard psychology professor turned counter-cultural drug guru, the other mixing stand-up comedian Lenny Bruce with Gustave Flaubert. From the larger perspective Route 1 & 9’s “Last Act” became a misnomer for the “latest act,” now designating an instalment of the Wooster Group’s work-in-progress. But here, too, history repeated itself. After excerpting Wilder, LeCompte went on to excerpt L.S.D., which already consisted of the high points only, when she reworked its second section with Globe Theater in Eindhoven and presented it independently as North Atlantic (1984). What made the latter production unusual is that it is based on a script by company member Jim Strahs, who also wrote The Rig, the first part of Point Judith, which embedded a condensed version of Long Day’s Journey into Night. Less out of the ordinary for the Wooster Group’s devised theatre is that North Atlantic functioned as a structural reincarnation and development of The Rig, now set on an aircraft carrier but its routine still broken by entertainments and both streaked by sexist verbiage (Savran 134, 143). In fact, the Wooster Group’s work-in-progress is one huge recursive structure in which each production becomes found material for the next one, just as Eliot, O’Neill, and Miller’s plays functioned as found material for Nayatt School, Point Judith, and L.S.D. This
Johan Callens

has little to do with self-imitation or artistic sclerosis but all the more with an ongoing creativity that dissolves the distinctions between the writer’s and director’s functions and rejects the neo-romantic and modernist myths about genius and originality, no matter that LeCompte has been the recipient of a well-endowed MacArthur or so-called “Genius” Award (1995-99).

What should emerge from the beginnings of the Wooster Group’s work-in-progress, by now almost too extensive to survey in its entirety, is its paradoxical formal operations: by provisional stops and starts, framings and excisions, fragmentation and accretion, repetition and revision. Each of the company’s productions, often revolving around a single canonical text, can be enjoyed by itself. But when the text chosen is a classic play, the radical treatment it receives, especially early on, makes its appreciation highly dependent on substantial prior knowledge. Comparison with the original text becomes necessary, yet that original has been absent in the adaptation, unlike in more conventional stagings, where the object of directorial interpretation remains largely “present” through the author’s lines. Or else, the Wooster Group come up with something like Flaubert’s La tentation de Saint Antoine, which already exists in different versions and recycles topoi from his other works (Neiland), so that it constitutes an unstable stage in an ongoing creative process mirroring the Wooster Group’s own. This process for instance led them to segment Chekhov’s Three Sisters, as the first three acts were dealt with in Brace Up! (1991) and the last in Fish Story (1994), a production whose unresolvability was reflected in its title, morphing from Fish Story II. A Work-in-Progress (Today I Must Sincerely Congratulate You), to UnFinISHed Story, and a by now hardly credible FinISHed Story (1996). In the latter incarnation at a Brussels retrospective a prologue, meant to refresh the audience’s memory about what had happened in the previous acts, also turned these into episodes of some ongoing, live-broadcast television soap and the prologue into its pilot.\footnote{From April 18 till May 4, 1996, Fish Story, The Emperor Jones, and The Hairy Ape were revived at the Kaaitheater, Brussels, then still called the Luna Theatre.} That the creative process of the Wooster Group productions extends over several years can also be explained by its co-ownership of
the Performing Garage, a luxury in New York with its soaring rents and real estate prices. The resulting changes which these productions go through in the course of a single run or following revivals inevitably invite repeated viewings. The hybrid intertextual, interdisciplinary and intermedial make-up of these productions further bursts the confines of discrete theatre works, just as the subsequent staging of other plays by the same playwright (O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* and *The Emperor Jones*) and the deliberate recycling of props and scenographical elements makes each production exceed its referential frame.8

The incremental repetition of the Wooster Group’s self-coined work-in-progress, then, may well require its replacement by the term “work-in-process,” the more since that work constantly interacts with the meandering lives of the performers, ever resisting formalization. This interaction complicates matters, since the autobiographical subtext opens the work to the world, yet seals it off hermetically to the spectators ignorant of those lives. In addition “progress” is a term burdened by the ideological overtones of the *méta-récits* — Marxism, Judeo-Christianity, and Psychoanalysis – which the Wooster Group, ever sensitive to the postmodern drift, has problematized. Thus the processual quality of their work runs counter to any ahistorical utopias, whether established here and now or in a hereafter. The abuses and excesses of global capitalism may have demonstrated its contradictions but failed to bring about the proletarian revolution, a fate prefigured in *The Hairy Ape* (1995). Religious terrorism has cast further doubt on the institutional rule of faith in a secular age. But to replace religion by psychoanalysis, as Eliot does in *The Cocktail Party*, is no longer a viable solution, given the suspicion of priests’ and doctors’ shared transcendental authority, not to mention the normalizing bent of the behavioral psychology Leary criticized or of the electroshock treatment Gray’s mother

8 In the words of Norman Frisch: “[...] all of the Wooster pieces have begun – out of the refuse, the material that was cut out of previous productions and things that people, for one reason or another, are just not yet ready to let go of.” Weems concurs: “I think the new piece is always built on the shards of what’s left over from the last one. The Group recycles images and icons and architectonic fragments, and that process contributes part of the epic sense of continuity in the work” (491).
received, after psychoanalysis and the Church of Scientology, of which she was a member, had failed her. The manner, incidentally, in which The Crucible links fundamentalism to capitalism in the early American colonies and the McCarthy era – as the property of the witch hunt victims served to enrich the survivors and those, like Miller, testifying before the House Un-American Activities Committee stood in danger of losing their jobs – proves highly relevant to the current struggle for geopolitical control over Middle Eastern resources, drugs as well as oil. To LeCompte personally Miller’s allegory resonated with her company’s loss of funding because of the blackface in Route 1 & 9, even if at first only a single line from the play – “Elizabeth, your justice would freeze beer” – caught her attention amongst the welter of material brought to the rehearsals of Nayatt School (Savran 176).

Of course, the chance beginnings of the Wooster Group’s works say nothing about their ramifications or the diverse reasons which govern the proposal of material by company members and the director’s preservation or discarding of this material, after it has been tested and explored in the crucible of the rehearsal room.9 And though chance may still determine how and when things “fall” into place, past experience, intellectual insight, intuition, and lots of problem solving within the material constraints also influence the emerging form. Then again the resulting work may offer a deliberate or inadvertent challenge to that of fellow artists. That LeCompte at one point decided to work on Stein’s Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights may therefore be connected to the play’s standing among the avant-garde, its having been staged already by the Living Theatre (1951), Richard Foreman (1982) and Robert Wilson (1992). The roles were inverted, though, when Wilson decided to stage Flaubert’s The Temptation of St. Antony, Three Sisters, or material by T.S. Eliot several years after LeCompte had already done so (in 2003, 2001, and 1994, to be precise). Granted that these writings constitute a pool from which any performance artist can draw at will, recurring names and titles demonstrate that the Wooster Group’s collaborative practice needs to be extended to the avant-garde at large. Such collabo-

9 “I can’t make it not work in my head. I have to come in here [The Performing Garage] and see it not work in rehearsal” (qtd. in Cole 122).
ration tends to trouble the prioritizing of conventional art histories, where “first” is still an honorific term and “last” a demeaning one, as in being one of the last representatives of a so-called dying avant-garde. For the rest, the workings of chance help to explain the lingering instability, the haphazard and disparate look of certain productions, the sense of reversibility countering the sense of “completion,” unlike in the future-oriented Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk whose joints must not show (Willett 204; Aronson 14, 21), or the utopian prospects envisaged by Lyotard’s méta-récits but already parodied in Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* through Colonel Vershinin. True, the foreignness of found material and its disruptive quality often depend on knowing or spotting its provenance, so that less knowledgeable viewers may integrate the material into the whole. And the recursiveness of the Wooster Group’s work-in-progress makes for a kind of synchronicity or preposterity that could be construed as ahistorical.

No hard and fast rules would seem to exist here. Contrary to expectations and David Graver’s view (31), everyday objects, and the particular stories they trail, may more easily be homogenized in the current postmodern artwork than canonical texts, which perhaps more expressly claim an autonomous meaning and challenge the spectators with discovering how the embedded material relates to the new context. In *House/Lights* (1998), the result of LeCompte’s encounter with Stein, the excerpts from Joseph Mawra’s underground movie, *Olga’s House of Shame*, possibly disrupt on stylistic and narrative grounds. By comparison, the quoted physical vocabulary from Merce Cunningham and Martha Graham in *To You, The Birdie!* (*Phèdre*) (2001) may well go unnoticed, while the sound and image bites from Buñuel’s movie, *Belle de Jour*, are identified. Sometimes the patchwork quality and interpretative riches – whether of confluent or disjointed meanings – appear retrospectively during analysis, sometimes instantly, independent of whether the director goes for the loose collage or more integrated montage (Graver 31-40).

On their website the Wooster Group themselves characterize their juxtaposition of elements and the resulting structures as “assemblages,” which positions them more within an avant-garde visual arts than a theatre context. This principle of assemblage applies to the diverse found
Johan Callens

materials, the non-coincidence of performers and characters, as well as to the prosthetic bodies resulting from the performers’ extension with and incorporation of bodily parts as seen on monitors: a hand holding a gun in *L.S.D.*, male and female crotches in *House/Lights*, feet in *To You, The Birdie!*. By the same token, the Wooster Group sets may be called “installations,” in keeping with the company’s self-professed “architectonic approach to design” and as a way of escaping the flattening effect of the illusionist proscenium tradition. For *Who Is Your Dada!* Elizabeth Diller (Princeton University) and Richard Scofidio (the Cooper Union) were in charge of the set, two architects who also collaborated on the Builders Association’s *Jet Lag* (1999). Being an integral part of the Wooster Group’s work-in-progress, the stage itself has been undergoing constant change (Jones). And when its metal, cage-like superstructure began to appear, it was as if the wooden, house-like constructions within the early work had been turned inside-out, much like the second section of *L.S.D.* had been promoted into the relatively independent *North Atlantic*. In any case, assemblages and installations forego conventional linear plots or cause and effect, favoring a more free-floating experience in which audiences determine their own positions and trajectories. Walter Benjamin in this regard spoke of the “incidental” attention, the “covert control” which the habitual experience of buildings fosters (239-241). Such “apperception” is also what Gertrude Stein worked on during her medical studies at Johns Hopkins University and what the Wooster Group performers possibly aimed for when “navigating” the complex set of *House/Lights*. In addition Stein’s and Benjamin’s “distracted reception” would seem to characterize the Wooster Group’s relation to the video monitors guiding them in performance.

Other concepts useful to characterize the company’s formal procedures (rather than discrete forms), are the “rhizome” and iteration. In botany rhizomatic roots grow horizontally, as opposed to the vertical, arborescent model of the inverted tree, but for Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* a rhizomatic work (like their book) is a “machinic assemblage” (4) whose infinite, paratactic and ultimately unattributable surface connections form plateaus of heterogeneous multiplicities which in the absence of any center, hierarchy, or plot defy the possibility of ever separating their different, constitutive orders – artistic, scientific,
and social; the work, the world, and the self – let alone the possibility of
(re)tracing the kind of discrete divides (dichotomous, pivotal or fascicu-
lar) that constitute non-rhizomatic structures. In that sense, the Woos-
ter Group’s work-in-progress forms a rhizome, without beginning or end,
and each of its productions a plateau, which can be read by itself or
as a gateway into the larger network.

Iteration or repetition with a difference, the other concept also use-
ful in characterizing the Wooster Group’s work-in-progress, has been a
bone of contention between John Searle and Jacques Derrida, ever since
the latter provided a critique of speech act theory in “Signature événe-
ment contexte” (1971) (1-23). For the linguist, who defended his posi-
tion in “Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida” (1977), the
oral and written communication of an intention presupposes its possibil-
ity of being repeated, in the sense of being heard, read and understood,
no matter how imperfectly. For the French philosopher, iterability re-
mains a function of readability but the written text’s différence, its differ-
ence and deferral of meaning, excludes the possibility of ever fully
knowing the communication’s intended meaning. For Searle, the inten-
tionality, like the word type and syntactical rules, limits the interpreta-
tive freedom. For Derrida, interpretation, contrary to the popular mis-
conception, is pragmatically determined and historically situated but
“unlimitable” by any author(ity) (34, 136-7, 148). Hence his pun in
“Limited Inc a b c” on “S.A.R.L.,” société à responsabilité limitée or Lim-
ited Liability Company, and “Searle,” whose authorial intentions appear
already delimited by his acknowledgement that his wife and Hubert
Dreyfuss contributed to the discussion (31, 34, 36). Reacting to the
critique of their extensive, often unacknowledged borrowings, Deleuze
& Guattari at the very start of their co-authored A Thousand Plateaus
also insist on the inevitable multiplicity of authorship or plurality of
intentions: “Since each of us was several, there was already quite a
crowd” (3). Iter-ability, creatively derived from the Sanskrit itara or other,
is therefore “the logic that ties repetition to alterity” (7). And
since “the other and alteration work parasitically within the very core of
the iter qua repetition of the identical” (102), there can be no repetition
of the same, only “identity and difference [...] repetition ‘as’ différence”
(54).
To characterize the Wooster Group’s work as rhizomatic and iterable, then, is to underscore that it keeps reconstituting itself in the encounter between the performers and the viewers, that it remains unlimitable and unfinalizable, much like Derrida’s writings and Deleuze & Guattari’s machinic assemblage simultaneously organizing and dismantling itself. Each new Wooster Group production “iterates” elements from their own repertory as much as from the cultural tradition, thereby differentiating and recontextualizing them. The past productions determine the present ones as much as the present supplement past ones, “preposterously” revising them, without ever finalizing their earlier historical meanings. Strictly speaking, the live arts are by definition unfinalizable, each performance inevitably differing from the one the night before. For all that, public performance tends to limit the creative process of rehearsals, which is why the Wooster Group from the start of its career did without “premières” and went for “open rehearsals,” another reason being that their reinterpretations of classic texts cannot but be re-readings. The extended runs of a repertory company, however, lead to some fixation, like the improvised solos of jazz musicians played too often. The practical and economic restrictions imposed by audiences and sponsors, together with the deadlines of touring schedules, also interrupt the creative process, which is then misread as completion. Over the years the risk-taking typical of rehearsals must have become jeopardized by the encroaching institutionalization, expectations of quality, and reputations to protect. The Wooster Group is wary of such institutionalization, e.g. by universities, though companies like Forced Entertainment actively pursue it to disseminate and legitimize their work, to secure funds, and assume a relative control over its narrativization and interpretation (Reason 63-8).

Presumably, the much desired condition of unfinalizability may have been easier to achieve in earlier works, like the more gestural and musical Sakonnet Point set in the child’s prediscursive realm. Or in L.S.D. (…Just the High Points…), whose public performances left extensive room for improvisation (Frisch & Weems 484). All the same, L.S.D. also contained the replication of videotaped passages from *The Crucible*
rehearsed on acid. In that respect it resembled and put an interesting spin on Leary’s hour-long, pseudo-religious, self-promotional, multimedia shows, whose eclectic mix of light effects, projected images and musical instruments in an artistically controlled manner tried to convey the mind-ripping psychedelic experience of an LSD trip. Begun at Millbrook, New York as a fundraising initiative by Leary and Ralph Metzner in the summer of 1966, their “psychedelic theater,” incorporating some chapters from Hermann Hesse’s *Steppenwolf* novel, initially formed the biweekly collaborative product of separate dance, lighting, and music workshops. The first New York performance, *The Death of the Mind*, took place at the Village Theatre, Sept. 20, 1966, and the hype it created over the next months turned it into one of the season’s biggest off-Broadway events. The following year a movie based on the show and titled after Leary’s famous mantra, *Turn on, Tune in, Drop Out*, was released in Los Angeles and suppressed within a week, so that fans had to settle for the soundtrack on Mercury Records (Greenfield 284-287, 304-305). Apart from feeding into the Wooster Group’s *L.S.D. (…Just the High Points…)*, Leary’s psychedelic shows (*The Death of the Mind, The Reincarnation of Christ* and *The Vision of Hieronymus Bosch*) may have provided one source of inspiration for Frank Dell’s *The Temptation of St. Antony*, besides offering an alternative lineage for the company’s intermedial work.

Paradoxically, their *Hamlet* (2006), which some would consider a subservient, non-interpretative, non-interventionist documentary reconstruction of John Gielgud’s 1964 production, as filmed by Bill Colleran, is perhaps the most radical application of LeCompte’s commitment to undecidability, a commitment which elsewhere, and this is the opposite extreme, supposedly led her to skirt unintelligibility. Robert Baker-White thus presents the Wooster Group’s deconstructions of plays as an inversion of the dramatic tradition in which the reheasrve mode of the inset destabilizes the frame. To him the tension between frame and inset

10 The same contradictory combination of reconstruction and improvisation can be found in *No Great Society* by Elevator Repair Service, based on two of Jack Kerouac’s television appearances, an episode of William F. Buckley’s *Firing Line* (from 1968) and one of *The Steve Allen Show* (from 1959) (Zinoman).
saves the rehearsal play from the “wholesale deliverance of performance
to the realm of indeterminacy and polyphonic flux” (184), a threat to
which the Wooster Group’s radicalization of the rehearse mode alleg-
edly exposes them, presumably most in productions that do not incor-
porate canonical texts. Agreeing with John Dewey that the aesthetic
experience requires a tension between resolution and non-resolution
(167), Baker-White thereby questions the very articity of those Wooster
Group productions. The simplest reply to this position is that the neces-
sary formalization of theatre need not depend exclusively on a written
script, that non-conventional forms remain forms, though they may not
be that obvious to the literary scholar. After all, Baker-White himself
defends the lingering theoretical force within his “anti-theory” of re-
hearsal, just as the rhizome and iteration are figures for open-ended
formalizations, but formalizations all the same. Going by Baker-White
the rehearsal mode resists generalizing theories “in favor of the practical
experimentation of creative energy,” but that does not mean that the
rehearsal mode of Wooster Group productions makes them theory-less,
if only because they remain marked by what he calls the anti-totalizing
“self-reflexivity of the noncoincidence” (67-69).

The Wooster Group’s Hamlet indeed self-reflexively welds public
performance onto private rehearsal, since in both instances videotaped
records (of previous rehearsal days or shows already presented) feature
prominently as an instrument. But just as the belated assignation of
“parts” to specific performers prevents their premature identification
during rehearsals, the cast changes necessitated by revivals again pry the
two apart in the eyes of spectators who have come to identify them dur-
ing earlier public performances. That the Wooster Group perform Ham-
let in the rehearsal mode marked by interruptibility and repetition is also
implied when Scott Shepherd asks the technicians to fast forward or
rewind the movie. Documentary reconstruction and poststructuralist
deconstruction meet since to “rehearse” derives from the Middle Eng-
lish “rehercen” and Old French “rehercer,” i.e. to harrow again or break-
up the clods of earth (Cole 4, 229). Poor Theatre: A Series of Simulacra
(2003) actually starts with the company’s videotaped preparation for a
re-representation of Grotowski’s Akropolis and then segues into a recre-
ated live rehearsal in which the technical hitchs have been pre-
programmed to enhance the impression of contingency. That impression is of course belied by the *mise-en-abîme*, the repeated mediation deferring the original, since the opening video showed the Wooster Group using another video on Grotowski’s rehearsal method. And by precluding any feedback the experience of watching the tape formed the very opposite of Grotowski’s participatory experiences in which the distinction between rehearsal and public performance was dissolved. On the other hand, audiences attending *Poor Theatre* only once may fail to distinguish between pre-programmed hitches and things actually going wrong, like the misfiring of Kate Valk’s gun during the 1996 Brussels revival of *Emperor Jones*.

Alternatively, the interruptibility and fragmentation of Wooster Group productions, so typical of rehearsals, also foreground the media’s influence on their postmodern aesthetic. As mentioned *Brace Up!* and *Fish Story* turned Chekhov’s *Three Sisters* into a TV soap, whereas the scenes of O’Neill’s *The Hairy Ape* were staged like boxing rounds whose breaks left room for ads on the TV monitors, in a structural simulation of television’s discontinuous flow. The company’s creative work in other media also “interrupts” the stage work, yet reinvigorates and complements it by iterating or re-interpreting its principles. Not only do the experimental films — *Wrong Guys, a film-in-progress*; *Rhyme ‘em to Death* (1994); and *White Homeland Commando* (1992) — develop ongoing concerns in different formats, but the DVD of *House/Lights* (2004) allows for different camera viewpoints. For the same reasons the company’s radio play based on *Phèdre* and the videos based on *The Emperor Jones* (1999) and *La tentation de Saint Antoine* (Flaubert Dreams of Travel but the Illness of his Mother Prevents It, 1986) should be considered extensions of their stage versions, new interpretations rather than authoritative ones saved for posterity in response to the urge for legitimation and the culture industry’s commodification. In a different manner, the creative work of Wooster Group members and associates, cur-
rent or former, with other companies, preserves yet modulates, inter-
rupts and continues their work with LeCompte: from No Theatre (Roy
Faudree), the Builders Association (Marianne Weems) and Elevator
Repair Service (Scott Shepherd) to Big Art Group (Caden Mansen), Joji
Inc. (Jim Clayburgh), Chris Kondek and others. Through the work of
these artists and all those influenced by the Wooster Group the linger-
ing impact of its methods and formalizing techniques would appear to
be secured. The thing to remember, though, is that these practices, after
the Wooster Group’s recoil from forms that indelibly fix, can never
amount to a set or authoritative model. The diverse contexts impinging
on the Wooster Group’s work-in-progress should prevent that work
from acquiring any disciplinary authority and from imposing exclusive
categories and methods of creation and interpretation.

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The Challenge of Non-Narrativity in Visual and Physical Theatre

Robin Thornber wrote in *The Guardian* of Joint Stock’s production of Caryl Churchill’s and David Lan’s *A Mouthful of Birds* at the Birmingham Rep with its reference to *The Bacchae*: “It left me longing for a dull, old fashioned scripted piece given shape, direction, and purpose by a single creative intelligence like Euripides.” Likewise, in *The New Statesman*, Victoria Radin, while claiming that the performance “enthralls,” complained that she missed “the stamp of a single person or long-standing group of collaborators over the whole evening, which then flows by an associative logic that seems as inevitable as it is unpredictable.” Furthermore there was a feeling amongst other critics that the main stage of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre was not the appropriate ‘frame’ for a performance that Thornber considered to be “one of those perversely inpenetrable [sic] and self-indulgent exercises in baffling obscurity which are so deeply meaningful to the company that they forget the need to engage and communicate with their audience.” The problem for Thornber (and audiences who walked out at the interval) appears therefore to be a consequence of the production’s non-narrativity, its plotless, fragmented quality and the inappropriate aesthetic expectations generated by the formal theatrical frame. In the light of these concerns and with reference to this and Churchill’s subsequent production, *The Skriker* (1994), I will explore the challenge of non-narrativity in the mainstream theatre for its creators, critics and audiences.
Non-Narrativity

Since Aristotle articulated in his *Poetics* the concept of mimesis, western drama has been predominantly representational and has employed dialogue to link a series of events or actions into a narrative that has a beginning, middle and an end. Central to the narrative is causality. Indeed the narrative may be expressed in the more complex structure of the ‘well-made’ plot in which sequential linking and causality are paramount. In the nineteenth century well-made play the plot was constructed to retain the audience’s interest by stimulating its emotions at various stages in the performance through the representation of changes in the characters’ fortunes.

This mimetic representation, as Bert O. States suggests, “is obliged to define art in terms of what it is not, to seek a source of artistic representation in the subject matter of art, and to point to a place where it can be found, if only in a set of abstract ideas or truths” (5). This patterning of plot is independent of the specific work and is employed to organise the representation and convey it to the audience who will ‘read’ it by identifying points of recognition and causal connections. In this mimetic theory the dramatic structure contains, as in a box, the psychological, moral, social or spiritual ideas of the play with none of the intellectual ‘meaning’ of the play being lost in reading rather than watching. Indeed literary critics have generally preferred to read a play in order to avoid “phenomenological distraction” (States 28). As the non-narrative play does not conform to these mimetic standards it is often deemed chaotic and incomprehensible. In the early twentieth century, modernist performance, exemplified by Strindberg’s expressionistic plays, tends to retain at least the simple epic narrativity in the loosely linked form of the journey or quest. Here, although the causal is relinquished except in terms of the initial goal of the quest, the challenge of non-narrativity is mitigated by the retention of the sequential and the audience is led, as in *A Dream Play* (1901), through a process of discovery.

In non-narrative physical and visual theatre character defines action rather than action character. In Strindberg’s *To Damascus* (1898), although the journey or quest is still a narrative, action – the exterior life –
is not as important as the imagery of its episodes which express the interior life. In *A Mouthful of Birds* and *The Skriker*, with the absence of even the linear quest, Churchill's vision of the world is expressed in terms of apparent structural chaos. Both plays inhabit psychic territories and their non-narrative synaesthetic mixture of inter-textuality, scenography, music, movement and dance, realistic and stylised dialogue, and monologue, reveals unexpected harmonies, contradictions and resonances. As Amelia Howe Kritzer writes of *A Mouthful of Birds*,

[the] attack on the traditional narrative structure of myth opens its generically singular perspective to encompass multiple points of view, subordinates language to image and rhythm, and seeks contact with a level of experience not communicable through simple narrative. (Kritzer, *The Plays of Caryl Churchill* 180)

Variation and contrast in the pace, direction, and intensity (and acoustic volume) of kinesic, proxemic, linguistic, and musical rhythm are fundamental to the performative process. As in Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*, the best analogy for the synaesthetic structure is that of music with its 'movements' containing variations of theme, motif, rhythm and volume. In performance, the 'language' is however, unlike that of music, hybridised – corporeal, auditory and cerebral. Such synaesthetic writing, Josephine Macon suggests, “juxtaposes various linguistic registers […] in order to produce a defamiliarised visceral impact which disturbs ‘reading’ and activates senses” (37). The form is employed quite consciously to disturb the audience’s perception and create a defamiliarised perspective that can only be perceived in a multi-sensory manner and will inevitably disorientate the audience during the performance. This is similar to poetic parataxis in which disparate images or references are juxtaposed, the reader being left to make his or her own connections. Such is employed in Lucky’s speech in *Waiting for Godot* to which I shall return later. However, as Hans-Thies Lehmann suggests in *Postdramatic Theatre*, “the paratactical valency and ordering of post-dramatic theatre lead to the experience of simultaneity. This often – and we have to add, frequently with systematic intent – overstrains the perceptive apparatus” (87). The simultaneity across the variety of channels with different semiotics and visceral effects characteristic of theatrical performance exacerbates this strain. The affective aim of physical and visual theatre is to exploit either sequentially or simultaneously all of these channels and,
during the performance the audience is forced constantly to seek syn-
chronic or diachronic connections. Consequently, as Lehman maintains,
“the spectator [of ‘postdramatic’ theatre] is not prompted to process the
perceived instantaneously but to postpone the production of meaning
(semiosis) and to store the sensory impressions with ‘evenly hovering
attention’” (87). Yet he also reminds us that “the human sensory appa-
ratus does not easily tolerate disconnectedness […] The search for traces
of connection is accompanied by a helpless focusing of perception in the
things offered (maybe they will at some moment reveal their secret)”
(84). It was undoubtedly the frustration resulting from this search for
connectedness that generated the vehemence of Thornber’s criticism of
A Mouthful of Birds and Maureen Paton’s of The Skriker in the Daily
Express which she described as “a work of quite awesome pretentious-
ness.”

Critical Methodology

The problem for the critic familiar primarily with mimetic performance
is to discover an appropriate methodology for the discussion of synaes-
thetic, affective theatre. Semiotic criticism, although offering advantages
over dramatic literary criticism, also has some disadvantages. As Bert O
States argues, “sensory experience cannot be accounted for by semiotic
systems” which he defines “as the scientific analysis of the means, or
apparatus, of the mimetic process,” in which “theater become a pas-
sageway for a cargo of meanings being carried back to society (after
artistic refinement) via the language of signs.” “Its implicit belief” he
maintains is “that you have exhausted a thing’s interest when you have
explained how it works as a sign” (6-7). Most significantly

the danger of a linguistic approach to theater is that one is apt to look past the
site of our sensory engagement with its empirical objects. This site is the point at
which art is no longer only language. When the critic posits a division in the art
image, he may be saying something about language, but he is no longer talking
about art, or at least about the affective power of art. (States 7)

Phenomenology on the other hand, takes into account the affective
power of art. States therefore proposes a complementary combination of
phenomenology and semiotics - “rounding out a semiotics of the theater
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with a phenomenology of its imagery” (29). Indeed, if we are to do justice to such plays they cannot merely be discussed in terms of themes expressed through dialogue and verbal metaphor. We must also take into account the phenomenological features. As a critic with only the written text to refer to, it is necessary to consider from a director’s perspective, the visual, scenographic, kinesic and proxemic features as well as the verbal, including

1.) The potential active sensory interaction between the performer/performance and the audience.
2.) The vocal and physical and spatial presence of the performer - voice, body, movement.
3.) The relationship between the aural and visual elements of the performance - sound and movement, lighting, set, costume, music and media.
4.) The style and rhythm of music relating to dance.
5.) Cultural reference and inter-textual reference.
6.) The synaesthesia of the variety of discourses involved.

Application of this critical methodology to A Mouthful of Birds and The Skriker will reveal how affective each is in communicating the dramatist’s perception through a multi-sensory, synaesthetic performance structure.

A Mouthful of Birds

A Mouthful of Birds is a play about those who deny their inherent passions, in consequence become possessed by them and sometimes erupt into violence. It was a Joint Stock ensemble collaboration between two writers, Caryl Churchill and David Lan, director Les Waters, choreographer, Ian Spink, and the researcher/performers. A dancer representing Dionysus oversees the action. The play is structured in seven episodes each focusing on a different character – an unhappy wife, a business man, a voodoo practitioner, Herculine Barbin (a nineteenth century hermaphrodite), a woman alcoholic, two prison warders and a female office worker. At the commencement of his or her performance each is given a character defining line (as in music a character motif) and portrayed undertaking everyday activities. After each scene there is a moment from The Bacchae. Then on an ‘undefended day’ each experiences
‘possession’ that leads him and her to reject their orthodox and socially acceptable existence. At the close of play they have final speeches describing the changes in their lives. According to Kritzer, the play’s overall theme is “spiritual regeneration through breaking open artificial structures that have imposed patriarchal order on the disunity of nature” (Kritzer, The Plays of Caryl Churchill 177). Their seven unrelated stories mix dance, drama and naturalistic dialogue, one echoing or blending into the other.

These seven stories are linked by the myth of The Bacchae and both plays end in murder. Although A Mouthful of Birds makes reference to The Bacchae in a number of short connecting scenes, it is not a reworking of the earlier play. However, the thematic association of the piece with the Bacchae, rather than unifying it, instead became problematic for audiences. The company had begun by looking at violence and madness with Churchill herself focusing on the unfashionable concern of violence by women. This, of course, explains the reference to The Bacchae. Many critics, nevertheless, found the short occasional references to that play unhelpful and even confusing. Dan Bacalzo, who reviewed the New York production for Theatre Mania wrote, “the evening does not quite coalesce into a unified whole. The use of sequences from The Bacchae adds little to the play’s impact and often seems a pretentious device to ease transitions.” The audience’s perception was that, as a summary of the Bacchae was supplied in the programme, not to know the original meant that it was impossible to comprehend fully what was happening. For those who knew the play, effort was wasted constantly trying to discover links. Indeed, the play opens with reference to The Bacchae – Dionysus in a white petticoat oversees the action. How, without textual help from the programme, the audience would know who he represents and what significance they would give to the petticoat if they did not know that in Euripides’ play, Dionysus is described by Pentheus as somewhat effeminate, is open to question. It would appear that in this initial experiment with synaesthetic theatre Churchill and Lan were not confident enough to let the play stand on its own and considered that it needed the support of inter-textual reference and, in providing this, placed the audience at a perceived disadvantage. In fact the loss of the Bacchic references would not be injurious to the play’s variety of semi-
otic and phenomenological discourses employed to convey various kinds of possession.

Each scene is self-contained, the characters’ predicaments are not related to each other and exemplify a variety of issues. Frances Babbage and Margaret Llewellyn-Jones describe the structure as a montage. While is does have a progression, a ‘journey’ for each character, it also spirals and circles in on itself; the multiple role-playing sets up innumerable resonances and contrasts; scenes are themselves dances and dances scenes [...] Costume is also action – sometimes a gift, a weapon, a means of transformation. (51)

The play’s overall dramatic structure is a stream of consciousness made up of fragmentary but thematically related issues. There is no narrative progression for each of the characters. The “journey” refers to the fact that they are simply established at the beginning of the play, change radically in the middle, and express the effects of their transformation at the end.

The styles of performance shift to reflect the contrast between the characters’ external and mental states. ‘Realistic’ portrayal conveys the exterior while dance conveys the interior life of a character. For example, in four scenes of Act 1 the housewife, Lena’s, movement, (which may be stylised) initially expresses the boredom of her married life while her psychological state is conveyed verbally and simultaneously by an actor/dancer representing a spirit. The audience must glean information from the combination of the actor’s dialogue and the spirit’s monologue. In one scene between Lena and her husband in which the spirit demands that she kill their baby in order to be free of him, the action transforms into a dance between Lena and the Spirit that conveys viscerally Lena’s interior feelings of love, dependency and violence.

Lena’s everyday movement of setting the table for breakfast is accompanied by her husband, Roy’s, monologue about a road rage incident. This transforms into the dance between Lena and the Spirit. The body is therefore used to complete the meaning of the verbal language and convey the character’s outer domestic and inner mental life. Initially the Spirit becomes a frog and Lena is a snake that threatens him.
He seizes her arm and becomes a lover. She responds but as he embraces her he becomes an animal and attacks the back of her neck. She puts him down to crawl and he becomes a train. As he chugs under the table she blocks the tunnel with a chair and he rolls out as a threatening bird. She becomes a baby bird asking to be fed and he feeds her. As he goes to get more food she becomes a panther, knocks him to the ground and starts to eat him. After a moment he leaps up with a fierce roar. She goes into the next scene. (Churchill 11f)

In the next scene Lena again returns to the mindless rhythm of setting the table and mundane, desultory conversation with Roy. Simultaneously the Spirit tells Lena to kill her baby in order to hurt Roy. Under this pressure, the scene turns into a dance as Lena and the Spirit struggle and Lena is dominant. The audience will now have learned to read the implications of the structure and be responding phenomenologically to the visual rhythm of the dancers. In the next scene Lena and Roy’s dialogue turns from desultory to oppositional as Lena begins to respond to the Spirit’s demands. The sound therefore becomes louder and rhythmically more aggressive and demands appropriately expressive movement from the actors. The scene climaxes with the Spirit pushing Roy down onto the table while Lena washes a shawl in a baby bath. This image is explained in the next scene when, having succumbed to the Spirit’s demands, Lena tells Roy that she has drowned the baby to which Roy gestures and repeats “What did you say?” Lena claims that “its wasn’t me who did it” (15) betokening the fact that she was possessed by the Spirit. Lena’s final line summarises the interplay, expressed in the scenes, between her mundane domestic external life and her inner passions and mental state – “I poured the teapot and blood came out” (16). The play’s semiotic and phenomenological discourses in which stylised movement and language turn on occasions into dance, are thus established and employed in subsequent scenes to convey various kinds of possession with the audience being required to adapt constantly to their variety of expression.

Scenes in Act Two follow this combination of realistic and stylised speech and dance, with the impact of these elements varying in each. They culminate with the climatic rhythmic and auditory expression of possession and violence in the scenes “Hot Summer.” Here again, everyday activities – Lil reading reports of murders aloud from a newspaper and the chopping of vegetables – are accompanied by a battle between
Mrs Blair and Doreen in which they increase the volume of their radios. This is then accompanied by their thumping, shouting, banging saucepans, knocking over chairs and smashing crockery, and culminates with Doreen slashing Mrs Blair with a knife. With the return to a normal rhythm and volume, Lil is heard still reading from her newspaper. While this action expresses the play’s overall intellectual theme of the abnormal breaking into the normal, it also excites the audience’s visceral responses to loud noise and violent rhythms and thereby engages it with the experience of ecstatic possession. This is followed, quite extraneously, by performance of the dismembering of Pentheus from *The Bacchae* which introduces an intellectual parallel perhaps intended to suggest the persistence of possession and violence in the human psyche.

Following this cacophony, the musical structure of the play now takes the form of a quiet coda in which the characters describe their lives after their experience of possession. The final speech by Doreen which makes unpleasant, visceral reference to her mouth being “full of birds which I crunch between my teeth. Their feathers, their blood and broken bones are choking me” (53), suggests that her experience of freedom from restraint has not been beneficial. In addition it also describes what was intended to be the audience’s response to the performance, which it will recollect and try to interpret later. “My head is filled with horrible images. I can’t say I actually see them, it’s more that I feel them” (53). As Babbage and Llewellyn-Jones rightly maintain, the play works phenomenologically in that it “is genuinely disturbing rather than one which ‘dramatises’ a disturbance within an undisturbed structure for the audience” (57). As Kritzer also recognises “emphasis on movement results in a rhythmic cohesion arising out of the repeated physical patterns. The total experience of the play combines a core of primitive energy, some scenes of poetic clarity, and a pervasive sense of the mysterious world of dream and trance” (*The Plays of Caryl Churchill* 174).

The *Skriker*

This “pervasive sense” reappears in *The Skriker* but here is completely integrated with the world of everyday reality. By the time that Churchill, this time individually, wrote *The Skriker*, with the experience of A
Mouthful of Birds and Lives of the Great Poisoners behind her she had become more confident in letting the non-narrative form speak for itself rather than referring to an earlier work. She also had total control over the mise en scène in which drama rather than dance dominated.

The scenes do not follow a traditional narrative but are a stream of consciousness unconnected by causality. As in Surrealism the play employs incongruity, juxtaposition and nightmarish, grotesque, visual imagery to unsettle the audience by creating moments of visual and verbal chaos in which the familiar becomes strange and disorienting. This is intended to tap into the audience’s psychological insecurities (represented by nightmares) and challenge its perception of the ecological state of the contemporary world. Indeed, Churchill’s omission of causality emulates the dream structure whose effect is described by Strindberg in his preface to A Dream Play.

Everything can happen, everything is possible and probable. Time and place do not exist; on an insignificant basis of reality the imagination spins, weaving new patterns; a mixture of memories, experiences, free fancies, incongruities and improvisations. The characters split, double, multiply, evaporate, condense, disperse, assemble. But one consciousness rules over them all, that of the dreamer. (175)

Judith Mackrell wrote in the Independent that this structure as well as the content was also like a fairy tale in that the action was poised “between the domestic and the grotesque, between reality and magic” with no sense of what was coming next.

In the first two scenes of The Skriker Churchill establishes succinctly the play’s atmosphere, its theme – the state of the relationship between nature, represented by the surreal folk-tale world, and contemporary ‘civilised’ society, represented by Lily and Josie, – and how the play should be ‘read’ by the audience. The set initially conveys, probably primarily through lighting, the “Underworld” and the action commences with the entrance of “JOHNNY SQUAREFOOT, a giant riding on a piglike man, throwing stones” (Churchill 243). What you see is what you get in that this immediately and effectively establishes that this is not a realistic play of ideas, that visual imagery is going to be a major feature, and that, although the supernatural and human are inextricably linked, the former is by no means benevolent. The Skriker, “a
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shapeshifter and death portent, ancient and damaged” (243), was revealed in the original production as a huge threatening spider-like creature with bat-like wings. She is damaged, and this is reflected in her long fragmented monologue with its ungrammatical structure, punning, alliteration, assonance, and sharp changes of tack reminiscent of James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (1934).

The great fall of the offwall entailed at such notice the pftschute of Finnegan, erse solid man, that the humptyhillhead of humself promptly sends an unquiring one well to the west in quest of his tumptytoes: and their upturnpikepointplace is at the knock out in the park where oranges have been laid to rust upon the green since devlinsfirst loved livvy. (3)

Or the likewise ‘damaged’ language of Lucky in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953) whose intellect may have been drained by Pozzo.

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattman of a personal God quaquaquaqua with a white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell. (42f)

The Skriker’s monologue, with its similar fissures in thought, establishes the subsequent fragmented structure of the play that must be likewise pieced together by the audience. It employs the more metaphorical English of pre-industrial society ‘damaged’ by the language of modern urban life. “Never marry a king size well beloved.” “Weeps seeps deeps her pretty puffy cream cake hole in the heart operation,” “no tainted meat,” “electric stormy petrel bomb” (243). Word association links the past and the destructive present, “changeling, changing chainsaw massacre massive a sieve, to carry water from the well well what’s to be done” (244). The Skriker’s central concern becomes evident in the ‘damaged’ language at the end of the speech:

They used to leave cream in a sorcerer’s apprentice. Gave the brownie a pair of trousers to wear have you gone? Now they hate us and hurt hurtle faster and master. They poison men in my rivers of blood poisoning makes my arm swelter cant get them out of our head strong. (246)

For this abandonment of the pagan, natural, world “revengeance is gold mine” (246). The Skriker’s twisting and contortion of language and
meaning establishes the importance of rhythm in word play that is not logical but musical. As Machon suggests, “Churchill’s play with words thus transmits primarily emotive and sensate experience via their sound, form and disturbed ‘meaning’” (159). Here the audience perceives the sound of verbal chaos that takes it beyond the expected grammatical and syntactical order and is therefore disorientated. The linear progression of the language in the monologue is also fragmented by diversions into folklore which illustrate the world of natural hazards – “danger thin ice” infanticide, hunger, ritual “dance in the fairy ring,” defiance of the old lore – “Tell them one thing not to do, things rue won’t they do it” (245). This is an example of the lateral (as opposed to linear) language often expressed as overlapping dialogue in other of Churchill’s play’s such as Top Girls. In this monologue, Churchill also prefigures the structure of a play that will not follow a simple causal linear narrative but, onstage, which will spatially link the ‘underworld’ of folk-demons with the contemporary urban society inhabited by Josie and Lily.

In The Skriker the body is foregounded by dance and costume and the twisting, turning and imagery of the language was expressed physically in the première production by the actor, Kathryn Hunter, whose performance as the protagonist was uniformly critically praised. As Machon points out, “the act of writing and verbal delivery […] becomes […] an emotional event and sensual act which take on the visceral qualities of communication” which “disturbs audience reception, enables it to be perceived in a multi-sensorial manner” (157).

Like Peer Gynt, The Skriker is a surrealistic convergence of everyday reality – here represented by two young women, Josie and Lily – and folk mythology. The dances are employed to suggest other states of being than that of these realistic contemporary characters who are intruded upon and affected by the more physically expressive Skriker. On one occasion the Skriker makes gold coins emerge from Lily’s mouth after she has kissed and been kind to her, and conjures toads from Josie’s mouth when she refuses to kiss her, thereby punishing for disregarding the natural world. Often during Lily, Josie and the Skriker’s dialogue, dancers simultaneously, and relatively incongruously, portray upstage apparently unrelated surrealistic and mythic figures such as a Kelpie, Bucket Man, Black Dog and Green Lady, some of whom hang
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from the ceiling, walk on stilt-like bones or have part human and part animal faces. The two worlds – the natural and the ‘civilised’ – are brought forcibly into collision by the shape-shifting Skriker. She encroaches upon the contemporary world by adopting its characters, including a woman of 50, an American woman of 40, a derelict woman, part of a sofa, a small child, a smart woman in her mid thirties, a man about thirty, a respectable man of 40. The play thereby abandons representation in favour of revelation. Using montage it does not represent the material world but conveys visually and phenomenologically the dramatist’s vision of its environmental state. What must also be borne in mind in relation to the latter, is that throughout the premiere production, keyboard and clarinets played an original score by Judith Weir described by Maureen Paton illuminatingly as “jaundiced music” (The Daily Express) and that the script demands song and dance.

The most powerful imagistic scene is Josie’s visit to the underworld. The previous mutation of scene into scene is interrupted by a sudden, sharp transition from the upper to the underworld accompanied by the shriek of a siren. The latter is a topsy-turvy world of grotesque creatures feasting in a palace reminiscent of the Troll kingdom in Ibsen’s Peer Gynt. However, in relation to the latter, where the Kingdom may be seen to refer to Peer’s moral decline, in the Skriker the world is an alternative reality to that inhabited by Josie and Lily. For Josie it offers a vision of the corrupted environment of the future which she carries back to the present. When the kindly Lily agrees to go to the underworld with the Skriker in order to save the upper world from disaster she is betrayed and is not allowed to return to the upper world until well into the future after the environmental damage has taken place. While Josie accommodates herself to the potential environmental disaster, Lily tries to stop it taking place and fails.

Towards the end of the play Churchill clearly states its theme by employing language that conforms to a relatively ‘normal’ grammatical structure and therefore inevitably engages the audience by its accessibility like a harmonious theme in an atonal piece of music. Here the Skriker, as a young man of 30, envisions a potential catastrophe.

It was always possible to think whatever your personal problem, there’s always nature. Spring will return even if it’s without me. Nobody loves me but at least
it’s a sunny day….But it’s not available any more. Sorry. Nobody loves me and the sun’s going to kill me. Spring will return and nothing will grow. (282f)

In performance The Skriker’s phenomenological affect is that the familiar world is portrayed as one of potential terror. The audience is not merely harangued with environmental politics but is forced to engage with the form and construct its own ‘message.’ Ben Brantley’s critical response in The New York Times to The Skriker’s affective structure was more appropriate than attempting to find intellectual meaning in a work that, although “densely cerebral” phenomenologically, creates an “enveloping chill [that] isn’t just intellectual.” The affect constitutes a change of perception and a dislocation of reality. “Afterwards you’ll be even more intent than usual on avoiding the eyes of people on the streets, wondering what demons lurk inside. You’ll even think twice before sitting on your sofa.”

The aim of the non-narrativity is to deconstruct surface reality rather than interpret it, and the overall phenomenological effect of the synaesthesia is to defamiliarise the world and thereby disorientate the audience and “haunt the memory as a concentrated encounter with ideas, images and emotion” (Machon 169). As this is not simply the abstraction of music or dance but includes the verbal, intellectual meaning will be formulated subsequently by each member of the audience according to his or her perception of reality. However, those ideas will not be taken from the box of the structure but rather, as in Surrealism, from the performance’s multi-mediated surface which, during its progress, should engage the audience both viscerally and emotionally.

In conclusion, both of Churchill’s plays are to a greater or lesser extent successful in achieving phenomenologically the central aim of non-narrative theatre best expressed by Artaud to whom non-narrative, imagistic, affective theatre owes so much. It impels us “to see ourselves as we are, making the masks fall and divulging our world’s lies, aimlessness, meanness, and even two facedness. It shakes off stifling material dullness which even overcomes their senses’ clearest testimony, and collectively reveals their dark powers and hidden strength” (Artaud 22).
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Works Cited

Primary Literature


Secondary Literature

Non-Standard Productions of Non-Standard Plays:  
*Gagarin Way, Cooking With Elvis* and *Eden*

_Treuenhof: Words are nothing._
_Winkler: Words are everything. After all, we haven’t got anything else._
_(Arthur Schnitzler: “The Word”)_

Apart from the strange world of academia malicious glee hardly anywhere is as virulent as in the theatre. We all love to read biting well-written negative reviews, as long as they do not concern our own work. However, when I go to see a production of a play I translated myself, I am always at my best behaviour and hope it is a success, altruistically for the sake of the author, less altruistically for the sake of my own bank balance. You sometimes have to be content with rather lacklustre results, but fortunately only twice I had to ask the question a hotel waiter famously put to George Best when he delivered some vintage champagne and found the footballer in bed with a naked former Miss World, the sheets covered with 20,000 in cash won at the casino: “George, where did it all go wrong?” The plays in question were Gregory Burke’s *Gagarin Way* at the Thalia in der Gaußstraße and Lee Hall’s *Cooking With Elvis* in the studio of the Maxim Gorki theatre Berlin.

The Thalia Theater Hamburg has one of Germany’s foremost ensembles, so a production there normally is a particular occasion for joy. But when the young director Annette Pullen rang me in March 2003 and
invited me to see it, I felt slightly apprehensive. She sounded as if she wanted to audition for one of those bland new German bands fronted by female singers with squeaky voices and chattered away cheerfully in a rather scatter-brained manner. As Gagarin Way is a text with a lot of testosterone floating around, I nevertheless told myself: Why not for once give it the girlie treatment? If nothing else it might at least undercut some of the characters’ macho posturing.

Inspirational for the play was the street sign “Gagarin Way” Burke saw in the former mining region of west Fife after the collapse of the Soviet Union: “I wanted to know how you got from this great Empire to a street sign in just a generation” (Waters). The dramatist’s aim was “to write about men and our infinite capacity for self-delusion” focusing on the working lives of four people from their early 20s to their late 50s. “I didn’t expect it to be a comedy but when you consider the themes which emerged while I wrote it – Marxist and Hegelian theories of history, anarchism, psychopathology, existentialism, mental illness, political terrorism, nihilism and the crisis in masculinity – then it couldn’t really be anything else” (Burke iv). Eddie and Gary, two workers in a computer-chip factory, kidnap Frank, an executive who came to inspect their plant. The plan is to interrogate, torture and kill this supposed representative of globalised capitalism. To their great amazement he turns out not be Japanese or American but like them hails from Fife. Unwittingly caught up in the action is Tom, a security guard who was unable to find something more adequate for his university qualifications.

Burke’s narrative is straightforwardly linear but the play is crammed with ideas and theories almost up to bursting point. During previews at the Traverse Theatre the author admitted: “If you look in a manual about how to write drama […], the number one rule is probably not to begin with a 10-minute joke about Sartre” (Mahoney). Apart from that 10-minute joke the two biggest surprises for the audience are the phenomenal eloquence of the well-read psychopath Eddie and the fact that Frank knows far more about Labour history, the student rebellion of 1968 or the mechanisms of capitalism than the two self-styled anarchists and Tom who wrote his thesis on working-class militancy in Lumphinnans during the inter-war years.
All that involves a lot of talk in a basically static situation, and it is perfectly alright to cut parts of it, especially as the Hamburg production was not the German première which had been staged simultaneously six months earlier in Essen and Leipzig. There and in other theatres like Göttingen or Magdeburg the text was trimmed but in no measure as ferociously as in Hamburg. Out went for example at the Thalia Tom’s asthma attacks (33ff), Frank and Tom being tied and untied (36f and 47f), the transferral of businesses to cheaper countries (61f), Tom’s theory of the “golden banana” (62), practically all references to Scotland like oil rigs (65), the devolution process (67) or its unhealthy food (75f), Eddie’s substance abuse (66f), Gary’s account of the Blitz experience (74), the Amsterdam euthanasia special (76), Gary’s pride in having taken part in the poll-tax riot (83) or Frank’s being fed up with “fucking airports” and “fucking hookers” (86). Where Pullen did not cut whole passages, she just kept one basic point as with Eddie’s theory of violence (41) and ignored the character’s extraordinary verbal dexterity. But the production thereby did not grow shorter, because apart from the roughly 60 minutes written by Gregory Burke the audience got reams of improvisation from the actors.

In the play Eddie in conversation with Tom cannot remember the exact term for a French law and just calls it “la something […] or le something” (7). At the Thalia Tom then came up with any French words he ever heard: “L’état c’est moi, voulez-vous couchez – no, that’s something different,” etc., etc. The mentioning of “a feel at an Arab’s arse” (9) provoked a prolonged debate whether in German one should use the dative or the accusative case. Paying homage to the fact that the play is set in a mining region led to an extensive pseudo-pythonesque riff on life in the pit, allegedly including a whole underground football team. Gary treated the others to the English version of the Internationale complete with raised fist and Eddie and Tom joined him for a red army song and Bandera Rossa. The most blatant invention was to make him a chocolate addict who enthused about a 20 kg slab from Switzerland with a picture of a white cow on the wrapping and asked the actor playing Eddie to bring him some KitKats from the canteen. Now, we all know that what after a couple of pints during an evening rehearsal seems hilarious might look less so in the cold light of the next morning. Pullen
however must have bought wholesale practically everything offered by her actors. She says: “I would rather direct twenty plays by Simon Stephens than a single one by Brecht” (Roeder/Sucher 117). This attitude I find very sympathetic, as I always liked Tom Stoppard’s assertion that he’d “rather have written Winnie the Pooh than the collected works of Brecht” (Spencer). Unfortunately the young director’s preference for new British plays is qualified by her claim: “I let the actors speak text of their own which is true to the core of the play and often far more beautiful than the author’s words” (Roeder/Sucher 119). Reading statements like that I always think of Peter Stein’s definition of a dramatist: “Somebody who is incredibly intelligent and therefore not a theatre person” (Stein 30).

Apart from all her juvenile toying around with additional text far below the level of anything Burke wrote, Pullen managed to come up with something even more ludicrous: completely out of the blue Eddie alone on stage quoted Danton’s weariness to get dressed from Büchner’s Danton’s Death and later on all the four characters recited the last conversation the condemned Dantonists have in the Conciergerie prison before being taken to their execution. None of the reviewers mentioned the improvisational liberties or the Büchner interpolations, as they apparently have a very high estimation of the Scottish school system. They also did not realise that Eddie and Gary were cast far too young for their parts and the desperately uncool Gary of all people was played by the company’s Kurt Cobain-lookalike or that Frank in Hamburg was more of a vain and hollow poseur than Burke’s touchingly world-weary manager. The four actors always ostensibly remained stage characters in stage situations as if they and the director knew nothing of the world outside of the rehearsal room. Every kind of believable reality and every sense of danger had been banned from the production. The worst consequence was that the four men appeared a good deal more stupid than on the page, making them easy targets for the audience’s laughter. Nonetheless all the reviewers praised Pullen as a very talented director. Talent she has indeed abundantly and she is particularly good at rhythmic variations. The problem is that she does not yet seem to know what to do with all her technical proficiency. This did not deter other big theatres from inviting her, up to now with results not terribly dissimilar
Pullen’s Eddie wore a t-shirt with the message “Style is everything.” At least some content would be very welcome for a change.

My evening in Hamburg was a disappointment, but not the worst I have ever experienced at a play for which I had done the German text. This dubious honour goes to the Maxim Gorki theatre. When I wanted to pick up my tickets for Cooking With Elvis at the box office the day before the scheduled opening in September 2000, I was told that I had come to Berlin in vain as it was postponed for a month. Two weeks into these extra rehearsals I heard that the leading actress had been replaced and braced myself for the worst.

The impetus for Lee Hall’s play was a story his mother told him about some of her neighbours in Newcastle: “A lot of it is actually true! But once we started working on it it became stranger and stranger. It’s sort of Mike Leigh meets Joe Orton. I like it because in the middle of this very crude farce is a very sad story.” About his working method the dramatist says: “It’s an old adage that the best laughs are the ones that cost something. But I really like to find humour that’s on the edge – laughter that comes through the complexity of the situation” (Bo-wen). In Cooking With Elvis the 14-year old Jill is seriously overweight and a passionate cook of preferably unusual food. Her bulimic 38-year old Mum works as a schoolteacher whose husband used to be an Elvis Presley-impersonator before a car accident turned him into a wheelchair-tied vegetable. Mum indulges in one-night-stands and brings home Stuart, 26 and a supervisor of cakes, for whom the older woman quickly becomes a bit demanding in her sexual appetite. Jill also falls for him and they, too, sleep with each other. Lee Hall’s well-made framework is broken by Dad as Elvis singing some of the King’s most famous songs and delivering a number of hilariously funny monologues to the audience in the style of a stand-up comedian.

Hall’s plays always have an exactly defined social background. The family home in Cooking With Elvis does not seem to be a daunting challenge for a set designer. Imagine my disbelief when I entered the studio of the Gorki and saw a cross between a sushi-bar and an American diner.

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in rectangular shape surrounded by 63 bar stools for the audience. Immediately I thought of the old theatre joke when at the opening of the curtain a spectator takes a single look at the set, calls out: “Already bad” and heads for the cloakroom. This is what I should have done myself. Instead I took my seat next to the theatre’s artistic director of the time, incidentally a conspicuously overweight man, putting on my best poker-face.

The façade was already hard to keep up when at the start of the performance a tiny pink Cadillac trundled along on a track bearing *amuse gueules*, either tiny pies or fruit gums in the form of hamburgers. Their stale taste provided a presentiment of things to come. The appearance of the two actresses came as the biggest shock: the 38-year old bulimic was played by a sturdy actress rather looking like 55 who for the whole evening signalled to us that she thought herself dreadfully miscast which was undeniably the case. The young girl with the weight problem was given to an actress as thin as a rake. This made a complete nonsense of all the conversations referring to the characters’ nutritional problems. I was accompanied by a friend who did not know the play and had to explain it to her later on the underground, as she thought these passages were written by a feeble imitator of Eugène Ionesco at his most surreal. Occasionally the characters came out of display cases stocked with Big Macs, French fries, wine gums, red paprika, pumpkins and cakes or went back there to lie down contortedly. Sightlines were a nuisance throughout, especially for the actor playing Dad who needs all the rapport with the audience he can get for his songs and monologues. Unfortunately he seemed intent on demonstrating what a dreadfully bad Elvis-impersonator his character used to be, whilst the only sensible advice from a director would be: Try to be as good as you possibly can, you will remain a very feeble copy of the real Elvis anyway.

Christian Schröder in *Der Tagesspiegel* thought the play was situated in a “prole-milieu” which is not at all the case despite the rather low pay for schoolteachers in Britain, as the family received a substantial amount of compensation from an insurance company after Dad’s accident. Schröder went on to say: “The cast permanently act hysteria, but you never feel even a hint of the desperation behind all this hysteria.” Taking into account Hall’s interest in “the very sad story” at the core of his
text, this was a verdict as damning as it was correct. All the humour did not cost anything, but came across as clumsy and forced, and the individual scenes just clunked along. Even more scathing than her colleague Schröder was Henrike Thomsen in the Berliner Zeitung, who claimed that in Christina Friedrich’s production the characters remained “freaks,” because the director was only interested in the food metaphor and ignored the rest of the play. Therefore “everything appear[ed] bana-

nal,” and there was not a single complex situation in sight. What is particularly infuriating on such evenings is that the audience will blame the author for all the misguided “ideas” the director had. At the Gorki theatre already during the meeting when the designer first presented his model for the set it would have been the artistic director’s duty to inter-
vene. You do not need to be a theatrical genius to realise that from the start in such an environment even a more suitable cast would have been completely lost. In her day job at the Ernst Busch acting school in Berlin Christina Friedrich trains young directors. One can only wish her students all the best.

As for both these disasters women were responsible, not only for political correctness’s sake I would like to end with a positive example of a play far better served by a female director. Eugene O’Brien’s Eden arguably is a good deal more difficult to stage than either Gagarin Way or Cooking With Elvis, as it consists only of two intercut monologues by Billy and Breda and the director has to invent the whole context. The characters are a married couple going through a difficult patch, because Billy thinks himself more of a Lothario than he actually is. At the Thalia Theater Halle in October 2004 the play was set in a pub where you could order Guinness and whisky at your table. I liberally took advan-
tage of these offers at reasonable prices to allay any fear of another ex-
perience on the Gorki level, but this precaution proved completely un-

founded. The two actors, despite the close proximity of the audience among which they moved freely, never put a foot wrong and the text came to life without the slightest alteration to it. This is far more difficult to achieve than all kinds of directorial gimmicks drawing constant attention to themselves. Instead of trying to make the most of what plays like Gagarin Way or Cooking With Elvis offer in transcending the boundaries of a too narrow kind of realism, more and more German
directors try to assume author status themselves. Many critics also seem to think: a carefully directed and well-acted play – how boring! Needless to say that the marvellous production by Annegret Hahn in Halle despite being a German première received only two reviews, one in the local paper, the other in a listings magazine. If Hahn had set it in a scuba-diving school, cast the actors completely against type and age and let them improvise wildly along the lines of “Guinness is good for you,” a huge career boost might have been the result, a boost for a kind of career that can only be made in Germany.

Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature


As several authors contributing to this volume have concluded, they are not dealing with entirely new forms of theatre, but are rather introducing new variations on older forms or, to put it differently, they are describing the pouring of old wine into new bottles. This also applies to my article, though with a codicil. The theatrical genre to which my essay addresses itself, the musical revue and one of its sub-genres, contains in equal parts wine and vinegar. I have labeled this sub-genre, at a venture, “a structured recitation of songs.” What hides behind that label will be illustrated here by two exemplary twentieth-century stage works.

The musical revue has had a long, if not entirely honorable history. One can trace its origins to France, Britain and Germany and its temporal emergence to the early nineteenth century. As The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians would have it: “In revue there are elements of other stage forms such as cabaret, variety show, vaudeville, pantomime, burlesque and musical comedy” (Lamb and Root 78). Another standard work on musical theater puts its history in terms more down to earth: “The art form [the musical revue] would never have risen above its crude nineteenth-century antecedents in minstrel show, vaudeville show and burlesque, if it had not evolved with highly gifted artists” (Grant 113). Even at the point of its greatest fertility, the time between the world wars, it was at best a showcase for emerging talent, such as the
highly successful strings of *Earl Carroll’s Vanities*\(^1\) and at its worst, a showcase for shivering ladies, too thinly clad for drafty theatre stages.\(^2\)

In the United States several sub-genres emerged, driven by new waves of influence from Europe. For one it was the political cabaret. A relatively rare import, it was nonetheless successful with a limited and sophisticated American audience. San Francisco’s “The Capital Committee,” Chicago’s “Second City” and a few other stages testify to its survival in today’s America. Another offshoot was the intimate revue, performed mostly in nightclubs and rooftop theatres. It was held together, if at all, by a thin plot or as a showcase for a single composer or performer (Flinn 116). Yet another sub-genre, the so-called concept revue, emerged simultaneously, with coherence supplied by a single theme such as DaSilva, Brown and Henderson’s *The Birth of the Blues*. In fact, sometimes (in contrast to the intimate revue) so much plot was introduced into the concept revue that Stephen Sondheim felt compelled to deconstruct again the close-knit coherence of these compact revues. His play *Company*, as beautifully documented in a film,\(^3\) meant yet another departure in the emergence of the concept musical.

So much for this brief, anything but exhaustive, sketch of the musical revue. It was perhaps needed, since no complete study of the “subgenre revue” so far exists.\(^4\) It is also needed since all its forms and variations are very much alive. That finding will confound the dreary conclusion on the subject in the *Musik Brockhaus*: “Seit dem 2. Weltkrieg sind die Revue-Theater fast verschwunden” (F.A. Brockhaus 493).

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\(^1\) Cf. Miller: “And though the revue had little influence on musical theatre as a dramatic art form, it gave first opportunities and paychecks to some of the men who would go on to polish the first generation of real American musical theatre […]” (Miller 18).

\(^2\) Flinn 116.

\(^3\) Cf. Kantor.

My topic concerns yet another aspect of this motley assembly of musical revues, which will also help to disprove the premature obituary set for it by the Musik Brockhaus. The song recital, to be discussed here, is a form of musical revue with a distinct form of its own. Its distinction was not immediately felt when it first came center stage. Newspaper editors were at first in doubt as to whether to assign performances to music or theatre critics. In fact, when in the 1930’s Betty Comdon and Adolph Green appeared in a nightclub act, The Revuers, for which they wrote their own songs and dialogue, reviews of their revue appeared in both musical and theatre columns (Ewen 635). A standard history of the musical theatre called the random recitals of tunes “songs in search of a show” (Flinn 117).

And then along came a revue which once more broke all traditional molds. It was created by Eric Blau and Mark Shuman, two American collaborators who conceived the idea of building a production around the songs of Jacques Brel, a Belgian composer and lyricist. In adhering to the theme of this volume, the exploration of “non-standard-forms,” it can be stated at the outset that many of the reviewers found the show *Jacques Brel is Alive and Well* (Blau and Shuman) “to be unusual” and to be “extraordinary entertainment” (Gross 14). Also “it is the off-Broadway Theatre doing what it does best, what justifies its existence – presenting the unusual.”

Yet when it came to defining the innovation, there was anything but unanimity. One critic called it a “Brel portfolio” (Whittacker 31); another offered not one but four definitions: “a presentation, a revue, a distillation of the songs and ideas of one of our more brilliant chansonnaires […] This is not a show […]. It is an experience.” Not to be outdone, yet another reviewer, no doubt a culinary critic, called it, legitimately, a “pastiche,” but also, less fittingly, a “bouillabaisse” (Harris 29).

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Obviously the creators of the show who culled 16 songs from Brel’s repertoire of over 200, also puzzled over the work they had created. They were aware – with all modesty – that their creation was innovative, even if not a theatrical revolution. “Yet, historically speaking, Jacques Brel’s formal innovation is small. Like almost all other formal changes in the art it extends inherited experience to a greater or lesser degree without losing contact with what has preceded it” (Blau 7). One could even argue that classical music, say Schubert’s song cycles like "Die schöne Müllerin" or “Die schöne Magelone” were among the show’s ancestors. Also Blau had the disconcerting experience that an informed theatre director told him after the show that a similar tradition in India antedated Jacques Brel by “more than fifteen hundred years” (Blau 60).

Of course Blau and Shuman did not leave it at that. We didn’t want it to be just a revue or just a concert. We wanted it to be ‘theatre’ and the big question was how to make it into theatre. I suppose you could say I had this animal feeling of what had to happen [...]. We were pretty sure we had something good – I suppose you could call it a Theatre of Song – but how could we try to explain it to audiences, to the press. [...] One critic later analyzed why the show worked so well and decided that what we had created was a libretto-less musical. (Rubin 31)

Undoubtedly the creation is theatre. “Talk about dramatic possibilities and music,” exclaimed a musicologist (Flinn 337). Of course its popularity as drama speaks for itself; it would not have weathered more than 1500 performances in Greenwich Village, innumerable road shows and revivals, recordings and a film without its dramatic appeal. Nor would it have earned such appellations as “dramatic,” “theatrical,” “seriocomic” from the critics (Kraft 15). But after seeing the show several times, each performance at a different site, I think I have detected at least five elements, none of them necessarily new, which, in the aggregate metamorphose a mere presentation of songs by the same composer-lyricist into musical theatre.

Underlying this transformation is, of course, the consummate artistry – and fervor – of Jacques Brel and the range of his subjects, timeless and topical at the same time. They range from love to death, from bullfights to politics and from admiration to denigration of Brel’s home country of Belgium. An additional component, contributive to the book’s success, is the seamless translation of the French text and, where
reasonably and plausibly, the transformation of the French cultural setting into Americanese. As an example of the latter: Where Brel, in the song “Marathon,” recalls excessive wine parties, we Americans hear of the “bathtub gin” of Prohibition days (Blau and Shulman 1).

What makes theatre and dramatic tension surge through the song recital is, first of all, the structure of the individual songs, a characteristic recognized by several reviewers, though referred to in different terms. “Narrative development” one reporter sees in them (Marcus 36), “songs that are short stories” (Mayer 35) and a historian of musicals adds, most relevantly, “a self contained one-act play” (Miletich 160). Often these one-act plays are acted out, quite dramatically, by the performers.

Second, given the frequent shifts of Brel’s mood and themes, the creators of the musical, Blau and Shuman, have occasionally provided transitions. After a melancholic song, “Alone,” describing how betrayal creates loneliness, there is a brief dialogue between the performers, written by Blau and Shuman.

MAN #1 (Spoken) You are bitter!
GIRLS #1 & 2 (Spoken) Bitter, bitter, bitter!
MAN #2 (Spoken) Bitter! It’s not me. It’s Brel. But he says that he writes the songs that he does because he’s in rapport with the world, as it is. (Blau and Shuman 4)

The directors of touring companies have enlarged upon these transitions. According to the reviews and my own observations these interstices have taken the form of interpretive dances or addresses to the audience and, in spectacular fashion at a recent (2002) Detroit performance at the JET Theatre, by backdrops, slides and a picture of the long-deceased Jacques Brel. One of the women performers “holds hand” with him as a sign of silent approval.

Elsewhere Blau admits that Shuman and he devoted considerable attention to the arrangement of the programs, by which he means the sequencing of the songs: “[…] We knew what we wanted: to order the songs and their interpretations in such a way as to create the theatre experience as opposed to the concert or variety experience” (Blau 61). Blau does not elaborate on the criteria for sequencing, but they can easily be inferred from the theatre program. The two songs that frame the presentation form the beginning and the end of a long journey. “Marath-
“thon” provides a near endless catalogue of human folly during the twentieth century, from World War I to Viet Nam. (In fact one reference work views Jacques Brel, by implication, as an anti-war protest piece) (Suskin 399). Other human aberrations or crimes, such as Stalinism, the injustice of the Sacco-Vanzetti trial and the Holocaust are also pilloried. But the show concludes with a sliver of hope with the line: “If we only had love [...].” One is reminded of Erich Kästner’s famous poem, “Trostlied im Konjunktiv” (Kästner 170).

But the artful structuring of the program does not cease with the framing numbers. In a concert recital, in a revue or in a cabaret, songs are frequently “bundled.” Arias or songs of love, and happy or tragic songs follow one another or, at most, the breaking of a mood is rare. But in Jacques Brel that is the rule. The haunting song “My death” (“My death waits like an old roué”) is immediately followed by the parodic feminist ditty “Girls and Dogs” (11). Or, in reverse, the lambasting of the middle class, in a song entitled “The middle class are just like pigs,” gives way (after a brief admonition not to pretend feelings of love) to one of the climactic songs of the show, the love song, “My love, you’re not alone.” We, the spectators, are forced to constantly adjust to the change of masks which – be they comic, tragic or in between – have come to symbolize drama and theatre. For me the performances of Jacques Brel resemble emotional roller coasters.

Fourthly Jacques Brel’s lyrics can be read as a fragmentary autobiography, which is intensified through the power of his melodies. Of course when Brel himself presented them during his own marathon runs through the bistros and concert halls of France, Belgium, London and New York, the impression that he was the protagonist of his own lyrics took on an added dimension. But no matter, the reviewers realized that the four performers, featured in the staging of his songs, took on his persona. “Suffice [it] to say,” wrote one Toronto reviewer, “that they [the performers] were able to be Brel rather than four young soloists” (Hicklin 39).

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7 The song titles in “The Table of Contents” frequently take liberties with the original titles bestowed by Jacques Brel: they often reveal the intent of the song, such as “Funeral Tango” and “Middle Class.”
In short the autobiographical elements are present and so palpable that Blau and Shuman, working on the show for several years, felt compelled to hint at them. “Sometimes, involved with his work, it seems suddenly that I know him completely: everything he is; all of his life and all of his secrets. After all, all of it is in his songs” (Blau 30). Elsewhere Blau adds, “but what he feels and believes is to be found in his songs. Not the total Brel, but as much of him as he can offer – the essential Brel” (Blau 40). Brel inadvertently reified Blau’s conclusion. During a 1967 press conference in New York he said: “There are people as unhappy and bored as I sometimes am […]. They feel a little better that somebody knows and tells them that he knows” (Stasio 59). Supported by Blau’s insights and Brel’s self-assessment one can reasonably assume that the abused young army recruit in the song “Next” and the dreamer of future fame in “Jackie” (nomen est omen) come close to being Brelian self-portrayals. These autobiographical elements, enfolded into the songs, add to the drama of the songs – and of the show.

As the most recent history of the musical theatre puts it: “In a sense, the show is more character study than anything else […]” (Miller 111). Precisely that aspect of the new type of revue found a great many followers. One revue, Ain’t Misbehavin’ (1978), tells of the life and times of Fats Waller; Sophisticated Lady (1981) does as much for Duke Ellington; Perfectly Frank (1980) becomes the life story of Frank Loesser. The songs accompany the life and times of the title heroes. But while watching the opening of LoveMusik, a more recent example, which chronicles the adventures of Kurt Weill and Lotte Lenya, I realized that the songs appeared no longer in chronological order. That rather confusing arrangement may have contributed to the foreshortened run of the show.

Finally Jacques Brel works as drama because it leans on a new form of theatre; it applied the dramatic theory of Brecht-Weill to the staging of a musical revue. By the time Jacques Brel opened, American theater devotees and reviewers had come to accept Brecht’s innovative type of theatre. They came to recognize it in Jacques Brel. Elly Stone, the wife of Eric Blau and the long-time star of the show and its occasional director, found Brechtian “alienation” in Brel’s lyrics (Schaeffer 39), but critics also spotted the connection. The reviewer of Newsday, covering the opening night performance – or rather trying to bury the show – un-
earthed nonetheless the connection to Brecht: “And so what it comes down to, shades, but pale shades of Brecht” (Tallmer 27). A biographical reference work, speaking of Brel’s recording, found in it the raucous Brechtian intensity (Stasio 58). As the show moved across the country, a Florida reporter noted the indebtedness to the *Threepenny Opera*:

“The arrow-shot of lyrics, melding poetry and sheer power, frequently evokes the deadly volley of Kurt Weill’s *Threepenny Opera*. Passing from the touching to the sardonic, the audience may painfully ponder life and love” (Hern 20).

The same critic implicitly also evokes Brecht and Weill, when he analyzes Brel’s predilection for social protest and his intolerance of people’s passivity in the face of injustice: “He pummels the audience to take position” (Hern 20). That is very Brechtian, of course.

As late as 2005 a newsletter from British Columbia quotes, approvingly, an earlier observation on the Brel-Brecht-Weill connection:

Brimming with flair, attitude and European sophistication, these rich compositions bring to mind the groundbreaking work of Kurt Weill and Bertolt Brecht, creating a universe all their own that consistently startles with its daring, candor and insight. The sheer musical poetry of each song supports many layers of interpretation, giving the show a new and unexpected meaning with every new cast and production team that takes it on.8

Some reviewers noted another startling parallel, one that I had also observed during the first month of the revue’s run: that Brel, like Weill, had frequently scored lyrics against the grain: “There are fast, funny songs too, reported the *Village Voice*, with a bouncy music hall gaiety, that is deftly and pointedly belied by the words” (Novick 18).

Hence, clearly, some of the experts agree that Blau’s and Shuman’s creation stood on the shoulders of Weill and Brecht. That is, of course, not a negative assessment, especially if such an assessment lifts the revue to dizzying heights via a flattering comparison:

Audiences that witness [… Elly Stone’s] tours de force know what it must have been like in the ’30’s, when that young Lotte Lenya sang the works of Brecht and Weill and cabaret fused with art. The resemblance to Brecht and Weill does

not end with Elly. The elusive melodies seem, at first, to be more cloaks for Brel’s verse. But they bear constant repetition [...] As for his lyrics, the terse, iron-clad couplets recognize revelations beyond politics and fashion; they know that every man is an expatriate from youth. (Stasio 58)

But now comes the ironic turn-about. Weill and Brecht never collaborated or worked singly on a revue. At a stretch, Weill’s Lunchtime Follies, text by Maxwell Anderson, could be so defined.9 Yet after Weill’s and Brecht’s deaths scores of adapters tried their hand at molding their songs into show-length revues. With Jacques Brel now supplying a ready-made model, these new adapters drew their inspiration from the French-American teamwork as well. The archive of the Kurt Weill Foundation for Music houses material which documents the appearance of more than a dozen of these additional attempts to pour old wine into new bottles. Some were successful, such as From Berlin to Broadway (Wilton 11) or the prestigious, intimate late-late show with Bebe Neuwirth, entitled Here Lies Jenny (Ryzik 7); others, such as Kurt Weill Cabaret, turned out dismal. “There is a disjointed, almost frantic air to many of the sketches, as if the performers are trying very hard to squeeze effective results out of intransigent material,” wrote and spoke a disconcerted critic for a St. Louis university radio station.10

But to show how unusual theatre can spawn still more unusual theatre, a show called Songplay by Jonathan Eaton can serve as prime example.11 The title itself points to the innovation. It is not, mutatis mutandis, a biography of Kurt Weill; it is not held together by an interlocutor, though the device of a transitional, functional dance is retained. It is an exile drama, six characters in search of his or her individual utopia. It is held together as well by the theme song, “Youkali,” Weill’s vision of a never-neverland. By subtly and unspokenly conjuring up the exile Kurt

9 Cf. Kowalke 76-81.
11 Songplay opened in St. Louis on September 26, 1994 at the Playhouse in the Park and ran until October 20, 1994. The script was never published, but the complete book is housed at the archive of the Kurt Weill Foundation, New York.
Weill, it inserts part of the autobiography of the composer via a back-
door.

An introduction to the script summarizes the plot:

The story is driven by the characters that the songs imply, and the sequence in
which the songs are arranged. The journeymen are the disinherited of several
lands: four men and two women, all itinerants, are gradually thrown together
while waiting to undertake a journey by ship to Youkali. They meet in a disused
dockside bar that serves as a waiting room. As they wait, relationships form,
shift, burst apart, and ignite. The characters tell of their experience in song: some
have been traveling to escape, fleeing persecution or failed dreams; all travel in
search of an ideal, a fair society, wealth, love, the good life, a redeeming experi-
ence. Their attitudes to the search and to each other are brought into focus by
three crises and a revelation. (Eaton [i])

Hence we have here one more variation on a theme. The originator,
Jonathan Eaton, has added a raison d’être, six individual missions, for
the characters assembled on stage. But the structured revue format re-
mains; there is a modicum of dialogue and an abundance of songs. The
36 songs, assembled from the European and American shows of Weill,
carry the message and plot. Eaton, like Blau and Shuman before him,
favors the clash of contrasts. When, for example, the German baritone
provokes the Jewish refugee with a raucous rendering of Weill’s “Rhine-
land Song,” the Jew touchingly counters with a soft liturgical song by
Weill.

The action is only partially scripted. As in Jacques Brel it leaves much
to the director and the performers. Also reminiscent of Blau’s and
Shuman’s structured recital, a song, “Youkali,” serves as the framing of
the play. In addition the unmediated contrast between the sequential
songs lends drama to the action. Finally the ancestry of Brecht is much
evidence. In the production I witnessed in Cincinnati, Brecht’s epic
theatre celebrated a sort of resurrection, with situations depicted that
antedate the time of the drama; characters also recite songs or dialogue,
which commemorate events or experiences that precede the action of
the revue. For example Lilly, an abused adventuress, at one point “re-
mains caught up in her recollections,” as the script dictates (10). Brecht
would have approved.

Like Blau, Jonathan Eaton suffuses the work with his point of view.
What he attributes to Weill in an interview also motivates him: “Weill
structured song recitals: an innovation in musical theatre

has a point of view – he depicts the little guy making headway in the world, but there are also political threads to it” (Carpenter 11). And Eaton, by using “Youkali,” a utopian song, as theme, comes close to Blau’s and Brel’s “If we only had love,” the conclusion to Jacques Brel.

In short the structured revue is alive and well and living all over, including in the many Kurt Weill revues, who had been one of Brel’s and Blau’s spiritual progenitors and posthumously supplied the songs for Songplay.

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A Fantasy Epic as a Theatrical Event –
*His Dark Materials* at the National Theatre

Academic criticism of contemporary drama tends to make a distinction between the conventional drama of the well-made play and various forms of modernist or avantgarde drama. While this distinction is very useful to describe the dynamics of dramatic development in the second half of the 20th century, it tends to overlook that both the well-made play and avantgarde drama share a set of features which originate in the tradition of Western theatre and in the conditions of theatrical production in Europe and America.

Since theatrical events commonly take place in the evening, starting at about 8 pm, both conventional and avantgarde plays tend to be about 2-3 hours long and are usually divided into two parts or acts to allow for an intermission. In line with the main tradition of Western theatre, both conventional and innovative drama are mostly text-dominated and actor-oriented. The text is customarily written for the theatre by a playwright who, especially in Britain, is often seen as the original creator of the event. In both conventional and avantgarde theatre, the playscript consists chiefly of lines to be spoken by actors. Mostly due to the financial restrictions of theatre companies, the number of actors involved is normally rather small (about 2-6). Many non-verbal forms of theatrical expression such as dance, puppet playing, live music, and elaborate stage technology are hardly used at all in either conventional or avantgarde drama. Those non-verbal elements which are used more frequently, like recorded music, sound effects, lighting etc., are only employed in a lim-
ined way to underline the text-dominated action and are not meant to play an independent role. The content of both conventional and avantgarde drama is mainly psychodrama or, to put it differently, consists of an internal development made external through verbal interaction.

This dominance of the internal over the external also influences the structural outline of both conventional and experimental drama. The number of scenes per act is limited and frequent scene changes are avoided. Reflexion dominates over action. The audience of both conventional and avantgarde drama consists mainly of well-educated adults who are looking for a performance which registers with their concept of “high art” (either classically realist or modernist). The cultural status of both conventional and avantgarde drama thus is quite high and the audience tends to be snobbish towards popular culture which is often seen as shallow and less serious when compared to drama. References to youth culture are usually reduced to token status in both realist and modernist drama. Conversely, drama as a whole is not the usual medium of expression in youth subculture.

Naturally, one could point to some exceptions like the group-authored plays of the 1960s and 70s but the scarcity of these exceptions and their limited hold on the stage essentially proves the general rules which apply to most plays from authors ranging from Ibsen to Beckett and Kane or from Wilde to Ayckbourn and Stoppard. What seems like a very diverse group of texts appears quite homogenous when compared with other cultural products, e.g. with standard Hollywood movies of the 1990s. Action-dominated films show how strongly, by comparison, theatre depends on verbal interaction and psychological themes. Entire series of films in the 1990s were mainly devoted to the exploration of special effects or the possibilities created by the use of CGI (Computer Generated Imagery). While blockbuster movies logically are not a standard medium of expression of youth subculture, there is, nevertheless, a much closer relationship of mutual interaction between Hollywood and youth culture than between drama and youth culture. It also hardly needs mentioning that the audience of a blockbuster movie is very different from a normal theatrical audience (both in composition and behaviour).
Surely anyone who has experience with both drama and film could easily add points to the list of obvious contrasts between films and standard drama, a list which is way too long to expand on it further within the framework of this article. Yet one more, almost random point of comparison might be mentioned to illuminate that the standards of drama are often taken so much for granted in drama criticism that they almost disappear from view. While the musical score usually plays a subordinate role in films, the status of music is nevertheless much more significant in films than in drama. Two details underline this: while a total absence of music does not surprise or disturb in either conventional or avantgarde drama, it is almost unthinkable in film. There is also very little music written especially for drama texts while the composition of a film score or at least a theme song is standard in Hollywood movies.

It transpires from all this that a decidedly non-standard form of drama, i.e. one that differs from both conventional and avantgarde drama, might contain the following features: it uses a text that was not originally written for the theatre and thus defies dramatic standards concerning length, structure, and content. The role of the playwright is reduced to that of an adapter of the text. The play exceeds the standard 3-hour duration and the limitation of scene changes. It is of epic scope, addresses children as well as adults and contains strong elements of action involving a major cast of actors. It makes heavy use of puppets and dance theatre, as well as of elaborate stage technology and live music composed especially for the event. These elements form an integral part of the play and carry the same weight as the verbal interaction.

The production of *His Dark Materials* at the National Theatre (2003/04) meets this bill in all respects as an overview of the production details shows. “This theatrical event – the word play seems inadequate” (Young 21) consisted of two parts, each with a duration of more than three hours. The playscript is based on a trilogy of fantasy novels by Philip Pullman, *Northern Lights* (1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber Spyglass* (2000). The stage adaptation by Nicholas Wright contains more than 50 named roles and required a cast of more than 30 actors, dancers and puppet players, who used about 120 puppets. The roughly 100 different scenes of the show were brought onstage with the
help of the full arsenal of the complex stage technology available at the NT but hardly ever used to its full capacity. This included the drum revolve stage, video projection from three projectors, an elaborate light design making heavy use of digital programming,\(^1\) various sound effects, plus a number of other special effects. There were “24 stage crew, eight electricians, four sound, ten dressers, two wigs” (Butler 41) working backstage to guarantee a smooth performance. Over 1000 set, lighting, and sound cues were needed to coordinate the various levels of the show.\(^2\) The performance was accompanied by a live orchestra of eight musicians, who were playing a score composed by Jonathan Dove exclusively for the production.

Several of these non-standard aspects of the production (namely the adaptation process, the staging, and the puppets) merit a closer analysis as they illustrate how *His Dark Materials* expands the confines of standard drama. They show at the same time, however, that this is not so much a process of avantgarde innovation but one of transformation through borrowing well-established techniques from areas like the modern film industry or age-old puppet theatre. Yet, the most interesting aspect of *His Dark Materials* is not the technical production but the fact that the National Theatre very consciously tuned in with a special strand of the zeitgeist at the beginning of the 21st century. The NT’s production of *His Dark Materials* must be seen in the context of the recent wave of the fantastic, which still remains an often overlooked aspect of contemporary culture and especially so in the area of drama criticism.

One of the main features of fantasy is that, while it describes fantastic worlds and thus the unreal, it is meticulously realist in its narrative

\(^1\) To bring the eponymous *Northern Lights* (the title of the first part of Pullman’s trilogy) onstage, light designer Huw Llewellyn spent days programming the movements and changes of about 45 lights on the big wrap-around cyclorama at the back of the set (cf. Butler 39).

\(^2\) This means that there was, on average, a sound effect, light or set change every 20 seconds. Adding to this the numerous exits and entrances of actors in the over 100 scenes (on average less than four minutes long), the overall impression of the show was one of constant flux.
outline. The events described within the framework of the fantastic must follow logical and especially narrative rules. The world described may contain any number of fantastic elements – yet the relationship of these elements must be fixed as the imagination invents its own fantastic rules and limitations. The main aspect of limitation in fantasy lies in the narrative consistency of the story told. As fantasy is unashamedly narrative in a traditional, decidedly anti-modernist way, a genre like absurdist fantasy remains impossible. In addition to the inclusion of fantastic elements, fantasy is also marked by a tendency towards epic scale and classical narrative with elements like quest, hero, poetic justice, and the creation of an overarching sense of purpose.

Philip Pullman’s trilogy is a clear example of fantasy in all these respects. The novels abound in fantastic elements like travel between numerous parallel worlds or characters including armoured bears and miniature fighters riding on dragonflies. The scope of the novels is also truly epic since they describe no less than the fate of not just one world but all the parallel worlds existing in Pullman’s universe. Not only the title of the trilogy but also its whole outline is drawn from John Milton’s epic poem *Paradise Lost* (1667) and, although Pullman inverts the roles of God and the Devil and reinterprets the concept of the Fall of Man, the story still remains one of a fundamental struggle between good and evil, which is spread out over the more than 1,300 pages of the three novels. Yet, as fantasy goes, this cosmic struggle is encapsulated in the story of the development of two teenagers, Lyra and Will, from childhood to maturity, making it essentially a quest cum Bildungsroman cum love story.

The fantastic elements, the dimensions, and the narrative outline of Pullman’s novels all contradict the standard format of drama but Nicholas Hytner as director of the National Theatre nevertheless took the chance to secure the rights for a stage version quite quickly after the final part of the trilogy had appeared in 2000. Obviously encouraged by the general craze about Peter Jackson’s film version of J.R.R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (2001/2002/2003) and the Harry Potter novels and films (volume one to five of the novels and the first two instalments of the film series had already appeared by 2003), Hytner embarked with the NT on “his greatest gamble” (Clapp 16). He was well aware of the
fact that an adaptation of Pullman’s novels lay beyond the scope of the theatre according to the normal concepts of drama and would usually be left to Hollywood for a screen adaptation. At an early stage of the production he even admitted: “I could be wrong about the whole thing. It might simply not work” (qtd. in Butler 10). Yet, he deliberately took on the challenge to compete with and even outpace the Hollywood adaptation of Pullman’s novels, which was negotiated at the same time. Although there was a clearly commercial calculation behind this, Hytner’s decision can also be seen as an act of theatrical self-assertion, a claim that the major trend towards fantasy is not to be left exclusively to the film industry and that “no vision is beyond the reach of the stage” (Nathan 15).

The National Theatre already had some experience with stage adaptations of massive novels, e.g. War and Peace (1996, adapted by Helen Edmundson) or Remembrance of Things Past (2000/01, adapted by Harold Pinter and Di Trevis) and enjoyed a reputation for successfully mounting technically challenging, large-scale adaptations of fantastic children’s books like The Wind in the Willows (1990), Alice’s Adventures Under Ground (1994, adapted by Christopher Hampton), and Haroun and the Sea of Stories (1998). The NT’s logistic resources had also been tested shortly before by productions of Alan Ayckbourn’s ingenious double-bill House/Garden (2000) and Tom Stoppard’s exhaustive trilogy The Coast of Utopia (2002). If there was thus a trend at the NT towards large-scale productions combined with novel adaptation and children’s theatre, His Dark Materials was the culmination of this process.

3 Hytner has at least succeeded in the latter as the release of the first part of the film version (His Dark Materials: The Golden Compass) is scheduled for 7 December 2007 – almost exactly four years after the opening of the NT production. Part two of the film trilogy is scheduled for 2009. The studio of the film version is, almost logically, New Line Cinema, who have also produced Jackson’s The Lord of the Rings and thus now count as the fantasy experts in Hollywood. The trailer for the first part of the Pullman trilogy consequently advertises the film with the slogan “In 2001, New Line Cinema opened the door to Middle-earth. This December they take you on another epic journey [...]”
Hytner’s overall concept was clearly to combine various elements into a hopefully popular and financially successful production: A celebrated literary source text in combination with the general trend towards fantasy was supposed to generate heightened public attention for the production. The large readership of the novels and the resulting extensive fan base of “Pullmanites” would guarantee a large potential audience, also of young people who do not normally frequent the National Theatre in great numbers. The casting of well-known film stars like Timothy Dalton and Patricia Hodge in leading roles would help to attract even more people and, finally, the production was to capture the seasonal audience of children flocking to the theatre with their parents for the traditional Christmas fairy tale.

The Olivier Theatre, the NT’s largest auditorium seating over 1,100, consequently became both a possible location and a necessity for His Dark Materials. The Olivier offered stage technology which made it appear possible to find visually stunning solutions to the innumerable problems posed by the adaptation of a fantasy epic for the stage – yet, as the plan of a gigantic stage show developed, the Olivier also became the only stage that contained the necessary technology to stage the envi-

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4 In 2001 The Amber Spyglass, the third part of Pullman’s trilogy, had won the Whitbread Award.

5 As in film adaptations of cult texts, the influence of the “fandom,” especially on the Internet, forms a decisive force. The NT production of His Dark Materials happily gained the approval of most Pullman fans and plays a major role on fan sites like hisdarkmaterials.org and especially bridgeofthestars.net.

6 Due to the enormous technical difficulties arising from the gigantic production, Hytner missed the pre-Christmas run in 2003 with the show opening late on 3 January 2004. The second run of the production then opened in time for the next pre-Christmas season on 8 December 2004. Hytner’s overall calculation is almost identical with the planning and scheduling of Hollywood studios. The three parts of The Lord of the Rings were launched before Christmas in three consecutive years. The first Harry Potter movies, the first part of The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe (2005), Eragon (2006), and of course The Golden Compass are examples of the same pattern.
sioned show.\footnote{Consequently the debated transfer to Broadway (cf. Butler 116) proved impossible as the show was so intricately bound up with the Olivier stage. Yet Pullman insisted (cf. Butler 58f) that the script of the play could also be used for new productions elsewhere, e.g. in schools (using a very simple set and much less stage technology). See also Wright’s “Production Note” in the playscript \textit{(His Dark Materials 231)}. By now, there have already been several other productions of the play, e.g. in Warwick (Playbox Theatre, April 2006), Dublin (O’Reilley Theatre, March 2007), or in Glasgow (Citizen’s Theatre, July/August 2007).}

If all went well, only the Olivier could seat the expected large audience which – in turn – would be needed to balance the high costs of the lavish production.\footnote{With a budget of 850,000 GBP, \textit{His Dark Materials} surpassed the framework of a normal drama production but it got the same kind of budget a musical production at the NT usually gets (cf. Butler 28). Of course, the cost of the NT production is dwarfed by the alleged budget of the film adaptation which is more than 100 times higher (it is said to reach $ 205 million, the biggest New Line Cinema budget so far).} Finally, \textit{His Dark Materials} provided a possible answer to the question constantly nagging any director of the NT, as to which theatrical use the oversized Olivier Theatre could be put to.

At the time when the first workshops for the play, which were investigating the technical problems and the intended puppet playing, started in autumn 2002 (more than a year before the opening night!) there was not yet a playscript. Nicholas Wright was still involved in the process of adapting the vast material of the novels. The 35 hours reading time of the novels had to be condensed into six hours playing time. This was the first fundamental decision in the adaptation process, which was again dictated by the framework of the National Theatre and the prospective audience. Wright and Hytner had considered the various possibilities of structuring the show:

We did think about one play, two plays or three. One play was obviously never going to be possible. Three plays we did think about quite a lot, and it just felt that was too much to ask of an audience, particularly a family audience: to come to the theatre three times, or if you are seeing them all in one day to come in the morning and stay all day. To ask four people to pay three times – that was never going to work. (qtd. in Butler 18)
The resulting two-play solution was a compromise which meant some serious restructuring of the trilogy pattern of the novels. The overall idea was in principle to have one long play spread out over two parts to be seen either on consecutive days or on the same day, with a break in between.9

To keep the two parts structurally tied together, Wright invented a frame narrative which also served to solve another problem that habitually dogs children’s theatre (but not film work) – the fact that children in the story usually have to be played by adult actors. Hytner was well aware of the fact that “though a twelve-year-old actor can carry a movie” (qtd. in Butler 22) this would prove impossible in a six-hour show on the vast Olivier stage, which daunts even most experienced actors. Wright’s frame narrative solved this by turning the story into a memory play, starting with a scene in which the grown-up lovers Lyra and Will are separated from each other and caught in their respective worlds. By an assignation, they “meet” every year by coming to the same place at the same time but in parallel worlds. Sitting on the same bench but literally “worlds apart,” they look back on the events that have shaped their lives, led to their love, and brought about their separation. The action starts from there with the grown-up Lyra and Will impersonating their younger selves and, after the six hours of the show, the play returns to this initially puzzling opening scene, which is then fully explained.

With the production process gaining pace in 2003, Wright still had to keep his script flexible to meet the demands of the whole production and especially the complex moving set. While in standard drama the playwright’s text forms a fixed basis of a performance and is rarely altered, Wright’s script constituted only one aspect of an overall design which had to be developed in close cooperation with the rest of the production team:

Playwrights like to think that they’re the sole author of everything that happens onstage. But in this case I knew that I would be sharing the driver’s compart-

9 For reasons of marketing, the NT claimed that the two parts could be viewed independently but in fact they formed a unity which could not really be separated even if part two started with a short “Opening Montage” (His Dark Materials 123) of “what has happened so far.”
ment with many others. Like the book-writer of a big musical, or the screen-writer of a film, I would be referring constantly to the designer, the movement director, the composer and every other member of the creative team. I would be working with the producer and the director, both united in the form of Nick Hytner. And I would be working with Philip Pullman. All this was very attractive. (Wright, Introduction vii)

The comparison with a film script made here is especially illuminating as it draws attention to the fact that Wright’s role in *His Dark Materials* was a different one from that of the standard playwright who often works quite independently from the production. Wright’s writing was strongly influenced by having to negotiate between different technical, logistic or economic demands and this entailed the necessity to rearrange material as needed. Hytner explained that dialogues or even entire scenes often had to be shifted or rescribed:

For Nick Wright and me it was very like working on a screenplay. Very often when you are working on a film with a writer, you’re called halfway through the location scout by someone saying, ‘We simply can’t afford to go to two locations on the Friday in the third week, so that scene you’ve got in the car park must now happen in the bathroom of the country house.’ (qtd. in Butler 21)

Especially the huge set with its complex machinery often demanded such changes: “Practical decisions had to be taken, again almost like making a movie, because, scene by scene we had to know where the set was moving” (ibid. 23).

Naturally, adding to the material of the novel and rearranging it was not the only solution to the problems posed by the adaptation process. Wright also had to cut extensively and knew that this was a tight-rope walk of trying to keep the play afloat while still meeting the expectations of the Pullman fans in the audience, who would bemoan the loss of any cherished detail from the novels.10 This is what Robert Hanks, in his

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10 The possible stance of a “Pullmaniac” (Macaulay 18) can be witnessed in the two reviews of Charles Spenser for the first and second run of the show respectively. While his first review was rather negative, he admitted in his enthusiastic review of the second run that this must have been due to the fact that “Pullman’s novels were still too fresh in my memory when I first went to the show. […] I was like a spoilt child, given a dog for Christmas and churlishly complaining that it wasn’t a cat. And
review of the production for the Independent, called “the Harry Potter syndrome” (Hanks 1709). As in the adaptation of the Harry Potter novels for the screen, the wish not to disappoint the fan audience, whose appreciation is essential to the success of the production, led to a crowded and sometimes breathless script.

However, just like the writers adapting the Harry Potter novels, Wright could also rely on the background knowledge of much of his audience which often made long-winded explanations partly superfluous. In addition to this, young audiences seem to have far less problems following a condensed and crowded plot than middle-aged theatre critics. In his rather negative review, Hanks also had to admit that his 10-year old companion to the show “was riveted from first to last, and claimed to have no difficulty following the plot” (ibid.).

Part of the reason why especially the young audience was so engrossed by the show lay in the fact that the plot of Wright’s adaptation quickly moved along a great trajectory with Lyra and Will hurrying from one adventure to the next. Significant reflexive passages of the novels like the whole plot line about Sister Mary Malone and the mulefas were cut and the individual scenes of the play were blended into a deliberately uninterrupted continuum: “They [the director’s team] were very keen to make sure that as many scenes as possible would end with what in a movie is called ‘a wipe’ [i.e. with overlapping actions]” (Butler 34).

Wright and Hytner thus turned the potential weakness of the “Harry Potter syndrome” deliberately into a main characteristic of the production. The set was designed to be in constant motion with the stage turning almost continually and the new set sliding upward or downward for that I can only apologize” (1710). This reaction, which is rather untypical for a theatre critic, nicely illustrates the dangers and possibilities of adapting a cult text.

11 It is an interesting facet of the show that reviews by critics who were accompanied by children (e.g. also Georgina Brown) tended to be very positive with an eye on the enthusiasm expressed in their child companion’s undivided attention for six hours. Experienced authors of children’s theatre like Alan Ayckbourn know that this is no mean feat since children are in many ways the most demanding of audiences.
with the drum revolve.\(^\text{12}\) The constant set changes were supported and heightened both by the lighting design and the live music. At certain points of the show, e.g. at the crucial moments when Will was cutting a “window” in mid-air with Æsahættr (the “subtle knife”) to open a passage into a parallel world, all the different levels of the production coincided. The movement and text of the actor was orchestrated to interact with the live music, with a special sound effect, a light and set change, and often also with a video projection on the backdrop showing the landscape of the new world (cf. Butler 43).

While the production relied heavily on modern stage technology to thus create what approaches a “Gesamtkunstwerk,” it also resorted to very old and actually quite simple theatrical techniques to solve the problem of bringing to life one of the key elements of the novels: the dæmons. In the fantastic world of Lyra every human is accompanied by a dæmon in animal form, who is a visual expression of that person’s soul. Dæmons can talk, act independently, and – as long as the human is still a child – even change shape from one animal form into another. This aspect of Pullman’s novels will surely prove to be a field-day for the computer animators in the film adaptation but in the NT production puppets were used to great effect.

Hytner has commented on the fact that a return to traditional and long-neglected means of theatre can create a truly modern theatrical vision which also expands the possibilities of text-oriented theatre:

\(^{12}\) The drum revolve of the Olivier, which had only been used as a simple revolve for several years (cf. Butler 33), consists of a revolve stage combined with a large “drum” which can be split in two half-drum and is combined with elevators which allow the two parts of the drum to be raised and lowered as needed even while the stage is turning. Set changes can thus take place below the stage while one part of the drum is lowered. The drum revolve also offers the possibilities to raise a “tower” of variable height on the stage with the convex side of one half-drum pointing downstage or, if the half-drum is pointing the other way, to create a “droom” (drum room) which was fitted with a projection screen inside for *His Dark Materials*. Since all the different functions of the drum revolve can be worked gradually and independently of each other, Hytner could have the stage continually morph from one set into another.
The British theatre has always proudly and strongly been a literary theatre, and the core of the National's work will always be literary, but particularly with the new generation of theatre-makers, it would be wrong for us not to be searching all the time for the best productions in new forms. It is a wonderful irony that the new forms are very often reinventions of the most ancient forms, which is what puppetry is. (qtd. in Butler 29)

For *His Dark Materials*, Hytner secured the support of the Oregon-based puppet designer Michael Curry, who had gained international reputation for the puppets in *The Lion King* (1997), the stage adaptation of the Disney movie of the same name. During the rehearsal period of *His Dark Materials* a puppet team was experimenting and training in separate rehearsals with the puppets from Curry’s workshop to develop the special techniques and movements necessary for the impersonation of the dæmons. Each dæmon was then manipulated on stage by an individual puppeteer dressed in black who also spoke for the demon. The puppeteer had to closely interact with the actor playing that demon’s human, especially when the demon was held by that person. The effect was often similar to that of a ventriloquist speaking to his puppet that seems to have a life of its own. In many cases, as e.g. with the silent dæmon of Mrs Coulter, Lyra’s mother, the manipulating of the puppet bordered on dance theatre and consequently a dancer was employed to manipulate that special dæmon. The shape-shifting of the children’s dæmons, which often appeared almost magical on stage, was made possible through quite simple sleight of hand borrowed from magicians in which the actor often lent a hand to the puppeteer in distracting the

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13 Other than with Disney, Curry has also cooperated with various other institutions on numerous projects. He has supplied puppets for several opera and film productions, for shows of Cirque du Soleil, for the Olympics, and for a number of theme parks. His puppet work thus embodies a multi-genre approach towards theatrical performance which is happily situated in the unspecified borderland between various forms of performative art and thus transcends standard concepts of theatre.

14 Anna Maxwell Martin, who played Lyra in the first run of the show, explained the difference of normal acting and the interaction with the puppeteer as follows: “Usually in a play you can just walk around freely, but we had to find a way of moving together, so I didn’t fall over him. Eventually we found a way of listening to each other and knowing where the other was” (Butler 11f).
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audience’s attention, making one puppet disappear, and letting another one appear. As Matt Wilde, the staff director of the production, explained, the greatest effect was thus often achieved by “[t]rying to keep it very simple, not to be too clever” (qtd. in Butler 42).

The technological aspect of this particular element of the show was thus kept to a minimum but by the simple means of installing a little light inside the semi-transparent puppets the dæmons achieved an ethereal character and they appeared, in combination with the expert puppet playing, as truly alive to many in the audience. Robert Hanks wrote about Pantalaimon, Lyra’s dæmon, in his review: “He trembles with apprehension or curiosity; his tail beats the ground with pleasure; his back arches in hostility” (1709) and Georgina Brown stated in her review for the Mail on Sunday: “The real triumph of the piece for me, however, is the puppeteering which moves beyond literary illustration into a wholly theatrical realm” (16).

Philip Pullman has often stressed that he considered the dæmons a central piece of his trilogy of novels. He attributes the origin of the whole epic to their appearance in the first four words of tale (“Lyra and her daemon [...]”) which enabled him to start off a story which had previously been just a vague idea (see Butler 49). Pullman has also underlined that he sees the dæmons as an inherently dramatic element in his novels which much helped the adaptation for the stage: “As soon as I wrote Lyra and her daemon [...] instantly it becomes a dialogue. She can say ‘Let’s go in here’, he can say ‘No, you mustn’t’, and she can say ‘Oh come on, don’t be a coward’. It’s inherently dramatic. That’s the sort of thing that works on the stage” (ibid. 50).

With the realisation of the dæmons as puppets on the stage, yet another element of Pullman’s vision was heightened. The story of Pullman’s epic is fundamentally about the necessary “fall from grace,” from

15 This is e.g. underlined by the fact that the programme of the NT production is illustrated with a number of paintings and woodcuts ranging from the middle ages to the 20th century and showing humans in close contact with a (pet) animal. The images are introduced with the comment: “Philip Pullman considers that previously unrecognized dæmons have appeared in portraits throughout the ages. Some are shown, here and on the following pages” (n.pag.).
innocence into experience in a Blakean sense. Even before the NT production was thought of, Pullman had drawn a connection to Heinrich von Kleist's famous piece “Über das Marionettentheater” [On the Marionette Theatre] in an interview. In accordance with Kleist, Pullman upholds the notion that grace is closely linked to innocence. With a heightened (self-)consciousness gained through experience, grace fades and has to be regained by the difficult road towards wisdom thus approaching “paradise again from the back, as it were” (qtd. in Theatre Programme n.pag.). In his essay, Kleist cites an adolescent who is not yet aware of his beauty, a fighting bear, and the puppet as examples of unconscious grace. With the children Lyra and Will, the armoured bears and the daemon puppets, the NT production contained all these elements. It is therefore quite deliberate that the programme for the show included a piece in which Pullman outlines the content of Kleist’s essay. The audience was to make the necessary connection themselves but when Lyra has to leave her daemon or innocent self behind to enter the Land of the Dead towards the end of the play the punchline is clear: “Pan[talaimon] I love you. If I have to spend the rest of my life finding you again, I will. But now I can’t go back. I can’t. I’m gonna push you away now. I’m sorry” (His Dark Materials 200).

The Land of the Dead sequence was singled out as an impressive climax of the play by most reviewers. The different theatrical levels of the production (Wright’s drama text, the acting, the music, the movements of the drum revolve stage, the lighting, the elements of dance and puppet playing etc.) interacted here effectively to foreground the central theme of the novels. It is characteristic of the NT production of His Dark Materials that it combined the traditional format of drama with a number of non-standard theatrical techniques to solve the challenges posed by the adaptation of a fantasy epic for the stage. The production was experimental theatre not in the sense of counteracting the format of standard drama but in pushing its boundaries to the limits by creating a fusion of elements mixing adult theatre with children’s theatre, popular culture with “high art,” and text-based theatre with non-verbal techniques borrowed from films, stage magicians, puppet and dance theatre, light shows, and musicals. The result was a highly popular show that was not at all avantgarde in a modernist sense but embodied a different kind
of innovative theatre that tuned in with the zeitgeist at the beginning of the 21st century.

Works Cited

Primary Literature


Secondary Literature


By the mid-1930s, Noël Coward had long become Great Britain’s leading matinee idol, singer, entertainer, actor and playwright. As a dramatist he was best known as the celebrated author of highly popular, and commercially very successful, traditional comedies of manners. However, in 1935/36 he conducted an experiment unique in the history of British drama. Under the collective title of *To-night at 8.30* he launched a cycle of ten one-act-plays. Like a dramatic kaleidoscope of styles and genres, this short-play cycle juxtaposes comic and farcical pieces, musical and period pieces along with serious pieces.¹ Yet, it is not solely in its form and genre that *To-night at 8.30* significantly differs from the typical Coward as well as the typical 1930s-play. Two plays of the cycle particularly stick out from the rest of Coward’s oeuvre, not least for their serious tone and subject matter. These are *Still Life* and *The Astonished Heart*. In what follows, I will pursue a ‘queer reading’ of *To-night at 8.30* in general and of *The Astonished Heart* in particular, in which I will demonstrate a) that under the cover of an outwardly heterosexual affair a distinct queer subtext can be detected and b) that Coward was a far more revolutionary dramatist than he is usually given credit for, having

¹ In total, the cycle comprises the following ten plays: Hands Across the Sea, ‘Red Peppers,’ Ways and Means, Shadow Play, We Were Dancing, The Astonished Heart, Fumed Oak, Still Life, Family Album and Star Chamber.
brought about some interesting theatrical innovations. It will be pointed out that the non-standard dramatic form mirrors the non-standard or queer content and how this is achieved. After offering a brief definition of ‘queerness,’ I will mainly focus on queer aspects in The Astonished Heart, but I will occasionally glimpse at Still Life in addition.

The heuristic definition of queerness this paper takes as its basis is a simple if twofold one. One meaning of queer is considered to be closely linked to sexuality, while the second meaning is taken to signify strange-ness, oddity, peculiarity or extra-ordinariness irrespective of sexuality. By the first meaning of queerness I understand a relational term indicating a certain distance or deviance from the norm, especially from heter-onormativity, which denotes some sort of sexual otherness. This can be same-sex sexuality but may also be any other form of marginalised, ‘non-straight hetero-sexual or hetero-normative’ sexuality, with the norm implying a monogamous and monoamorous lifestyle. The often-quoted definition of queer by Halperin (1995) is still helpful:

[... Queer] acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm. Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without an essence. ‘Queer’, then, demarcates not a positivity but a positionality vis-à-vis the normative. (62, emphasis in the original)

In arguing that queer is a “positionality vis-à-vis the normative” and that it is “whatever is at odds with the normal, [...] the dominant,” Halperin seems to merge the two meanings of queer, i.e. the one related to sexuality and the one irrespective of sexuality. In the following, I will likewise take into consideration both meanings of queer, because apart from

2 Dean’s recent (re)definition of queer is equally useful:
Those excluded from the general population – whether by virtue of their sexuality, race, class, or nationality – are by definition queer. In this way, ‘queer’ came to stand less for a particular sexual orientation or a stigmatized erotic identity than for a critical distance from the white, middle-class, heterosexual norm. (240)

For an example of the use of queer in the non-sexual sense, see the following dialogue from Coward’s Hay Fever (1925):

Myra: Where’s the barometer? [...] stage direction
Richard (at the mention of the barometer, Richard chokes): On the piano.
Myra: What a queer place for it to be. (III, 80)
pointing out the allusions to sexual queerness in *To-night at 8.30*, I aim at demonstrating the ‘queerness,’ extra-ordinariness, and ‘non-standardness’ of the cycle of one-act-plays as a genre.

When inquiring into the queerness of the individual pieces of *To-night at 8.30*, it is worth remembering that these plays were written in 1935, i.e. at a time when plays were still subject to theatre censorship. It goes without saying that this was also the time when homosexual acts were legally defined as serious crimes. Under the infamous Labouchère Amendment to the 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act, homosexuality was subsumed under the obnoxious phrase ‘gross indecency.’ And (male) homosexual acts remained punishable until the Sexual Offences Act legalised sexual acts between consenting male adults in 1967, one year prior to the abolishment of theatre censorship. Indeed, until 1958 all public mention of homosexuality on stage was explicitly forbidden (cf. De Jongh ix; McKenna 109; Sinfield 44; Weeks 48-49). In other words, in the mid-1930s there was no way an English playwright could present sexual queerness, particularly male homosexuality, on a public stage, unless in a cunningly disguised, coded or otherwise covert manner. Accordingly, one possibility of representing queerness against all odds was to inscribe a play with a queer subtext to go with a straight surface text and thus to outmanoeuvre the censor and obtain a licence. In short, throughout most of Coward’s career, explicit depictions of sexual queerness were ‘unrepresentable’ in every sense of the term, and queerness could be hinted at only ‘between the lines.’ Homosexual playwrights and members of the audience were, of course, aware of the ensuing necessity of writing and reading about deviant forms of sexuality between the lines. Sean O’Connor therefore speaks of homosexuals as being ‘culturally bi-lingual’:

[…G]ay people are practiced at interpreting art, never taking anything at face value and locating themselves within texts that seem, superficially, to exclude them. We have had no choice but to read ourselves in works about heterosexual relationships and as, on the whole, we are born to and cultivated by straight parents, we understand the language of heterosexuality: we are ‘culturally bi-lingual’. (8, my emphasis)

With regard to the plays of Noël Coward, such ‘cultural bilingualism,’ or at any rate an increased awareness for covert meanings, helps to trace
queer subtexts and in fact reveals that his work offers ample material for queer readings. Prolific playwright that he was, Coward wrote more than 50 plays throughout his long career, which began in the late 1910s and reached far into the 1960s. He surpassed all other playwrights of the time, including William Somerset Maugham and G.B. Shaw, both in output and in commercial success (cf. Hoare 230, 262; Sinfield 53).

Since most of his plays are popular and rather traditional comedies of manners, Coward is hardly famous for having introduced breathtaking theatrical innovations. However, to consider Coward exclusively as a ‘conventionalist’ would not do justice to his achievements as a playwright, as it would mean to ignore some striking innovations he contributed to the theatre of his day. For, in fact, Coward wrote several other plays in addition to *To-night at 8.30* that were quite innovative at the time. To name but two, one may mention *Post-Mortem* with its a-chronological time scheme, or the almost epic *Cavalcade* with its impressive mass scenes. Moreover, recent criticism has pointed out that even Coward’s ‘conventional’ comedies – at least in terms of dialogue, disjuncture between scenes and theatrical self-referentiality – anticipate the works of post-war playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and even the younger generation including Mark Ravenhill, Patrick Marber and Martin Crimp (cf. Kaplan/Stowell xiv; Edgar 3-15).

In 1935/36 Coward branched out into virtually virgin territory. By writing and staging the cycle of one-act-plays *To-night at 8.30*, he produced a theatrical form without precedent. The one-act-play itself was a rare genre in England at the time. G.B. Shaw, J.M. Synge and W.B. Yeats as well as Lord Dunsany, Lady Gregory and Sean O’Casey had each written a few one-act-plays, but apart from that it was a rather uncommon and not a particularly popular form to be presented on the English stage. When staged at all, it was usually deployed as a curtain-raiser (cf. Morley 187). So even Coward’s choice of the one-act-play as a genre was rather daring in itself. But to launch a whole cycle of one-act-plays was actually a little theatrical revolution. What is more, the manner in which this short-play cycle, with its almost meta-theatrical title, was
produced had been hitherto unheard of. The individual pieces were performed in triple bills on three subsequent nights, though never in the same order. The idea was that instead of going to the theatre and watching one particular full-length play, the audience would attend the theatre on three subsequent nights, and each night they would see three one-act-plays in a row, but they would remain unaware in advance which of the plays they were going to see. This is remarkable not merely because this manner of production was highly unconventional and experimental, but also because it entailed certain consequences, not least regarding the audience. For example, there was always the same cast who appeared in the different plays. First and foremost, it was the thespian dream-team Noël Coward and Gertrude Lawrence, who starred as the male and the female leads in each play. In fact, Coward later claimed to have written the whole short-play cycle as a vehicle for promoting Gertrude Lawrence and himself, since their overwhelming success as Amanda and Elyot in *Private Lives* (1930) had corroborated his belief in the ‘Star System.’ He was convinced that the audience loved to see them as a couple, and *Tonight at 8.30*’s success proved him right (cf. Mander/Mitchenson viii). For an audience, this particular manner of production meant that within a very brief period of time, they saw the same actors in different roles in different plays – a device which dramatically enhances the performative character of play-acting and role-playing.

With regard to *Still Life* and *The Astonished Heart*, the fact that the same actors appeared in the different plays is particularly interesting, because the plays’ basic plotlines are highly similar. At the centre of each play is an extra-marital love affair, though in one case the affair remains repressed (*Still Life*), while in the other case it is fully acted out (*The Astonished Heart*). However, although the stories themselves are similar, their outcomes are crucially different. When the adulterous lovers Laura Jesson and Alec Harvey break off their affair in *Still Life*, both return to their respective families and their respectable, though somewhat dull,
middle-class lives. In *The Astonished Heart*, by contrast, the male protagonist Chris Faber commits suicide by jumping out of the window when his lover abandons him. In short, the two plays represent two variations on the consequences of illicit or forbidden love.

In the case of *The Astonished Heart*, the arrangement may best be described as a *ménage a trois* or a love triangle. And even though a commonplace, it is still true that each love triangle entails the possibility of same-sex eroticism, due to the uneven numbers. The three participants of the triangular relationship are the middle-aged psychoanalyst Chris Faber, his wife Barbara, and a friend of Barbara’s, the predatory intruder Leonora Vail, who becomes Chris’s lover. Interestingly, the secret double life of the illicit lovers Chris and Leonora is not all that secret, because the betrayed wife Barbara is fully aware that her husband has embarked on a love affair. Even more interesting is the fact that despite her knowledge of the affair, Barbara betrays no sign of sexual jealousy. This conspicuous absence of sexual jealousy can be attributed to the fact that the Fabers have long ceased to be sexual partners and are affectionate friends rather than lovers. They sleep in separate bedrooms, they have remained childless — notice that childlessness is never a good sign in Coward — and Barbara is very outspoken about the fact that their relationship is one of tender affection, not sexual attraction:

> Barbara: […] it would be different if I were still in love with you, but I’m not, any more than you are with me; that was all settled years ago. We are tremendously necessary to each other, though […]. (iv, 439)

Barbara is in fact so sympathetic towards her husband as to even suggest he go abroad with his lover and ‘act out’ the love affair: “[…] go away with [your lover] – take two months […] go to the most lovely, beautiful place you can think of, relax utterly – give yourself up to loving her” (iv, 439). A possible explanation for why the wife does not feel any sexual jealousy could be that her relationship with her husband is on an altogether different plane from the sexual relationship he has with his lover. And I would argue that this could be an indication that it is not a ‘straight-heterosexual’ love affair on which the husband has embarked. Everything we know about the Fabers’ marriage — separate bedrooms, no children, no sexual jealousy but a wife who supports her husband in acting out his sexual fantasies with another partner – indicates that
their is not exactly the heterosexual model marriage. Instead, one may see strong likenesses to the sham marriage depicted in Coward’s last play *A Song at Twilight* (1966), namely that of the closeted homosexual Hugo Latymer and his philanthropic, homophile wife Hilde. As the Latymers’ example demonstrates, there are, after all, profound reasons that may lead a non-heterosexual male and a supportive female to marry one another, especially at a time when the only legitimate relationships are heterosexual ones.

To come back to non-standard forms of drama, what is striking in terms of scenic representation and action is that in both plays the major part of the action is transferred to the backstage realm. It either happens during the scenes but off-stage, or it does not even happen during the individual scenes but in between them, so that most of what really matters is not put on display. Consequently, we as the audience have to fill in all the missing action. In *Still Life*, for example, we witness the secret lovers only as they repeatedly meet in a public place, the refreshment room of Milford Junction station. But we never see a single kiss, or an embrace, or anything of that sort. Similarly, in *The Astonished Heart*, the actual falling in love of the protagonist with his wife’s friend and their embarking on a love affair occurs literally ‘behind the scenes.’ As a result it seems that the whole affair is happening in the dark or under cover. To put this differently, both plays are full of what I would propose to call, with Wolfgang Iser, ‘gaps.’ And these gaps have to be filled by our imagination. One may arguably even see traces of modernist literary techniques in this deployment of gaps. Like readers of modernist fiction, the audience have to think and work hard to provide all the missing pieces. A sense of disruption is thus evoked, which is quite innovative in a play of that time. David Edgar, for one, has pointed out that a number of Coward’s plays anticipate late 20th-century plays such as Patrick Marber’s *Closer* (1997) or Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) in “explor[ing] disjuncture through what happens between scenes rather than within them, [and] expressing unconnectedness with the theatre’s tools of connection” (14).

No less significantly, in both plays there are ‘gaps’ not only in terms of scenic representation but also on the level of dialogue. Just as much of the crucial action remains unseen, the crucial words remain unspoken.
The characters speak between the lines rather than expressing their thoughts and feelings directly, and there is a distinct reticence about the way the characters talk to each other. This is particularly true of *Still Life*, as the often-quoted dialogue about Alec Harvey’s special field of interest, viz. preventive medicine, exemplifies:

Alec: [...]. You see I have a special pigeon.
Laura: What is it?
Alec: Preventive medicine.
Laura: Oh, I see.
Alec (*laughing*): I’m afraid you don’t.
Laura: I was trying to be intelligent.

[...]
Alec: [...]. For instance, my speciality is pneumoconiosis.
Laura: Oh, dear!
Alec: Don’t be alarmed, it’s simpler than it sounds – it’s nothing but a slow process of fibrosis of the lung due to the inhalation of particles of dust. [...].
Laura: You suddenly look much younger.
Alec (*brought up short*): Do I?
Laura: Almost like a little boy.
Alec: What made you say that?
Laura (*staring at him*): I don’t know – yes I do.
Alec (*gently*): Tell me.
Laura (*with panic in her voice*): Oh, no – I couldn’t, really. You were saying about the coal mines –
Alec (*looking into her eyes*): Yes – the inhalation of coal dust – that’s one specific form of the diseases – it’s called Anthracosis.
Laura (*hypnotised*): What are the others?
Alec: Chalicosis – that comes from metal dust – steel works, you know –
Laura: Yes, of course. Steel works.
Alec: And Silicosis – stone dust – that’s gold mines.
Laura (*almost in a whisper*): I see. (*Still Life*, ii, 350-51)

Here we have a prime example of how Coward literally lets his characters speak between the lines, as this extract illustrates particularly clearly how submerged meanings or implied messages are transported by means of elisions and omissions. It is not so much that the characters do not mean what they say, but that they mean much more than, or much apart from, what they articulate. There is a deep subtext underneath the actual utterances, and far more is implied than is verbalised. Ironically, the ‘hidden subtext’ is easily discernible in the stage directions, which do
not underline the characters’ enunciations so much as undermine them (“staring at him,” “gently,” “with panic in her voice,” “hypnotised,” “almost in a whisper”). It is ironic, too, that Alec Harvey of all people – a doctor specialised in preventive medicine against pneumoconiosis, which may eventually cause heart failure – cannot prevent his own heart from failing him and from falling for a married woman.

As I see it, the fact that the crucial action is removed ‘behind the scenes’ and the crucial messages are transposed ‘between the lines’ strongly indicates that there is more to the love affairs of these two plays than meets the eye, or the ear for that matter. And this, I would argue, may well be a further indication that something here is odd or queer. In other words, I would assume that a ‘culturally bilingual’ member of the audience, or in fact anyone with a heightened sense of (queer) awareness, could be inclined to read these gaps as signifiers of something left unsaid and unrepresented, and that this ‘Unrepresented/ Un-representable’ may well be sexual queerness. It may be argued, of course, that in the scene quoted above two people of the opposite, not of the same, sex fall in love with each other. However, as has been emphasised repeatedly, it would have been simply impossible to openly represent a same-sex couple’s falling in love and their embarking on an affair – whereas one way of avoiding the censor’s blue pencil was to disguise same sex love as illicit heterosexual love. Since homosexuality was regarded as an illness at the time, the fact that while Alec and Laura are about to fall in love they are talking about diseases of all things, further adds to the (queer) ambiguity of the dialogue.

To return once more to matters of theatrical non-standardness, another peculiarity of The Astonished Heart is its time scheme. The first scene takes place in November 1935. It is the day after Chris’s jump out of the window, while Chris is actually about to die – a fact, however, we learn only much later in the play. After this initial scene, the play leaps back in time, and the next scene takes place precisely one year earlier. All the subsequent scenes cover the rest of the time between these two dates. The play finally comes full circle with the last scene, which is set on the day of Chris’s death and is, in fact, the continuation of the first scene. What this implies is that most of the play takes place in the past. Put differently, the The Astonished Heart is structured like a cinematic
flashback, possibly even a flashback of the dying protagonist. This is remarkable, for one thing, because, apart from what J.B. Priestley had recently introduced in his time plays, such an a-chronological time scheme was highly uncommon in plays of the time, and, for another thing, because it anticipates more recent works such as Harold Pinter’s *Betrayal* (1978) or Tom Stoppard’s *Artist Descending a Staircase* (1973).

No less significant, but again rather a-typical of a pre-postmodern play, is the fact that the exposition is completely dispensed with. Instead, particularly at the beginning, the play comes close to resembling a jigsaw puzzle. The entire first scene can only be fully understood retrospectively. At first, we are solely informed that something dreadful has happened to an unnamed somebody and that “[t]here isn’t much time, is there?” (i, 416), but we do not know what kind of calamity has happened or to whom. Only at the very end of the play do we realise that the three people assembled in the first scene, Barbara Faber, Susan Birch and Tim Verney, must have been talking about Chris Faber, who, as we then know, has thrown himself out of the window having been rejected by his lover. We may argue, therefore, that the play is also experimental in its mimicking of the way in which we make sense of the world and ourselves, which does, after all, mainly happen only with hindsight. In this respect, too, one may feel reminded of late 20th-century plays; and again one may think of Pinter’s *Betrayal* but also of Kevin Elyot’s plays *The Day I Stood Still* (1998) and *Mouth to Mouth* (2001).

Apart from these ‘theatrically peculiar,’ non-standard, or queer aspects, there are further queer aspects to be detected on the content level of both plays. First of all, there are the predominant themes of furtiveness, the fear of discovery, and the striving for middle-class respectability. However, in *The Astonished Heart* the protagonist does not fear discovery so much as becoming estranged from his ordinary middle-class life. In fact, he has a terrible fear of being “swept away” and “far from [his] life” (iv, 439-40) due to his obsessive passion, and he fears that his existence will be ultimately destroyed if he gives way to his desires, as the following extract demonstrates:

Chris (*tortured*): [to Barbara] […] it started so easily, so gaily – little more than a joke; there were no danger signals whatever. […] the whole thing was so apart from us and all we mean to each other – my intelligence lied to me – my intelligence insisted that it was nothing, just a little emotional flutter that would
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probably loosen me up and do me a power of good; then suddenly I felt myself swept away and started to struggle, but the tide was stronger than I knew; now I’m far from the land […] far from my life and you and safety – I’m struggling still, but the water’s terribly deep and I’m frightened – I’m frightened. (iv, 440-41, my emphasis)

It is important to note the many references to water, e.g. Chris’s fear of becoming ‘submerged’ and of being drowned by the ‘tide’ of desire. All these references signal severe danger. They indicate not only that Chris has difficulties in keeping his emotions and desires under control, but even worse that he is about to be “swept away” by them. What Chris is experiencing in connection with his lover is not a friendly, calm, and harmless kind of love but a vigorous, almost violent, sexual infatuation and obsession. Again I would argue that Chris’s apprehensions may ‘ring a queer bell,’ since many homosexuals know such anxieties, i.e. of becoming estranged from respectable middle-class life, of losing the safety of one’s social environment or, for that matter, of becoming prey to one’s own – illicit and hence dangerous and/or threatening – passions.

Furthermore, the gender roles in The Astonished Heart are rather subversive as they undermine ‘traditional’ role models. The betrayed wife, for one, is certainly not the stereotypical housewife. Barbara is neither a mother, nor eager to keep her spouse as a sexual partner. She is a model of reasonableness and rationality, which becomes particularly obvious in situations in which one might expect ‘an ordinary wife’ to become highly emotional, either desperate or angry, for example when facing her partner when he returns from his lover. Barbara, by contrast, does not make a scene. Far from it, she remains extraordinarily level-headed and, as has been pointed out above, even supports her husband in acting out his extra-marital passions. As regards the two lovers, it is the male adulterer who is the passive part. Chris is weak, effeminate, unstable, and extremely emotional. The female adulteress, by contrast, is the active intruder and a first-rate conqueress. She is the one to have flirtations on the side, while Chris is the one to make hysterical scenes. Above all, it is she who not only initiates but also ends the affair, while he is the one who is left behind, suffering so intensely from his bruised and astonished heart that he commits suicide.

The fact that the gender roles in this play are at odds with ‘traditional’ gender roles certainly contributes to the temptation of re-
considering the characters’ sexes and sexual predilections.\(^4\) The least one could say is that the play does not ascribe the ‘traditional’ gender attributes to the biological sexes. Whether this merely indicates that Coward is being rather progressive in abstaining from traditional role models or that he employs such unusual or ‘ab-normal’ gender ascriptions in order to induce the audience to re-code the characters’ sexes and sexual predilections is, I think, a moot question. To read Leonora Vail – or ‘Veil’ – as a male character might be going over the top, even though behind her first name lurks, or is veiled, the virile male Leo. Concerning Chris, at any rate, there are indications that he may have bisexual, if not homosexual, inclinations. His relationship with his assistant Tim, for instance, is of a rather intimate kind. According to Barbara, “Chris thinks the world of him” (i, 420). Understandably, Tim is shattered by Chris’s suicide and seems to be grieving even more severely than the widow (cf. i, 414-416). Interestingly, in the film version of the play, Tim was played by Coward’s then real-life lover Graham Payn, while Coward himself starred as Chris. So, for those ‘in the know,’ the bond between the two men must have resembled a very strong one indeed. Even Chris’s profession links him to ambiguous sexualities. For one thing, we know that he is not able to draw clear distinctions between his private and his professional affairs, his job and his emotions. His psychoanalytic practice is located in his own flat, implying that his patients frequent his home: “[…] double doors lead to Christian’s part of the flat, his bedroom, consulting room and office” (i, 413). The setting thus already anticipates

\(^4\) As regards Barbara, there is also an interesting remark by Leonora indicating that she is rather surprised to find her friend married:

Leonora: […]. And does he love you?
Barbara: Really, Leonora!
Leonora: I know I’m behaving badly, but it seems so funny –
Barbara: What seems so funny?
Leonora: I know what I mean, but it’s awfully difficult to explain. (ii, 425) Apparently, Leonora always thought it rather unlikely that Barbara would ever be loved by and love a male, possibly because she believed her friend’s inclinations far from being exclusively heterosexual. Their adolescent friendship at any rate seems to have been a fairly intimate one, including theatre performances in male drag (cf. ii, 419).
Chris’s ensnarement to come, namely the battle between his heart and his mind. Indeed, his patients are said to fall in love with him on a regular basis:

Leonora: Do his patients fall in love with him?
Barbara: Practically always. (ii, 423-24)

Significantly, Chris’s lovesick patients remain ungendered, meaning they may well be female and male alike. In the film version, a male patient actually appears who has a homosexual affair. It has been pointed out that this patient, one Philip Lucas, “is the only patient in the cast list of the shooting script and is described by Coward as ‘one of Christian Faber’s patients whose problems are similar to his own’” (O’Connor 171). What is more, as a psychoanalyst Chris must be familiar with all sorts of repressions, inhibitions, and ‘aberrant’ or ‘deviant’ forms of sexuality:

Leonora: What’s a psychiatrist then?
Barbara: Someone who cures diseases of the mind –
Leonora: Oh, repressions and inhibitions and all that sort of thing. (ii, 422)

Even so, as far as Chris himself is concerned, he does not seem to “know all about himself right from the beginning” (ii, 423), and it is quite obvious that not everything in him is “cut and dried and accounted for” (ii, 423). In fact, Barbara criticises him on one occasion: “you’ve crushed down your emotions for years” (iv, 440). What is more, as has already been pointed out, for several reasons the Fabers’ marriage is not exactly the heterosexual model marriage (separate bedrooms, no children, no sexual jealousy, and no marital sex).

Finally, I would like to draw attention to the title of the play. The ‘astonishment of heart’ is a biblical quotation stemming from Deuteronomy 28. It is noteworthy that there it is meant as a threat or punishment. The relevant quotation runs as follows:

14 And thou shalt not go aside from any of the words which I command thee this day, to the right hand, or to the left, to go after other gods to serve them.
15 But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe to do all his commandments and his statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee: […]

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28 The LORD shall smite thee with madness, and blindness, and astonishment of heart […]. (Deuteronomy 28: 14-15; 28, my emphasis; cf. The Astonished Heart, ii, 429)

Evidently, rather than a positive or stimulating human experience, the ‘astonishment of heart’ here is to be understood as a downright threat and a curse and is ranked among diseases such as madness and blindness. And it should not go unnoticed that in the play this quotation is not just obscurely evoked by the title but that it is cited word-for-word:

Tim: Is there a Bible in the house?  
Barbara: [...]. Whatever do you want it for?  
Tim: Chris wants a quotation to use in his lecture on Friday.  
[...].  
Susan (to Barbara): It’s for his paper on the Development of Psychopathology [...].  
Tim: This must be it – (He reads.) “The Lord shall smite thee with madness, and blindness, and astonishment of the heart.” (ii, 428-29)

Tim’s verbatim quotation of the respective passage, particularly since it occurs at a very early stage of the play, converts it into a foreshadowing of the events to come. Indeed, as such it corroborates the suspicion that Chris’s sexual orientation is not as ‘straight’-forward as his marriage certificate indicates for at least three reasons. This is, firstly, because the ‘astonishment of heart’ here is clearly associated with illness. Needless to say, homosexuality, too, was considered an illness, if not a curse, at the time.

Secondly, psychoanalysis was one of the first sciences to explore sexuality, including ‘deviant’ kinds of sexuality such as homosexuality, “inhibitions” and “repressions” (ii, 422). It has therefore already been pointed out that Chris is linked to deviant sexuality by his profession, and that there is no clear-cut boundary between his private and professional life.

Thirdly, the issue of shame comes into play here. Once again, a comparison of Still Life and The Astonished Heart may prove worthwhile, since shame plays an important yet different role in each piece. Still Life’s Laura Jesson, who has to hide her secret life, mostly feels shame in the face of others. True, as long as her adulterous affair lasts, she does experience feelings of shame, yet this is arguably mainly because she is
conscious of violating the laws of her middle-class environment by committing adultery. But there are strong indications that her feelings of shame terminate the very moment the secret affair ends. Even though considering suicide briefly, Laura does not, after all, kill herself but ultimately returns to her mediocre husband and the children. One may argue, therefore, that Laura is not ashamed of her feelings as such but only troubled if there are witnesses to her trespassing of the rigid heterosexual middle-class norms. Such is suggested, at any rate, by the way she recoils from Alec with horror when their secret lovemaking is discovered by Alec’s colleague (cf. iv, 367). Chris, by contrast, does seem to be thoroughly ashamed of himself, i.e. of his own genuine self, his feelings and his sexual longings, more or less regardless of the views of others. Significantly, his extra-marital relationship is sanctified by his immediate social environment, but he himself is unable to accept it and is unable to come to terms with himself. His suicide, therefore, may well be the most extreme form of self-loathing and self-punishment. At any rate, a queer reading could account for Chris’s pronounced feeling of shame and his intense suffering from his sexual infatuation. This is an aspect which is otherwise rather difficult to explain, considering that Chris’s own wife is highly understanding and sympathetic, and that neither his marriage nor his reputation are seriously endangered by the affair.

To come back to the ‘astonishment of heart’ as a biblical reference, it goes without saying that the Bible was the first text to stigmatise homosexuality as a sin. To be more accurate, homosexuality was considered a sin deserving severe punishment, if not, in fact, death. Such, at least, may be inferred from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, whose inhabitants *inter alia* were considered guilty of committing acts of anal penetration (cf. Genesis 10). Accordingly, for a queer reader it would not be too difficult to see a connection between an illicit sexual affair, an ‘astonished heart,’ biblical sin, and death by suicide, and to provide homosexuality as the last missing link.

To sum up, we have seen that in *The Astonished Heart*’s triangular relationship, the betrayed wife does not consider the husband’s new partner as a sexual rival, that traditional gender-roles are dispensed with and that the adulterous lover is ashamed of his feelings and sexual longings
and experiences them as a punishment. Hence, from a queer perspective, one may well read Chris’s dangerous liaison not just as any kind of extra-marital affair but as an illicit and very possibly homosexual one. And so one may conclude that in this particular love triangle three is not just an odd but a queer number. A queer line of argument could arguably even account for the two strikingly different endings of *The Astonished Heart* and *Still Life*. It has been pointed out that in *Still Life* the extra-marital affair remains rather repressed and ‘in the closet’ whereas in *The Astonished Heart* it is fully acted out. In fact, it is acted out to such an extreme that Chris, who has given himself up entirely to his new partner, cannot cope with the changes the affair has caused in him. As a result of a) experiencing an ‘astonishment of heart,’ b) losing his former self, and c) ultimately being rejected by his lover, combined with d) feelings of shame and self-repulsion, Chris eventually throws himself, or what is left of his former self, out of the window. *Still Life*’s Laura, by contrast, whose extra-marital affair has been repressed rather than acted out, i.e. who at no point of the affair lost herself entirely in it, also considers committing suicide when the affair is ended. But in contrast to Chris, Laura still has the option of entering her old home again through the backdoor, and she takes it.

So we may conclude that *Still Life* and *The Astonished Heart*, two stories of illicit love affairs, can be read as two sides of one story, namely a story of homosexual love or ‘the love that dare not speak its name.’ A possible reading of the two different endings could then be that an unrestrained giving in to one’s sexual longings is fatal, as Chris’s example illustrates, and that the only way to survive in a middle-class environment, at least in the 1930s, is to repress one’s desires, as the lovers do in *Still Life*. One thing is clear, however, namely that if one chooses to pursue such a queer reading of Chris Faber’s love affair, one has to acknowledge that the evoked image of homosexuality is hardly a positive one, nor can the homosexual character be said to provide a role model for homosexual men – far from it. When read as a coded story of homosexual love, *The Astonished Heart* is rather bleak. Bleak or not, such a message would not be entirely surprising, coming from a playwright who, though exclusively homosexual in his private life, never openly admitted or acted out his queerness.
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As far as the other kind of queerness, the ‘theatrical non-standardness’ of *Tonight at 8.30*, is concerned, we have seen that by employing the rare form of the one-act-play, and even more by introducing the new genre of a whole cycle of one-act-plays, Coward presented himself not as the celebrated author of popular comedies of manners, but as the creator of some significant theatrical innovations. Among the most striking innovations are the extraordinary manner of production in varying triple bills, the unusual time scheme, and the deployment of telltale ‘gaps’ both in scenic representation and on the level of dialogue. Interestingly, even though Coward’s short-play cycle was a huge success at the time, the genre remained rather out of the ordinary. Only very recently has it been recognised as an exciting playground by contemporary dramatists, as Sarah Heinz’s essay on Neil LaBute’s short-play cycle *autobahn* (2005) delineates.

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Secondary Literature


The Queerness of Noël Coward’s Cycle of One-Act-Plays To-night at 8.30


Minute Dramas in Compressed Spaces –
Neil LaBute’s Short-Play Cycle *autobahn*

1. Introduction

In the introduction to his short-play cycle *autobahn*, Neil LaBute talks about “the pleasures of limitation”: “why plays that all occur in automobiles? Because I love the infinite possibilities that a confined space offers the writer, director, performer, and audience” (xi). As someone who has worked in film and theatre, LaBute sees the limited possibilities of the stage as a motor for creativity. You have to create space, time and character on the stage through very limited means in contrast to big film sets, blue boxes and computer animation.¹ Now, the inside of a car is an even more limited space as it confines actors as well as viewers in real life and on the stage to one very small room. At the same time, it is an intensely dramatic space, as LaBute says in his introduction: “Cars, like most everything else, have been used as covert love nests, battlegrounds, or places of refuge in the past. So why shouldn’t we appropriate these inherently dramatic spaces for the theatre while we’re at it?” (xiv).

¹ See xxii of the introduction to *autobahn* for LaBute’s discussion of the differences between theatre and film settings and the necessary “willing suspension of disbelief” of the theatre audience. For a more general discussion of the differences between theatre and film see Roger Manvell who similarly states that “in the theatre we accept theatricality; in the cinema we demand actuality” (Manvell 266).
The idea of using the car as a playing space for dramatic pieces is not new. Before LaBute’s seven-play cycle was first produced as a staged reading in New York in 2004, the car had been used as a space for productions like Car Show, directed by Annie Ryan of the Corn Exchange Theatre in Dublin and first produced at the Dublin Fringe Festival in 1998. Car Show consists of four short pieces that are performed in four parked cars with an audience of three people each in the back seats. Even more than in autobahn, the audience itself becomes a part of the confined small place as they eavesdrop on the two actors performing in the front seats. This uncomfortable and simultaneously exciting proximity highlights the idea of the confinement and dramaticality of the playing space and points to the car as a central space of experience for modern man. Or as LaBute writes in his introduction to the short-play cycle: “Theater is anywhere you make it. I hope that with this print edition of autobahn actors take the text and memorize it, gather their friends in their own cars, and take off down the road, filling those intimate interiors with my words and their emotions” (xivf). Although autobahn is mostly produced on regular stages and not in cars, the audience can feel and experience what it is like to be trapped with another person in a small space, an experience that productions like Car Show take seriously by taking it to its limits.

The intimacy of the car is coupled with the feeling of conflict and estrangement in the same way as movement and standstill are combined: The car is a means to move in order to be somewhere else. Nevertheless, the people inside do not move at all, a fact that in Car Show is emphasized by the cars being parked and in autobahn by the fact that the interiors of the cars are set on a fixed stage. Two people in the front seat of a car, confined into that small dramatic space, unable to get out, while

2 On the homepage of the Corn Exchange Theatre, Car Show is described in the following way: “Simultaneously open and intimate, public and private, Car Show offers us fascinating glimpses into other lives as we huddle in the back seat, eavesdropping. It’s ‘fly-on-the-windscreen’ Theatre at its intimate best” (The Corn Exchange Theatre Co. 30 Aug. 2007 <http://www.cornexchange.ie/productions/carshow.htm>). I thank Harold Fish for pointing out this production to me and providing me with useful information.
outside the street is moving away under their wheels; that is the setting for all of the seven short plays in LaBute’s short-play cycle. All of these people are connected to each other. They are mother and daughter, husbands and wives, two best friends, pairs of lovers, a man and a girl, probably his daughter. Between these people crises and catastrophes happen without leading to a conclusion or denouement. This combination of movement and standstill is central to LaBute’s short-play cycle and can also be found in its formal structure. It is both a well-made play with progress and development and a circle that at the end meets with the beginning.

2. **Hypothesis**

In accordance with the aim of this collection I will look at the short-play cycle as a non-standard form of contemporary drama. Here, I will show that the cycle undermines the traditional notions of action, causality, coherence and closure. At the same time, I will discuss why LaBute’s *autobahn* develops its central topics along the lines of a traditional standard play with acts and scenes, beginning, middle and end. The main thesis is that *autobahn* does both: It presents a progressing movement that resembles the roads along which the characters travel. And simultaneously it emphasises the repetitiveness and openness of the events that take place in the front seat which does not seem to move at all. In that sense, *autobahn* as a whole as well as the single short-plays contained in it take on the pyramidal form of classical drama theory as well as the form of a circle which overlap and form one structure.
With reference to Aristotle and his *Poetics*, theory of drama has defined the three unities of space, time and action. The space of the play should at best not change between different locations and time should try “as far as possible to limit itself to a single day” (Aristotle 36). The action must conform to the rules of completeness and unity. Of completeness, Aristotle says:

By ‗whole‘ I mean possessing a beginning, middle and end. By ‗beginning‘ I mean that which does not have a necessary connection with a preceding event, but which can itself give rise naturally to some further act or occurrence. An ‗end‘, by contrast, is something which naturally occurs after a preceding event, whether by necessity or as a general rule, but need not be followed by anything else. The ‗middle‘ involves causal connections with both what precedes and what ensues. Consequently, well designed plot-structures ought not to begin or finish at arbitrary points, but to follow the principles indicated. (Aristotle 39)

This beginning, middle and end-structure must conform to the category of unity, in which the plot has to centre “around a single action” in which “its parts, consisting of the events, should be so constructed that the displacement or removal of any one of them will disturb and disjoint the work’s wholeness” (Aristotle 40). Classical drama theory therefore has developed an ideal form of drama in five acts which take on the well-known form of Freytag’s pyramid. Here, all acts are arranged as mirror-images of each other in a rising or complicating and a falling movement (cf. Freytag). The introduction of the first act gives us all there is to know about the action, the second act complicates the action and creates tension which culminates in the third act in the moment of climax and peripety. Then in the fourth act the action moves downwards in the reversal of dramatic structure, finally followed by catastrophe or denouement in the final act.

At first glance, the short plays of *autobahn* do not conform to these rules at all. They have neither beginning nor ending, nor do we find a presentation of catastrophe on stage, not to speak of a denouement or
resolution. Without exposition two people are suddenly seen on stage talking to each other in a conversation that has obviously been going on for some time. Then the scene is over without us knowing where and how the characters will end up. We are left, quite literally, in the middle of nowhere. There are not five acts, but just one scene adding up to seven loosely connected scenes in the complete cycle.\(^3\)

The metaphor of the autobahn is very telling in this context. Whereas a standard drama of the pyramid form would have to drive up and down a mountain road, ascending to the top and descending to ground level again, LaBute’s short plays drive along at ground level all the time. At the end of the last short play the nameless female protagonist thinks about this movement at ground level and formulates:

> Maybe the Germans have it right, after all. Not about … I don’t mean in all ways, no, of course not. I certainly don’t agree with their, you know, politics … but the car thing, that autobahn they’ve got there, maybe that’s not a bad idea, actually. Perhaps that’s the way it should be … all of us speeding by one another, too quick to stop, too fast to care … just racing along, off on our little journeys and no sense of how dangerous or careless we’re being. (92)

This comment contains the openness and incompleteness of autobahn’s single plays as well as the cycle as a whole. All the characters are really speeding by one another on a road that does not have any climax, no beginning and no end. Their journeys are not big, tragic journeys which will end in catastrophe. All these people are off on little journeys and they most often have only a much dimmed sense of how careless they are. They are no tragic or comic heroes and heroines.

\(^3\) In the original staged reading first produced in 2004, only five of the seven printed one-act plays were used. It is conspicuous though that the version for the staged reading as well as the printed version conform to a pyramidal structure with a beginning, a middle and an end with symmetrical parts in between. As Hanna Kubowitz shows in her article, a different approach to the openness of one-act plays with a very similar effect for the audience can be observed in Noël Coward’s To-Night at 8.30. Here, Coward combined different parts of his one-act play circle on subsequent evenings. This makes clear that the single one-acts are self-contained units although they are part of a bigger whole. In autobahn this is illustrated by the staged reading’s omission of two of the seven one-acts without eliminating its overall structure of circle and pyramid.
Nevertheless, a closer look at the seven short plays reveals that autobahn might be closer to the dramatic pyramid than expected and more well-made than meets the eye. In the sense of Scribe’s definition of the well-made play as “the spacing and preparation of effects so that an audience should be kept expectant from beginning to end,” I will show that LaBute’s cycle can be called both traditional and well-made (Taylor 12). Looking at the first, the fourth and the seventh of the short plays in autobahn, I will show how these three parts of the cycle can be interpreted as the beginning, the middle and the end of a surprisingly traditional dramatic structure while undermining it at the same time. The three unities of space, time and action and the requirements of unity and completeness will here serve as an orientation.

3.1 Beginning: “funny”

The first short play entitled “funny” features a mother and a daughter on their way home. It is a beginning insofar as it presents a situation in which a new beginning for the protagonists seems to be possible. The young woman has just come out of rehab after being treated for a drug problem, claiming to be better now. The text starts with three dots indicating that we are entering an ongoing conversation. The young woman on the front seat, who will do all of the talking in the first short play, says to her driving mother:

…it’s all the same, you know? How it looks out there, along the highway. It is. That’s funny, I mean, not funny-ha-ha but the other kind of funny. What would you call that? Funny-strange, I guess. Or odd. Funny-odd. It’s just … I mean, I didn’t expect that. That stuff would seem so … familiar. It is funny. To me, at least. (7)

Analysed in terms of the dramatic unities, the first short play displays no change of location and the time is confined to even less than a single day. Played on stage, “funny” takes about twenty minutes with no break

4 This assessment of the microstructure of autobahn can also be found in the combination of micro- and macrostructure in Tom Stoppard’s trilogy The Coast of Utopia as Holger Südkamp shows in his article.
or skip in its temporal structure and directly imitates the twenty minutes of conversation between mother and daughter, exactly conforming to Aristotle’s unities of space and time.

The plot centres around one action, mother driving, daughter talking, while the relationship between the characters is the main focus of the whole scene. After the stage direction “The Older Woman looks over at the Young Woman. Silence” (9) the young woman claims to have completely changed: “But I’m better now. Totally all better. Right? You believe that, don’t you … Mom?” (9). Interpreted as the first part of the dramatic pyramid this comment creates tension comparable to the function of the second act. After being very economically introduced to the two characters on the first page (comparable to a first act) we want to know whether the daughter has really changed or whether she will fall back onto her old pattern of rehab, claim of being better, relapse and next rehab, a vicious circle mother and daughter are well used to. The tension is even enhanced by the daughter’s plans for her future when she is back home in her old environment:

I think maybe it could be really easy to fit back in at home, in a way. […] it could be an easy fit for me to get myself into the groove. To register down at the community college next semester and maybe get a job even, my old job back, or that sort of deal … I could do that. (10)

The climax follows on the next page where it becomes clear that all this will never happen. The young woman, her mother and their relationship have not changed. Comparable to the climax of a third act which turns the movement of the plot around, the daughter announces:

I mean, I told them all that other stuff, too, all the crap they wanted to hear about me getting better and the like, but I do sort of believe this honesty thing. Just sitting here, as we were driving, it came over me. This desire to be truthful. So there it is. The truth. I know I’m gonna relapse. Can’t wait to, really, so if that means you wanna turn around and drive me back, then I guess so be it … (11)

This is the short play’s peripety, destroying the created hope for a change. The hope was a false one, in fact there is no new plot to be turned around and, following this logic, the car does not turn around. Instead we read: “The Older Woman doesn’t turn from watching the road, nor does she turn the car around. She just keeps driving” (12). Now the
action continuously leads towards catastrophe, which the daughter already anticipates: “[...] tell Dad, call those emergency numbers when we get back to our place” (12).

Nevertheless, the short play does not end with catastrophe but with a return to the beginning, transforming the pyramid into a cycle. On the bottom of the last page, the daughter says: “… funny. Not funny-ha-ha, but the other one. Strange. Or ironic. It was funny-ironic, that’s what it was. We thought so, anyway” (13). Catastrophe does not happen on stage, there is no catharsis, there is no relief. The car moves on, the people inside just sit there. Their relationship does neither move nor end. There is unchanging continuity in the personal situation of the two characters which is mirrored in the familiar scenery outside the car: “It’s all the same.”

While presenting to us a very classical structure of rising and falling action with a peripety in the middle, the short play also destroys this structure by starting and ending suddenly without solution and even returning to the starting point of the scene. The peripety is no real turning point as the hope that is raised at the scene’s beginning vanishes during the climactic confession of the daughter. The pyramid becomes a circle and there is no way to stop endless repetition. That way, “funny” promises a new beginning only to destroy it, putting off the final catastrophe into the future.

3.2 Middle: “merge”

The middle of the short-play cycle is entitled “merge.” Its structure is very similar to that of “funny” in being one action, two people in a car talking about one specific incident, in one unchanging location, the front seats of the moving car, in a continuous time structure which spans about thirty minutes. The play presents a man and a woman, who are introduced as “A Man and a Woman in an expensive car. He is driving. She wears sunglasses” (41). That this scene really is the middle of autobahn is made clear by the first sentence, where the woman says: “Turn here” (41). This is not only the turning point of the short-play cycle; it could also be the turning point of the couple’s journey as well as their personal turning point. It looks like a peripety.
Again, we can make out the simultaneousness of pyramid and circle. The tension continually rises in the first half of the scene. Man and woman are talking about an incident which has obviously happened on the business trip the woman has just returned from. Two or more men entered her hotel room, she blacked out, and she woke up naked at noon the next day. While the man tries to get more information he becomes more and more agitated, questioning her about the number of men, how dark the room was, what happened after she woke up, whether she called the police, whether the men broke in, etc. During this discussion the man and the woman take up positions of activity and aggressiveness (he) and passivity and evasiveness (she):

Man   How many were there? Huh?! You make it sound like a platoon or something, for chrissakes!
Woman    Don’t yell at me …
Man    I’m not yelling …
Woman    Yes, you are. You are and you know it.
Man    All right, sorry.
Woman     You said you wouldn’t do that, if I just told you about it. That’s what you said.
Man    I know, I know … (44)

The tension between man and woman rises continuously during their conversation and the audience waits for the climax which seems closer at hand on every page. Then before any solution can be presented, the calling of the police for example or the burglars getting caught, the story of the burglary gradually turns into something else. The burglary becomes a rape, a rise of tension which very quickly turns into something else again. Obviously, all of this has happened before, maybe even several times, and the fourth short play becomes a circle once more. The rising action is now followed by the falling action of an old, well-known and definitely not tragic story. She drank too much, the men claimed to live in unhappy marriages, she invited an unknown number of them up to her room, she really blacked out at some point, and returned home the next morning. Although this could be the real peripety of the scene, a turning point for her marriage, her personality, her life, the woman reduces what happened to a sad anti-climax that leads nowhere:

[…] they all have the same story in the end. Wife, three kids, want a divorce – they’re almost separated, really, living in town during the week but waiting it out
until the children are old enough to – you just listen to see if you can pick out the little flourishes they’ve added to the story, like a joke they heard somewhere and embellished it a bit. (54)

Although she is talking about the men who attended the convention, she is also talking about herself. Her story is also the same story in the end, including her drinking problem, her loneliness or her speechlessness towards her husband. Nevertheless, something has changed between man and woman, as he immediately recognises: “Something in your eyes there, even with the tinted lenses on, I caught a thing in your eyes as I scooped up the Samsonite. So I asked you. […] I was scared, the way you looked at me …” (55). The incident seems to divide their life into before and after and break up the monotony of the well-known route. The incident becomes a past they want to put behind them in what she terms a fresh start: “And we can start fresh …” (56). This fourth act of “merge” indicates that everything will end in a denouement pointing teleologically into a future where everything will be different.

But just like in “funny,” there is neither denouement nor catastrophe as the new start turns into a cul-de-sac, just as their lane ends. Accordingly, the woman observes: “I mean, start again, from here. Clean the slate and … This lane ends in, like, a block or so” (56). Therefore, the fifth act is left out in favour of openness. The two people continue to drive along the same route; they do not turn around because there never was a real turning point. The climax has been reduced to another well-known part of the same old story. Instead of turning around, they have to merge into a bigger road leading them to their unchanged, old life:

Woman   This lane ends. You’ll need to merge.
Man     Angel? Tell me. Just tell me that. Please.
Woman     … you gotta merge …
Man     Please. I need to … please …
Woman     … merge …

The Man drives on in silence, stealing glances over at the Woman. Her head rolls to one side; asleep. (57)

The three dots at the end of the last sentence point to something that will follow and at somewhere where the circle will begin anew. The positions and problems of man and woman have remained as static as the front seats which they inhabit during the scene although their car has
moved on, turning and merging with the mass of people also moving in space and time in their front seats.

3.3 End: “autobahn”

The final short play of autobahn bears the title of the whole cycle, a fact which already indicates its finality and its function of provisionally closing the cycle’s open structure. It displays the same spatial and temporal unity as the other plays and the same unity of plot. This last play presents a relationship where communication and personal closeness have come to an end due to a catastrophic event that has already happened before the scene starts. In that sense the final short play takes us beyond the classical pyramid while undermining it by showing how catastrophe does not bring on a solution or end. Instead people are left speechless like the man or confused like the woman. The catastrophe has destroyed their normality and the whole point of this last short play is the woman’s verbal strategy to mend this loss of normality through conversation. The man does not say a single word, though, closing the movement of the short-play cycle by connecting the last piece to the silent mother of the first piece.

As in all the other short plays, the first sentence of “autobahn” points to its position in the cycle. While the first sentence of “funny” is a beginning and the first sentence of “merge” is a middle, the first sentence of “autobahn” is an end. The woman says: “We just keep doing lousy things, I guess” (85). This is an end insofar as she realises the pointlessness of all attempts at saving her relationship or changing her situation. The fact that she is referring to mankind in general does not eliminate the reverberations of her assessment for her personal situation. The couple of “autobahn” have already found themselves in the cul-de-sac that the couple of “merge” are approaching and all of them know that there is no way out. Nevertheless, the woman in “autobahn” unsuccessfully tries to re-establish a connection to her husband with interjections like “I’m sure you feel it, too” (85), “… don’t you?” (85) or “It is ‘we’, right? You felt the same way about things, I know you did […]” (86).
Although this short play seems to be the least likely to exhibit the features of standard drama, the pyramidal structure can nevertheless be found in “autobahn.” LaBute here uses the trick of giving us the whole story that led to catastrophe in retrospect. The woman remembers what happened and retells her husband to reassure herself of what really happened. As the couple have no children of their own, they chose a foster child for adoption whom they now have given back to the agency. The audience is only gradually informed about the dramatic events that led to that decision, again building up a rising tension in the sense of a first and second act. The happiness of the first months is described, “[…] for the first few months it seemed like we were all very happy” (86), as well as the woman’s feeling that this is a new start: “[…] there he is, looking up at me with his big blue eyes and letting me know that this is the start of a glorious time” (86). Then she reveals the gradual crumbling of the family idyll as the foster child leads a life on the autobahn, breaking the American speed limit of life quite literally when stealing the car and racing up and down the main street of the town. Or as the woman formulates it: “He was a pusher. He pushed us. Us, and the limits, and anything else he could butt up against” (88). This conflict with the foster child comes to a climax when the boy takes a handgun to school. The story of a new beginning in a new family with a new chance for happiness is turned around, leading the short play towards catastrophe.

Now this catastrophe takes on a surprising shape when we discover that the foster child claims to have been abused by the man now silently driving the car. How catastrophic this turn of events has been can be seen from the following statement that can be applied to the boy as well as to the woman’s husband: “It just frightens me, it really does. That he could have been under our roof, eating off of our dinnerware, and been harbouring a soul like that one. You just never know, do you? No. Never …” (89). Again, his wife unsuccessfully tries to explain the unsettling revelation away by trying to re-establish normality through sentences like “And at least none of this has touched us. Right?” (91). As in “merge” and in “funny,” a fresh start is indicated only to be replaced by the feeling that nothing will ever change and that even the hope for another beginning is a false one.

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Still, “autobahn” takes this motif one step further. Here, the false hope for a new beginning cannot be replaced by a return to the beginning because the catastrophe has destroyed the couple’s old life as well. Therefore, the woman’s reassuring declaration of going back to their old selves takes on a hollow sound that shows in her speech’s repetitiveness: “Well, it doesn’t matter … it’ll go away and then we’ll be right back where we are. All fine and good. Fine and good, because we are that ourselves … fine and good people who enjoy a place in the community” (89). She is neither fine nor good, but she is unwilling to accept this. Instead, she is so desperately trying to bring about the closing denouement of a strengthened relationship that she is blind to the fact that there is no future to move into. What happens instead is what she has predicted in her second sentence: “All this lousy stuff that seems to finally catch up with us. Right?” (85). The subjunctive in her last sentences makes clear that the lousy stuff in her life has really caught up with her and that even on the autobahn it is impossible to drive away from it: “And maybe then we wouldn’t hurt so much. Or feel so deeply when we’ve been betrayed or hurt or lost” (92f).

“autobahn” therefore is both pyramid and circle in the same way as the other short-plays. Nevertheless, it also exhibits this concurrence in a fashion that is even more paradoxical than in the other six plays. It dramatises a relationship in which neither a new beginning nor a return to an old life is possible. The two people constantly move on in their car while at the same time they are unable to make any progress at all. It presents the attempt at running away from a conflict and its constant verbal confrontation just as it characterises the woman as someone who denies the crisis of her relationship while freely talking about it. Consequently, its pyramidal form with its development from hope to catastrophe is met by circularity in action and conversation.

4. Conclusion

My hypothesis was that autobahn as a whole is meeting the requirements of standard drama while simultaneously undermining them. I tried to show this by analysing the cycle’s beginning, middle and end. Seen individually, the short plays exhibit a pyramidal structure of rising and fal-
ling action which turns into a circle when coming to the open end that meets with the short plays’ beginning. The cycle as a whole repeats this structure.

Fig. 2: Cycle and Pyramid in *autobahn* as a Whole

As the plays make clear, nothing in the personal conflicts of the protagonists is resolved, nothing changes. Nevertheless the plays as well as the whole cycle give the impression of a teleological movement. The metaphor of the front seat therefore is central to the meaning of *autobahn*. There is a concurrence of movement and standstill: People sit frozen in the enclosed dramatic space of their cars while outside the landscape rushes past. Therefore the two epigrams of *autobahn* put the short-play cycle’s two contradictory motions in a nutshell:

“They change their climate, not their soul, who rush across the sea” (Horace, in LaBute vii) and
“Everything in life is somewhere else, and you get there in a car” (E.B. White, in LaBute vii).
Works Cited

*Primary Literature*


*Secondary Literature*


A Well-Made Trilogy?
The Relationship between Micro- and Macrostructure in Tom Stoppard’s *The Coast of Utopia*¹

1. Introduction

When the Player asks Ros and Guil in Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966/67) what they want from a play, Ros answers: “I want a good story, with a beginning, middle and end,” and Guil adds: “I’d prefer art to mirror life” (58). What Hamlet’s excellent good friends here wish for is the compliance of a play with dramatic principles that are Aristotelian. Aristotle says, concerning the scope of the plot, that “tragedy is the representation of an action that is complete and whole and of a certain amplitude […]. Now a whole is that which has a beginning, a middle, and an end” (Aristotle 41). Furthermore, according to Aristotle, tragic poetry is a form “of imitation or representation” (31). Its function is to describe “the kinds of thing that might happen, that is, that could happen because they are, in the circumstances, either probable or necessary”; it is concerned with “universal truths” (43f).

¹ The following essay incorporates elements and ideas from my forthcoming PhD thesis on Tom Stoppard’s biographical drama.
These Aristotelian principles, which also became the subject of discussion of another canonical text with regard to drama theory in the nineteenth century, namely Gustav Freytag’s *Technique of the Drama*, are also constitutive elements of the *well-made play*. Traditionally, the *well-made play* subsumes plays which are constructed in the style of an Aristotelian dramatic model, i.e. according to a causal-logical plot which is plausible (cf. Schnierer 21). It usually presents mimetic images of life on stage, and its plot structure is teleologically and causally directed towards the dissolution of its complication (cf. Krieger 284). Hence, in *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard does not only critically engage Aristotelian dramatic conventions, but also the conventions of the *well-made play* (and much more besides). This critical engagement can be found throughout Stoppard’s entire work for the stage. He has written experimental one-act plays, e.g. *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), *After Magritte* (1970), *The Fifteen Minute Hamlet* (1972/76), *Dogg’s Hamlet* and *Cahoot’s Macbeth* (1979), which challenge the duration and segmentation of the *well-made play*. Some of his feature-length stage plays, e.g. *Travesties* (1974), *Arcadia* (1993) and *The Invention of Love* (1997), also deal with the notion on a metadramatic level.\(^2\) However, Stoppard’s feature-length stage plays do just that: they feature the duration of the *well-made play*. This has changed with his monumental trilogy *The Coast of Utopia* (2002), consisting of the three parts *Voyage*, *Shipwreck* and *Salvage*. In its entirety, the trilogy runs between eight and nine hours.

In *The Coast of Utopia*, Stoppard depicts episodes from the lives of the so-called Russian intelligentsia, most prominently of Alexander Herzen, Michael Bakunin, Vissarion Belinsky and Ivan Turgenev. The trilogy is set between 1833 and 1868 and covers, geographically, six European countries. Historically, it deals with the development of Russia in contrast to the “enlightened” West, the failure of the European

\(^2\) Cf., for example, Londré, for whom the ending of *Travesties* is “a travesty of the well-made play’s ending” (85), Melbourne, for whom Stoppard “leaves behind the old ‘Newtonian theatre’ of the well-made play” with *Arcadia* (557), and Borgmeier, for whom *The Invention of Love* is “by no means – as can be expected from Stoppard – a ‘well-made play’” (151).
revolutions of 1848/49, German Idealism and Romanticism, Marxism, the emancipation of the Russian serfs and the generation gap between the 'superfluous men' (lishnye lyudi) and the 'nihilists,' i.e. the 'new men.' In The Coast of Utopia, Stoppard apposes and opposes different historical concepts on the levels of structure, theme and character. He reflects on the idea that life is less the assertion of a single will than the product of innumerable and shifting relationships, and he considers the relationship between personal history and socio-historical forces. Furthermore, Stoppard critically engages the conventions of the well-made play by also apposing and opposing a macrostructural design of the trilogy with individual microstructural designs of its three constituent plays. The following essay aims at analysing the complex relationship between standard and non-standard form by comparing the macroscopic level of The Coast of Utopia with the microscopic levels of Voyage, Shipwreck and Salvage. In order to do so, I will first examine The Coast of Utopia as a trilogy, i.e. with the three plays considered as a sequential unit. I will elaborate that Stoppard, despite the fact that he has written a trilogy, has really contributed a non-standard form of contemporary drama and theatre. However, as Stoppard has stressed from the first staging of The Coast of Utopia, the three plays Voyage, Shipwreck and Salvage can also be seen as self-contained. Thus, in the second part of my paper, I will tackle the question whether the criteria of a supposed well-made trilogy still work if the plays are not seen as a sequential unit, but separately, i.e. if we consider the microstructures of Voyage, Shipwreck and Salvage.

2. The Macroscopic Level

In The Coast of Utopia, Stoppard uses a mixture of documented material and fictional elements. He draws, for example, on Herzen's memoirs My Past and Thoughts (Byloe i dumy, 1861–67) and on his From the Other

3 In her article Sarah Heinz makes a similar observation on Neil LaBute’s short-play cycle autobahn (2004).
Holger Südkamp

*Shore (S togo berega, 1850)*, and on Turgeneyev’s *Literary Reminiscences and Autobiographical Fragments (Literaturnye i zhitieiskie vospominaniia)*, 1874/80). Stoppard even partly quotes from them in the stage directions (cf. *Salvage* 92 and *Shipwreck* 52) and throughout the text. His main secondary sources, as described by the playwright in the “Acknowledgments” section at the beginning of the plays, are E.H. Carr’s *Romantic Exiles* (1933) and his biography *Michael Bakunin* (1937), Isaiah Berlin’s *Russian Thinkers* (1978) and the writings of Aileen Kelly, one of the leading scholars of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russian intellectual history, who wrote her doctoral thesis under Berlin’s direction. As with the autobiographical writings quoted in the stage directions, Stoppard sometimes even quotes *verbatim* from these texts, too.

With a vast basis in, and similarity to, primary and established secondary sources, the trilogy can be said to follow the mainstream interpretation of its historical main characters. It aims at historical stage realism as well, the London production using “96 wigs and 40 ‘face-sets’ of moustaches and beards [and] 416 costumes: 271 for the actors, 60 for the understudies and 85 for the stage hands” (Peter). In addition to the observed realistic elements present in *The Coast of Utopia*, and despite the fact that, as a trilogy, it does *not* comply with the standard length of the *well-made play*, *The Coast of Utopia* can be read on a macroscopic level – i.e. taking all three plays as a sequential unit – as a *well-made trilogy*. The main reason for this observation is that the trilogy follows the Aristotelian plot with beginning, complication, middle, denouement and end (cf. 41 and 56), or Freytag’s pyramid with introduction, rise, climax, return or fall and catastrophe (cf. 115).

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4 To Herbert F. Tucker, *Russian Thinkers* “stands to the epic dramaturgy [… of the trilogy] in a relation like that borne by Epicurus’s teachings to the *De Rerum Natura* of Lucretius or by Aquinas’s philosophy to the theological architecture of *The Divine Comedy*” (Tucker 156). In the case of Stoppard’s presentation of Herzen, Thomas Harlan Campbell views *The Coast of Utopia* as “the latest contribution to what we might call a 150-year-long tradition of English ‘Herzenism’” (Campbell 215). To him, “[t]he thesis of Berlin/Kelly and the antithesis of Carr produce the unique synthesis of Stoppard’s *Coast of Utopia*” (222). On the influence of Berlin’s, Kelly’s and Carr’s view of the historical Herzen on the trilogy, cf. Campbell 216-23.
The beginning of (or introduction to) the trilogy is *Voyage*. “Premukhino, the Bakunin estate, a hundred and fifty miles north-west of Moscow” represents the traditional Russia of aristocratic landowners. Alexander Bakunin, the father of the future anarchist Michael Bakunin, stands for a system in which a “landowner’s estate is reckoned not in acres but in adult male serfs” (*Voyage* 59). The exciting force in the trilogy, in which the action is started, the chief characters show what they are and interest is awakened (cf. Freytag 125), is achieved by the introduction of the four main characters: Bakunin Jr., Belinsky, Turgenev and Herzen all stand for the beginning of the ideological, philosophical, political as well as physical departure from a Russia which seems to be literally behind the times, towards the coast of utopia. The rising movement takes place during the first four scenes of *Shipwreck*. According to Freytag, during this movement the main characters need to be given room and opportunity to act (cf. 125). The newly named Russian intelligentsia is given this room to identify and define itself as a “uniquely Russian phenomenon, the intellectual opposition considered as a social force” (*Shipwreck* 17) that is distinct from traditional Russia and the West. The ideological and political preparation for the climax takes place at the Herzen residence in Paris, where the main characters discuss their different political convictions.

The whole of *Shipwreck* forms the middle or climax in this Aristotelian plot, with the title of the play again hinting at the crisis of the trilogy. On the one hand, this applies to the political events in the trilogy: the outbreak of the European Revolutions of 1848, especially in Paris with the establishment of the Second Republic, followed by “omnibuses full of corpses” and the drowning of the Marseillaise “in volleys of rifle fire” (53). On the other hand, it also applies to the personal events in the lives of the protagonists, which make up the tragic forces in the trilogy. They begin with Belinsky’s death and continue with Bakunin’s imprisonment, the adultery committed by Herzen’s wife Natalie and the death by drowning of Herzen’s mother and his deaf son Kolya. It ends with

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5 Although *Voyage*, *Shipwreck* and *Salvage* are not divided into scenes, I have counted those sections beginning with a date as scenes to enable the reader to follow the suggested structure.
Natalie’s and her newborn’s deaths as retold by Herzen to Bakunin. Thus, *Shipwreck* “naturally forms the middle point of a group of forces, which, darting in either direction, course upward and downward” (Freytag 130). The denouement or return consists of Herzen settling down in London and his engagement with the other political émigrés. This return also takes place on a personal level, in the affair Herzen starts with his best friend’s wife, who bears the same name as his first wife. The forces of the final suspense consist of the so-called emancipation of the serfs and its bloody consequences. The revolutionary generations become separated for good because of their differing opinions about the assassination attempt on the Tsar by the nihilists. These moments are, in Freytag’s words, “a slight hindrance, a distant possibility of a happy release, [...] thrown in the way of the already indicated direction of the end” (136).

In consequence, *Salvage*, as a whole, forms the end or catastrophe of the trilogy. The revolutionary émigrés of Europe have washed up on the English shore “forever going over the past, living on recrimination and fantasy” (16), and Herzen has lost every illusion dear to him. His (by now old) generation of Russian revolutionaries quarrel with the nihilists about the way in which to achieve the emancipation of the serfs. The achieved emancipation backfires, the revolutionary network collapses and the assassination attempt shatters the last hopes for reform in Russia. Herzen’s children become estranged from their father and Russian culture, abandoning Russian for other European languages. In the conclusion, the ideas of the main characters have not reached their desired goals, which can be seen as a failure in terms of tragedy. As Freytag puts it: “The more profound the strife which has gone forward in the hero’s soul, the more noble its purpose has been, so much more logical will the destruction of the succumbing hero be” (137).

3. The Microscopic Level

So far I have considered *The Coast of Utopia* as a trilogy, i.e. with the three plays considered as a sequential unit. The question is to what ex-
tent the criteria of a well-made trilogy still work if the plays are not seen as a trilogy, but separately, i.e. if we consider the microstructures of Voyage, Shipwreck and Salvage.

3.1 Voyage: The Reversal of the Aristotelian Cause-and-Effect Chain

Voyage is divided into two acts, the first one set entirely at Premukhino, the second one in Moscow and St. Petersburg with the exception of the last scene, which returns the play to Premukhino. What is most striking about the structure of Voyage is that chronologically, the scenes of the second act more or less take place between the scenes of the first one, as the following figure shows:

Moreover, the plot of Voyage is not presented following the Aristotelian principle of cause-and-effect, but rather in the opposite way, as the recipients usually learn about an effect before its cause. It exemplifies Aris-

6 In chronological order, the sequence of the scenes in Voyage would be I.i (Summer 1833), II.i (March 1834), II.ii (March 1835), II.iii (March 1835, a week later), I.ii (Spring 1835), II.iv (Summer 1835), I.iii (Autumn 1835), II.v (Spring 1836), I.v (August 1836), I.vi (Autumn 1836), I: Inter-Scene (November 1836), II.vii (December 1836), II: Inter-Scene (January 1837), I.viii (January 1837), II.xi (February 1837), II.xii (March 1838), II.x (April 1838), I.ix (Spring 1838), II.x (June 1840), II.x (July 1840), I.x (Autumn 1841), II.xii (Spring 1843) and II.xiii (Autumn 1844).
totle’s differentiation between “what happens as a result of something else and what merely happens after it” (Aristotle 45). The farce surrounding Belinsky’s penknife becomes a metaphor for this reversal of cause and effect. In Act I, he retrieves his lost penknife in the belly of a carp. This penknife he will have lost in Act II at the Soirée when Stankevich tries to prevent Belinsky from fleeing the scene, ripping his coat pocket. It will then have been found by Liubov, who takes it for Stankevich’s because he is looking for it in order to return it to its owner. Thinking herself a fool on realising that it is not actually the penknife of Stankevich, whom she loves, Liubov must have thrown it into the fish pond, where it was gobbled up by a carp, which in turn is fished by Belinsky. The critic aptly describes the circumstances surrounding his lost penknife already in the first act of Voyage: “Lost objects from another life are restored to you in the belly of a carp” (36). The farce surrounding the penknife exemplifies the fact that Voyage does not follow the dramatic unities of time, place and plot because the cause-and-effect chain is reversed in the play. Many additional examples for this reversal can be observed in Voyage, as the following table shows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>effect</th>
<th>cause</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.ii: the four sisters read a letter by Natalie Beyer</td>
<td>II.iii: Natalie writes the letter to the four sisters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.ii: Alexander is angry as Michael has deserted the army</td>
<td>II.: Michael has left his regiment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.ii: Varenka, meanwhile married to Dyakov, is pregnant</td>
<td>II.: Varenka is engaged to Dyakov</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.ii: the newly-weds are not Liubov and Baron Renne, as one might assume after I.ii, but Varenka and Dyakov</td>
<td>II.: Varvara tells Mrs Beyer that Liubov has rejected Baron Renne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.ii: Tatiana and Alexandra tell Liubov that Stankevich fancies her and not Natalie, and that “he led Natalie up the garden” (11)</td>
<td>II.ii: Natalie confronts Stankevich about her mistaken affections and tells Tatiana and Alexandra that Stankevich “led […] her” up the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.iii: Liubov returns “Stankevich’s” penknife;</td>
<td>II.ii: Belinsky loses his penknife, which is picked up by Liubov, who mistakes it for Stankevich’s penknife;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.vi: Belinsky’s penknife is restored to him in the belly of a carp</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.iii: Kant’s philosophy has taken Schelling’s place in the philosophical circle</td>
<td>II.ii: Stankevich introduces Michael to the works of Kant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.v: Michael has his first article published in <em>The Telescope</em></td>
<td>II.v: Michael submits his first article to <em>The Telescope</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.v: Michael says he heard Count Sollogub was a fop</td>
<td>II.v: Asked by Michael what he thinks of Sollogub, Belinsky calls the count a fop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.v: Tatiana complains about a horrible letter written by Michael</td>
<td>II.v: Michael writes a letter to his sister Tatiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.v: Belinsky arrives at Premukhino</td>
<td>II.v: Michael invites Belinsky to stay at Premukhino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.vi: <em>The Telescope</em> has been banned and closed down; Michael tears out chapters of a German history book and gives them to his sisters for translation</td>
<td>II.v: Nadezhdin is arguing over an article at the censor’s office; Michael is hired by Count Strogonov to translate a German history book</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.vi: Belinsky discusses his article about Russian literature</td>
<td>II.ii: Shevyrev is quoting from and objecting to Belinsky’s article in <em>The Telescope</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.vii: In a letter to Varenka, Michael calls Dyakov “an animal” (44)</td>
<td>II.vi: As Varenka “has weakened” on the matter of Dyakov, Michael felt obliged to write to her “about that animal Dyakov” (94)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.viii: Alexander wants Michael to study agriculture; Michael has broken off relations with Belinsky</td>
<td>II.ix: Michael has to leave for Premukhino as his father calls him back to study agriculture; Belinsky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The table discloses a reversal of causality in *Voyage*: Act I presents the effects while Act II states their causes. This reversal negates the dramatic unities of time, place and plot of the *well-made play*. Thus, the structure of *Voyage* becomes diametrically opposed to the Aristotelian plot of *The Coast of Utopia* and its structure of a *well-made trilogy*.

### 3.2 Shipwreck: *The Swirl of History*

Unlike *Voyage*, the second part of the trilogy, *Shipwreck*, has a linear structure with the exception of two scenes. Both acts of the play end with a flashback: Act I with a ‘reprise’ of Scene iv and Act II with a ‘continuation’ of the first scene of Act I. Both flashbacks are triggered by personal loss. In the scene before the reprise, Herzen learns of Belinsky’s death from a letter and he tells Turgenev about it:

*Herzen* (with Granovsky’s letter, cries out) Who is this Moloch who eats his children?
*Turgenev* Yes, and your taste for melodramatic, rhetorical –
*Herzen* Belinsky’s dead.
*Turgenev* No, no... oh, no, no, no... No!... No more blather please. Blather, blather, blather. Enough. (56)

The news of Belinsky’s death makes the political discussion between Herzen and Turgenev seem irrelevant and unimportant. The reprise that follows is the repetition of the end of the gathering at the Herzens’ in Paris. However, while Scene iv runs for a while in “a *continuum of word-noise*” (37) with simultaneous conversations taking place, during the reprise “[t]he rest of the scene now repeats itself with the difference that instead of the general babel which ensued, the conversation between Belinsky and Turgenev is now ‘protected’, with the other conversations virtually mimed. At the point where the babel went silent before, nothing now alters” (57). The reprise also ends differently from the original scene, with deaf Kolya pronouncing his name for the first time instead of being drowned out by a thunder of historical noise.
In the scene before the continuation, Herzen has just given Bakunin and the recipients a summary of the events of the last year. It is, on the one hand, the deaths of his son Kolya, his mother and his wife Natalie, and on the other hand the disappointment with the western civilisation because of the failed revolutions that make Herzen reach his gloomy conclusion about West Europe at the end of the scene:

Nobody’s got the map. In the West, socialism may win next time, but it’s not history’s destination. Socialism, too, will reach its own extremes and absurdities, and once more Europe will burst at the seams. Borders will change, nationalities break up, cities burn […] the collapse of law, education, manufacture, fields left to rot – military rule and money in flight to England, America […] And then a new war will begin between the barefoot and the shod. It will be bloody, swift and unjust, and leave Europe like Bohemia after the Hussites. Are you sorry for civilisation? I am sorry for it, too. Natalie’s voice – from the past – is heard distantly calling repeatedly for Kolya. Distant thunder. He can’t hear you. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry, Natalie. (103f)

The following scene, the one that concludes Shipwreck, is the continuation of the reunion of Kolya and his mother Natalie brought about by Herzen’s best friend Ogarev: “Sokolovo as before: a continuation. Distant thunder” (104). At the end of the scene, Ogarev tells Herzen’s other son, Sasha, how the two met and became revolutionaries:

No, my happiest day was another day, before that, up on the Sparrow Hills, just where the Cossack had come running down, and your daddy and I […] we climbed up to the top where the sun was setting on Moscow spread out below us, and we made a promise to […] to be revolutionaries together. I was thirteen then. (He gives a little laugh and looks up.) The storm has missed us. (105)

In Shipwreck, reprise and continuation both have the function of putting into perspective the present through reflections of the past. Over their heated political conversation about the outcome of the western revolutions and their different attitudes towards it, Herzen and Turgenev have forgotten about the individual in history, of which they become painfully aware through Belinsky’s death. Without the “general babel,” the reprise refocuses on Belinsky and Kolya and the belief that answers are not to be found in abstract utopias, but rather in art and personal happiness. This is similar to the continuation. After the failure of the European revolutions and his personal loss, Herzen remembers the idealism and enthusiasm which made him a revolutionary in the first place. The
continuation amplifies the disappointment and personal tragedies Herzen had to go through during Shipwreck and the contrast between the idealist view of the future in the past and the real present in the course of the play.

Reprise and continuation break up the apparently ‘well-made structure’ of Shipwreck. The reprise establishes a connection between the scenes in the first act: from the time shortly after the failed revolution in Paris back to the time shortly before. The continuation arranges the whole of Shipwreck into a plot: from Herzen leaving the European continent for England back to the beginning of Herzen receiving permission to travel to Europe with his family. The flashbacks are foreshadowed by Natalie’s remark to Ogarev in the first scene of Shipwreck to which the play returns with its last scene: “But don’t you ever have the feeling that while real time goes galloping down the road in all directions, there are certain moments [...] situations [...] which keep having their turn again? [...] Like posting stations we change horses at [...]” (4). Both, reprise and continuation, are also connected with Kolya, who is either playing with a spinning top or becoming aware of the sound of distant thunder. Spinning top and distant thunder become leitmotifs for the structure of Shipwreck. The top symbolises recurrence, the thunder the noise of historical events. If we imagine now that the reprise and the continuation arch back over the chronological plot of Shipwreck, that these two arches were set on a top, and that this top was spun, we would receive the impression of a swirl, as the following figure illustrates:
This swirl is similar to what the historical Turgenev described as the ‘torrent of history’:

Only the few chosen ones are able to leave for posterity not only the content, but also the form, of their ideas and opinions, their personality, to which, generally speaking, the mob remains entirely indifferent. Ordinary individuals are condemned to total disappearance, to being swallowed up by the torrent; but they have increased its force, they have widened and deepened its bed – what more do they want? (Turgenev 203)

The characters in Shipwreck may be able to stem this torrent, the historical swirl, for a short while, but it will seize most of them sooner or later. The flashbacks in the form of reprise and continuation show that the past and its memories are not identical as in a ‘well-made’ cause-and-effect succession, but that the past has undergone slight alterations in retrospection, which in turn is due to the traumas of the remembering characters. The meaning of the past for the present is thus presented, not as an unchangeable constant, but rather as a limited variable, whose focus can change, depending on personal experiences and the emotional state of mind of the person remembering.
3.3 Salvage: Reflecting on the Macrostructure

The structure of *Salvage* is much more conventional compared to that of *Voyage* and *Shipwreck*. One critic has pointed out that it has “a generic ‘historical drama’ structure” (Mullin 6): contrary to that of the two other plays in the trilogy, the plot of *Salvage* progresses linearly without any exceptions from February 1853 to August 1868. And as in the macrostructure of the trilogy, the Aristotelian plot or Freytag's pyramid with introduction, exciting force, rising movement, climax, falling action, force of the final suspense and catastrophe can again be found in it.

The first half of the first scene of *Salvage* constitutes the introduction. Through Herzen’s dream the spectators learn that he and his family have by now settled in London, and that England’s capital has become the place of exile for many former European revolutionaries. The plot is set in motion on a personal level when Malwida is hired as tutor for Herzen’s children, and on a political level when Herzen and Worcell establish the Free Russian and Polish Press. These incidents constitute the exciting force. The close relationship between Tata, Olga and Malwida and her move into Herzen’s house, the quarrel about the press, the arrival of the first Russian edition of Herzen’s *From the Other Shore* on New Year’s Eve of 1854, the death of the Tsar in 1855 and the arrival of Ogarev and his wife Natalie one year later constitute the rising movement of *Salvage*. The climax is reached when Herzen and Natalie kiss at Worcell’s funeral. The tolerated adultery between Herzen and Natalie, Ogarev’s love affair with the prostitute Mary and Chernyshhevsky’s visit to Herzen in London make up the falling action. The forces of the final suspense are provided by the Russian Emancipation and its bloody consequences, the formation of Bakunin’s revolutionary network and its collapse and the failed assassination attempt on the Tsar by Karakozov. The catastrophe is realised in the last meeting of the remaining protagonists. Herzen’s children have distanced themselves from their father, not speaking their mother-tongue any longer. Their father has become an old and weak man, whose visions have failed. However, in a final dream sequence, Herzen argues against Karl Marx’s historical vision, holding on to his convictions of personal liberty:
(to Marx) But history has no culmination! There is always as much in front as behind. There is no libretto. History knocks at a thousand gates at every moment, and the gatekeeper is chance. We shout into the mist for this one or that one to be opened for us, but through every gate there are a thousand more. We need wit and courage to make our way while our way is making us. But that is our dignity as human beings, and we rob ourselves if we pardon us by the abolution of historical necessity. What kind of beast is it, this Ginger Cat with its insatiable appetite for human sacrifice? This Moloch who promises that everything will be beautiful after we’re dead? A distant end is not an end but a trap. The end we work for must be closer, the labourer’s wage, the pleasure in the work done, the summer lightning of personal happiness […] (118)

And even Bakunin, who epitomises Hegelian dialectics and teleology throughout *The Coast of Utopia*, seems to finally have settled down for a quiet cigarette, proclaiming: “At last, the happy moment.” Herzen’s youngest daughter Liza “kisses him [Herzen] like a tomboy,” which is followed by “[s]ummer lightning […] and cheerful responses of fright […] then thunder and further responses […] and a quick fade” (119).

However, although *Salvage* is structurally designed as progressing in a linear manner, the first act of the play hints at the theme of recurrence from *Shipwreck* through the motif of the loss and recovery of a glove. Maria, the German nanny of the Herzen children, complains first that two-year old Olga has lost a glove, only to find it in her pocket (cf. 4). In the same scene, Malwida finds a child’s glove on the floor and Herzen says that it is his (cf. 11). When later in the play Worcell, who is ill, is about to leave Herzen’s house, he realises that he seems to be “a glove short.” Herzen is puzzled, but Worcell only answers: “No matter. Last time I had three. That probably explains it” (42f). This loss and recovery is finally associated with the glove of Herzen’s son Kolya, of whom all that could be salvaged from his death at sea in (a) *Shipwreck* was a single glove. This is explained at Worcell’s funeral, where Natalie and Herzen kiss for the first time. Herzen comments: “I’m always at the wrong funeral. Kolya’s body was never found. There was a young woman rescued from the sea, my mother’s maid. For some reason one of Kolya’s gloves was in her pocket. So that’s all we got back. A glove” (56). The missing

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7 This glove featured prominently in the New York production of *The Coast of Utopia* at the Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts in 2006/07. Each part of the
and finding of a glove in *Salvage* becomes a metaphor for death and the continuation of life respectively. A glove always needs its counterpart to fulfil its function. The presence of an uneven number of gloves, whether it is one or three, always implies the absence of another. The play demonstrates that ‘presence through absence’ evokes the past, and that the past determines the present as well as the presence of certain characters. This is also true in the larger context of *The Coast of Utopia*, as the presence of the plot of *Salvage*, with its references to the other plays and their characters, evokes the absence of its prequels *Voyage* and *Shipwreck*. Thus, all three plays become part of a larger (historical and dramatic) design, a design that constitutes the trilogy. And *Salvage* does not only establish its relationship to the macroscopic level of the trilogy through the plot, but through the doubling of its Aristotelian macrostructure as well, namely that of the *well-made play*.

### 4. Conclusion

To embrace the full meaning of Stoppard’s *The Coast of Utopia*, it must be regarded from two perspectives: the macro- and the microperspective. On the macroscopic level, with all three plays taken as a sequential unit, the trilogy is presented as a *well-made trilogy*. Stoppard refers to, and quotes from, primary as well as secondary sources and thus explicitly positions his trilogy in the discourse on Russian history, giving a historical and scenic portrait of the lives and times of his protagonists. He only seems to stray from his sources for reasons of theatricality and thematic complexity. This faithful reproduction of the historical subject matter is substantiated through historical stage realism. *The Coast of Utopia* is arranged teleologically and chronologically, dating from Summer 1833 to August 1868. Different languages are presented on stage to give a realistic picture of aristocratic Russian life and of a journey trilogy began with a tableau of Herzen, sitting alone in an armchair and holding Kolya’s lost glove. The glove, then, physically connected the three plays.

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through mid-nineteenth century Europe. Stoppard utilises Chekhovian and Brechtian epic drama to mediate the recipients’ transition into the historical world presented. Intertextual and intermedial allusions help to place the main characters in their cultural epoch and intellectual patterns of thought. The titles of the plays *Voyage*, *Shipwreck* and *Salvage* which make up the trilogy follow the dialectical pattern of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, emphasising the teleological progress of history and of the plot. On the macroscopic level, then, *The Coast of Utopia* can be seen as a well-made trilogy despite the fact that with its length it contradicts the conventions of the well-made play.

On the microscopic level, i.e. seeing all three plays as self-contained, the picture is a different one. In *Voyage*, the Aristotelian cause-and-effect chain is reversed. In *Shipwreck*, reprise and continuation arch back over the plot and give the play the form of a semi-swirl. *Salvage* again follows the conventions of Aristotelian tragedy and of the well-made play. In their contrasts, all three plays break up the trilogy’s suprastructure and present a non-standard and innovative approach to drama. In their sequence, however, they yield to the conventional structure of the well-made trilogy again. This is summarised in the final figure.8

On the structural level, the ‘well-made’ macrostructure of *The Coast of Utopia* stands in contrast to the three individual microstructures of each play. The three plays lead from the reversal of Aristotelian causality in *Voyage* via the recurrent change in *Shipwreck* back to the ‘well-made’ structure of *Salvage*. Each play features a particular metaphor which allegorises each structure: in *Voyage* it is the farce of Belinsky’s pen-knife, in *Shipwreck* it is Kolya’s spinning top and the sound of distant thunder, and in *Salvage* it is the loss and recovery of a glove. These objects, which are an integral part of each plot, connect the structural and the thematic levels of the individual plays and their non-standard forms with Stoppard’s well-made trilogy.

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8 See end of article.
The Relationship between Micro- and Macrostructure in Tom Stoppard’s The Coast of Utopia

Works Cited

Primary Literature


Secondary Literature


The Persistence of the ‘Well-Made Play’ in British Theatre of the 1990s

The story of the well-made play in twentieth-century British theatre is one of dominance and decline, followed by an ongoing resistance to prevailing trends. In this article, I hope to argue that during the early 1990s the well-made play enjoyed a brief flourishing and momentary return (literally) to centre stage before it was superseded again - in much the same way that the likes of Terence Rattigan and Noël Coward were swept away by the Angry Young Men of the Royal Court during the 1950s. However, between 1991-1994 I contend that the well-made play re-established itself, not only as a West End entertainment, but one which came of age in terms of formal experimentation and the introduction of political commentary into a genre which had always been perceived as conservative in both form and ideology.

Despite its brief resurgence, I hope to trace how the so-called in-yr-face dramatists such as Sarah Kane, Rebecca Prichard and Joe Penhall quickly supplanted the well-made play. Lasting from 1994 until roughly the end of the decade, Aleks Sierz (who coined the term in his influential book of the same name) briefly classifies the key features of in-yr-face theatre – all of which which seem directly antagonistic to the ethos of the well-made play:

Characterised by a rawness of tone [...] it uses explicit scenes of sex and violence to explore the depths of human emotion [...] it is aggressive, confronta-
Graham Saunders

...tional and provocative [...] it can be so intense audiences may feel they have lived through the events shown on stage. (Sierz “Outrage Theatres”)

In direct contrast, the well-made play is based on a structure comprised of the following: exposition, complication, development, crisis and dénouement. Its dramatic form is often self-consciously artificial, although at the same time it strives for an effect of verisimilitude; its subject matter is usually drawn from middle class life and as a form puts itself completely in the service of its audiences, providing expectation, suspense and emotional satisfaction.

Although its origins lay in nineteenth-century France with the work of Scribe and Sardou, the well-made play saw its fullest assimilation within English theatre during the twentieth century. John Russell Taylor in his book on the subject, *The Rise and Fall of the Well-made Play*, observes that from the work of Tom Robertson in the 1870s a trend was established for a type of realistic drama concentrating on aspects of middle-class life (Taylor 28). From this point onwards, English theatre effectively sealed itself off from developments in European drama until the mid-1950s, when other influences – notably Brecht and the Absurdists began to make their influence felt. However as already mentioned, the greatest challenge was mounted by a new generation of indigenous dramatists such as John Osborne, John Arden and Arnold Wesker. The well-made play went into rapid decline; writing in 1967, John Russell Taylor notes its low stock against a vogue for devised work and experimental playwriting (Taylor 9).

Nevertheless, during the intervening decades the form has proved to be remarkably resilient, weathering a succession of theatrical trends from the socio-realism of the 1950s, the agitprop epic historical / political plays of the 1960s and 1970s to the feminist theatre of the 1980s. Nevertheless, the well-made play continued a process of low-key development, accompanied by commercial success during the 1970s and 1980s through the work of dramatists such as Alan Ayckbourn, Michael Frayn and Simon Gray.

Writing in 1994, John Bull observed that Gray represented “the nearest the contemporary mainstream comes to a reworking of the territory of the well-made drawing room comedy supposedly killed off in the
The Persistence of the ‘Well-Made Play’ in British Theatre of the 1990s

mid-1950s” (Bull 123). Yet far from Gray representing the genre’s twilight, between late 1992 and early 1994, aspects of the drawing room play and English variations of the Feydeau farce made a spirited return in the work of Kevin Elyot and Terry Johnson. Going further, an alternative history can be presented against the dominant discourse on British playwriting in the 1990s, whereby the well-made play – whilst subsequently muted by a generation of younger dramatists – actually constituted some of the defining plays of the decade: moreover, several of these plays were spawned from within the ranks of in-yer-face theatre itself.

The return of the well-made play can be traced to September 1992 and announced itself to the sound of crashing cutlery and a collapsing set. This was in every sense a theatre ‘event,’ and despite the ur text coming from an unlikely source, it arguably reinvigorated a British theatre that John Bull dismissed at the time as a “parade of bland product uniformity” (Bull 219). The play in question was Stephen Daldry’s revival of J.B. Priestley’s 1946 play, An Inspector Calls, at the Royal National Theatre. The production has since become a landmark piece, transferring to both the West End and Broadway, while productions based on Daldry’s original conception still tour both nationally and internationally. Wendy Lesser considered the production to be a daring flight of directorial brilliance whereby Daldry had taken “a dull old theatrical warhorse – and, in the process, has given a contemporary stylishness and a political currency to Priestley’s post-war socialist ideas” (Lesser 17). While some saw An Inspector Calls (and by default the well-made play) as single-handedly responsible for kick-starting British theatre again, others felt that the necessity to find recourse in a 1940s drawing-room drama merely provided further evidence of the malaise enveloping British theatre at the turn of the 1990s. John Bull alludes to this by pointing out that Daldry’s acclaimed production coincided with a nostalgic vogue for West End fare that evoked the golden age of the well-made play: revivals of Oscar Wilde’s An Ideal Husband, Arthur Wing Pinero’s Trelawny of the ‘Wells’ and Noël Coward’s Hay Fever and Fallen Angels. With this in mind it is little wonder that Benedict Nightingale rather sardonically commented that in 1992 An Inspector Calls “seemed the most contemporary play in London” (Nightingale 27).
However, this revival was closely followed by three new plays which arguably continued the momentum it had created: Terry Johnson’s *Hysteria* (1993) and *Dead Funny* (1994) together with Kevin Elyot’s *My Night with Reg* (1994). With the exception of *Hysteria*, the plays had contemporary settings and all explored themes and ideas associated with modernity. Like *An Inspector Calls*, Elyot’s and Johnson’s plays all made successful transfers to the West End, yet started (at the The Royal Court and Hampstead theatres) outside the commercialised theatre sector.

As well as marking a return to the structure associated with the well-made play, Elyot’s *My Night with Reg* also coincided with another short lived trend in the early 1990s by its association with a number of so-called ‘gay plays’ such as Jonathan Harvey’s *Beautiful Thing* (1993) and David Greer’s *Burning Blue* (1995). Perhaps prompted by the RNT’s 1993 production of Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, *My Night with Reg* was one of the first major British plays to examine the male homosexual community and its reactions to the AIDS crisis.

Elyot himself comments that one of the reasons why the play is set in a drawing room (and as he points out “with French windows no less”) comes down to reasons of structure: setting the play in one room can both allow for long periods of time to be condensed as well as what Elyot calls “writing sustained scenes, not using filmic cuts, but following the example of Chekhov and Ibsen, [of] a play revealing itself over three or four movements.” More significantly Elyot comments, “I like the idea of the set suggesting a boulevard comedy but then subverting the genre in that it’s about men desiring each other, betraying each other and dying” (Edgar 52).

This aim of subverting a familiar form is something that unites many of the dramatists in this article, but there is a further reason why Elyot’s play, about the effects of AIDS on a group of long-standing male friends seems particularly apposite to the well-made play. While hostile critics such as Carl Miller found Elyot’s plays “as conservative in form as anything by Rattigan and Coward” (Miller 1996), the playwright David Rudkin has observed that Rattigan’s work utilises the perfect dramatic form by which homosexuality could make a veiled appearance. Rudkin comments, “The craftsmanship [...] seems to me to arise from deep
psychological necessity [...] to invest it with some expressive clarity that speaks immediately to people yet keeps himself [Rattigan] hidden” (Innes 2002). Noël Coward, freed to some extent by a certain relaxation of censorship laws, was able to directly address the subject in one of his last plays, *A Song at Twilight* (1966), although Elyot’s drama is far more direct in its representation of homosexuality. However, the one element from the well-made play that is itself most suitable for Elyot’s purposes is its utilisation of the long-buried secret from a character’s past slowly revealing itself during the course of the play. While almost verging on a cliché of this type of drama, it becomes the ideal vehicle in which to express the knowledge of AIDS as well Guy’s long-standing infatuation and unrequited love for his friend John.

While John Russell Taylor believes that the well-made play declined rapidly after 1956 due to its associations with moral and social propriety, in many respects it was this very conservatism that paradoxically made *My Night with Reg* a notable play. With its middle-class characters, well-structured plot and mannered comedy (not forgetting its French windows), based on the reunions between six male friends, its structure becomes a microcosm of the British homosexual community and its response to AIDS during the 1990s.

Like *My Night with Reg*, the use of the well-made play to reveal the unspoken and the taboo also forms the basis of two of Terry Johnson’s most well-known plays from the 1990s – *Hysteria* and *Dead Funny*. John Russell Taylor argues that the decline of the well-made plays during the 1950s came about as they grew increasingly less theatrical in their aspirations: yet whether one is an admirer or detractor of Daldry’s *An Inspector Calls*, it nevertheless restored a much-missed element of spectacle to a theatrical landscape in 1992 that looked dangerously close to ossifying into a branch of dramatic literature.

Similarly, Johnson’s *Hysteria* and *Dead Funny* are important examples of plays that further restore and develop a vibrant sense of theatricality to these traditional forms of English theatre. While elements of drawing-room comedy exist in both (especially *Dead Funny*), both plays constitute major reworkings of the English farce tradition. While experimentation within the form is not new – Joe Orton, Alan Ayckbourn and Michael Frayn have all borrowed from this genre in their work –
Johnson's two plays are significant in respect to how closely dramatic form is related to its principal themes.

This is most overtly displayed in *Hysteria*, where the play is structured on a recurring dream of the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, in which the action at the beginning is repeated at the end: in this way the play becomes a narrative of Freud's unconsciousness which is centred around a production of Ben Travers's farce *Rookery Nook* (1926), that we learn Freud attended during his time in London. Johnson takes this historical detail as his structural basis, whereby familiar Freudian ideas and iconic motifs are communicated in the form of a Whitehall farce which would have been familiar to metropolitan English audiences in the 1930s. These include a predatory woman (akin to the figure of Jessica in *Hysteria*) pursuing a victimised male (Freud), and Johnson even borrows one of the key incidents from *Rookery Nook* – namely a woman in a silk night-dress being thrown out of her house - for the opening of *Hysteria*, where the play begins in earnest once a rain-soaked Jessica taps on the French windows outside Freud's study.

From this point onwards, English farce refashioned itself in psychoanalytical terms. For instance, after his evening at the theatre watching *Rookery Nook* Freud interprets farce in the following manner: “It had a seductive logic, and displayed all the splendid, ha!, anal obsessions of the English” (Johnson 12), while in an early edition of the play Dali comprehends Englishness itself through this particular theatrical model: “So Dali chase you [Jessica] through French windows, round the garden, back through front door, yes?” (Johnson 45). It also becomes the pattern whereby Freud's dreamscape reveals his own obsessions and fears. Although at one point Freud asks Jessica “to please remember this is my study, not some boulevard farce” (Johnson 10), psychoanalysis and the energy of farce often merge as we witness Freud's increasingly desperate attempts to hide the naked Jessica inside his washroom closet. Like the spectre of AIDS in *My Night with Reg*, the well-made play / well-made farce becomes an apt theatrical model for explorations of the unwelcome secret. Freud's increasingly desperate attempts at concealment forms the basis of farce – and the need to hide that which wishes to reveal itself is a constant motif in *Hysteria*. Principally this takes place through the character of Jessica, who describes herself as Freud's“An-
ima [...] the denied female element of the male psyche” (Johnson 7). Jessica is essentially a manifestation of Freud’s own repressed suspicions that his female patients in Vienna were being sexually abused by fathers and male relatives. Freud’s reaction, according to Johnson is to shift the blame onto the patients themselves, forming in the process a cornerstone of his theory concerning infantile seduction.

Farce is less pronounced in Dead Funny, and here it conforms more to traditional elements of the well-made play through exposition (a marriage in crisis, a wife who craves a child and a physically and emotionally distant husband who sublimates his enthusiasms into vintage British comedians), complication (despite being impotent with his wife Richard is shown having sex with a female member of the Dead Funny Society) and denouement (the fling between Richard and Lisa is discovered and Richard leaves). Again, like My Night with Reg the dramatic form employed comes through a predilection for the buried secret and its subsequent revelation. Dead Funny contains several revelatory episodes. Chief amongst these is Brian’s confession of his homosexuality, and it is interesting to note that as late as 1994 this was still seen as a worthy central admission. It goes to show that if homosexuality in the light of AIDS was still a ticklish issue, then the seemingly ‘conservative’ form of the well-made play was its ideal presentational form.

As in Hysteria, Johnson presents darker themes in his play – crumbling marriages and various manifestations of male anxiety including physical and emotional inability to establish intimacy along with doubts about paternity – and renders these as subjects for broad entertainment. While Hysteria principally does this through farce, Dead Funny achieves this through the actors impersonating and performing the routines of their favourite comedians such as Benny Hill, Frankie Howard and Norman Wisdom. Johnson also incorporates slapstick incidents such as Eleanor losing her skirt. And while the underlining (and literal) sterility of the two marriages is more reminiscent of Strindbergian drama, the confrontation promised after Richard has been sleeping with his best friend’s wife involves nothing more than a clownish fight with a large bowl of trifle.

However, this encroachment of the well-made play into more disturbing territory was curtailed by the arrival of the in-yer face writers.
Dead Funny premiered at the Hampstead Theatre in January 1994, the same year in which stirrings from the Royal Court’s Theatre Upstairs hinted that something new was in the air – by January of the following year Sarah Kane’s Blasted had created an unprecedented brouhaha, and theatre writing suddenly appeared to change from what had gone before. This new style of drama seemed to reject attention to the detailed mechanics of plot or dramatic structure, often adopting an approach based around a series of short, seemingly unconnected scenes such as Mark Ravenhill’s Shopping and Fucking (1996) and Some Explicit Polaroids (1999). Such plays, as David Edgar somewhat archly summarised concerned “young people shooting up in flats” (Reinelt 47), and it seemed that this vogue for the shocking and the experimental, like the socio-realism of the angry young men forty years before had once rendered the well-made play moribund.

However, things were not quite what they seemed. Often, whenever a cultural or artistic moment / movement is identified or defined, a certain number of rogue ‘stowaways’ also come to be wrongly identified but subsequently assimilated into the new category. Just as The Stranglers, Blondie and even The Boomtown Rats in the late 1970s were wrongly identified as displaying a punk sensibility, so in-yer-face theatre also contained its fair share of misplaced writers, who while on the surface seemed to display the necessary stylistic credentials, were in fact nearer to the Hampstead worlds of Simon Gray and Terry Johnson than the syringe-strewn squats of Che Walker or Mark Ravenhill. Dominic Dromgoole was one of the first commentators to spot this anomaly, pointing out that Jez Butterworth’s Mojo (1995) – an early and high profile example of in-yer-face theatre – despite its stylish and amoral use of violence, was “close enough to a well-made play to delight all the critical devotees at that shrine” (Dromgoole 42).

It is also worth remembering that 1997 – arguably the year that in-yer-face theatre was at the height of its ascendency – saw the Evening Standard Award for Best Play go to Tom Stoppard’s The Invention of Love. With its principal subject the Victorian poet A.E. Houseman, and a structure that incorporated familiar ingredients from the genre, such as dramatic suspense being produced by delaying the arrival of its off-stage character Oscar Wilde, the play demonstrated a stubborn resistance to
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the prevailing zeitgeist. Stoppard’s earlier play *Arcadia* (1993) can also be seen as one of the other key contributions to the development of well-made play, which if anything is even more formally ambitious and intricately structured, with its two alternating time frames and merging of Chaos Theory and Romantic poetry.

However, the key in-yer-face play that most readily adopted the model of the well-made play during this period was Patrick Marber’s *Closer* (1997). While in simpatico with much new theatre writing of the late 1990s by being darkly savage, self-consciously modern and metropolitan in its sensibility – Christopher Innes for instance calls it “aggressively contemporary” (Innes 433) – *Closer* also employed a dramatic structure based around the well-made play. These contradictory forces made *Closer* something of a theatrical oddity amongst its peers.

At one point in the play Larry tells Dan, “you think the human heart is like a diagram” (Marber 94), and in some respects *Closer* is also constructed along similar complex lines. Peter Buse has described this two-act play, with its twelve scenes, divided into six on either side of the interval, as “structurally immaculate” (Buse) to the point “where form and content are in absolute co-existence” (Macaulay). Marber himself has also spoken of the profound influence that ‘well-made plays’ and ‘well-constructed novels’ (Sierz, *In-yer-face Theatre* 191f) had on his own writing, and, as Daniel Rosenthal points out, each scene ends with “cliff-hanger moments” in which “our desire to find out what has happened next makes this character-driven play more compelling than many plot driven murder-mystery” (Marber xxvii). These features perhaps account in large part for the West End and Broadway success that the play enjoyed, where audiences simultaneously enjoyed the nostalgic comforts of the well-made play within what seemed to be a genuinely contemporary treatment of metropolitan relationships.

*Closer*’s formal structure is also governed by stage objects as well as by its language. John Russell Taylor notes that a feature of Scribean drama was “the art of making connections” (Taylor 15), and these abound in *Closer*. Key amongst these is the central image of the Newton’s Cradle, which we first see on Dan’s desk throughout scene three, and which Alice later buys as a present for Larry in scene nine. Not only does the Newton’s Cradle obliquely connect both Dan and Larry to
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Alice as her lovers but, as Christopher Innes observes, “with its swinging metal balls that knock each other out of contact…[it] becomes an image of the continually changing pairings in the play” (Innes 433).

More generally, Closer as a play also defines itself by constantly eluding and contradicting any easy definitions for belonging to specific categories of genre: while formalised and intricate, at the same time it never quite fully belongs within the realm of the well-made play due to its feature of breaking from its artificial structure with outbursts of brutal, yet honest emotion. As Marber explains: “The idea was to create something that has a formal beauty into which you could shove all this anger and fury. I hoped the dramatic power of the play would rest on that tension between elegant structure […] and inelegant emotion” (Buse).

In the same year as Closer, David Hare, a dramatist from the generation who emerged after 1968, also made a notable foray into the world of the well-made play with Amy’s View. Written when New Labour came to power and at the height of ‘Cool Britannia,’ Richard Boon describes Amy’s View as “a pastiche of precisely the kind of Rattiganesque fifties play [that] is invoked only to be exploded” (Boon 52). Certainly, the play seems to follow a style reminiscent of Harley Granville Barker or Arthur Wing Pinero in which a social or political critique is carried out through a domestic family setting. During its four acts, Amy’s View spans the years between 1979 and 1995, and with it changes to English culture reflected in the decline of the theatre and the corresponding rise of media culture. The play’s success – transferring from the RNT to the West End (and revived with similar success in 2007) – makes Amy’s View one of Hare’s most commercially and critically successful plays. While it may seem a long way removed from work such as Knuckle (1974) and Fanshen (1975), the use of the well-made play in Amy’s View is no less uncompromising than earlier, more avowedly ‘political’ work.

What of the well-made play in the millennial decade? It is certainly true to say that its brief zenith in the early 1990s seems to have passed: yet if this is so, then the same is also true of in-yer-face theatre. One offshoot or consequence of in-yer-face theatre is what Aleks Sierz calls ‘me and my mates’ plays, which he defines as “naturalistic plays set on underclass council estates,” although often written by young middle class writers whose “visits to the lower depths are pure cultural tourism”
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(Sierz, In-yer-face Theatre 81). Specific examples are always subjective, but might include Grae Cleugh’s Fucking Games (2001), Maggie Nevill’s The Shagaround (2001) and Simon Farquhar’s Rainbow Kiss (2006).

Two other dramatic forms have also dominated new writing in recent years: Verbatim and Faction Theatre. David Edgar, writing in 2004, sees the popularity of Verbatim Theatre (especially in ‘tribunal plays’ such as Richard Norton Taylor’s The Colour of Justice in 1999 and plays based on interview material such as David Hare’s 2003 The Permanent Way which examined the state of the British railways since privatisation), arising out of the political vacuum that followed in-yer-face theatre; to accentuate this Edgar draws on the parallel to the establishment of the Theatre of Fact movement in the 1950s being a direct reaction against the playwrights associated with the apolitical Theatre of the Absurd (Reinelt 48).

Edgar’s other category, ‘Faction,’ has perhaps been the most significant dramatic genre to establish itself within recent years in film, theatre and television. Ten years ago it would have been difficult to convince anyone that a play concerning the 1977 television interviews of David Frost and former President Richard Nixon would make promising material for a play, but Peter Morgan’s Frost / Nixon successfully transferred in 2006 from the Almeida Theatre to a long West End residency. Frost / Nixon has followed a successful formula in which established historical events are blended with a series of imagined ‘what if’ scenarios.

Yet despite other theatrical trends the well-made play stubbornly persists – maybe not at the moment in terms of new writing, but glancing at current West End listings one can see successful revivals of Somerset Maugham’s The Letter, Patrick Hamilton’s Gaslight and the 1960s English farce Boeing-Boeing as well as adaptations of John Buchan’s The Thirty Nine Steps and Conan Doyle’s The Hound of the Baskervilles.

In many respects it seemed a return to John Bull’s pessimistic trawl through the West End theatre of 1994. However, all may not be lost for the well-made play. In January 2007, Dominic Cooke, the incoming Artistic Director of the Royal Court, announced that the theatre was to turn its attention to the middle classes in terms of subject matter. Whether by this Cooke meant an encouragement of the well-made play
as a dramatic form to tackle difficult subjects as it had in the past with Elyot’s *My Night with Reg* or Johnson’s *Hysteria* was unclear.

If new playwright Polly Stenham’s *That Face* (2007) is anything to go by, the dysfunctional pseudo-families of Ravenhill et al. will be replaced by dysfunctional middle-class families with daughters at boarding school and investment-banker fathers on their second marriage in the Far East. This may confirm what critics of the Royal Court such as John McGrath have said all along: that a theatre which claims to be oppositional is in reality little more than one step removed from West End audiences who flock to see revivals of Coward and Rattigan.

However, the French window – that seemingly indestructible, if at times somewhat dilapidated feature of the British stage – whether a rickety relic from the theatre of William Somerset Maugham, or deriving from a sustainable rainforest in the work of contemporary dramatists – still allows for something unexpected to enter through its portals. In this respect, the well-made play itself as a genre may yet have the capacity to surprise us by concealing further tricks up its contrived sleeve.

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*Primary Literature*


*Secondary Literature*


Notes on Contributors

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JOHN BULL is Professor of Film and Theatre at the University of Reading. He has published widely in the fields of modern and contemporary drama, including New British Political Dramatists and Stage Right: Crisis and Recovery in Contemporary British Mainstream Theatre, and in post-Restoration drama, including Farquhar and Vanbrugh. He is the editor of British and Irish Playwrights Since World War II, the first three volumes of which have been published. A past Chair of the Standing Committee of University Drama Departments, he has directed many plays from the classic and modern repertoires, as well as two of his own. He is currently working on a book on contemporary British drama, and as Contemporary Drama Editor of the new Oxford Companion to English Literature.
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He is currently completing a volume on Sarah Kane for Faber’s The Playwright and the Work series and a short monograph study of Patrick Marber’s play Closer for Continuum Press.

GUY STERN, born in Hildesheim in 1922, emigrated to the United States at the age of 15. After completing his studies and teaching German and Comparative Literature at various American universities, among them Hofstra University, Columbia University, and the University of Cincinnati, he was brought to Wayne State University, Detroit, in 1978 as Distinguished Professor for German Literature and Culture. Repeated guest professorships led him to Germany, e.g. to Frankfurt a.M. (1993) and Leipzig (1997). He holds the Großes Bundesverdienstkreuz and the Goethe-Medaille.

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