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Staging Interculturality
Contemporary Drama in English

Staging Interculturality

Papers given on the occasion
of the eighteenth annual conference
of the
German Society for
Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English

Edited for the society
by Werner Huber, Margarete Rubik,
and Julia Novak
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Acknowledgements

The papers collected in this volume constitute the proceedings of the eighteenth annual conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English (CDE). The conference was organised under the aegis of the University of Vienna’s Department of English and American Studies and held at Don Bosco Haus, Vienna, between June 4 and 7, 2009. In the time-honoured tradition of CDE gatherings as symposia it brought together some 80 international delegates to reflect on the theme of “Staging Interculturality.”

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Werner Huber
Margarete Rubik
Julia Novak

March 2010
Introduction

In the age of globalisation, contacts between different cultural groups have become a common aspect of everyday life. Intercultural competence is now a set requirement for corporate staff, and training courses suggest that intercultural encounters are deserving of the highest attention. However, the resulting challenges to national, ethnic, class and gender identities point to the considerable complexity of encounters between different cultures. While intercultural encounters have been conceptualised rather positively as ‘multi-culturalism,’ emphasising the benefits for all participants, theories of the ‘clash of civilisations’ paint a much darker picture. The number of buzzwords created in recent years in order to articulate aspects of migration and cultural exchange, such as hybridity, cultural diversity, cross- and trans-culturalism, gender performance, and social change all testify to an increased awareness of, and interest in, these phenomena among politicians and academics alike. The 2009 CDE conference set out to examine how contemporary drama and theatre in English engage in the discourse of interculturality.

Raymond Williams has called culture “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language.” In the context of this conference, culture, in Williams’ sense, is to be understood as “a particular way of life, whether of a people, a period, or a group.” Culture, hence, as Stuart Hall has stressed, is a major site of ideological struggle, one of the principal sites where divisions along ethnic, gender and class lines are established and contested. Of course the meaning of cultural forms and their place in the cultural field are not fixed forever, but the cultural field is defined by a struggle to re-articulate and re-define cultural practices.

However, if culture is the arena of a continuous struggle over meanings between various social groups, then theatre is an ideal site to enact
and dramatise these conflicts and present them, as it were, in actu. Theatre is a major constituent in the politics of culture and thus also in the negotiation of intercultural relations. And since cultural identity is established performatively, what better space to study this struggle over the meaning of culture than through the signifying practices of the stage itself, where a natural and inevitable dialogue takes place between processes of production and activities of consumption.

The term intercultural theatre generally denotes an engagement with non-European theatre traditions and inspiration drawn from foreign dramatic models. Salient times of cross-cultural receptivity were the early 20th century, when theatre reformers like Max Reinhardt, Bertolt Brecht or Antonin Artaud were inspired in their dramaturgy and stagings by Chinese and Japanese models, or the 1980s, when directors like Peter Brook and Ariane Mnouchkine looked for a universal theatrical language by uniting eastern and western traditions. Their experiments were celebrated, but also criticised for their alleged imperialism and orientalism.

What then, is the present state of ‘intercultural’ theatre in Britain and in the English-speaking world? Many critics have accused British theatre of being basically unreceptive at least to European influences and of domesticating and anglicising European plays when they are performed on British stages. Yet London, New York, Toronto or Sydney boast a vibrant multicultural scene. Is the situation, then, different when it comes to Asian, Middle Eastern or Caribbean influences on the theatre?

Of course the ethnic dimension of the intercultural dialogue, be it in the form of imitation or in the form of the so-called clash of civilisations, is the aspect that first meets the eye and seems almost inescapable in the theatrical scene of the English-speaking world today. However, the conference organisers saw fit to widen the term and sought to include questions of class, gender, generation, and sexuality in the investigation of interculturality and its expression on the stage.

These categories, too, involve negotiations of power between hegemonic and marginalised groups and a clash of cultures and are as productive of drama as ethnic conflicts and more exotic influences. The inter-cultural as well as intra-cultural frictions between ethnicities, classes and genders are complex and mutable, involving changing alli-
ances, mutual cross-fertilisation and constantly shifting grounds of conflicts.

Hybridity and cross-culturalism have become household terms. But has hybridity truly and genuinely entered the English-speaking theatrical world, and in what way? Formally, with regard to a new aesthetics? Or thematically, by presentations of intercultural conflicts? Is there a truly multi-cultural synthesis in contemporary drama, or mere cultural cannibalism?

The recent economic crisis has exacerbated the pressures of migration and social change. In how far has this theme informed contemporary drama? And whose voice is mediated in such plays? In society and politics, the 1990s’ celebration of multiculturalism has undoubtedly given way to a much bleaker outlook about the limits of transcultural understanding.

These conflicts are explored more searchingly and vividly, it seems, in theatre than they are in political discourses or journalistic articles – perhaps simply because art has the power to individualise problems of globalisation, cultural conflict and social change, thus making them emotionally accessible to the audience. As will be shown below in the interpretation of individual plays, this may take the form of tragedy or parody, of satire or documentary drama. Plays dealing with interculturality may stir up the spectators or shock them, it may make them laugh or rouse them to furious protest – but they rarely leave them emotionally detached.

What, then, is the present state of engagement in English theatre with the dramatic and theatrical languages taken from different cultures – either foreign or from various sub-cultures within the dominant society? How exactly are contacts and conflicts between various cultures and intra-cultural power struggles taken up and staged in contemporary theatre? What visibility have such plays achieved? And which segment of the audience do they appeal to?

In the first keynote lecture, “Writing Black People,” British playwright Simon Stephens discusses the significance of racial identity in his own work, which is internationally noted for its exploration of the clash of cultures and values and the transgression of traditions and norms across frontiers and class boundaries. Stephens offers some in-
sight into his writing process and its relation to major political occurrences such as the London suicide bombings of 7/7, outlining the genesis of three black characters from his plays Motortown, Pornography, and Harper Regan. He points to the metaphorical status of colour in his plays and reflects on the question of cultural authenticity and the dramatist’s right to “write black people,” conceding that “the relationship between the white artist and the black subject sits on a complicated history.”

“Writing Beyond the Stereotypes” is the title of an interview conducted by theatre critic Aleks Sierz with award-winning British playwright and screenwriter Tanika Gupta. While Gupta rejects the label of “Asian Writer,” complaining that it denigrates her work and “boxes her in” by suggesting a preoccupation with stereotypically Asian themes (such as arranged marriages), her plays often deal with intercultural encounters on various levels. In conversation with Aleks Sierz, the author traces her professional development from writing for television series such as EastEnders to the success of Sugar Mummies, her play about sex tourism in Jamaica, which premièred at the Royal Court in 2006. Gupta reveals the personal and political motivations behind her plays as well as the meticulous research underlying much of her work.

D. Keith Peacock in “Youth, Multiculturalism and Hybridity” takes on the subject of generational conflicts within the family arising from the pressures on young people of ethnic minorities to define both their group identity as well as their personal identity in a multicultural society. The crossing of borders between ‘traditional’ values of immigrant culture and the adoption of values represented by peer groups and dominant society constitutes a struggle for what Stuart Hall has described as “new ethnicities.” The three plays Peacock discusses to illustrate this conflict are: Hanif Kureishi’s Borderline, Ayub Khan-Din’s East is East, and Tanika Gupta’s Fragile Land.

Graham Saunders in “‘The Great Chinese Takeaway’: The Strange Case of Absent Orientalism in Contemporary British Playwriting” concerns himself with the paradox of the underrepresentation of the third most prominent immigrant community in British public life, viz. the group generally known as BBC: British Born Chinese. He takes stock of existing evidence in literature and drama, citing cultural initiatives such
as Yellow Earth and their theatre production of Running the Silk Road, but also speculates on the failure of contemporary theatre to engage with the Chinese experience in Britain. This he attributes to an attitude of neo-colonialism and token orientalism which considers China as being more ‘exotic’ than former British colonies in Southern Asia.

For Marissia Fragkou “Intercultural Encounters in debbie tucker green’s random” take place on many different levels. Fragkou studies a playwright who is per se very much against identity categories and stereotyping. In this particular monodrama on the topic of teenage knife crime in London the issues of race, age, and gender are foregrounded. With particular reference to the Royal Court production Fragkou also situates random in the pragmatics of audience reactions and the wider socio-political context of black and youth street culture.

In “Queering Race in DeObia Oparei’s Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self” Franziska Bergmann undertakes a queer reading of Oparei’s provocative play, premiered at London’s Royal Court Theatre in 2002, focusing on the Afro-British protagonist’s transgressions of gender as well as race. As Femi negotiates his identity through his various jobs – transsexual prostitute, macho rent boy and actor with the white bourgeois ‘English Royal National Heritage Company’ – both gender and race emerge as products of performative acts.

Lenke Németh identifies “The ‘Cultural Mulatto’ in Adrienne Kennedy’s Funnyhouse of a Negro and Suzan-Lori Parks’s Topdog/Underdog,” a model of African American identity which undermines binary oppositions of race and which is generally attributed to a ‘post-soul’ aesthetic. Suzan-Lori Parks is discussed as a representative of the new generation of African American artists who have left behind notions of cultural separatism. Her play serves as a point of reference for the study of Adrienne Kennedy’s Funnyhouse of a Negro and its tragic ‘mulatta’ protagonist as a harbinger of the New Black Aesthetic, which anticipated the ‘post-soul’ era by nearly thirty years.

In “England People Very Nice: Intercultural Confusions at the National Theatre, London” John Bull joins the debate surrounding Richard Bean’s controversial play England People Very Nice, premiered at the Royal National Theatre in February 2009. Bull first sketches the ideological context surrounding the production and the debates on mul-
ticulturalism (as the diagnosis of parallel but separate social identities) and interculturality (as a dynamic process and dialogue with the idealistic goal of integration/unification). He then deconstructs the politics of the play and its author with regard to these key issues and observes a “lack of ideological clarity.” This he considers a reflection of the confusion over issues of multiculturalism and interculturality prevailing in the nation at large.

Claudia Georgi examines “Cross-Cultural Similarities and Intra-Cultural Hybridity in Richard Bean’s The God Botherers,” which dramatises the encounter between three English human aid workers and the local community in the fictional country of Tambia. While Bean’s playful handling of cultural stereotypes initially seems to suggest a binary opposition between global West and local Tambia, his black comedy is revealed as a deconstruction of the ideological foundations of development aid in the so-called Third World which ultimately raises questions about the possibility of intercultural understanding on a global level.

Holger Südkamp (“Among Unbroken People Next Door (In the Time of the Messiah): Henry Adam’s Drama of Interculturality”) investigates Scottish playwright Henry Adam’s treatment of intercultural themes in three plays: Among Unbroken Hearts, which depicts a conflict of different generational cultures in modern-day Scotland, The People Next Door, which offers a localised take on the ‘global’ war on terror in post-9/11 Britain, and the apocalyptic Petrol Jesus Nightmare #5 with its violent clash of opposing cultural interests. Südkamp traces the development of Adam’s intercultural drama from local youth drama via multicultural community drama to cynical politico-religious drama, examining the thematic relevance of interculturality to a Scottish playwright in Great Britain.

In the second key note lecture, “Contemporary Irish Theatre: The Way We Live Now,” Nicholas Grene asks whether contemporary Irish theatre is in the same way expressive of the “deeper thoughts and emotions” of Ireland as the 1897 manifesto of the Irish Literary Theatre had formulated as one of its main tenets. Drawing on his experience as a judge for the Irish Times Theatre Awards, Grene surveys the total theatrical ‘output’ of Irish theatres in 2006 (122 professional plays and opera productions) and assesses it in comparisons with local traditions, but
Introduction

also with larger international and intercultural trends. His final diagnosis is that the obsession with “varieties of Irishness” and the need to reflect “the way we live now” – even in the days of the Celtic Tiger – still act as an overburdening legacy of the founding generation of the Irish national theatre.

Sarah Heinz (“The Whiteness of Irish Drama: The Irish and Their Black Other”) relies on the critical paradigms of Whiteness Studies to explore aspects of intercultural encounters in three Irish plays: Brian Friel’s Dancing at Lughnasa, Declan Gorman’s At Peace, and Donal O’Kelly’s The Cambria. In each play the transgression of cultural norms brings to the fore the relativity of Irishness based on the construction of whiteness (or blackness). This awareness ties in with, and is triggered by, the multiculturalism of Celtic Tiger Ireland as a country of (now largely non-European) immigration.

In “Mapping Polish Identities on the British Stage” Monika Pietrzak-Franger addresses the topic of Polish immigration in Britain and its theatrical representation. With the help of two examples – Gappad Theatre’s ID-Re-Identification and Cherry Blossom, a Traverse Theatre/Teatr Polski Bydgoszcz co-production, she explores the basis of Polish transcultural identities in the ambiguous contact zones of economy, place, and language. In addition to these more subject-oriented parameters, the plays are also characterised by elements of verbatim theatre, narrative theatre, documentary theatre, and multi-media aesthetics to underline the ambivalence of transcultural identities.

Patrick Gill (“From Staging Interculturality to Intercultural Stagings: Text and Performance in the Plays of Sulayman Al-Bassam”) picks up the special case of Sulayman Al-Bassam, a Kuwaiti dramatist writing in English, and demonstrates how the intertwining of Arab and European discourses in his work gives a new meaning to interculturality on stage. Taking The Al-Hamlet Summit as his prime example, Gill studies the playtext as well as the play’s international performance history with a view to the blurring of the Self vs. Other dichotomy in intercultural contexts. As he makes clear through a comparison with another Al-Bassam play, Kalila wa Dimna; or, The Mirror for Princes, a basic degree of familiarity with the (Shakespearean) pre-text is a
pre-requisite for the success of a play with intercultural, i.e. international, audiences.

**Giovanna Buonanno** ("1001 Nights Now: Diaspora Narratives on the English Stage") discusses the origins of a contemporary version of the Arabian Nights that premiered at the Nottingham Playhouse in October 2005 and its significance as a model of intercultural theatre. Following Homi Bhabha and Patrice Pavis, she demonstrates how the diaspora experience of Muslim immigrants (e.g. economic migrants and asylum seekers) into Western European societies, once it is transformed into narrative, can help create a diasporic space in the theatre where such stories of deprivation and survival can be shared and appreciated ‘interculturally.’

**Marilena Zaroulia** ("Travellers in Globalisation: From Near to Elsewhere and Back") engages in a critique of Marc Augé’s concept of the ‘non-place,’ which raises fundamental issues about travelling, mobility and globalisation in the age of “supermodernity.” Focusing on David Greig’s *San Diego* and Complicité’s *A Disappearing Number*, Zaroulia offers a positive interpretation of “non-places” in the theatre as sites of transcultural exchange. In her understanding, by thematising recognition of Self and Other the plays eventually open up moral and affective structures of audience appeal, which points to utopian aspects of globalisation and cosmopolitanism.

**Kathy Smith** in “(There is Nothing) Outside of the Text?: Towards a Psychoanalytic Model of the Transcultural Spectator” approaches her topic in three steps. She first surveys the interculturality of three “multi-oriented” theatre companies and their productions: Kneehigh Theatre and Bacchae, Graeae Theatre Company and Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*, and the National Theatre’s production of Mark Ravenhill’s *Mother Clap’s Molly House*. She then offers a critique of Patrice Pavis’s concept of the “hourglass of intellectual exchange” to arrive at the psychoanalytically oriented construction of the “transcultural spectator,” who is seen as occupying the space “outside of the text” where “the ‘otherness’ of the encounter with ‘different’ cultural groups” is suspended. As many of the articles collected in this volume have addressed reader response and audience reception in intercultural encounters and contexts, trans-
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cultural spectatorship could be said to emerge from these proceedings as the main ideal or, at least, the main concern.
Keynote Address: Writing Black People

It’s a real pleasure to be invited to Vienna to speak to you this evening. It’s a city I love. I’ve spent many happy times here. It is, however, as daunting as it is gratifying. I’m not daunted by public speaking ordinarily. In fact I rather enjoy it. I’m daunted, however, to be speaking to an audience of academics.

My own academic career was enjoyable and deeply unspectacular. In 1992, I received a 2.1 from the History Department of the University of York. It was at York that I first went to the theatre of my own accord and at York that I produced, directed and wrote my own plays. I had a tremendous time there and learnt a tremendous amount. And although I was proud to have achieved a fairly decent degree I have to admit that I never felt completely comfortable in the world of academia. I deliver this lecture with the same sense of trepidation and crippling fear of getting everything wrong in front of people far, far cleverer than I am that I delivered all of my seminar papers and sat all my tutorials at the University in.

There is something fitting about this sense of trepidation however. It cuts to the quick of the curious characteristics of the relationship, in fact probably in all the arts, between the practitioner and the theoretician, between the artist and the academic. I think we make each other nervous. Not all of us and not all of the time. I’ve enjoyed many happy times with academics, some very good meals and some terrific drinks and I daresay such drink and such food may be similarly terrific tonight, but nevertheless I am left with a sense that we speak different
languages to one another. I have the sense that we see theatre in different ways, indeed that we watch theatre in different ways.

Between 2001 and 2006 I taught playwriting at the Young Writers Programme of the Royal Court Theatre in London. This different way of watching was something I actively encouraged in my students. I encouraged them to watch and to read plays not as an audience member or as a fan, and not as an analyst or a student but rather to watch them and to read them as a thief. To identify moments of clarity or drama or power in a play or in a production and, rather than to interrogate their semiotics or deconstruct underlying codes of meaning, to figure out ways in which they could nick those moments for their own plays.

It was important to me that I taught at a theatre, not in a University. I learnt my skills in theatres and while I was of the sometimes unfashionable belief that while it was possible to teach playwriting (for goodness sake if one can teach brain surgery or how to land a jumbo jet then surely one can teach how to wrought a dramatic scene) I nevertheless felt happier carrying out that teaching in a rehearsal room working for an establishment whose commitment was to producing new plays than in a seminar room working for an establishment whose commitment was to marking them. I've heard many of my peers, some of whom you'll be talking about over the course of this weekend, being similarly dismissive of attempts to identify meta-structures in their subtexts, for example, or deconstruct the semiotics of their stage directions. We take solace in the notion that we are on the front line, writing plays and flogging tickets and getting bums on seats. For us it is not the library or the seminar room but the rehearsal room, the theatre canteen and the theatre bar where we learn our trade – rubbing shoulders with our audiences, drinking with our actors, arguing with our directors.

It is a solace, I suspect, that allows us to get away with some frankly flabby thinking. Because our subtexts DO have meta-structures, our stage directions DO have semiotics and maybe we’d be better off spending a little bit of time thinking about those things, as a means of taking some kind of responsibility for them, than chatting to actresses about football results and pretending we know celebrity film directors really well. I’m grateful to Werner Huber for giving me the opportunity of spending a certain amount of time thinking in that way.
Tom Stoppard commented that the reason he enjoys being a dramatist is that it is one of the few jobs where he is allowed to contradict himself openly and retain any kind of dignity. And maybe this is the essence of the difference between the way academics and playwrights think. The older I get the more doubt I seem to have about everything. I can barely hold an opinion for long enough to finish a sentence before wanting immediately to contradict it. Such self doubt and self contradiction seem to lend themselves rather well to dramatic writing where our work is to explore and investigate and test utterances, however inarticulate against one another and against the dramatic actions and imagery that we juxtapose with them. To do this well, I find, it helps not to really know what it is you want to say. Or at least not to believe it too stridently. Such ignorance or dis-ingenuity lends itself, I would guess, less happily to the work of a lecturer or a researcher, for whom having some kind of opinion of some kind of clarity at some point might be in some way helpful.

I'm nervous that my anxiety around the world of academia limits my aptitude for delivering this lecture. I'm nervous too about the subject of my lecture. Because I'm going to talk about my own plays. I'm not sure how qualified I am to talk about my own plays. I think my perspective on my own plays is, I'm afraid, rather limited by having written them. I have a feeling that many of you would be able to analyse the meaning of my plays far more happily and with more clarity and objectivity and insight than I would. When I write all I'm finally concerned with is making the shape on the stage, whether that's a visual shape or a linguistic shape, a behavioural shape or a shape of narrative sit as closely as possible to the shapes that seems to sit somewhere in my head. I judge my work and the work of my collaborators only by the proximity of resonance between those two things and how warmly that resonance is received by our audiences. Everything else I leave to critics, or to you lot and wish you fair weather with your work.

But nevertheless, despite all this anxiety and nervousness and qualifications to my aptitude and ability I will actually deliver something of a short introductory lecture to you this evening. I'll talk for about forty minutes and then I'm happy to try and to fail to answer your questions with any kind of clarity at all.
Simon Stephens

My limited perspective on my own plays was thrown into relief by the initial email I received from Werner Huber in November last year. He said of my plays that they “explored the clash of cultures and values, transgression of traditions and norms across frontiers and class boundaries.” I thought “blimey! Do they? I had no idea.”

Mulling on it over the past few months I’m happy to concede that in some way he may be right. I want to talk about one element of that clash or transgression tonight, as a means perhaps of allowing an insight into my work and my process. Perhaps this may operate as a feeble but in some way helpful starting point to your weekend-long consideration of the discourses surrounding multi-culturality. I want to talk about racial identity in three characters I’ve written in three of my plays. I want to talk about writing black people.

I think my gratitude and terror at being asked to speak tonight is matched only by the bewildered incredulity of my family. They’re rather entertained by the idea that I’m going to deliver a fucking lecture in fucking Vienna for fucks sake! My sister-in-law asked me what I was talking about. Half jokingly I told her I was going to talk about black people. She was slightly taken aback. What right did I have to talk about black people she asked? Wouldn’t they have been better off actually inviting somebody who was black to speak? Her bewilderment was genuine and completely understandable. It wasn’t completely dissipated when I explained that rather than actually talking about black people I would be talking about my experiences of writing black characters. This made some more sense but she still wasn’t completely convinced by how qualified I was to deliver the lecture. She wouldn’t be alone in that. I’ve written characters in plays who are women, I’ve written gay characters, I’ve written Italian characters and characters in their eighties and characters that are under ten. I’ve written brick layers and murderers and hairdressers and soldiers and swingers and managing directors, taxi drivers, architects, policemen, postmen, and cellists. But none of those characters, living lives very, very different from my own, have raised any kind of eyebrow in my audiences or asked them properly to ask the question “how dare he write about something he knows so poorly?” The question is always asked on some level, however un-articulated it may remain, when a white writer writes a black character.
The relationship between the white artist and the black subject sits on a complicated history. It carries with it echoes of colonialism and slavery in its essential gesture of objectification. I think to some people, perhaps my sister-in-law amongst them, there is an echo of that colonialism and that slavery and those centuries of repression and economic marginalisation in any instinct to fictionalise. But fictionalise I do. As a writer I write often about London, the city where I live. I would be tempted to argue that it would be more absurd, more offensive, more ludicrous of me to construct an imaginary London with no black characters or non-English speakers, than it would be to allow the black population of London freedom from the objectifying impulse of my imagination. The point isn’t to not write black characters but, especially if one is operating within a theatrical language that sits under the tradition of naturalism, to write them with grace and detail and honesty.

I’m going to talk about three characters I’ve written in particular as a means of exploring that racially transgressive gesture. In my play Motortown the character Jade, like all of the characters in that play, has no surname. Her age is unfixed at some point between either 14 or 16 years old. She is the co-habitee and lover of a much older man who makes his living dealing firearms. She is brutally tortured and finally murdered by the play’s central protagonist Danny, a veteran of this second Iraq War returning to live in his home town of Dagenham. If Jade has no surname, the second character I hope to talk about is one of several characters in my play Pornography who has no name at all. In fact it’s not entirely clear whether or not he is actually black. He is a suicide bomber who for reasons unspecified in the play embarks on a fictional journey from Stockport to London to plant a bomb on the London Underground system on July 7, 2005. The third character I’m going to talk about does have a name. He is Tobias Rich. He is the seventeen-year-old subject of the voyeuristic attentions of Harper Regan, in my play of that name.

I’m going to talk about writing these characters. I’m going to talk about their blackness. And I’m going to talk about their status as people.

Motortown was conceived and planned between March and June 2005 and written in a speedy four-day period at the start of July of that year. I
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wanted to write a play that came from a position of anger. Writing for
the Royal Court for its fiftieth anniversary I wanted to write a play that
filled both its proscenium arch and its remarkable history of transgres-
sive, engaged, politically charged theatre. I decided quite early on in the
writing that I wanted to write about the war in Iraq. Or rather I wanted
to write a play triggered by my own messy, contradictory attitude to-
wards that war. More specifically, by my own messy, contradictory atti-
dute towards the anti-war movement. In March 2003 the largest protest
demonstration in British history took place when over two million
people marched across the centre of London to Hyde Park to protest
against the Labour Government’s plans to join with President George
Bush in the US and declare war against Saddam Hussein. The arguments
firing their march were persuasive at the time and in retrospect, as we’ve
come to understand the dishonesty of the governmental arguments in
the build-up to the war and the almost criminal naivety of the absolute
absence of post-war planning for the country, could be considered even
more persuasive still.

The fallout of the Iran-Iraq war at the start of the eighties has been
ongoing as I understand it for twenty-five years and more. The failure of
the Government of George Bush Snr to support the civil uprising in Iraq
against Saddam Hussein, in the years after the first Iraq war, seemed to
me at the time desperately negligent. The ten-year period of economic
sanctions seemed only to prey on and marginalise the poor and weak of
the country. The decision to go to war seemed to contravene important
UN legislature and seemed based on flimsy unsubstantiated evidence
related to Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction that few people seemed to
really believe and that were quickly passed over by the US and UK Gov-
ernments as being secondary in motivation. The declaration of war felt
awful at the time and continues to feel so.

But I didn’t go on the march. In fact I couldn’t go on the march be-
cause I had to travel to Glasgow to play a concert with my band. But I
think even if I’d been in London I would have stayed off the march. I
mistrusted it. And I wasn’t entirely sure why. There was something
about the sense of moral confidence of the anti-war campaigners that
frustrated me. The irony of the amount of campaigners who drove to
London to protest against a war fought ostensibly for control of Oil
Supplies seemed palpable to me. The indignity with which the protesters supported the sovereignty of the Presidency of that most vicious, brutal dictator Saddam Hussein seemed pathetic. The comparisons that some of the campaigners made between Saddam and Tony Blair and George Bush, some of them even going so far as to compare Bush to Hitler, seemed almost offensive in their idiocy.

If, as I suggested earlier, self-doubt and contradiction are useful characteristics for a playwright to have there’s part of me that wants to argue that my self-doubt and contradiction about the ethics of declaring war in Iraq were fundamental to the writing of Motortown. It was a play born out of self-doubt. It was a self-doubt exacerbated by my later response to the arrest and public pillorying of Lieutenant Gary Bartram, a British soldier serving in Iraq who developed photographs taken in the war zone at his local chemist. The chemist found images of brutal treatment of Iraqi prisoners of war on the photographs and contacted the police. Bartram was held up as a moral demon. His behaviour and that of his peers horrified the country. He was tried in military court. He was sentenced to three years in military jail. Tony Blair and General Michael Jackson, the head of the British Army, were hasty in castigating him. I was confused by my own reaction though. Because while I was aware of how awful his behaviour and the behaviour of his peers was I felt nothing but sympathy for him. He was twenty-one. He was a lad, really. He was fighting in a war the like of which nobody had really known before. A war that only started once it had been won. A war where the enemy remain secretive sometimes even to themselves, such is the nature of suicide bombs detonated by mobile phones. He had to carry the weight of international moral disapproval at such a questionable war before even contacting the chaos of the peculiar war zone of Basra, and he and his mates cracked under pressure and behaved awfully. At least as awfully as they might have behaved in any Luton nightclub over the course of the past ten years. I was aware how awful his behaviour was. But as shocked as I was by him I was also drawn to him. My sympathy for him sits under the creation of Danny.

Motortown is informed by other elements. At the end of the nineties I was a schoolteacher in Dagenham, Danny’s home town, and had wanted to write about the place for years. Its cultural limitations, the
extent to which it was dominated by the brooding, now closing Ford Factory, its proximity to and distance from my home in East London, the barely contained casual violence and racism and honesty of some of the students at the school haunted me then and continues to do so. The play sits on a huge well of doubt and fear about my personal life, my relationship with my wife and my two boys – Danny’s relationship with his brother mirrors my own with mine and the relationship between my two sons in some way. I was informed by other plays about brothers – Sam Shepherd’s True West, Harold Pinter’s The Caretaker, for example, and by other plays of the Royal Court’s history.

The play layers these elements over one another. It synthesises them to a point where the political ideology of the play is defined by its contradiction. It is interesting to me that critics described it both favourably and unfavourably as both an anti-war play and an anti-anti-war play. For me it’s important that my plays don’t present arguments but explore mess. Hopefully this mess has a shape. Hopefully it is informed by a world outside my house as much as it is informed by an attempt to make sense of what goes on within it. But the writing of a play for me is not schematic; it’s as intuitive as it is planned. It’s dependent on musicality as much as it is ideology.

And in this intuitive, musical mess sits Jade. I don’t know when I decided that Jade was black. I don’t really know now if she is 14 or 16. I’m not entirely sure of how much I knew about her before I wrote her dialogue. I knew that this play, so inspired by Martin Scorsese’s Taxi Driver, needed a character akin to that played by Jodie Foster in the movie. A scarred angel whom the protagonist mistakenly feels he can save. A delusion that leads to brutal murder. In the time of Vietnam this brutality was played out against her pimps and traffickers. In the more morally chaotic time of Iraq 2 – The Sequel it was played out on her.

Jade is the only character in the play not to take her name from the actor I most wanted to play her. I taught a girl at the Royal Court who made up part of an outreach programme and who had been in care and had worked as a sex worker and a drug dealer. She was maybe 16 years old and she was brilliant and alert and deeply damaged and she gave the character her name. She was a young black girl. I enjoy writing women characters. Somebody suggested to me one time that I write the women
I wish existed in real life so I could hang out with them. I think it’s true of Jade the fictional character. As it was true of Jade the writing student. I was worried about Jade the student. I wanted to protect her. I also found her rather beautiful. Any teacher who has experienced the, I suspect, rather familiar, moral chaos of being physically attracted to a student will recognise how that might have led to an inclination to fictionalise. That inclination sat under the writing of Jade. It made sense in this time of a world of warfare.

She has very, very few lines. I wanted to give her more. Every time I tried though they seemed wrong. She always felt to me to be a girl who spoke little. She watched a lot. She has the watchfulness of the damaged. But she speaks rarely, partly out of fear, partly out of a need to protect herself. Every time I tried to flesh out her back story in speech or utterance it felt intuitively dishonest. It felt like a kind of betrayal of her. She does have one of the most important lines in the play though. When she corrects Danny’s anatomy, in the face of his torturing her, and has the courage to tell him that the human eyeball is connected to the eye socket not with cartilage but with muscle she is dipping into a deep well of moral fury and speaking with clarity and accuracy. In that moment she’s as morally heroic as she is victimised.

At the Royal Court people walked out in the middle of the performance of *Motortown* every night after the scene where she is killed. It is a horribly difficult scene to watch. I remember taking a break from rehearsals of the Royal Court production and going back ten days later to the rehearsal room where it happened to be the case that the company were rehearsing that scene. To see it for the first time played with real commitment and deep skill by Danny Mays as Danny and Onny Ohiura as Jade was deeply unsettling. I sat yards away from where they were working and asked myself what the fuck I thought I’d done. It’s a scene that has remained as upsetting every time I’ve seen the play. It’s upsetting because it’s so violent. It’s upsetting because he’s so cruel. But it’s upsetting too because she’s black. A question that is often asked of me is why did I make the black girl the victim? Why is the only black character in that play treated so awfully? I always go back to Dagenham and a pupil of mine there, a mild-mannered, polite 14-year-old called Daniel Evans. I was teaching Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* to his class. I
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asked them what happened to communities in times of poverty. The class agreed with me that often in times of poverty communities unite. He waited. He put his hand up. He told me I was wrong. He suggested to me that in times of poverty communities disintegrate. They turn on one another. As Paul Schrader had it in writing about *Taxi Driver* it appears to be unfortunately the case that in times of weakness the weak rather than uniting and turning to overthrow the strong, or the poor the wealthy, in fact the weak turn on the weaker to make themselves feel stronger. The poor turn on the poorer to make themselves feel richer. Danny’s torture and killing of Jade is upsetting and cruel. But it is also pathetic. It dramatises the fragility and pathos of the English at a time when their moral core has collapsed. Jade is a quiet, determined voice of clarity in the midst of this collapse and she is destroyed for that clarity and quietness. There was something about that that seemed to resonate with what I wanted to say about my world at that time.

*Pornography* is a play which happens to be about the week during which I wrote *Motortown*. It’s about the first seven days of July 2005. This is a week that started with the Live 8 Concert to raise awareness of a crisis in distribution of wealth surrounding the repayment of debt from the Third World to First World Countries and banks. It is a week that played out against the G8 summit in Gleneagles in Scotland. On the Wednesday of the week London was successful in its bid to stage the 2012 Olympics. The following morning four boys took bombs onto the London transport system and killed themselves and 52 other people in a protest inspired by Al Qaeda against the British support of US policy in the Middle East.

It is a play that has been described by one prominent British director as a love song to London. Six stories play out across the week. Four of them take the form of monologue. Two of them take the form of dialogue. One of the monologues, as I’ve said, describes the journey on route to a suicide bombing. The stories all play out across the city. It’s the city I’ve lived in now for fifteen years. I got married there. I had my children there. All of the plays I’ve written that have been professionally produced were written there. It remains my favourite city. I think I would be happy to live in my house there for the rest of my life. But the play, I hope, is more than just a love song to London.

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In the fallout of the attack I was struck by how bewildered people around me were by the notion that the boys who bombed London were British. They were boys with limited apparent connection to Islamist organisations. They were described by police at the time as “lilywhites” – they had no previous record. How interesting it strikes me writing this lecture that the noun the police use to describe innocence should be so coloured! People I knew and liked were as incredulous as the police. They couldn’t believe that people with Yorkshire accents should so turn on their own. How could they do that? I didn’t share their bewilderment. For me England at the time felt like a country that was tearing. All around me modes of behaviour were becoming increasingly transgressive. Rules were breaking. They were breaking regardless of race or age or gender or religion or class. The atomic structure of the country felt fragile. The suicide bomb in that sense felt part of something rather than separate from something. It felt to me that while it was an action clearly motivated by religious and political ideology it was also motivated by living in England at the turn of the millennium. It was symptomatic rather than causal of a country gone astray. I wanted to write about that atomisation.

I made two decisions in the writing of the play relating to this. One of which was to have the bomber as just one of a series of stories, each inspired by Jacques’ Seven Ages of Man speech from Shakespeare’s As You Like It. All of them stories of transgression. All of them built around one action of a rule being broken. The placing of the bomb was thus placed into a context that was different to the usual contexts of Islamism and Muslim faith that many commentators at the time were placing it within.

The second was related to what I gave the bomber to say. The bomber in my play never talks about his religion. He never talks about his race. He never talks about US or UK foreign policy in the Middle East. He never mentions Allah. Or Osama bin Laden. Or the prophet. He describes a journey from Stockport, via Derby, to London. He talks about England. He describes in fact a journey that I took myself. He makes observations about the English class system and English physical geography and London. His observations, in fact, are observations I have made myself. More than most characters I’ve written his voice is
quite directly my own. There was a simple reason for this. I recognised myself in the boys who bombed London. I suspected there was much of all of us to recognise in them. I wanted to dramatise that self-recognition.

I’ve always been haunted by mortality. I have a terror of the inexorability of my own death. This is something that seizes me sometimes like a panic. I have it nearly every time I fly not because I think the plane will crash but because contemplating that slender possibility leads me to acknowledge that which I most often try to ignore – that one day I will die. The random suddenness of a terrorist attack on the London Tube clarified the awfulness and inevitability and randomness of death in a way that was very close to hand for me. I was drawn to it. Three of the four boys who bombed the Underground were in their late teens. Like Lieutenant Gary Bartram they felt horribly young for the job they’d been given. I was fascinated by that. After the attack, film of them caught on CCTV cameras was screened on British TV. They are at Luton Train Station. About to get on the train to King’s Cross. About to carry out their attack. I was fascinated by it. In that moment the inevitability of their own death would have been as pronounced as the inevitability of their own crime. I very much wanted to explore how that felt. I was drawn to them not because of their religion or their politics but to their fear and their fragility and their youth. I was drawn to them because I recognised myself in them. While many others were considering them as monsters or defining them by their political action I very much wanted to dramatise their humanity. Like many criminals they were defined by very limited axes of identity. I wanted to open up others.

*Harper Regan* was written one year later in 2006 and produced at the National Theatre in 2008. It tells the story of a woman in her early forties who leaves her family and her job to travel across England to visit her father before he dies. Her decision to flee is motivated by the immense pressure she feels dealing with the fallout of her husband’s confession to the police that he took photographs of children as young as ten without the consent or awareness of those children or their parents for some kind of sexual gratification. It is a play about a woman making sense of her marriage when it appears to have fallen apart.
It takes the form of a road movie. Or a stages of the cross play. On her journey Harper meets a handful of people. Several of them strangers to her. They help her inform her sense of self. One of these people is 17-year-old Tobias Rich. Tobias is a peer of Harper’s daughter. He is a student at the same college as her. He is studying engineering. He lives on a neighbouring street with his father, his mother having left him to go and live in Cardiff. He is a black boy. Harper lies to him that she mistakes him for somebody else. Really she has been watching him from her window for weeks. She finds him beautiful. She wants to talk to him. So she does. She opens him up after initial reluctance. He tells her how amoral his father finds British women nowadays, with their irreligious flagrant sexuality. He shares his father’s disapproval he says. Then he encourages her to go and see her Dad even if it means she loses her job. She watches him drink from her water bottle. Later she goes to see him before she goes back home after her trip to confess to him that she had lied to him. And to encourage him to tell the truth in his life and take responsibility for his own destiny.

17 is an important age in the play. Harper’s daughter, Sarah, is 17. She herself was 17 when her parents separated. It is a charged age. When you are 17 you are on the cusp of legal adulthood. You are above the age of consent for heterosexuals in the UK but not for homosexuals. You can vote. You can join the army. You can drive. You can’t drink alcohol. You can’t sue anybody. You are just about to make sense of who you are. I think adulthood is perhaps a process of losing the clarity of that sense. Harper Regan is a play that celebrates ambiguity and celebrates that eroding clarity as being indicative of maturity.

Tobias Rich is a character whose surface defiance has the clarity of the street and of his father’s religious and moral dogma. He rebuts any attempts she makes to soften him. But her journey succeeds in penetrating his veneer. In doing so he acknowledges his fears to her and his doubts and his need for security and how he misses his Mum and how isolated and lonely he feels.

I was drawn to the idea of writing about Uxbridge, a town defined by its proximity to Heathrow Airport and position at the end of two London Underground lines. This is a town on the cusp of departure that reminded me of Stockport, the suburb of Manchester where I grew up.
Tobias’s yearning for departure is never released but is encouraged by Harper. It is as though she comes back to urge him to leave.

More than with any play I’d written since I wrote *Herons* in 2000 I knew very little about Harper Regan before I wrote the dialogue. Each line was written consecutively. The writing of each character, including Tobias, was thus as much of a journey as Harper’s journey to Stockport and back. And so elements of Tobias took me by surprise. I think his love of his bicycle and fascination with Man United were random and came out of the writing. Certainly they are elements of his character that I share. I think his relationship with his mother caught me similarly unawares. But his blackness didn’t. Nor did his father’s Islamic-inspired disapproval of empowered women. In a play which was a celebration of ambiguity it felt important to have a character that had inherited moral confidence and have that confidence shaken and shaken and shaken again.

I say that I knew that Tobias was black before I started writing the play and I think it’s true. But what is interesting is how rarely his colour or religion or race is explicitly referred to. He never calls himself black. Harper never refers to his blackness. His father’s morality is not exclusive to black people. His language is not defined by a specifically black idiom. So in what sense, it could be asked, is he black? This is a question often asked to me by theatres throughout Europe who, hamstrung either by a slighter history of colonialism than the English and so slighter tradition of immigration OR by a creeping institutional racism, seem to find it incredibly difficult to cast black actors.

Similar questions are asked of Jade. In fact I can think of very few productions of *Motortown* outside England where Jade was played by a black actress. And no productions of *Pornography* where the bomber was black. Like Tobias and The Bomber Jade too never defines her own colour. In fact only Danny refers to her blackness after killing her and he has lied about so much else in the play, it has been suggested to me, he could very happily be lying about her colour. I have to admit that the monochromatic nature of casting choices outside England troubles me. But these questions at least force me to consider the meaning of blackness in my plays.
I can offer, you won’t be surprised to hear, no clear, confident theses about how I use colour in my writing. Rather just a series of disconnected contradictory observations.

As a writer, to date, I’ve operated within the language fundamentally of a modern realist tradition. For me it’s been important to create characters on stage that in some way appear to mimetically recreate the behaviour and utterances of people outside the theatre. I try to make my characters realistic. I try to make them in some way recognisable. I do this because it is a means of facilitating self-recognition within the audience that has a particularity that satisfies me. It moves me in other people’s plays. I try to emulate it, or I have to date at least, in my own.

I take time, therefore, in the writing of my characters to think about all the elements of their personality that contribute to their identity. I think about their age, their gender, their sexuality, their history, their class, their jobs, their lives. I think about their colour. In the writing of Jade and Tobias the colour manifests itself, therefore, not so much in language or utterance or ideology but in their sense of self. A black boy in Uxbridge on the cusp of sexuality is aware of his blackness. In fact, for both Jade and Tobias their colour in their scenes is sexually charged. Jade has a white lover. Tobias is the subject of Harper’s gaze and sexual desire. I think his blackness must be an element of her desire. But he’s sexually empowered in terms of his race, too. He says himself in the only reference to colour in that whole play that he “likes white women.”

Both Jade and Tobias are also aware of their blackness in that it can be used as a means of marginalisation. Both Jade and Tobias are lonely characters. Both have absented themselves from their youth cultures and from institutional cultures around education. Both have been abandoned by at least one parent. Their colour is not their sole defining axis, but it strikes me now that in Harper Regan and Motortown I use the colour of Jade and Tobias as an existential phenomenon more than a political or ideological one.

In Pornography the removal of colour played along the same terms. By denying attribution of colour I was trying to suggest that the suicide bomber existed in all of our audiences, regardless of their religious or ethnic background. Here the removal of colour became an existential gesture.
If my sister-in-law is right that I should think twice about talking about black people then I should be very careful, I guess, about making this next statement. For me the colour of characters in my plays operates only metaphorically. In my plays the colour of my characters is a metaphor.

Now clearly colour isn’t a metaphor. Colour is a real, tangible, visual phenomenon. We see the colour of things. But colour in humans has long since moved beyond that simple process of synaptic identification. I stand in front of you and at one and the same time you can see I’m a white person. And also see that I’m not in any way white at all. My skin is a kind of light tanned brownish pink. If it was really white you’d be rather alarmed and I’d be probably quite ill. My whiteness therefore has become a kind of metaphor. In their 1989 single Fight the Power Chuck D of Public Enemy made the challenge to Black Radio Stations: “Radio Stations, I question their blackness, they call themselves black but we’ll see if they play this!” This was as fascinating an explosion of colour identity as it was a marketing gauntlet. He was making an argument for colour as metaphor.

Nowhere is this more important to think about than in theatre. Theatre is a metaphorical medium – its means of telling stories works most powerfully because it makes us aware that the worlds we are watching aren’t real. And it is a visual medium. We should consider the visual impact of our work. There is no more striking visual impact of a character than their colour. And we should consider the metaphorical elements. What I should have said to my sister-in-law is that I don’t really write people. The characters in my plays, much as they might be couched in the language of socio-realism don’t actually exist. People often ask me what I think happens to my characters after the plays finish. Increasingly this question mystifies me. Nothing happens to them. They don’t exist any more. They never did. They were actors all along. Pretending. The plays work only in so much as the metaphors work to communicate a unifying idea. A happier title for this lecture might therefore be ‘wroughting metaphorically black characters.’

So what does the blackness of Jade and Tobias mean? And what does the removal of colour of The Bomber mean? Well, Jade and Tobias, the only black characters in those plays, don’t, either of them, symbolise
violence. Nor do they symbolise danger. Such are these the most common symbolic resonances of young black characters in British drama nowadays that Troy Glasgow, the actor who played Tobias Rich at The National, commented at the time how much of a relief it was to play a character who wasn’t a violent gangster aspirant armed with a knife and a gun and a handful of bling.

The Bomber is different. Not only in that his actions, albeit off-stage actions, and sentiments are murderously violent but that while his actions are most speedily attributed, in the world outside the theatre, to Islamic fundamentalism, the removal of any insistence of colour or ideology in his text demands an acknowledgement of that violence being more omnipresent than most audiences may like to consider.

Jade and Tobias, rather than being symbols of aggression, are both the object of sexual desire for the main protagonists in their plays. In one the desire leads to impotence and then brutality and murder, in the other to release and sexual connection.

They are also symbols of youth. It is maybe no coincidence that they are both characters created as I move towards and through my mid-thirties. Youth seems increasingly elusive and increasingly important to me. Especially as my fear of death becomes increasingly acute.

They are characters who operate in neighbouring but different worlds to their protagonists: Jade in Canning Town to Danny’s Dagenham, Tobias shares the Uxbridge bridge that adjoins his very different street to Harper’s. In this sense they symbolise the yearning for escape that runs through all of my plays like a thread. And with that the yearning to go back home. Tobias facilitates Harper’s return home. Jade means that Danny, to his horror, can never really go home again.

Both are strangers to their protagonists before the starts of their plays. In that sense they throw their protagonists’ understanding of self and of their family into real relief.

Both Harper and Danny in some sense try to save Tobias and Jade – in both cases from the clutches of domineering men. One is left with a sense that Harper is more successful than Danny in this respect.

And while Harper and Danny both make some kind of attempt to communicate something of urgency to Tobias and Jade it is they who learn more from the younger characters than they teach.
In all of these symbolic relationships the blackness of Tobias and Jade, while maybe never referred to explicitly, is absolutely fundamental.

The themes of flight and homecoming; of the possibility or impossibility of communication or contact; of how one exists within and out-with a family and of fear of mortality define at least my sense of what my plays are about. While my language might play around areas of the mimetic, finally my plays and all the characters within them are an attempt on my behalf to complete something in myself or my world that was interrupted and to share that moment of completion with others so they might complete it in themselves.

All three plays were written at a time of warfare. All three plays were written at the end of the Bush Presidency in the US and the Labour Government in the UK. I am of a generation of writers that has eschewed confidence and clarity of political ideology in my plays because such clarity or confidence seems to make very little sense of the chaotic, messy world that I witness around me. As our ecology shudders under the weight of an exponentially increasing population, as that population moves around the globe with more ecologically and virally catastrophic consequences, as that population forces itself north and south from an increasingly uninhabitable equatorial region, as dwindling resources lead to increasingly brutal warfare, as dwindling wealth in our over-crowded cities leads to increasingly desensitised acts of individual violence and as the economic structures that have implemented and justified and underpinned these movements collapse like a house of cards, the old paradigms of political confidence seem more and more anachronistic. My plays don’t have the action to persuade or to convince or to teach of this. Rather they have the actions to explore or to test or to interrogate. In a culture that seems to be tearing itself up the desire to flee or to return home, to stay young or accept age, to fuck or to fight but at least to try and to communicate, to help or to look for help and be granted it or refused it, seems to me to be increasingly universal. My metaphors, all of the metaphors in my plays amongst which I would include the metaphor of a character’s colour, are means of exploring or suggesting or interrogating that.
Tanika Gupta, Aleks Sierz

Writing Beyond the Stereotypes
(Tanika Gupta in Conversation with Aleks Sierz)

Tanika Gupta is one of the most prolific and outstanding new writers in contemporary British theatre. Born in Chiswick in 1965, she is a bilingual British Bengali who – after reading Modern History at Oxford University – began her career in 1991, when her Radio 4 play, Asha, was part of the BBC Young Playwrights Festival. In 1995, her BBC film The Rhythm of Raz was nominated for a Children’s BAFTA and the following year her film Bideshi (1994) won an award at the Bombay Short Film Festival. Meanwhile, although she made a living writing for television soaps such as Grange Hill and EastEnders, her play Voices on the Wind was being developed at the National Theatre Studio and, in 1996-98, she was Writer-in-Residence at the Soho Theatre. In 1997, A River Sutra was staged at Three Mills Island, London, and Skeleton at the Soho. In 1998, Flight, her BBC2 screenplay, won an EMMA. The Waiting Room (2000), staged by the National, won the John Whiting Award, and was followed by Sanctuary (National) and Inside Out, toured by Clean Break (both 2002). In 2003, Gupta’s Fragile Land opened the new Hampstead Theatre’s education space, her Asian version of Hobson’s Choice was staged at the Young Vic and she won the Asian Woman of Achievement Award. Later, she had further success with her campaigning play about the Zahid Mubarek case, Gladiator Games (Sheffield Crucible, 2005), and Sugar Mummies (Royal Court, 2006). A year later came her play for
the National Youth Theatre, *White Boy* (Soho). In 2008, she was made an MBE. What follows is an interview which illustrates the proposition that while labels such as “Asian Theatre” or “Black Theatre” retain a popularity among academics and arts bureaucrats, the work of actual playwrights tends to subvert such easy distinctions. Labels, and old ways of thinking, linger on, while reality changes rapidly. The stereotype of the “Asian playwright” is that of a writer who only writes about their narrowly defined “community,” and its “typical” preoccupations, such as, for example, arranged marriage. In a long career, Gupta has found herself writing beyond the stereotype. Instead, her work has been influenced by, as well as intervening in, the project of staging the intercultural.

*Aleks Sierz:* Can we start by talking a bit about your background?

*Tanika Gupta:* Alright. I was born in London, and my parents were Indians from Calcutta [now Kolkata], although originally they were from what is now Bangladesh. So they were Hindus who came from Dhaka, which is the capital, and during the Partition [of India, 1947] there was a massive movement of population – for reasons of religious identity – between India and what was then called East Pakistan. My parents went from East Pakistan to Calcutta, and then came to Britain in the early 1960s.

In Britain, there’s a joke that most Asian parents want their children to be doctors, lawyers or accountants. And so the arts are absolutely not encouraged, and not without reason: there’s no money in them. But I was very lucky in that my parents were what we call arty-farty: my father was a singer and my mother was a dancer. Contrary to cliché, they did not have an arranged marriage but they met and fell in love. They met in Shantiniketan, an ashram in West Bengal, set up by [the Nobel-prize-winning poet and educationalist] Rabindranath Tagore. The story goes that my father used to walk to college in the morning singing – he had an amazing voice – and my mum used to hear him sing every day. When that happened, she used to run to the bottom of her garden but by the time she got there she couldn’t see him because he’d already gone past. So she says that she fell in love with his voice before she ever saw
him, and we used to say: if you’d seen him you wouldn’t have fallen in
love with him.

In London, he worked for the BBC World Service as an occasional
contributor, and they did things such as *Great Expectations* in Bengali.
He was a translator, actor, singer and poet. But he made money by
working as a businessman.

*AS*: Given your background, why do you dislike the label “Asian play-
wright”?

*TG*: Well, basically because it denigrates you, categorises you, labels you
and boxes you in. I always say the same thing: you wouldn’t call Tom
Stoppard a Czech writer or Harold Pinter an East End Jewish writer, so
why should you call other writers “women playwrights” or “Asian play-
wrights” or “gay playwrights”? I also think that, as a writer, you should
be allowed to write what the hell you want. So although I’m proud of
having an Indian background, I don’t want to write plays just about that
subject.

*AS*: You’ve never worked with Asian theatre companies such as Tara and
Tamasha: why is that?

*TG*: Mainly because, in the early days, a lot of their work was focused
on encouraging actors, and a lot of the big name Asian actors in Britain,
such as Meera Syal, came through Tara, but their concentration was not
on new writing. They didn’t really have the specific expertise to work
with new writers. So even a very successful show, such as *East Is East*,
was written by an actor, Ayub [Khan-Din]. He went to Tamasha with
his script, but it was developed through a workshop with the Royal
Court Theatre, and both theatres now argue about who developed the
play! Was it the Royal Court? Or Tamasha? Or the writer himself? Who
knows? Anyway, Asian theatre companies staged mainly adaptations
and translations, and not new work. I never worked with them because I
was much more interested in developing my individual voice as a writer.
AS: So you avoided the ghetto of doing adaptations of Indian novels or Indian versions of classic European plays. But you started out as a radio dramatist and television writer.

TG: At the time, theatre in Britain was quite a closed shop. It still is, in many ways. It was very hard to get in if you weren’t called David. Or Howard. I tried to get into some workshops but with no luck. It’s an odd thing because you are meant to do your apprenticeship in the theatre and then go on to write for telly, whereas I seem to have done it the other way around. I actually entered a competition run by the BBC and had my very first play [Asha] produced on the radio. It was only after I had written quite a lot of television and radio that they noticed me in theatre.

AS: Talawa theatre company, which is “black” as opposed to “Asian,” had a role in your early work.

TG: At the time, there were so few black and Asian people working in theatre and television that there was a kind of desperation to get us involved. And there were all these arguments about whether this was tokenism or positive discrimination. The way I got into television was that the BBC had a bursary for black writers. So I applied and got in, but it’s almost like entering through the back door. And frightening them all when you walk in. Now things have changed and the label is not even “black” anymore, it’s Black Asian and Minority Ethnic: BAME. A Chinese friend of mine said that he didn’t come into this category. “Don’t you come under Asian?” I said. “I dunno,” he said. So we are all a bit confused by the whole thing of labels and categories.

But certainly, as far as I was concerned, I didn’t care where it came from as long as I could get some sort of platform and training. A lot of people said to me at the time: “Don’t do it – they are being tokenistic.” But if I don’t do it, I won’t get anywhere. So Talawa was doing the Black Women Writers Project and I applied. And I remember when I walked in, they were a bit confused by me. You could see from their eyes that they wanted to say to me: “Are you black?” But Yvonne Brewster, who
ran Talawa, was mixed-race anyway! But now you can’t say “mixed race” anymore either: it’s “dual heritage.”

What Talawa did, which was really fantastic for me, was dramaturgy. When I wrote my first play the scenes were two pages long and nothing really happened in them, so I was unable to sufficiently dramatise what was a great story. So they put me together with a dramaturg, the director Matthew Lloyd, who was as white as they come. But Talawa put me together with him and he took me through the whole process of how to write a play. At the end of that, I had a really good play which I then handed back to Talawa and said, “Here you go.” And they said, “It’s fantastic, but we can’t do it because you’re not black.” Rather bizarrely, the play [Voices on the Wind] then went to the National Studio and was workshopped there.

AS: You also had a mentor at the BBC?

TG: Yes, another black woman, Frances-Anne Solomon from Trinidad. She had this passion to develop as many black and Asian writers as she could. And whenever you manage to get black, Asian, minority people in positions of power in these organisations, they naturally think about telling more diverse stories.

AS: As well as that, you also wrote for television series such as Grange Hill.

TG: Yes, when they first approached me I thought that they were going to ask me to write a new Asian character. So I said that I would love to write an Asian kid, and they just looked at me as if I was mad and said, “There are no Asian kids in this programme, and we’ve asked you in because we think you are a good writer.” And I felt very stupid at that point because I felt that I was putting my own problems onto them. [Director and writer] Anthony Minghella was the script editor at the time.

AS: Tell us about Voices on the Wind.
The story is that my grandfather’s youngest brother, Dinesh Gupta, was hanged by the British in 1930. He was one of the Bengal Youth Volunteers, Hindu freedom fighters, who practised violent insurrection – the total opposite to Mahatma Gandhi’s tactics. Three volunteers – aged nineteen, twenty and twenty-one – went into the headquarters of the British Raj in Calcutta, a huge redbrick building called Writer’s Building, where all the clerks used to work. The three of them [Gupta, Benoy Basu and Badal Gupta] shot and killed the Inspector General of prisons [Col N S Simpson, who had been notoriously brutal]. They then ran around shouting, “Free Mother India,” shot a few other people and then shot themselves in the head. Two managed to die but my great-uncle botched his own suicide. So the British cured him in hospital, tried him and then hanged him six months later. He was only nineteen at the time.

In the six months Dinesh Gupta spent in jail, he wrote letters to his family. Because of censorship, he couldn’t write anything political, so he wrote these beautiful letters in Bengali and English, which quoted Shelley, Keats and Byron. In fact, when those letters were given to me it made me want to write. I was nine years old when I went to India for the first time and I was ushered into the presence of my grandfather and his older brother. They lived on Dinesh Gupta Road, named after their brother, and they sat me down and pulled out this pair of glasses and these letters. At that age, I just didn’t really know what these old men were going on about, but gradually I understood and got more interested. In the family, he was a martyr. But when I was looking up information about him in the British Library newspaper library after I began work on the play I couldn’t find anything. I remember asking my father, so he asked me: “What are you looking under?” and I said, “Freedom fighter,” and he said, “You idiot, look under terrorist.” So I did that, and there he was.

Apparently, when he was in jail, he had an Irish jailer called Mr Swan, and they became friends. So I decided to write the play as a dialogue between these two. What was difficult about the play was writing something that was so personal about someone who was such a hero in the family – in retrospect, I don’t think it was fictionalised enough. At that
stage, I was too reverential. You can’t have jokes about sex when you are writing about your great-uncle the freedom fighter.

He was a complete opposite to the stereotype of the pacifist resistance to British rule. It’s the opposite to this notion that Gandhi went up to the British and asked for independence and they just gave it him. In fact, there were years of struggle. What interested me about looking at that whole period of history was that I had no idea about just how much violent resistance there was, and how many people were killed, and how big a problem it was for the Raj.

AS: *The Waiting Room* also had a family connection.

*TG*: It’s said that playwrights always write about the same thing. There’s obviously a lot about death in my work. I come from a very non-religious family, despite the fact that they are a part of Hindu culture. So what happened was that my father had a dream: he told my Mum that he dreamt he was in heaven – and his idea of heaven was acting in a Tagore play – and halfway through he realised that he wanted to see me and my brother, and he saw us down on earth. But in order to get to us he had to crawl through a long tunnel and when he got to the end of the tunnel he was standing outside our house and saw my Mum and my brother coming out of the house and waved and clapped his hands to attract their attention, but they didn’t see him. He realised in his dream at that moment that he was dead and that he was a ghost. He woke up and told my Mum this story and she said, “Are you mad, you’re only fifty-three.” And that evening he had a massive stroke and four days later he died. At the same time, I was expecting my first child. So everything was happening at once. And, oddly enough, there was a very spiritual atmosphere.

Playwriting can be quite therapeutic. So I decided to write a play about the whole process of mourning and grieving. And I looked at the detail of Hindu ceremonies and found out that they say that, for eleven days, the soul wanders the earth. And my Mum kept leaving out these glasses of water, apparently for my father’s soul to drink. And of course I kept moving them: why are these glasses lying around? Lots of women came to our house, many of whom I’d never seen before, and there were these ululations. Apparently, although none of these were related to us,
they had come to Britain on the same boat as my parents, so this was one of those immigration rituals. They knew each other quite well.

*The Waiting Room* was about what happens to you when you die. But because of the fact that I couldn’t really release myself when I was writing about my uncle, I made sure that I didn’t make the same mistake, and this time I made my father into a woman and actually that released my creativity.

The National’s production of *The Waiting Room* had Shabana Asmi, who isn’t a stereotypical Bollywood star but a film actress who has worked in what we would call art cinema, and I remember telling the National, “You do realise that she’s really famous in India and that she has a massive following?” And they kept saying, “No, no, we’ll be fine” – as if to say, “We’ve had Vanessa Redgrave so why would this be any different?” “No, no,” I said, “this is different: she’s Indian and Indians can be hysterical.” Anyway, come the first day, they all turned up in typical Indian fashion thinking that they could just buy a ticket and walk in. And the whole of the Embankment was a sea of saris, flapping in the wind. And they tried to storm the Stage Door!

On the first night, there were the usual blue rinses in the audience, but there was also a little ring of Indian women sitting at the front, complete with grey hair in tight buns and saris and shawls. And the minute Shabana Asmi came in, suddenly all the saris flapped up and these miniature video cameras appeared. The most up-to-date cameras you’ve ever seen. The ushers went mad and came storming down the aisles, saying, “Put those away right now!” And the canny old ladies just said, “No English, no English!”

*AS*: Let’s move onto *Sanctuary*, which was staged at the National in 2002 and which only had one Asian character in it.

*TG*: A friend of ours, who comes from Uganda, came around one day and he was telling me the story of when he went to Lake Victoria with his family to have a picnic. And about halfway through the picnic, they noticed that there was something in the rushes. So they went down to have a look and his little boys saw this horrific sight, which was an entire family, about seven people of different generations, who had all been
decapitated and thrown into a river somewhere upstream. The bodies were just bobbing in the rushes, and that was the moment, he said, that he realised that something terrible was happening in Rwanda. While he was telling me, he was crying. And I remember thinking that it must be horrific to stumble across something like that.

So I started to get interested in the subject and I wanted to tell a story about Rwanda. But, knowing that it would be based on research, I was worried that I might not be able to get into the situation. So, in the end, the play turned into a story of different cultures and not just a story about the Rwandan genocide, although that is central to the plot. It was set in a church garden so there were overtones of the Garden of Eden and all of the characters are running away from life in some way: they are all refugees. I was also interested in exploring the friendship between an African and an Asian man because, once again, the stereotype is that Africans and Asians hate each other’s guts. But actually my experience of meeting people was that there was more in common than otherwise.

AS: What about another research-based play, *Gladiator Games*?

TG: The stories behind a play are dramas in their own right. In this case, I was approached by a young director [Charlie Westenra] from Sheffield Crucible Theatre to do a play about this nineteen-year-old Asian lad called Zahid Mubarak, who was put in Feltham Young Offenders Institute, which is the largest prison for young people in Europe, for stealing a packet of razor blades. He was put in the same cell for six weeks with Robert Stewart, a fascist skinhead, who had a crucifix and RIP tattooed on his forehead. On the night before Zahid was due to be released he was beaten to death by Robert Stewart with a wooden table leg. His family spent five years getting a public enquiry into his death and eventually they succeeded. By that stage, so much time had passed that members of the prison service who were responsible could say, “Oh, I don’t remember exactly what happened.” The play’s title comes from the rumours that prison officers used to deliberately put unsuitable boys together in cells and then lay bets on who would get beaten up. They were imitating the video game called Coliseum, although none of this
was ever proved. But they must have known that Stewart was a racist because he wrote some 400 letters which were explicitly about White Power and signed them with a swastika. He had acute psychological problems. He was severely mentally ill and he shouldn’t have been there in the first place.

When I was approached by Westenra, she was young, bubbly and bright-eyed. She told me that we’d got the family’s backing but, actually, when I first went to meet them, that turned out not to be the case. But what was interesting about the whole story was that the family, who went through the whole judicial process, are a working-class Pakistani Muslim family who live in East London. So it was amazing that they managed to go from one court to the next and finally to succeed in getting a public hearing for their case. In terms of their struggle for justice, it was also a gladiatorial bout, with them as David up against Goliath. But, ultimately, as with Stephen Lawrence’s parents, nothing will bring their son back. And the guilty prison guards will never get punished. At the same time, it is not just the individuals that are at fault but the whole prison system.

AS: *Gladiator Games* had a mix of verbatim and fictional scenes…

TG: Originally, Sheffield Crucible wanted me to write a verbatim play in the style of the Tricycle Theatre’s tribunal dramas, such as *The Colour of Justice* [about the murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence]. However, I find this style of writing rather boring: in theatrical terms, there’s nothing really happening. You might just as well get a journalist to transcribe and edit them – you don’t really need a writer. So although I interviewed a range of people, from family to Prison Officers Association people to barristers, when I put all this together it was authentic but nothing dramatic was happening. For me, and for an audience, the really interesting thing was what happened in the cell between the two boys. And I had to make that up, although it was based on hearsay, because nobody really knows. Although they apparently got on quite well at times, playing backgammon and so on, until the very last night. So I just dramatised the scenes between them. On stage, it was fascinating to see a skinhead and an Asian boy together in this small space – when you put
two people from different backgrounds together you get drama. In the play, those are the most powerful scenes.

AS: How did the family react to the idea?

TG: At the beginning, they just thought that we were freaks from outer space. Just think about it: they had never been to see a play. It was a different world to them. The play itself was weird because clearly it was nothing like seeing their son. But they enjoyed watching the audience and feeling its response. The whole experience was very Brechtian because after each performance there was a panel discussion and they’d invite various experts from the field of criminology or justice to come and talk. And every night most of the audience would stay behind. Usually, only a handful of people do so. And it was incredibly moving: when the show toured to the Theatre Royal Stratford East, these local white kids would be asking these barristers and prison officials why Stewart turned out to be fascist and said that they didn’t think like him. For the family, these moments were incredibly heartening. It showed that people cared.

AS: You convinced the family that you were a “proper writer” by telling them that you wrote for EastEnders and, in the production, there was an actor from the series.

TG: The actor who played both Zahid and Zahid’s uncle (we had a small cast that doubled) was Ray Panthaki, the handsome one from EastEnders, who happens to be Asian. He played Ronnie on television and every time he went on stage, someone from the audience would shout “Ronnie!” For the actor this must have been a nightmare! But it did mean that people immediately empathised with him. Soap stars seem to be embraced by the wider public in a very powerful way. The actor who played Robert Stewart [Tom Mackay in the first run and Kevin Trainor in the second run] did all the preparation: he shaved his head and waxed the hair off his chest and made this astonishing transformation. And some of the stuff that he had to say on stage was absolutely horrific. I remember reading some of Stewart’s letters and it was almost
as bad as reading about Auschwitz or something. Somehow you want to read more because you become fascinated by the evil. We only included a small amount of this material because it was really disturbing that anyone could think like that. Even though he only had a couple of letters to read on stage, we thought that Tom and Kevin would get massacred because the audience was very mixed and quite militant, but, although there were a couple of instances of verbal abuse, people usually just sat there, looking sick. Very quiet, very upset. And not just the Asians, black and white people too.

AS: *Sugar Mummies* has no Asian characters at all: how did you come to write that one?

TG: I was asked by the Royal Court to write a play and initially I found that difficult because of this image of “a Royal Court play.” I even thought that maybe I’m too old to write a typical Royal Court play! I didn’t really know what they wanted and eventually they called me in and said that they’d read an article about sex tourism: would I like to write a play about this? Yeah, alright then. So they sent me to Jamaica to research it, and that was the best gig I’ve ever had.

The play is about the way white middle-aged women go to places like Jamaica to shag black men. So it’s about exploitation of black men and the whole industry of women now having the economic power to buy sex in the way men have done for centuries. But, of course, when I got out there, I found that it was a slightly different story in that the exploitation was mutual. As well as white women going out there, there were also black women. There were also women going there in order to get pregnant by black men – the “I want a brown baby” type. It really was as crude as that. So it was a weird world. I’m middle-aged now so I could just go and sit on the beach, like a sitting duck, and research this subject! I took my husband and three children, and we all had a great holiday and because they were there I could run back to them! I remember on the very first day I was walking along the beach with my little one, who was about five at the time, and this young guy comes up and starts chatting me up. But after a while, I thought it was going a bit far so I said, “You should go and chat to those young girls over there – they’re
more your age.” And he said, “Me no wan’ the kitten, me wan’ the cat.” And I just thought: “That’s going in my play!” And it did.

For the whole time I was there, it was quite unbelievable. These young men would call out: “Hey, Naomi Campbell!” Or they used to hiss at you: “Hey, my size, my size!” And it was really interesting to see how that patter worked. I mean, if that was what you were looking for, you would just melt. It was also very funny. And then there was the stereotype of the black stallion. Every single white woman I spoke to would say, “Well, of course, you know, they are much bigger and they can go all night.” Of course, I’ve been married for ages so I wouldn’t know about all this — so I was thinking, “Is this true?” Then one day I was having my hair braided by a Jamaican woman and I said, “Look, is it true: do black men have bigger whatsits?” And she just looked at me and sucked her teeth and said, “I wish it were true!” In fact, they said that black men smoke too much ganja to be good lovers. Which summed it all up really.

_Sugar Mummies_ was the second biggest selling show at the Court that year after Stoppard’s _Rock ’n’ Roll_. The audience was quite unlike their normal audience. Black audiences tend to be louder than the actors on stage, and sometimes they are enjoying themselves so much they forget to watch the play. It becomes a pantomime. The more the word got out that this was a fun evening, the more black people came and they made it more of a comedy than it originally was. And the actors, especially the younger ones, played up to the audience so there was a lot of strutting and it was a very feelgood play. Which was not the original intention. It also toured to Bolton, and the real sugar mummies turned up to see it there. So all the girls went to see it together and, although it’s quite critical, it really spoke to them. And at the end they would go up to the actors and say, “Can we have a picture with the blacks?” And I thought, “Have you really not listened to a word of the play?” Or they would say, “I’m going to Jamaica now!” Talk about stereotypes! Honestly!

_Ends._
Works Cited

Cultural Borders:
Youth and Multiculturalism in Modern British Asian Drama

The immigrant experience is defined by crossing national borders. However, in multicultural Britain, borders are maintained between the minority immigrant communities themselves and the white British majority. The political policy of official multiculturalism, of recognising cultural diversity by giving equal attention or representation to the cultural needs and contributions of all the groups in a society, encourages the freezing of a culture as it was when the immigrant left his or her homeland and assumes that each culture can remain fixed when confronted with alien values and behaviour. It is conservative in that it implicitly recognises the right of the older generation to enforce religious and cultural orthodoxy.

In an article in the Daily Telegraph, 23 May 2000, “Why multiculturalism has failed,” Yasmin Alibhai-Brown reports conversations with Asian and black teenagers:

Although most feel connected to the values of their parents to some extent, their identities are changing in unpredictable ways. A young Asian man was [equally] scathing: ‘Multiculturalism is a boring word. It is grey and small and domestic. It does not include Europeans. It does not include internationalism. It is like an old cardigan knitted out of different coloured scraps of wool.’
For children of South Asian parents born in Britain and faced with living and attending state schools in a predominantly white Western society identity is at first defined in terms of a group – race, ethnicity, class, gender, nationality or religion, as Anglo-Asian, British-Asian – but also, in adolescence, like their British peers, they seek to define a personal identity. As theories of ‘identification’ from Freud onwards suggest, we become who we are by identifying with multiple ‘others,’ be they other people, cultures or belief systems. In a culturally or religiously restricted grouping within a multicultural society, this inevitably leads to familial conflict. Multiculturalism neglects to recognise that everyone has a variety of cultural identities, including class, race, gender, sexuality, age, and intelligence, and categorises people simply by race, culture and religion. In the school situation, influenced by their peers and by popular culture, partly also to survive outside the home or for acceptance on an individual level within an ethnic majority peer group, young people may cross cultural borders and adapt to the dominant society without necessarily completely abandoning the values of their immigrant culture, to construct what Stuart Hall (1992) has described as “new ethnicities.” For some Asian immigrant parents the construction of these new ethnicities with their explicit threat to their cultural and religious values inevitably leads to generational conflict within the family.

This conflict between two cultures as experienced by young people is central to the action of the plays discussed in this paper: Borderline by Hanif Kureishi, East is East by Ayub Khan-Din, and Fragile Land by Tanika Gupta. It is shown to be particularly problematic for British Asian girls owing to the cultural dominance of males, and, particularly, of the father. Although fathers do not always appear onstage, their influence is evident in each of the plays. The familial conflict between parents and their adolescent children examined in the plays is not, therefore, simply cross-generational and cross-cultural but is also cross-gendered, for it is the males, fathers and sometimes brothers, who attempt to maintain the social, moral and religious values of the immigrant culture over their wives, daughters and sisters.

A major source of conflict within the family is the contrast between the collective view of Asian cultures and British individualism. For the
Asian community the desires of the individual are associated with selfishness. Particularly in traditional Muslim families it is expected that the father (supported by other males in the family) will maintain the cultural status quo based on the concepts of izzard (honour) and sharam (shame). These are more important within the family and community than are the wishes of the individual. These three concepts – collectivity, izzard and sharam – have particular influence on girls: what they are permitted to wear; how they behave within and outside the home; what level of education they should have; whether they should work outside the home or in the family business; how and in what circumstances they should form relationships.

In relation to the above, part of the action of the plays concerns girls (and in one case boys) threatened with arranged marriages in Britain either to men from the homeland or second-generation males from the immigrant population in Britain, threatened with forced return to relatives in India or Pakistan either as a means of cultural and religious control or for an arranged marriage, and prohibited from mixing with boys, particularly white boys or those of another religion or Asian country and also with ‘amoral’ teenage white girls. These prohibitions are enforced in the case of girls by keeping them at home outside of school hours, censorship of their clothing, which, at least at home, should be Asian national dress, discouragement of girls taking higher education, which might alienate Asian suitors who expect a subservient wife or may lead to the daughter moving away from the family with the concomitant loss of parental control and employment in the family business. Boys are less restricted but are expected to work hard in education and take subjects at university such as engineering, law or medicine that will lead to well-paid, high-status careers. They are also discouraged from having relationships with white girls and pressured to marry within their race and religion. However, as Charles Taylor points out and as the plays reveal, “we define our identity always in dialogue with, sometimes in struggle against, the things our significant others want to see in us” (32-33).

Over the past twenty-five years a number of Asian dramatists have explored the somewhat porous cultural borders as experienced by young people and highlighted their dialogical relations with others. In so doing
they have questioned the success of Britain’s multicultural policy in relation to the inevitable identity politics affecting second-generation British Asian teenagers. This paper will refer to plays by three British Asian dramatists written since the 1980s – Hanif Kureishi, Ayub Khan-Din, and Tanika Gupta – which portray and explore the conflicts of culture experienced by teenagers in accommodating multicultural borders. While dealing with significant issues, all of these plays conclude with a positive outcome for the young people, which could be viewed as an assertion of romantic individualism, but is intended, I believe, to offer young British Asians a model for the discovery of an identity in a multicultural society in which they are a minority.

According to Hanif Kureishi (born in Bromley, England, in 1954, the son of an English mother and Pakistani father), editors and literary managers from the late 1970s

required stories about the new British communities, by cultural translators, as it were, to interpret one side to the other. [...] This was the end of something – a psychological loosening of the idea of Empire – and the start of something else, which involved violence, the contamination of racism and years of crisis. The questions that a multi-cultural society had to ask had hardly been put. (xvi)

The ‘cultural translation’ was however not only from the minority to the majority in order that the latter might learn something about the ‘alien’ culture in its midst in individual human terms rather than in terms of racial stereotypes, but was sometimes also intended to help, particularly Asian parents, to learn something about what their children were facing outside the home and what familial, individual and inter-personal tensions multiculturalism could produce.

In 1981 racial tension was in the news following that year’s race riots, primarily amongst Afro-Caribbeans in Brixton in London, Toxteth in Liverpool, and Handsworth in Birmingham. There were also riots in Southhall in London involving Asian youths and skinheads attending a pop concert. The widespread violence focused Margaret Thatcher’s government’s attention on the serious social and economic problems affecting Britain’s cities and various social programmes, often involving the arts for young people, were put in place in perceived problem areas.

In that year the theatre company Joint Stock devised, with Hanif Kureishi as its writer, the play Borderline. After a short tour it was per-
formed at the Royal Court Theatre in London. *Borderline* was one of the first plays to look at the British Asian immigrant community. Joint Stock, under its director, Max Stafford Clark, employed a distinctive working method in the preparation of their productions. The company consisted of a director, writer and actors who, over six months, would take part in workshops during which the actors would research the topic of the play and then improvise scenes suggested by the director, based on the recorded or documentary material collected. The writer would then go away to write a play which might or might not contain material from the improvisations. The resulting script would be rehearsed in the normal manner with the writer undertaking re-writes where necessary. The company’s research for the play focused on the Sikh community living in recently turbulent Southall in West London and the play exhibits an undercurrent of racial violence represented by the formation of the Asian Youth Front.

In retrospect, Kureishi considered that the journalistic approach of this research was by its nature, “too external, sketchy, an impression. We knew the subject was there but we couldn’t get at it, not from this far outside – it was too big, too vague – and not from the inside either: we didn’t know enough” (xix). Nevertheless, by spanning most aspects of the immigrant and second-generation experience, the play does establish fundamental characters and concerns that were given more focused attention in subsequent drama.

The play as journalism is established from the outset by the introduction of the central character, Susan, a white, liberal journalist who is making a television documentary about a Sikh community in London’s Southall and will, therefore, inevitably portray it from a white British female perspective. The characters she meets are a broad cross-section of the British Asian community, including a young Sikh girl and her Pakistani parents, two illegal immigrants, a successful Indian restaurateur who is referred to but does not appear, his teenage son, the rich son of a Pakistani businessman who is seeking a wife, and male and female members of the Asian Youth Front resisting threatened racist attacks.

The play opens provocatively with the generational and cultural conflict experienced by a young British Asian girl, Amina, and her boyfriend, Haroon. It employs shock tactics to portray a teenager’s rebel-
lion against being trapped in a culture at odds with the one in which she lives. Amina, whose parents are Pakistani, appears dressed in traditional *salwar kameez*. She is apparently conforming to the requirements of her culture. However, as evidently she does regularly, she has escaped from home at night through her bedroom window to meet her boyfriend, Haroon, and wants to have sexual intercourse in the open behind her father's house. Haroon is a studious youth whose aim is to escape from the community to go to university. When on this occasion he demurs, she replies, “We’ve fucked in worse places” (Kureishi 97), not the language of the innocent, shy girl her father, Amjad, believes her to be. Language and costume are powerfully at odds. The scene reflects studies quoted by Paul Ghuman:

> The capacity for compartmentalism is quite startling in some cases, where completely mutually contrary self-definitions are held simultaneously. On the one hand, South Asian girls learn to think and behave as the obedient and respectful daughters wearing the *salwar kameez* (tunic with baggy trousers) and speaking in Punjabi/Hindi at home. On the other, they wear European-style uniform and speak English at school and are engaging and assertive like their English peers. Some girls have even been known to cope with dating, which is anathema to most South Asian parents. (Ghuman 47)

Nevertheless, Amina’s father, Amjad has tried to assimilate to some extent into the dominant culture by moving into a white area. He has, however, suffered rebuttal, and Amina’s friend Yasmin feels sympathy that “they’re isolated up there. Just up the road, but in a way he’s taken you over the borderline. I pity them” (Kureishi 114). They and their house have been attacked, but the police have done nothing about it.

Amina was born and brought up in Britain, but her parents want to keep her within their culture and feel threatened by western ideas. Amjad tells his wife, “We mustn’t let our daughter be influenced by these Westernized children. You’ll have a shock one day, Banoo, if you catch her kissing a boy. I’ll marry her soon” (Kureishi 107). Banoo feels that they are unable to cope with her in the British context: “We are poor people. Where we came from, education is for the rich. But it has changed her and we can’t understand” (Kureishi 125). As Ghuman points out, the influence of school can be seen as pernicious: “Teachers encourage an inquiring and questioning attitude in their students which
sometimes conflicts with the deeply cherished religious traditions of the South Asian family” (96).

Amjad hits Amina across the mouth when he discovers that she has been going out secretly at night (Kureishi 128). She has “become too English” (Kureishi 129) and is “thinking too much lately” (Kureishi 130). In a survey by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, a Pakistani woman who had grown up in the UK and had four children expressed a similar opinion: “The western system is spoiling our children and making them bad. This system has snatched the right of parents from them, and has given it to the young people” (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 3). Another interviewee asserted that the younger generation under thirty who had been born in Britain “have been born without that spiritual dimension. […] So it becomes materialist, it becomes entertainment-centred, it becomes quick-fix centred, and to have no soul to hold you together” (5). In Borderline Amjad’s solution is a forced marriage. He decides that Amina will marry the son of a rich British Asian businessman, who “will force her to become a good wife” (Kureishi 129).

Another view of arranged marriage is provided by Yasmin of the Asian Youth Front. She describes how she was emotionally blackmailed into marriage by her father. “He arranged a marriage for me. I kept refusing. He began to starve himself to death. […] He preferred death to being laughed at by his relatives. I can still remember his joy – he trembled like a leaf – though he was so weak, his bones poking through his flesh. […] I know now if he’d died it would have been better for us all. Now as far as they’re concerned I’m dead‖ (Kureishi 115-116). Ultimately, however, she divorced the man.

Fortunately for Amina, before her marriage can take place her father dies and thereby frees her to assert her personal identity. After her father’s death Amina travels to Pakistan for his funeral. Her mother stays there with her two sisters, but Amina returns to England, where she is loosely chaperoned by an elderly relative from Bradford, with its large Asian community. Released of her parental control she does not, however, abandon her race but joins the Asian Youth Movement’s resistance to racist attacks. She now has short hair and wears a skirt and tee-shirt. As the altered semiotics imply, she is now a British Asian fighting
for a place in British society. She has rejected both assimilation and multiculturalism and has embraced a new hybrid ethnicity.

Haroon, Amina’s boyfriend, also feels stifled by his culture. “This place and the past, it’s like an octopus. You drag one limb off you while another curls itself around you” (Kureishi 100). He intends to go to university and liberate himself from his background. He insists that the Asian Youth Front will not change anything, as it is too localised and has a village mentality: “We’ve got to engage in the political process. Not just put out fires when they start them. Yasmin and Anwar – they’re brave. But they’re separatist.” He wants to be a lawyer and sees this as a way of changing the status of the Asian community within British society. He tells Amina, “We’ve got to engage in the political process. […] I say we’ve got to get educated. Get educated and get inside things” (Kureishi 118). For him the answer is assimilation.

A final option available to young Asians is illustrated by the portrayal of the Asian Youth Front which, as Haroon suggests, subscribes to separatism and the construction of a defensive shield against a threatening white majority. “We’re developing a siege mentality and everything. It’s distorting us,” Haroon tells Yasmin, to which she replies, “it’s strengthening us. We know who we are” (Kureishi 149) – in itself an extreme form of multiculturalism.

Cultural conflict and border crossing, this time for young men, is the concern of Ayub Khan-Din’s East is East (1996). This semi-autobiographical play, a mix of comedy and serious concerns, is set in the 1970s in working-class Salford in Manchester. Perhaps because of its autobiographical nature, it is more tightly focused on a family and the young people within it. As in Borderline, in this play the Khan family live in a white neighbourhood where they run a characteristically British fish-and-chip shop rather than in Bradford (or “Bradistan’’), where they would be amongst a large population of a similar ethnicity. In addition, the family has crossed another cultural border in that the Pakistani father, George Khan, is married to a white British woman, Ella, and therefore has mixed-race children who are forced to negotiate the cultural borders not only in the wider majority community and in terms of religion but, more significantly, within their own home. In addition to the racial divide within the family there is also religious disparity – Ella
is Catholic, while George is Muslim, both religions having strict ideologies. Ella represents Western individualism, while George maintains a belief in izzat and sharam. She wants her children to discover their own identity and beliefs within a British context and is willing to undermine George’s wishes in order for them to do so. George wants them to adhere to the religion and culture of his homeland. Ella emphasises their difference: “George, you’ve got to understand, things aren’t like they were when you were young. Kids are different today, our kids are different, they’re bleeding half-caste for a start” (Khan-Din 50).

Whereas Borderline is concerned with national and cultural borders, East is East foregrounds the topic of religion. In the first scene George discovers to his shame that his youngest son, who is twelve years old, was not, like his brothers, circumcised at birth and insists that the error be rectified. Although George seeks to maintain religious orthodoxy, only one of his sons, Manheer, follows Muslim precepts. The other sons, in common with the majority of white adolescents, are lax about religion and join in local Christian street parades because they are fun and are a rebellion against their father. Religion and its place in Pakistani culture are returned to throughout the play, and religion is shown to be a source of conflict between husband and wife. Each of the sons attempts to define and locate himself in relation both to his father’s Muslim Pakistani ethnicity and to the dominant white culture. With the exception of Maneer, who dresses like a Pakistani, wears a skull cap and is religious, they are developing an hybrid ethnicity as “Anglo-Indians” or “Eurasians” (Khan-Din 44).

SALEEM. I thought we were Anglo-Indian.
MEENAH. We’re Eurasian.
SALEEM. Sounds more romantic than Paki I suppose.
TARIQ (pointedly at MANEER). We’re English!
MANEER. We’re not Anglo-Indian, not Eurasian and not English.
TARIQ. Look Maneer, if you want to be Pakistani go live in Bradford, and take me dad with you. (Khan-Din 44)

Tariq is the least religious and visits the mosque only once a week. Like Amina in Borderline, who sneaks out to meet her boyfriend, he sneaks out at night to be with white girls and, like Amina, returns through his bedroom window. He hates “paki music,” wants to be British and does not want to marry a ‘paki.’ Maneer sees his Muslim faith as
a source not only of spiritual, but also moral values in an irreligious and immoral society. They even call their father and anyone who clings to Pakistani cultural values the racist term, ‘Paki.’ One son, Nazir, has already run away from the family to find his freedom to be, in George Khan’s words, “a pansy hairdresser.” Another is secretly taking a course at art school and is gay. The youngest, Sajit, wears a parka twenty-four hours a day and won’t allow it to be washed. Consequently he smells. He explains that when it is buttoned up “I’m not there... I don’t have to listen to anyone arguing and shouting at me” (Khan-Din 46).

When he feels threatened, George Khan’s assertion of his cultural and religious values takes the form of savage violence against his wife and one of his sons, Saleem, who speak out against the intended arranged marriage of himself and his brothers. Towards the end of the play two sons stand up to their father. Sajit, who has previously hidden from the situation inside his parka jacket, takes it off and, symbolically, hits his father with it, and Abdul physically defends their mother against their father’s assault. Having done this, Abdul tells the others that “he’s got no right to tell us what our culture should be, he lost that when he settled here and married me mam” (Khan-Din 74). The borders of multiculturalism have already been crossed by the son’s mixed race and new individual ethnicities are being negotiated. Although Abdul has some understanding of his father, neither George nor Mr Shah, the proposed bride’s father, is presented sympathetically. George is overbearing and violent, and Mr Shah uses his British wealth to similarly maintain restrictive Pakistani traditions. When criticised for presenting George as a racial stereotype Khan-Din responded that his own father was like that. Indeed, the two men are representative of what the young are struggling against. Their influence, Khan-Din is suggesting, should not be taken lightly.

The play’s setting in 1970 would appear to imply that the cultural values and conflicts of the Asian and Indian communities had changed for young people by the time of its writing in the 1990s, but Tanika Gupta’s Fragile Land (2003) suggests otherwise. In fact, the play even deals with concerns similar to those found in Kureishi’s play twenty-two years earlier. Although parents and their influence and experience are constantly referred to and affect the teenagers, in this case the family is
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not present and the play exclusively portrays young people between fourteen and nineteen years old from a variety of races and cultures, each, in different ways, attempting to come to terms with being part of a relatively small minority within a multi-racial society. Tasleema’s family is Bengali; Fidel has been given a non-English name by his parents, who are white liberals, a lawyer and an artist; Lux is a Hindu from South India, who speaks English and Tamil; Omar is a Bangladeshi and Muslim, and Quasim is mixed race and Muslim. Hassan is an Afghan, a true outsider, who tries to emotionally blackmail Tasleema into marrying him so that he will not be deported to his homeland. Gupta thereby emphasises that immigrants are not an homogenous group and that there are as many differences between them as between them and the white majority. An additional focus on the personal is evident in dream scenes in which Tasleema, Hassan and Omar individually reveal their fears. Each involves being imprisoned and returned to their parents’ homeland.

The central character is the seventeen-year-old Bengali girl Tasleema, who was born in Britain. She is faced with the question of establishing her individual identity. An Aberystwyth University Department of Education paper on “South Asian Girls in Secondary Schools: A British Perspective” describes the particular difficulties faced by South Asian girls.

The common tasks of adolescence, which include the formation of an integrated sense of self, the emergence of an independent self, and the acceptance of a sexual self, are undoubtedly problematic for many young people. It can be argued that issues of autonomy, control and sexuality may present particular difficulties for children and adolescents described in this paper. (“South Asian Girls” 3)

In an early scene in the play Tasleema’s friend, Lux, challenges her to consider the possibilities open to her after she has taken her A-level examinations:

LUX: Only two weeks to go – then you’re free. Do what you wanna do, make your own plans. Your dad can’t boss you around anymore.
TASLEEMA: Try telling him that. I wanna finish my A levels. I’ve gotta get my grades… I wanna be someone.
LUX: An educated housewife.
TASLEEMA: Fuck off.
LUX: You might as well get used to the idea, ‘cos that’s what your Abba’s got lined up for you. Nice Bengali boy, good teeth, steady income and a healthy body. (Gupta 9)

Like George Khan’s son Nazir, Tasleema’s sister, Nasreen, has run away, in this case with a white boy, and consequently their father is keeping close watch on Tasleema to ensure that she does not do the same and even threatens to send her away to Bengal. Although Indian fathers have high educational aspirations for their children, this applies traditionally only to boys. When Tasleema is eighteen and has her A levels she crosses the legal border from child to adult and can leave home and escape to college. When she ultimately confronts her father he bursts into tears but, unexpectedly, does not try to stop her. He appears to accept that change is inevitable. She crosses the cultural border by leaving to stay with her sister in a northern city and will enrol in a college.

Although the concerns of this narrative are not unlike those found in the earlier plays, an additional contemporary factor appears with the character of the sixteen-year-old Asian youth Omar. He is full of resentment towards British society. This leads to school absences and the taking of a knife into school and giving it to an Albanian boy, who is being bullied by English boys, ostensibly for his self-defence. During a fight the boy stabs an attacker in the hand and he and Omar are suspended. This racial resentment is also fed by the public’s view of Muslims since the terrorist attacks in Britain and the Iraq war – “it’s getting worse you know – with this war,” says Omar. “They hate Muslims. The other day some little shit called my auntie a ‘Muslim Cunt.’ They’ve even started picking on our women” (Gupta 33). This is evidently fertile ground for Muslim radicalisation. Indeed Omar thinks Muslims such as him would “be better off fighting for Saddam. Least we’d know where we were... It’s us against them. A holy war – that’s what Bush said” (Gupta 34). He and his fourteen-year-old follower Quasim verbally abuse the white English boy, Fidel, because he is the boyfriend of Tasmeela’s Indian friend, Lux. They adopt ‘Muslim Brethren’ prejudices and call Fidel “white trash.” However, at base Omar fancies Lux himself and does not like her having a white boy-friend. His adoption of fundamentalist Muslim ideas, particularly towards women, is therefore more a result of anger than belief. Quasim
claims to be disgusted with Lux for mixing with another race, and Omar aims to discourage inter-racial relationships and thereby avoid “dilution of the race” through which they will lose everything – “our identity, respect, culture” (Gupta 15). It also turns out that Quasim’s mother is white and, even though she has converted to the Muslim faith, if anyone is diluted it is him. The cause of the racial insults is shown therefore not to be political but personal. It stems from adolescent emotions. In Omar’s case the verbal abuse arises not from a hatred of British society but from sexual jealousy and from his feelings towards his parents. He is bitter because they went back to Bangladesh and left him with what he unjustifiably calls a “fascist uncle” who does not want him, in a country that does not want him and in a school in which there are “gangsters” in the playground and teachers who do not care about their pupils. The play hints at how these personal feelings can translate into the kind of comprehensive resentment that may lead to Muslim radicalism and bombings. However, Omar is revealed to be basically terrified of failure at school and of having to return to Bangladesh to admit he is a loser. The move towards radicalism is explored no further, and Omar undergoes a conversion when, after he has accidently broken his “fascist uncle’s” shop window and his uncle has forgiven him, he decides that he should stay, ostensibly out of duty to his family, in order to obtain a good education.

While exploring issues significant for British Asian teenagers, the play resolves the situation satisfactorily for Tasmeela and Omar and Lux and her white boyfriend Fidel, although the Afghan, Hassan, despite or perhaps because of his somewhat dubious efforts to remain in Britain, is deported. The play suggests that times are changing and that for young people the borders between cultures and races are being eroded through a gradual process of identification in favour of hybridity. In Charles Taylor’s words, “thus my discovering my own identity doesn’t mean that I work it out in isolation, but that I negotiate it through dialogue, partly overt, partly internal with others” (34). As in the plays, this is a challenge to those “significant others” who would prefer to maintain the borders offered by multiculturalism. However, for those who consider that, although assimilation or hybridity may lead to “a dilution of the race,” the latter will not inevitably mean a loss of “our identity, respect,
culture” but rather the emergence of a hybrid identity as a truly British Asian one. In the plays discussed we witness the experience of young people as they undertake this often painful process of becoming in mult-cultural Britain.

Works Cited

Primary Literature


Secondary Literature

‘The Great Chinese Takeaway’:
The Strange Case of Absent Orientalism in Contemporary British Playwriting

This article is one with modest ambitions. It began with the intention of bringing to light an existing narrative that few had heard. However, I now believe that the narrative has yet to be created because it barely exists. As such, this article has become more a series of preliminary observations that seek to draw attention to a peculiar absence – an absence that runs silently yet troublingly throughout the now familiar historical narratives of post-war British theatre.

There is a general consensus that the real achievement of the new drama after 1956 was to give voice to disenfranchised groups: from the working-class voices that emerged in the 1950s and 1960s to the feminist and queer voices of the 1970s and 1980s, the often-declared project was to challenge the mono-cultural view of British life. If the angry young men (and women) achieved anything, it was to signify that new voices existed beyond the drawing rooms and French windows of the London stage and that a previously untapped audience existed for what was called ‘the new drama.’

While several of the voices being heard for the first time came from the indigenous working class, its newest arrivals – namely the experiences of migrant communities – were to become over time incorporated into the new writing being produced by British theatre. The first evidence of this can be found in the so-called ‘Windrush Generation’ from
the Caribbean after 1947. From Errol John’s *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl*, which premièred at the Royal Court in 1958, there has been a continuous (if at times uneven and muted) presence on stage of black British voices. The same has also been true of Asian immigration – be it the economic migrants from Pakistan after the Second World War or those fleeing persecution such as the Kenyan and Ugandan Asians who came to Britain during the 1960s and 1970s. Certainly, by the time that Tara Arts was set up in 1977 British Asian dramatists had become a small but significant presence.

However, the absence I want to discuss arises from a community whose existence barely registers on British life. This is despite being a continuous presence since the eighteenth century, and where presently it represents the third largest ethnic community in the UK. I refer to the group termed *British Born Chinese* (or *BBC*). At present there are an estimated 500,000 BBC living in the UK, who make up just under 1% of its overall population. Between 2001 and 2003, people of Chinese origin were also the fastest growing migrant group in the UK.

Frustrated at the general lack of writing on the subject I emailed a number of prominent figures in British theatre for advice. One of these was the playwright David Edgar, who responded by having “absolutely no idea.” A similar response came from the literary agent Mel Kenyon at Casarotto-Ramsay, who have represented (and continue to represent) some of the most influential British playwrights since the 1950s. Rather than being disheartened, this led me on to consider another approach. Instead of searching for a tradition that did not seem to exist, I now started to think about reasons why such a collective invisibility within British culture might have come about. David Parker sardonically notes in his book *Through Different Eyes* – one of the few studies of the BBC community – that “it is an indictment of British scholarship and race relations politics that perhaps the best way to trace the pattern of post-war Chinese settlement would be [to] track the listings of Chinese restaurants in *The Good Food Guide*” (Parker 62). The academic discipline of Cultural Studies has been similarly myopic, whereby even a

1 Email from David Edgar to author, 9 June 2008.
'The Great Chinese Takeaway'

A seminal article such as Stuart Hall’s “New Ethnicities” (1991) fails to make any reference to the Chinese community. Even more recently, the BBC documentary series *7 Up 2000* that charts the lives of new Britons born in the new millennium, on the one hand earnestly assembled a group of young children to reflect the diversity of the British Isles (even to the point of including a recent migrant family from Eastern Europe), yet singularly failed to include anyone from the Chinese community.

This cultural blindness, while worrying, is partly explained by a number of factors. One of these concerns patterns of migration, whereby there has never been a major influx of Chinese at specific times; whereas mass immigration, say by the Afro-Caribbean community, has marked out distinctive presences in areas such as Notting Hill and Brixton in London, the Chinese community has always been more disparate – settling first around major ports such as London, Liverpool and Cardiff and then moving out further to smaller provincial towns. The nearest the Chinese community ever gets to making itself a visible presence is in the establishment of so-called ‘China Towns’ in major cities such as London, Birmingham and Manchester. Yet their existence is in some respects a purely artificial contrivance, more often than not created, it would seem, through the commercial interests of city councils and the Chinese business community rather than any pattern of natural settlement.

Mike Phillips gives some indication of this missing sense of cohesion in the Chinese community by his observation that post-war black British identity has come out of what he calls “a number of historical crises” (27) such as the Notting Hill riots in 1958 and the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. Disturbing as such events are, paradoxically they have created some sense of cohesion and shared identity amongst the black community. Yet, whereas BBC have also experienced racism, this has never become acknowledged as a national event through the media by which their presence could become heightened to the wider British populace.

2 The murder of Stephen Lawrence was also the subject for the play (and later television adaptation) *The Colour of Justice* (1999), while debates about black youth and knife crime informed Debbie Tucker Green’s *Random* (2008).
The history of the British Empire comes into play, too. With the notable exception of Hong Kong, the BBC population is not drawn from its former colonies. This has particularly been the case with Chinese migration since the 1990s, where populations not exclusively drawn from Southern China (where historically the British had a long-established presence) have settled in the UK. Whereas the sense of ‘otherness’ in post-war Afro-Caribbean and Asian diasporas was mitigated by a shared cultural relationship between their homeland, the ‘Mother Country’ and their identities as colonized subjects, such distinctions are missing from BBC communities. This perhaps explains why other black and Asian writers have not only managed to access and utilize British theatre far sooner: while grossly simplifying matters, such groups were perhaps already conversant with its traditions. By contrast, Chinese theatre is thus twice removed from British sensibilities, not only by virtue of its concentration on spectacle and physical movement dominating narrative, but narrative itself being derived from a completely different mythic base.

Several useful examples that serve to illustrate some of these issues come from Yellow Earth’s recent production, Running the Silk Road (2008). Established in 1995, Yellow Earth provides an outlet for South-East Asian performance in the UK. Running the Silk Road, a play about a group of friends who travel to the Olympics via the Silk Road, undertook a successful national tour, culminating in performances at London’s Barbican. The promotional flyer describes the play as a coming together of a contemporary story with “magical and timeless myths performed using the spectacularly acrobatic, whirling excitement that is the Beijing Opera Theatre.”

The writer of Running the Silk Road is Paul Sirret, a non-Chinese writer. While such attention to ethnic origin might sound uncomfortably essentialist, for the purposes of this article it becomes significant when one considers that Yellow Earth decided to commission Sirrett for a project in which traditional Chinese theatre plays such an integral part. It also serves to illustrate the dearth of BBC dramatists in the UK.

3 Yellow Earth, Running the Silk Road, promotional flyer, 2008.
In an interview I conducted in June 2008 with David Tshe Ka-Shing, at the time Yellow Earth’s Artistic Director, he recounted an interesting story of a bid made to the National Lottery to fund Running the Silk Road that serves to illustrate how much of the unfamiliar is excluded from British culture. Part of Yellow Earth’s rationale for financial assistance came from their plan to lead education workshops in schools, based around the Chinese myths that are explored in the play. The bid was finally rejected by the National Lottery on the grounds that Chinese myths do not constitute any part of British life. With Greek myth forming the basis of western theatre, it would have been interesting to see if Yellow Earth would have met with a similar response if an application had been made with the Oresteia as its subject.

Still the most well-known example of a writer attempting to explore the experiences of the Chinese in Britain is Timothy Mo’s novel Sour Sweet (1982), yet this example also reveals something significant in the corresponding failure to find any such comparative work in theatre. While Elaine Yee Lin Ho comments that “for many readers in Britain the novel was a way into a world or a parallel space which they vaguely knew existed but was as alien as the distant colony of Hong Kong itself” (50), the irony is that Mo himself is a writer whose experience of Britain comes from a dual remove: born in Hong Kong, his experience of Britishness is also highly selective. Not only does Mo acknowledge “I know nothing about Chinese culture” and “I’m a Brit,” but his identity itself needs to be qualified by pointing out that he belongs somewhere within a background that includes not only being mixed race, but spending his first ten years growing up as a colonial subject in Hong Kong, followed by a quintessentially privileged English establishment upbringing by way of public school and Oxford University. Yet despite all this, Sour Sweet has somehow become a definitive narrative for what Peter Lewis, writing in 1982, saw as articulating “modern England and a largely self-contained and alien world functioning within it” (21).

In British theatre, the voice of the anglicized Chinese writer of colonial background dominating over BBC voices is even more commonplace. For example, initiatives set up by Yellow Earth such as Yellow Ink and Yellow Voices, which have sought to promote British-born South-East Asian writers, have found singularly little success in finding BBC
dramatists. Instead, a number of those taking advantage of these awards have come from writers such as Simon Wu and Liya Wu, who are Hong Kong and Taiwanese-born respectively: their plays mainly reflect and draw upon a relationship to their homeland rather than any experience of living in Britain. Now, while there is nothing worse than a commentator grumbling about the work people *should* be writing, even Ben Yeogh, the one BBC writer that *Yellow Voices* has so far managed to find, while British-born like Timothy Mo, also comes from a similarly narrow anglicized background: educated at Westminster School, Cambridge and Harvard. And thus Yeogh is also far removed from the experiences of most BBC Chinese. Moreover, Yeogh’s work to date has shown little evidence of wanting to articulate his British/Chinese identity. For instance, with the exception of his play *Yellow Gentleman* (2006), which looks in part at its central protagonist’s experiences in London as a young man, Yeogh’s work so far has ranged from the self-explanatory *Lost in Peru* (2006) to his recent adaptation of a fourteenth-century Japanese Noh play *Nakamitsu* (2007) at the Gate Theatre.

This last, somewhat arbitrary use of a Chinese writer to translate a Japanese drama also says something about the random interchangeability in which South-East Asian theatre is treated in Britain. To some extent, *Yellow Earth* has itself become caught up in this vague and amorphous sense of ‘Asianness’ by aligning itself to a very broad range of performers: for example, its current group of writers who form the *Yellow Voices* scheme includes the Japanese performance artist Kauko Hohki. Therefore, while this policy is to be welcomed in terms of broadly promoting South-East Asian drama, the work produced by BBC playwrights becomes less prioritized as a consequence.

Towards the end of my interview with David Tshe Ka-Shing, the issue of institutional racism was brought up. Tshe Ka-Shing cited the 2001 adaptation of the Young Vic’s *Monkey! A Tale from China*, where despite a few tokenistic Chinese actors playing minor roles, the production employed a Caucasian cast, writer (Colin Teevan) and director (Mick Gordon). Tshe Ka-Shing also made mention of the same company’s recent production of Brecht’s *The Good Soul of Szechuan* (2008), where despite giving it a Chinese setting, its director and cast again were all non-Chinese: adding insult to injury was the decision for its actors to
depict Chinese characters. This ‘yellowing up’ prompted one BBC, Zhang Jin Yao, to write on the This is London website:

Okay, it is now the 21st Century and the Young Vic still insists on using white performers to play Chinese despite the numbers of talented British East Asian performers who do not get casting consideration due to institutional racism, snobbery and general low regard. I’m all for colourless casting but the playing stage is simply not level in this respect. [...] If these plays were based on Black or South Asian characters I doubt that the Young Vic would be so keen to minstrel up actors of the wrong ethnicity. It would at least use mixed-race performers to ‘appease’ both sides of the argument. [...] No wonder mainstream theatre remains the preserve of white middle class-minded people (Yao)

Productions such as Monkey! A Tale from China also give a discernable feeling that British theatre’s concerns lie firmly in a one-way traffic towards the East rather than an interest in the experiences of its own indigenous Chinese community. While theatre seems happy to accommodate productions such as Running the Silk Road, or adaptations of classical and popular novels such as Wild Swans, this work still operates in almost neo-colonialist terms whereby China is still seen as somehow ‘mysterious’ and ‘exotic.’

Conversely, it is perhaps too easy to blame theatre institutions in the UK for being narrow and parochial in their representation of the Chinese community. If British theatre has failed to engage in a conversation with its third largest ethnic community, then equally a similar neglect has emerged from the Chinese side. David Tshe Ka-Shing sees this coming about through a cultural trait of deference to authority resulting in figures from the BBC community not coming forward to establish their presence in terms of bidding for arts funding.

However, there are also encouraging signs that things are beginning to change and that a small number of BBC and expatriate writers are beginning to emerge. The success of Xiaolu Guo's novel A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers (2007), which charts the experiences of a young Chinese migrant woman in London, as well as recent collaborations between Yellow Earth and the Soho Theatre in London are evidence that literary agents and theatres are now slowly realizing the artistic potential of the Chinese in Britain.

Yet at the same time, I cannot help thinking that somehow an important narrative has been irretrievably lost through the collective failure of
British theatre and the Chinese community to connect with each other. Writing in the 1997 collection *Between Two Cultures: Migrants and Minorities in Britain*, James Watson predicted that a new Anglo-Chinese generation would emerge with a completely different identity from their parents. Whereas these changes in outlook have found themselves written onto the stage by black playwrights, from the differences between first and second generations in Winsome Pinnock’s *Leave Taking* (1988), to current debates in the black community expressed in debbie tucker green’s *Random* (2008), such generational differences in the BBC community have singularly failed to be articulated on stage. If Stuart Hall’s assertion that “identity is formed at that point where the unspeakable stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of history” (Hall 44) is valid one could argue that such stories from the BBC community are missing, at least in terms of dissemination through theatre writing. Whether this has been self-willed by the BBC’s failure to assimilate or whether institutions such as British theatre have failed to recognize this particular community it is difficult to say; yet the persistence of this singularly glaring absence at the turn of the second millennial decade is both perplexing and of concern for the BBC community and theatres such as the Royal Court, Birmingham’s Repertory Theatre or the Manchester Royal Exchange that purport to represent the spectrum of British experience.

Works Cited


Intercultural Encounters in debbie tucker green’s *random*

In the early 2000s, New Labour’s call for ‘cultural diversity’ in the arts enabled Black British playwrights to achieve more visibility and receive stagings at more mainstream venues such as the Royal Court, Hampstead, Soho and the National Theatre (see Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms* 31-38).\(^1\) debbie tucker green made her debut with *dirty butterfly*, which was staged at the Soho Theatre in February 2003, while her second play, *born bad*, opened in swift succession at the Hampstead Theatre; she received the Olivier Award for Most Promising Newcomer in 2004 for *born bad*, and she is also the first black woman playwright to receive two premières at the Royal Court Downstairs, with *stoning mary* (2005) and *random* (2008).\(^2\) With reference to her latest play, *random*,

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\(^1\) The emphasis on fostering cultural diversity in theatre under New Labour took shape after the publication of the *Eclipse* report by the Arts Council of England in 2002. According to the report, regional theatres were invited to re-assess their equal opportunities strategies in order to employ African Caribbean and Asian practitioners and encourage more culturally diverse work. As Lynette Goddard suggests, the *Eclipse* report seemed to have a wider impact on theatres across the country, as a number of black playwrights became more visible: “the insistence that theatres have to programme something culturally diverse may well have underscored the re-emergence of black playwrights since the publication of the Eclipse report” (*Staging Black Feminisms* 36).

this paper will focus on tucker green’s exploration of issues of death and her use of affect in the context of ethnically and culturally diverse communities. Drawing on random’s different encounters with diverse audiences and in the light of Judith Butler’s recent exploration of issues of vulnerability and grief, this paper will examine the ways in which tucker green opens up spaces of a dynamic intercultural exchange, debating issues of grief, vulnerability, contiguity, violence, and accountability, through a challenging dramatic language and representation of the self.

Towards the end of the 1990s, playwright David Edgar presaged that issues of difference and belonging, which are instrumental in the context of multiculturalism and interculturality, would preoccupy the arts in the new millennium. Edgar argued:

How communities of difference relate not just within themselves but between each other in an increasingly globalized but also fractured world is the major human question we’ll confront in the new century. […] the question of belonging will inevitably foreground in the arts, and particularly the narrative arts, as people seek ever more desperately to construct, deconstruct and reassemble stories that make sense of the world. (―Provocative Acts‖ 33)

With reference to the 1990s and their urge to problematise monolithic identity categories, Edgar traces connections between the pressing question of “who we are,” which lies at the heart of much dramatic work, to the question of “who we belong to” (33). Edgar’s views mirror some of the discourses that have been circulating during the last two decades and that revolve around the question of belonging in a post-identity politics and global capitalist frame. In the early 1990s, the fields of philosophy and gender studies were strongly influenced by the work of Judith Butler, who contested identity categories as “instruments of regulatory regimes” (“Imitation” 13), opening them up as sites of trouble. Butler envisaged the formation of fluid identities that would resist and pose a critique of traditional representational apparatuses, raising further questions vis-à-vis the complex ways of belonging in an unstable and uncertain world.

After the present article was completed, another publication on random appeared that raises similar issues with regards to debbie tucker green’s treatment of grief and the spate of knife crime (see Goddard, “Death”).
These ideas gained prominence in the context of 1990s British theatre and especially in the work of the new generation of women playwrights. Phyllis Nagy, Sarah Kane, Rebecca Prichard, Clare McIntyre, and Jenny McLeod are among those who openly refused to be framed according to their gender or ethnicity and whose work often defies fixity and categorisation, refraining from the politics of the ‘issue-based’ play. Since the 1990s, women’s work for theatre seems to shift the focus to themes of wider political significance that would in turn address broader audiences. However, this suggestion does not necessarily imply that women playwrights of the 1990s tailored their work according to traditional dramatic standards; contrary to their male counterparts who were still firmly attached to more conservative forms despite the decade’s urge to come up with a new dramatic language (see Edgar, “Plays for Today”), many women dramatists utilised a variety of styles, sharing their predecessors’ desire to contest standard forms (Aston 15), thus maintaining their markers of difference and individuality.

debbie tucker green seems to follow a similar trajectory; her work bears an idiosyncratic theatrical mark while she is particularly resistant towards identity categories, refusing to define herself or her work. She always uses lowercase for her name and the titles of her plays, a choice that further hints at her opposition to hegemonic structures but also marks her difference from other writers. Thematically, tucker green’s theatre often focuses on issues of abuse and communal responsibility across the wider sociopolitical spectrum, concerns that reflect the shifts occurring in the context of contemporary black women’s theatre. According to Lynette Goddard, millennial black women dramatists depart from

the explicit concerns with cultural identity that were typical of earlier black women’s theatre, and tend to focus on the interpersonal relationships between characters in urban multifarious (multicultural, multiracial, multifaith) communities to ask complex questions about the world we live in now. (“Middle-Class Aspirations” 96)
Ken Urban argues that Tucker Green’s theatre shares allegiances with the legacy of the Cruel Britannia of the 1990s. Nevertheless, it is important to underscore that, unlike other playwrights who have been labelled as the ‘new brutalists,’ Tucker Green seems to be more interested in staging the effects of violence rather than actual scenes of abuse (Goddard, Staging Black Feminisms 186). In Debbie Tucker Green’s theatre, the visceral effect of explicit violence is replaced by a distinctive dramatic style whose force lies in punchy sound and rhythm that engage the audience in an affective and cerebral experience. Goddard describes her style as “capturing the expression of raw emotions in a language and rhythm that makes the disturbing sound beautiful” (Staging Black Feminisms 187). Moreover, Tucker Green often uses the language of street patois, popular in the context of youth culture, while she also breaks conventional forms of dialogue; her characters do not converse in normal prose but their exchanges rather resemble internal monologues framed by minimalist aesthetics.

With *Random* the above traits become particularly pronounced; the play echoes Tucker Green’s concern regarding abuse and social responsibility, while its action is confined in the imaginary and the discursive. The story of the play is narrated by a black actress on a completely bare stage. It begins with the exposition of a normal day in the life of an average black family, father, mother, sister and brother, who live in an unspecified urban context (probably London). Tucker Green goes through the minutiae of their everyday routine sketching a familiar social milieu, often accompanied by humorous moments. It is very early in the morning and the birds are “bitchin their birdsong outside” (*Random* 3); the mother burns the porridge, the sister keenly waits for her boyfriend to text her and gets upset because her brother will not lend her his mobile, the brother cannot seem to wake up to go to school on time. Apart

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5 Urban particularly refers to Tucker Green’s *Stoning Mary* (2005) and draws a connection with Kane’s *Blasted* that premiered ten years earlier. *Stoning Mary* uses a technique akin to *Blasted*; while the play alludes to issues that tantalise contemporary Africa, Tucker Green is adamant that it should be set in the country in which it is performed and that all the characters are white.

6 Street patois has also been utilised by other dramatists like Rebecca Prichard in *Yard Gal* (1998) and Che Walker in *Been So Long* (1998) (Pinnock 29).
from the family, the play features a number of minor characters such as the boy’s teacher or the daughter’s colleagues from work. The performer vividly brings all the characters to life by means of a continuous flow of performative storytelling in a mixed style of Caribbean and British street patois. The normality of the life narrated in the first part is suddenly disrupted when the police inform the family that their son has been stabbed to death in the street. From that point onwards, tucker green explicitly focuses on the family’s reaction and their private ways of dealing with grief.

Similarly to her previous plays, tucker green’s *random* directly engages with contemporary social reality and becomes particularly relevant for young black audiences as it specifically responds to the recent surge of knife crime in Britain that has cost the life of a large number of mostly black male teenagers and has been acknowledged by the BBC as “a major national issue confronting young people” (Barling). The year 2007 was reported as “the worst year on record for fatal street violence amongst young people” (Barling), as 26 teenagers were brutally murdered in London, while only during the first term of 2008 (around the time that the play was performed) the number of fatalities had culminated to eighteen.

In a interview with Aleks Sierz, *random*’s director Sacha Wares discusses the play’s urgency by stressing its impact on young people “as much as the regular theatre-going audience” (Wares). As Wares recounts, *random*’s relevance for young audiences was made apparent after a rehearsed reading at the Royal Court Upstairs, which attracted an overwhelming response from school audiences. Following the reading, the Royal Court Theatre and its artistic director Dominic Cook decided to take the risk to stage the play in the Court’s Downstairs space instead of the Upstairs studio. In hindsight, it was certainly a risk worth taking as, during its run, the play attracted large numbers of young audience members, especially black youths, who literally flooded the predominantly white, middle-class Royal Court’s auditorium. tucker green’s use of the cultural codes of youth street culture seemed to actively engage
young audiences, who identified with the family’s everyday reality and their bereavement.\textsuperscript{7}

Notwithstanding the play’s efficacy in the context of the young black community, to argue that the play is relevant mostly for a particular audience would negate its wider political scope that reaches beyond the black community. I would argue, therefore, that \textit{random} embarks on a complex negotiation of the borders of diverse communities. Taking into account the internal cultural diversity of the audience of the particular production, it is interesting to examine how the play’s emphasis on grief opens the possibility to create a provisional community, addressing a heterogeneous audience.

However, before expanding on this proposition, I would first like to probe the ways in which tucker green deals with the spate of knife crime victims, which has triggered a debate in the British government and media. Although Sacha Wares and tucker green are adamant that \textit{random} is not an issue-based play that discusses the causes behind the crimes or offers solutions, it is nevertheless significant to read it as a polemical response to the controversy stirred by Tony Blair’s remarks in a keynote speech he gave in Cardiff in April 2007. Blair particularly located the problem in “black gang culture” arguing that “particular youngsters are being brought up in a setting that has no rules, no discipline, no proper framework around them” (Walker) and urged black communities to “take responsibility for diverting young people away from this type of violence” (Barling).\textsuperscript{8} While Blair’s evaluation of the problem as racially and culturally specific widens the gap between the black and the white

\textsuperscript{7} Drawing on their experience as audience members, Aleks Sierz in the \textit{Tribune} (286) and Michael Billington in the \textit{Guardian} (284) observed the shift in the audience’s mood and comportment during its run at the Royal Court; while at the beginning of the play the audience often broke into laughter of recognition due to the familiarity of everyday life, after hearing about the murder they became silent.

\textsuperscript{8} \textit{stoning mary} has also been read as a response to Tony Blair’s speech given in the context of the World Economic Forum, where he contended that “if what was happening in Africa today was happening in any other part of the world, there would be such a scandal and clamour that governments would be falling over themselves to act in response” (qtd. in Goddard, \textit{Staging Black Feminisms} 183). Nevertheless, in the context of \textit{random}, tucker green critiques rather than illustrates Blair’s statements.
community and forecloses the possibility of intercultural exchange, random, on the other hand, can be seen to offer a different take on the issue that implicates urban alienation and social responsibility. Tucker green's sketch of a normal family evokes the victim's innocence, as it is made clear that he does not form part of gang culture, contrary to Blair's allegations. What is more, the play's very title indicates the randomness of violence and its implications for the wider community. As the sister notes:

random don't happen to everybody.
So.
How come “random” haveta happen to him?
This shit ent fair. (random 50)

random comfortably fits within Debbie Tucker Green's body of work, which has previously focused, as Goddard intimates, on “stories of abuse in domestic settings to raise broader questions about care and neighbourliness in contemporary societies” (Staging Black Feminisms 182). In random violence may not be the product of domestic abuse as in dirty butterfly or born bad, yet Tucker Green intertwines the private and the public space, foregrounding the issue of witnessing and inaction.9 The daughter ponders on how the eye-witnesses of her brother's brutal murder failed to take action and chose to keep their silence:

Whole heap a somebodies
on street.
Saw.
Whole heap a peeps
on road
was present.
But I lissen –
hard –
an' still I hear …
(Silence)
Silence shoutin the loudest.
Cos it seem that

9 In dirty butterfly Amelia and Jason, a black couple, overhear a white woman's domestic abuse by her partner, but fail to take action, while in born bad a daughter blames her mother and siblings for not protecting her from the sexual abuse she has suffered from her father.
tucker green also comments on the treatment of knife crime by the British press, as the daughter blames the media for fuelling the public’s fear of hooded youngsters:

The press
pressin
the picturesque for a bite
Their blue-eyed reporters
shieldin their zeal
for a – “good”, “urban” story
stepping into these sides
askin foolish questions
[…]\ Feelin brave askin a hard-lookin “hoodie”
what he think.
only to find under the cloak of Adidas
is a brotha
whose eyes don’t stop flowin. […]\nBut … they don’t show that bit tho. (random 41-42)

Several members of the press read the reference to the “blue-eyed reporters” as problematic, arguing that it expresses a prejudice against white people (Letts 284; Hart 286). Despite the fact that her comment strikes a chord in the context of contemporary Britain, tucker green’s explicit reference to racial difference can be seen to encourage a divide between white and black audiences. On the other hand, this does not suggest that green attacks white culture for the spate of knife crime; on the contrary, her emphasis on witnessing, which I outlined above, implicates everyone regardless of race. Paul Taylor’s review for the Independent encapsulated how the play successfully reminds us of our own complicity and passive consumption of violence: “we’ve grown used to news reports about the killing of black teenagers who blundered innocently into their people’s conflicts. Tucker Green’s [sic] play fleshes out the circumstances of one story, forcing us to see the terrible cost of such attacks” (284).

In this light, I wish to suggest that random opens the debate to a wider audience, exposing the precariousness of life itself and the vulnerability of the new generation in the face of violence that seems to be
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spreading across the globe. One of the play’s most memorable lines, “death usedta be for the old” (random 42), strongly reverberates this threat. In her article “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” written in the wake of 9/11 and the war on terror, Butler contemplates how the global spread of violence and fear urges governments to protect human vulnerability by ensuring sovereignty and increasing security. On the other hand, Butler calls for a reconsideration of social and political organisation vis-à-vis life’s precariousness across the globe (Precarious Life 30); she makes a case for a return to a collective responsibility for the “physical lives of one another,” which will be achieved by exposing and experiencing vulnerability in order to draw attention to our dependency upon others (30).

In a similar vein, random invites the audience to consider issues of vulnerability, collective responsibility and dependency. As previously outlined, tucker green refrains from traditional forms of Western theatre and boldly situates culturally specific markers of identity and language on stage, which often makes it difficult for a white, middle-class audience to follow, as some members of the British press have argued.10 Despite the difficulties that the use of Caribbean and British patois may pose for some members of the audience, one of the play’s merits lies in tucker green’s way of making the audience share the feelings of grief inflicted upon the family irrespective of identity and class categories. In particular, random uses the body as a trope to discuss issues of physical vulnerability, contiguity, identity and belonging. The performer’s body becomes a fluid representation of identity cutting across gender, race and age, undermining identity coherence and homogeneity; it also becomes a vehicle for bridging the private and the public, for embodying the individual and the collective. As Butler asserts, “the body has its invariably public dimension; constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine” (Precarious Life 26). Against this backdrop, tucker green’s random reconceptualises a politics that does not encourage autonomy and separation, but rather embraces dependency, community and difference.

10 Most notably, The Daily Mail’s Quentin Letts, in his review of random, asserted that “the 50-minute poem is hard for a middle-class, white ear to follow” (284).

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The technique of storytelling further implies a relational view of identity and the self as the performer’s polyphonic narration has a strong emotional impact on the audience. According to Butler, the narration of grief is a relational identity process *par excellence* and might be a valuable “resource for politics” (*Precarious Life* 30): “I might try to tell a story [...] about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very ‘I’ who seeks to tell a story [...] is called into question by its relation to whom I address myself” (*Undoing Gender* 19). In this sense, the actress’s body in *random* uncovers the tenuous borders of selfhood that separate the “I” from the other, the stage from the audience, conveying a sense of proximity and openness of identity based on the affective impact of grief.

For the Royal Court production, the British press also underscored the moving quality of both the text and the production, which might suggest how their own emotional involvement enabled them to recognise the play’s urgency and efficacy. The most telling reaction came unexpectedly from *The Daily Telegraph*’s Charles Spencer, who has complained in the past about tucker green’s stylised forms, arguing that they lack substance (285). In his review of *random*, Spencer asserted that “the writing seemed to penetrate the very heart of grief,” praising tucker green for achieving empathy (285). Further, Aleks Sierz in the *Tribune* noticed that the solitary and insular way that the parents choose to grieve hints at an interesting intersection between cultures that perhaps makes the play more relevant for a British audience: “although the family is black and the parents have been written as if they were migrants rather than British born, it is interesting that their grieving is so typically English” (287).

On the other hand, some critics suggested that *random* would have been more successful as a radio play or that all the characters should have been physically present on stage. However, these comments do not only undermine the performative force of the actress’s fluid body, but also negate the power of performance to create a provisional community who would physically share this experience of the “here and now” of performance. Furthermore, other critics such as Nicholas de

11 See, for instance, Georgina Brown in the *Mail on Sunday* (286).
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Jongh in the Evening Standard (284) and Georgina Brown in the Mail on Sunday (286) intimated that the play could have profited from a more intimate space such as the Royal Court Upstairs in order to achieve the desired effect. In response to that, Sacha Wares commented on the possibilities that the Downstairs space offered: “we wouldn’t reach anything like the size of audience the play demanded […] it would diminish the scale of the play because even though it is only one actress, the story is really very powerful and huge and it deserves to be seen by as large an audience as possible” (Wares).

To conclude, Edgar’s claim regarding theatre’s shift to relations of difference and belonging in a fractured, and, I would add, increasingly violent world, becomes fully materialised in debbie tucker green’s body of work. random in particular provides a dynamic negotiation between the universal and the particular, the mainstream and the marginal, otherness and sameness, constituting a performative gesture of sharing grief. In Theatre @ Risk, Michael Kustow envisages theatre “as an art and as a model of living together” (xi); this paper has made a case of how random actively invites its audiences to consider their role as members of diverse communities and their own responsibility in the face of calamity.

Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature


Intercultural Encounters in debbie tucker green's *random*


FRANZISKA BERGMANN

Queering Race in DeObia Oparei’s
Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self

The play that will be analysed in this article is DeObia Oparei’s Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self. It had its début performance at London’s Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 2002 and unfortunately has not been staged since. In literary and theatre studies, the play has not yet received the attention it deserves either. As the following analysis demonstrates, the text is of great importance as it deals with urgent questions that are mostly ignored by the Western European public theatre landscape: in the focus of the play’s interest we have the complex examination of gendered and racial identity. The play demonstrates that not only are sex and gender products of performative acts (as Judith Butler argues in Gender Trouble) but so is race. Through the phenomenon of race crossing, Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self illustrates that the category of race is neither innate nor natural. Analogous to gender crossing, race crossing is a method that transgresses conventional notions of racial identity and reveals their constructedness. Thus, Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self bears many striking similarities to the arguments of contemporary Queer Studies, Black Studies and Postcolonial Studies. I will therefore outline key concepts of these theories before I start with a more detailed interpretation of exemplary scenes from the play. Before starting on the theoretical part, a short summary of the play’s plot is necessary.

As already mentioned, questions of identity are of great significance in the play, as it deals especially with forms of role-playing. This already
becomes apparent in the description of the characters: the protagonist of *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self* is the Afro-British Femi, alias Laurence, an actor playing the role of Othello, alias Big Black Jungle Nigga, a macho-rentboy, alias Shaneequa, a transsexual callgirl, alias Ziggy, a character that is performed by Femi during a meditation session. As can be seen in the course of the play, Femi takes on different roles subject to specific contexts. During daytime he is rehearsing Shakespeare’s *Othello* at the *English Royal National Heritage Company* for a rather second-rate gangsta rap production. Apart from him, all other actresses and actors of the company are white. By night he earns his money as a sex-worker, either as the demonstratively racialised and masculine Big Black Jungle Nigga or as the beautifully feminine, dressed-up drag queen Shaneequa.

In most cases Femi is booked by his clients for SM role-playing. Due to these extremely context-dependent identity constructions, Femi becomes more and more confused in the course of the play. It is not only Femi who is in search of his ‘true identity’ but also his brother Olunde and his colleagues from the theatre company, who are forced to question their conventional concepts of themselves. Femi’s white-skinned colleagues, for example, try to find their true identity as ‘niggas’ in a kind of meditation that is initiated by him. And the partner of Femi’s best friend Kareema experiences a ‘feminine’ role for the first time during sexual intercourse.

From a genre-specific perspective we can trace certain elements of In-Yer-Face Theatre¹ as *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’ self* deals with extensive and explicit sex scenes that can have an irritating and provoking effect on the audience. Connected with these sex scenes is the abundant use of explicit language. However, the largely aggressive aesthetics and often pessimistic, serious attitude of In-Yer-Face Theatre is overcome in this play: Oparei creates his play as a comedy that contains aspects of

¹ Aleks Sierz, who is the leading theorist on In-Yer-Face Theatre, defines its aesthetic in the following way: “In-yer-face theatre shocks audiences by the extremism of its language and images; unsettles them by its emotional frankness and disturbs them by its acute questioning of moral norms.”
Shakespeare’s comedies such as *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* that are linked to the gay aesthetics of ‘Camp’.⁴

**Intersectionality: Theoretical Links between Queer Studies, Black Studies and Postcolonial Studies**

During the last decades, Queer Studies have promoted the view that it is not enough to focus solely on gender and sexual identity. It is also necessary to include other categories such as race, since social regulations do not affect a single level of identity only. Rather, it is now taken for granted that gender and race are intertwined in a very complex way. Thus, interdisciplinary connections between Queer Studies, Black Studies and Postcolonial Studies have been established. As Nikki Sullivan states, this new kind of perspective is needed since for too long Queer Studies as well as Gay and Lesbian Studies have focussed solely on the categories of sex and gender. As a consequence, the figure of the homosexual has been conceptualised as exclusively white-skinned, which thus became the unmarked norm (cf. Sullivan 66). This highly problematic tendency also explains why theorists like Gloria Anzaldúa (*Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*), who have always dealt with race, sex and gender as basically intertwined categories, have not been integrated into the canon of queer theorists, while Judith Butler, Michael Warner, Eve K. Sedgwick and Teresa de Lauretis have (cf. Sullivan 66). Within the context of Queer Theory and the emancipatory queer movement, this mechanism of exclusion is all the more striking as queer politics have adopted ideas of the black liberation movement so as to resignify a former negative category. Sullivan argues, referring to Mercer, that in the case of ‘black pride’ queers have adopted the idea of ‘queer pride’ or ‘gay pride’ (67). Therefore, Queer Studies have now integrated insights from Postcolonial Studies, Critical Whiteness Studies and Black Studies. New fields of research like Queer Black Studies or Queer of Colour Critique have been established recently. The perspectives that operate on an interdisciplinary level make it possible to ‘sub-

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⁴ ‘Camp’ is a style that takes nothing too serious and celebrates every kind of kitsch; see Sontag 1967.
vert by means of intersectional approaches the implicitly objectified effect of the interpellation by/through categories per se as well as their fixation on asymmetric power binarisms such as white/black, masculine/feminine, hegemonic/subaltern’ (Dietze, Haschemi Yekani and Michaelis 109; my translation).

As intersectional approaches demonstrate, sex/gender and race can never be clearly distinguished from one another, since, for example, marginalised racial identities are often associated with femininity. An analysis of racialised colour symbolism from a Critical Whiteness perspective shows amongst other things that in the Western order since the Enlightenment Whiteness\(^3\) is coded as masculine, blackness as feminine. Jana Husmann-Kastein maintains that ‘the symbolic relation between blackness and femininity materialises also along the implicit feminisation of the Other that is effected against the backdrop of normative [white] masculinity’ (55; my translation). Schößler likewise states that stigmatising metaphors exist within colonial discourses which ‘sexualise and effeminise the subjugated. […] The Black (as well as the Jew) is positioned as female in the symbolic repertoires of degradation. […] Sexuality […] as well as imperialism and colonialism form one single power-political nexus.’ According to Schößler, sexism ‘is one, if not the strategy of racist power’ (122; my translation).

Since race and gender are inextricably interwoven, Sullivan suggests that the heteronormative order be described as a system that does not only privilege certain forms of gender identity but also favours specific kinds of racial identity. Thus, it is *white* heterosexual masculinity that is at the top of social hierarchies, and by no means is it black heterosexual masculinity. If ‘gender is differentiated further from an ethnic (anti-racist) perspective,’ whiteness (very much like masculinity and heterosexuality) ‘loses its status as an unmarked, neutral position’ (Schößler 122; my translation). Speaking with Simone de Beauvoir one could state that non-white subjects as well as women and homosexuals/queers are positioned as ‘Other’ (i.e. the marked) within the hegemonic order, while white, male, heterosexual subjects take the status as the ‘One’ (i.e.

\(^3\) The use of the terms ‘black’ and ‘white’ is, as Schößler also emphasises, ‘a highly reductionist binarism, whose imaginative constructed status is evident and should be kept in mind’ (120; my translation).
the unmarked). To disclose the constructed nature of this symbolic order, it is necessary to recognise that whiteness is a racialised category – just as was done with heterosexuality (which is marked as a sexual category) and masculinity (which is marked as a gender category) in Queer and Gender Studies.

A further concern of intersectional perspectives within Queer Theory should be a more detailed analysis of mechanisms by which racialised identity is produced because the production of racial identity bears many similarities to the production of sex/gender. Both sex/gender and race are considered to be innate and natural. Analogous to heterosexist discourses, racist discourses assume that race is a fixed fact based on the natural difference between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Eickelpasch and Rademacher 79). Eickelpasch and Rademacher elaborate on this naturalisation process in the following way: although common everyday racism may rely on the ‘evidence’ of visible differences (for example, we think we know who is a ‘Turk,’ an ‘Arab’ or a ‘Black’), a closer look reveals that these visible differences are not ‘real’ and ‘natural’ but the product of traditional and deeply embedded cultural practices of perception and attribution (79; my translation).

In order to analyse in greater detail the mechanisms with which racial identity and difference are constructed, it is necessary to examine the performativity of race. But such a concept has not yet been established or developed. Up to now, Sarah Salih is the only one who has pointed out this desideratum for research (with regard to Butler’s Gender Trouble) and who makes explicit the discursively generated parallels of race and sex/gender. According to Salih, this is only mentioned peripherally in Butler’s Bodies That Matter:

Is race an interpellated performative, and is racial identity something that is ‘assumed’ rather than something one simply ‘is’? Would it be possible once again to alter the terms of de Beauvoir’s statement and affirm that ‘one is not born but rather one becomes black/white’? Or could the word ‘race’ be substituted for ‘sex’ in Butler’s description of Bodies That Matter as ‘a poststructuralist rewriting of discursive performativity as it operates in the materialization of sex’? (Butler 1993, 12). […] Butler rejects models of power that see racial differences as subordinate to sexual difference, and she argues that both racial and heterosexual imperatives are at work in reproductive and sexing practices. Interpellations do not just ‘call us’ into sex, sexuality and gender, but they are also ‘racializing’ im-
peratives that institute racial differences as a condition of subjecthood. (Salih 92-93)

To speak of racial performativity is also a fruitful approach – as Sullivan shows with reference to Michel Foucault – insofar as both categories, race and gender, have not always been a part of Western epistemology: “the science of race emerged alongside of, or perhaps more particularly, in conjunction with, sexological accounts of sexuality in the eighteenth century” (57). Taking this into account, race as well as sex/gender can no longer be regarded as essential entities but rather as discursive positioning.

In the context of Postcolonial Studies, Queer Black Studies and Queer of Colour Critique since the 1980s and increasingly around the turn of the millennium, concepts have emerged that transgress fixed binaries like white/black, the one/the other and hegemonic/subaltern. The following passage will outline one concept that will be important for the analysis of race crossing in Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self. This is the by now well-known concept of ‘hybridity,’ as it was introduced by – among others – Homi K. Bhabha and Stuart Hall.

The model of hybridity undermines ideals of “racial purity” (Sullivan 73). Hybridity points to forms of existence that cannot be assigned to a single culture, a single nation or a single category of race. According to Bhabha, hybridity has to be defined in the following way: “[it is] a strategy or a practice which in various ways establishes space(s) for being neither (European) Self nor (indigenous) Other” (Sullivan 73). Thus, hybridity questions those images that try to segregate and isolate culture, nation and race. The concept of hybridity especially enabled persons who call themselves ‘mixed race’ and/or live in a diaspora to define and describe themselves. In his studies on hybridity, Stuart Hall analysed the lives of blacks in British diasporic contexts. Hall notes that there are basically two representational modes of black subjectivity in the diaspora: the first one is mainly based on identity politics and draws its power from the ideal of a homogenous black subject:

[Black became] the organizing category of a new politics of resistance, amongst groups and communities with, in fact, very different histories, traditions and ethnic identities. In this moment, politically speaking, ‘The black experience,’ as a singular and unifying framework based on the building up of identity across
Queering Race in DeObia Oparei’s Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self

ethnic and cultural difference between different communities, became ‘hegemonic’ over other ethnic/racial identities […] (Hall, “New Ethnicities” 252)

Inherent to this thought pattern is a logic that reverses hegemonic white racism into its opposite, as it believes in an “essentially good black subject” and an “essentially bad white subject” (Procter 123). But as Hall emphasises, this reversal is insofar a required strategy as “historically it has been and continues to be, a necessary fiction in the struggle against racism in postwar Britain” (Procter 123). Since the mid-1980s, the rigid concept has increasingly dissolved and alternative notions of diasporic black identities have been generated. Following Hall’s argument, one could trace for example these altered models of representation in a new aesthetic of “black British film,” which became popular, as already stated, in the mid-1980s (cf. Procter 123). These films display the plurality of black subjectivity. Diasporic experience, Hall says, now is characterised by difference (cf. Procter 123) and hybridity: “The diaspora experience […] is defined, not by essence or purity, but by recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite difference; by hybridity” (Hall, Cultural Identity 120).

The space of the diaspora on which I will focus here, is inextricably linked to the concept of hybridity according to Hall: it can be captured as a moment of denaturalisation since it not only questions fixed concepts of blackness but also hybridises the ‘host society’ (cf. Dietze, Haschemi Yekani and Michaelis 121). Therefore, it is not only the subordinate existence that is being subjected to transformative processes but also the hegemonic structure. The diaspora and the ‘host society’ are thus to be seen in a constant reciprocal relation. Hence, in the words of Julika Griem and following the definition of hybridity, cultural contacts are no longer essentialist or dualist but form a ‘third space’ (Homi Bhabha). In the ‘third space’ the constitution of identity and alterity is conceived of as neither a multicultural coexistence nor a dialectical interposition but mutual interpenetration of centre and periphery, oppressor and oppressed (Griem 269).

The concept of hybridity focuses on phenomena that significantly destabilise race as a rigid identity category. Despite this, we should not forget that racism today is still a very powerful force, as Anna Cheng
critically notes. In her publication *The Melancholy of Race. Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief*, Cheng highlights those mechanisms that help maintain white hegemonies and racist structures. Using psychoanalytical approaches, Cheng illustrates that unconscious formations are of great importance when it comes to racialised white and black identities. The phantasm of progress, whose telos is total equality, fundamentally lacks awareness of the past and ignores a history that is steeped in racism, especially that of North American slavery: “when it comes to the future of the race question […] the past is not dead; it is not even the past” (Cheng 7). The history of racism is continuously being written and rewritten despite more liberal laws; it is still deeply rooted in the Western symbolic order. The racialised ‘Other’ therefore suffers from “racial melancholia” which manifests itself in the vehement rejection of the black subject’s stigmatised skin colour. The melancholia’s origin lies in the ‘perfection’ of whiteness never to be attained but still craved for (cf. Cheng xi). It is not for nothing that paradoxically one of the richest black entrepreneurs in the US is the owner of a skin-lightening cream (cf. Cheng 6). Following Cheng’s argument, it is necessary not only to look at deconstructivist approaches but also to reflect on those mechanisms that help sustain racist patterns. The contemporary American dedication to progress and healing, eagerly anticipating a colourblind society, sidesteps the important examination of racialisation: “how is a racial identity secured? […] less attention has been given to the ways in which individuals and communities remain invested in maintaining such categories, even when such identities prove to be prohibitive or debilitating” (Cheng 7).

**Race Crossing between the Contradictory Contexts of Deconstruction, Assimilation and Appropriation**

*Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self* presents multiple forms of race crossing. I choose the neologism ‘race crossing’ in order to describe – in analogy to the phenomenon of ‘gender crossing’ – acts that transgress the construction of a coherent and continuous racialised identity and thus reveal its performative aspect. The following section exemplarily focuses on those three instances of race crossing that Oparei depicts in most
detail. These are illustrated by the characters of Femi, Raef, Hermione as well as Olunde.

Femi’s Race Crossing

A central conflict dealt with in Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self is Femi’s struggle for recognition as a classical Shakespearean actor. Femi is a member of a London theatre company that because of its name of The Royal National Classical Heritage Company appears to be a high-culture, bourgeois institution. It is Femi’s dilemma that the Western theatre landscape is deeply influenced by white hegemonic structures. Femi’s brother Olunde, a radical black power activist, points this out in an argument with Femi:

Olunde: No black people go there, innit?
Femi: Where?
Olunde: At the Royal National Classical thingy-majiggy-jiggy. For your opening, it’ll be sold out d’ough, packed, rammed. Just to see your black face. (Femi laughs.) They’re gonna be going mental for their first real-live nigger! (17)

Olunde criticises that in Western theatre, Femi is automatically put into the position of the ‘Exotic’ since non-white actors are an exception. Femi thus resembles a small sensation and the audience primarily visits the performance to get to see their “first real-live nigger,” not because they are interested in the play. Olunde’s use of the hyperbole “first real-live nigger” intensifies his critique of Western theatre and puts The Royal National Classical Heritage Company’s staging of Othello into the context of a freak show as was common for 19th-century fairs, where citizens of imperial nations could ogle at non-white persons on display in a degrading manner.

It is telling as well that Femi plays the part of Othello and not any other part. As Raddatz (17) or Balme (105-116) note, black actors hardly ever have a chance to be cast for any other serious character since they are reduced to their skin colour. Even though Femi rejects Olunde’s critique of Western theatre (“I think they’re a bit more sophisticated,” 17), several scenes in Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self document that Olunde’s observations are quite justifiable: Femi convulsively tries to
adopt a white habitus in order to fit into his theatre company and tries to avoid being cast in the position of the ‘Exotic.’ Femi seeks to create an identity that — in total opposition to the ‘Other,’ the ‘Exotic’ — is located at the top of the hierarchy of the Western order. Linked to Femi’s performance of Whiteness is his attempt to be regarded as a member of the educated upper classes on the one hand and as a heterosexual on the other. An intersectional perspective makes clear that specific racial categories (here: whiteness) are directly linked with specific categories of class (here: educated bourgeoisie) and specific concepts of sexuality (here: heterosexuality). The entanglement of whiteness and educated bourgeoisie is vividly illustrated in a passage in Act I, Scene i: Femi is on the phone to his acting agent Anne, who informs him that The Royal National Classical Heritage Company will do its rehearsals in Peckham. Femi is not pleased about this:

Femi What’s the Royal National Classical Heritage Company doing rehearsing Othello on a council estate? [...] I’m not being snobbish! I just don’t do South!

Here as well as in other passages of the play (III, iii) it is mentioned that Peckham is one of London’s social problem areas due to its rather poor inhabitants, who mainly have a migrant or working-class background. Femi’s resentful attitude is due to the fact that he does not want to frequent a part of town that is unfit for him as a bourgeois person. He himself lives in the bourgeois district of St John’s Wood.

The overlapping of whiteness and heterosexuality is shown in Act II, Scene v. Here Femi’s lover, Colin, unexpectedly turns up during the theatre company’s rehearsal after the couple had a serious argument. Femi fears his white bourgeois reputation may be stained by Colin’s sudden appearance and figures the only solution to the problem is his denial of his homosexuality:

Colin and Laurence, apart.
Laurence [i.e. Femi] What the fuck j’u want, Colin?
Colin Last night you had your cock up my arse, now it’s ‘What the fuck j’u want Colin’!
Laurence (for all to hear) Look, I’m really sorry, man, but I’m not into you in that way, yeah?
Colin What way?
Laurence I’m not gay, man!
Colin Oh! I see. I get it.
Laurence I’m really sorry, man. I’m just into girls […] (Colin exits.)
Laurence rejoins Hermione and Raef. […]
Laurence: […] I think he’s gay. Isn’t it funny how gay guys always fall for straight guys! (64-65)

Femi’s assimilative practices of whiteness make him go so far that he, in the context of his acting job, not only pretends to be a member of the educated bourgeoisie and a heterosexual but even tries to conceal his blackness. Olunde critically comments on Femi’s assimilation practices. Thus he describes Femi to his colleague on the telephone as a coconut:

Olunde […] Hol’up, D! Yeah, it’s my brother … de coconut of St John’s Wood. […]
Femi Wha’ dja mean, coconut? (66)

The metaphor of the coconut here refers to the fact that Femi seems to be black from the outside but because of his behaviour has a white core. During a rehearsal in Act I, Scene ii, Femi attempts to assert his whiteness with a performative speech act by stating that he is not black.

Dominic […] We’ll chat black, move black, dress black, act black, be black.
Hermione But I’m not black.
Laurence Neither am I. (They all look at Laurence.) I mean, I don’t speak like that! (13)

In this passage, the company debate how they could stage Othello as an ’authentic’ gangsta rap production. They come to the conclusion that everyone has to adopt characteristics that are commonly associated with black culture. Hermione doubts that the group will be able to perform in that way since most of the members of the group are white. Here Femi perpetrates a Freudian slip, which demonstrates that Femi does indeed consider himself to be white. The stage direction “They all look at Laurence” makes clear that complete assimilation will always fail (cf. Fanon’s analysis of Blackness in Black Skin, White Masks) as in a white-dominated society black skin colour cannot be disguised as a marker of ‘natural difference.’ Through the racist gaze of his colleagues, Femi is automatically put into the position of the ‘Other’ and he feels forced to specify his statement. In the passage quoted above, the gaze can be interpreted as a performative practice that fixes the difference between black and white.
Another effort by Femi to be perceived as white by his theatre company is his preference not to be called by his Nigerian name, Femi, but by the Western-sounding name of Laurence. On the one hand, Femi thus denies his African family background, on the other hand, this hints at Femi’s identification with the legendary British actor Lord Laurence Olivier, famous for his Shakespearean roles, among them Othello. With regard to Femi’s adoption of his new name, DeObia Oparei works with a doubled race crossing here: the black Femi identifies with a white actor who himself successfully played the black Othello in 1964. This double race crossing gains complexity within the context of The Royal National Classical Heritage Company as the theatre company plays Othello, a play that is originally set in the white culture of the West but is now produced as a gangsta rap performance and thus transferred to black culture. Not only does Femi alias Laurence, alias Othello, transgress his racialised identity boundaries. His white colleagues likewise adopt features that are connoted as black.

**Raef’s and Hermione’s Race Crossing**

Femi’s colleagues learn a black habitus needed for the gangsta rap production during meditational role playing initiated by Femi. Through such role playing, Femi encourages his colleagues to free their “nigga within” (36). In the following passage, Raef meets Femi, who has just dressed up as the transsexual Shaneequa (a comic effect is that Raef is not informed about Femi’s life as Shaneequa and thinks that Shaneequa is Femi’s sister). Hence race and gender crossings are swapped in a comical way, the scene resembles a travesty.

Shaneequa [i.e. Femi] Incense! [...] I want you to completely and utterly abandon yo’self to me. [...] Close your eyes. (Raef, in the centre to the room, closes his eyes.) Take a deep breath. (Raef does as he is commanded.) Inhale. Exhale. [...] Now, relax your mind, I want you to join me on a journey to a higher level of consciousness. [...] Come, as we prepare to ‘free the nigga within!’ In your mind’s eye, you see a door.

Raef Yes.
Shaneequa Knock on that door, and enter. (Eyes closed, Raef enters) [...] Raef Yes! [...] I can smell him! [...] Shaneequa Who is it Raef? [...]
Olunde’s use of the ‘coconut’ metaphor is turned into its opposite here. Femi’s motto of “free the nigga within” assumes that his white-skinned colleague Raef has a black core. In the course of *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self*, all the white members of the theatre company adopt a habitus that is considered black gangsta style; the actors become so-called wiggas (i.e. white niggas) and compare themselves to Eminem (39). Act II, Scene iii shows that Femi’s colleague Hermione has adopted a gangsta-style behaviour as well as a gangsta-style appearance. “Her hair is braided, she wears Brixton-sized gold hoops in each ear” (76). Olunde is very surprised when he is confronted with Hermione in front of Femi’s home. Hermione does not fit at all into Olunde’s image of the hegemonic white.

When Olunde accidentally nearly hits Hermione with his BMX bike, Hermione is not scared – a reaction that Olunde would have expected due to racist constructions of white women encountering black men. Instead, Hermione reacts very self-confidently and quick-wittedly. Olunde is so impressed by Hermione’s atypical attitude that he starts to revise his dogmatic world-view and makes advances at her. Olunde’s change of mind is illustrated by an image, with which he describes Hermione: “Woo! Cheese on bread, bwoi! Times are changing, man” (77). With this Olunde refers to Hermione’s seemingly hybrid racial role, cheese and bread stand for white and black skin colour. The image combines these two elements and does not depict them as separate entities. In contrast to the metaphor of the coconut, there is no outer façade and no hidden interior, but both elements are equally visible.

Even though this hybridisation seems to effect a positively connoted destabilisation of white identity, two aspects in this scene may be seen as problematic. First, Hermione does not give up her white hegemonic position completely: in the conversation with Olunde, she describes Femi’s skin colour in a fetishising manner.

**Hermione** [... he’s [i.e. Femi] rather black, isn’t he?

**He** [i.e. Olunde] mimics her eroticisation of Femi’s blackness.
This fetishising degrades Femi to an object that can be classified; it is also an act that re-establishes the traditional dichotomy of the white ‘Self’ (Hermione) and the black ‘Other’ (Femi).

Second, referring to the form of race crossing which is shown in this scene, we have to consider that transferring black attributes to a white context can be a form of ‘cultural appropriation.’ The most basic definition of cultural appropriation is “the taking – from a culture that is not one’s own – of intellectual property, cultural expressions or artifacts, history and ways of knowledge” (Resolution of the Writer’s Union, 1992; qtd. in Ziff and Rao 1). However, it is open to debate whether cultural appropriation per se is a problematic act because it ‘steals’ specific cultural features or whether it is rather a common practice as culture is never a closed system but in a state of constant exchange with other cultures (cf. Ziff and Rao 2). Ziff and Rao emphasise that cultural appropriation should be opposed when it has the following consequences:

When concerns about cultural appropriation arise within various domains, several claims tend to emerge: One is that cultural appropriation harms the appropriated community. A second complaint focuses on the impact of appropriation on the cultural object itself. The concern is that appropriation can either damage or transform a given cultural good or practice. A third critique is that cultural appropriation wrongly allows some benefit to the material (i.e., financial) detriment of others. A fourth argument is that current law fails to reflect alternative conceptions of what should be treated as property or ownership in cultural goods. (8-9)

These four criteria are by no means met by the cultural appropriation presented in Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self. As the scene between Hermione and Olunde demonstrates, Olunde (who indeed is very critical and sensitive towards white racism) does not feel affected or colo-

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4 In most cases cultural appropriation is associated with acts that derive from hegemonic systems and adopt characteristics from subaltern cultures. It has to be decided whether one can also classify assimilative practices as acts of cultural appropriation. In order to prevent terminological ambiguity I use the term in this context only according to its first definition, i.e. I consider cultural appropriation to be a hegemonic practice (cf. Ziff and Rao 7).
nised. As shown above, he is rather amazed by Hermione’s race crossing.

Olunde’s Race Crossing

As already mentioned, Olunde’s dogmatism is undermined when he meets Hermione, who does not behave according to his image of whiteness. In Act I, Scene iii, Olunde is first shown as a dogmatic Nation of Islam activist, who, in his emancipatory quest, rejects anything that he associates with white culture (“The white man’s day is numbered!” 16). Thus, Olunde buys into Hall’s first representational mode that radically follows political ideals. But being confronted with Hermione, Olunde abandons his separatist world view and from then on adopts attributes that he once classified as white and therefore vehemently opposed. Despite this, Olunde does not give up his critical attitude towards white hegemony: as the dialogue between Hermione and Olunde shows, he reacts very glibly and critically by ironising and thus ridiculing Hermione’s fetishising gesture.

In order to articulate his love interest in Hermione, he starts to learn and recite Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*.

**Olunde** (sniffing Hermione) *That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet!*

**Hermione** Shakespeare!

**Olunde** (taking out a copy of *Romeo and Juliet* from his back pocket) *I’m learnin’.*

In this passage, the intertextual reference to *Romeo and Juliet* serves two purposes at once. First, the quotation illustrates Olunde’s race crossing. Olunde makes use of white bourgeois cultural capital to impress Hermione. Second, the use of the *Romeo and Juliet* quotation alludes to the possibility of combining two positions that seem to be antagonistic at first glance. In literary history, Romeo and Juliet are the romantic couple *per se*, who, due to their love, overcome the conflict of two hostile families. For *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self* the intertext demonstrates that blackness and whiteness do not necessarily have to stand in opposition to each other.
Olunde’s position can be classified as hybrid insofar as his identity no longer conforms to those patterns that Stuart Hall describes with his first model of black representation. Olunde’s race crossing not only questions fixed categories of blackness, but, with his adoption of a white habitus, also destabilises the economy of the hegemonic order: Olunde recites white theatrical roles – not just the role of Othello – and thus opposes the ‘theatre of biopolitics’ (Raddatz) that only gives black roles to blacks and white roles to whites. Hence, Olunde’s race crossing can be understood as a positive pluralisation of formerly rigid identity concepts.

As the passages analysed demonstrate, *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self* operates with three modes of race crossing. Its complex dealing with this phenomenon is particularly striking: on the one hand, these race crossings can be interpreted from a perspective that highlights their deconstructivist potential. According to this reading, the queer trajectory of *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self* lies in its destabilising of essentialist notions of racial identity and – to follow Judith Butler – can be regarded as a product of performative practices in the sense of *doing race* (as opposed to *being race*). In *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self* the image of a natural, unalterable white or black identity is subverted by transgressive acts that can be compared to the concept of drag⁵ that Butler describes as a way in which inflexible gender categories can be subverted. Just as not every form of drag necessarily challenges the hegemonic, heteronormative gender system (cf. Butler, *Bodies*, ch. 4) but can also affirm it depending on the context, not every form of race crossing automatically unsettles racist essentialisms. In *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self* attention needs to be paid to the context within which race crossings are played out in order to determine their deconstructivist potential: Femi’s adoption of a behaviour that is associated with whiteness, for instance, rather bears the characteristics of assimilation and thus cannot be classified as questioning white hegemonic values. Hermione’s race crossing is more

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⁵ Judith Butler introduces drag as a method of destabilising fixed gender binarisms: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (*Gender Trouble* 187). Bearing Bhabha’s notion of mimkry in mind, the concept of drag can be transferred from the category of gender to the category of race as well.
ambivalent. On the one hand, she takes on a habitus which, since it resembles a gangsta rapper’s and even impresses the radical black power activist Olunde, does not correspond to the ideals of the dominant white order. Still, she is unable to reflect on the fact that she occasionally fetishises and therefore objectifies blackness in a racist manner. In *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self* Olunde’s race crossing is the only transgressive act that effectively challenges the opposition of white versus black. For this reason, Olunde is the only character who occupies a hybrid position within the play. *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self*’s principal agenda is an aesthetic of openness which can be traced in the conception of the play’s characters. By means of a complex handling of pluralised identity, the play makes clear that the destabilisation of conventional subject patterns can subvert dominant identity discourses, but it does not do so automatically. It is always necessary – as *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self* vividly illustrates – to consider the specific context in which the category of race is played out as part of an identity. *Crazyblackmuthafuckin’self* is not only a queer play because it destabilises identity concepts such as race and gender and hence takes on prominent aspects of Queer Theory. It also makes use of an aesthetic technique through which rash and one-dimensional judgements are made impossible.⁶

Works Cited

*Primary Literature*


⁶ I want to thank Silvia Pontes, Bettina Schreck and Kathy-Ann Tan for their valuable comments.
Secondary Literature


They say the clothes make the man. All day long I wear that getup. But that don’t make me who I am.


I write poetry filling white page after white page with imitations of Edith Sitwell. … Queen Victoria is my idol.

Adrienne Kennedy, *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962)

African American identity – how it is constituted, constructed and maintained – has long been and continues to be a central question in the African American literary tradition. Ranging from Negro spirituals and slave narratives to works of the Harlem Renaissance and the Black Arts Movement, this body of literature has invariably addressed the issues of authentic Blackness and a sense of self located in between cultures. The literary manifestations of black consciousness in all these periods thematize a struggle for freedom – freedom over the body in the ante-bellum era, a fight for recognition of African American identity during the Reconstruction period, the time of the Washington-DuBois debate, the Harlem Renaissance, and a struggle for social and political freedom in the Civil Rights Movement era.
Born after the early successes of the Civil Rights Movement into a radically altered cultural and political scene, a new generation of black youths, however, departs from the freedom-fighting spirit of their fathers and grandfathers and, inevitably, redefines African American existence and identity in hitherto unprecedented ways. Immune and distanced from the separatist and nationalist impulses inherent in the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s, a new generation of African American artists creates their own aesthetic filter, a new Black Aesthetic that reconsiders the cultural practices (imperatives) of black people. In his by now seminal essay “The New Black Aesthetic” (1989), cultural critic, essayist, and novelist, Trey Ellis identifies the “cultural mulatto” as the representative of a new type of black identity, claiming that “just as a genetic mulatto is a black person of mixed parents who can often get along fine with his grandparents, a cultural mulatto, educated by a multi-racial mix of cultures, can also navigate easily in the white world” (235). By giving prominence to the multi-racial and multi-cultural legacies as shaping factors of the black self, Ellis not only removes social and psychological burdens that African Americans have experienced in their marginalized position over centuries but also pries open race-imposed cultural boundaries and dichotomies that have long traumatized African American consciousness and existence. Pertaining to these mixed legacies, Ellis underlines that we “no longer need to deny or suppress any part of our complicated and sometimes contradictory cultural baggage to please either white people or black” (235).

The ever-increasing body of African American art and literature in the post-Civil Rights Movement period now calls for the construction of “a more or less coherent critical conversation about the art of this ‘post’ era,” as Bertram D. Ashe suggests (609). Though the legitimacy of identifying it as a discrete literary period is still contested as the labels range from post-soul, post-liberated to post Black to New Black. Typically, works produced after the 1990s tend to present characters with “a

1 Ellis’s seminal essay now ranks among other key documents of Black American consciousness such as Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain” (1926), Richard Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937), Larry Neal’s “The Black Arts Movement” (1968), and Hoyt W. Fuller’s “Toward a Black Aesthetic” (1968).
hybrid, fluid, elastic, cultural mulattoesque sense of black identity” (614), ignoring the definition of black experience in terms of segregation.

Though written nearly thirty years before the articulation of the New Black Aesthetic and the emergence of post-soul texts per se, African American playwright Adrienne Kennedy’s *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962) fully elaborates and anticipates a post-soul aesthetic. The present paper is predicated upon the claim that Kennedy’s work serves as a dramatic harbinger of the New Black Aesthetic in the sense that her female protagonist, a tragic mulatta, prefigures the cultural mulatto. First produced in 1964 (the same year as Amiri Baraka’s black consciousness raising play *Dutchman*), *Funnyhouse* earned more frowns than approval as the play aims to erase race-imposed binary oppositions by accentuating the multiplicity of legacies in the mulatta’s existence. Additionally, the subject of passing revisited by Kennedy – believed to have been passé by then – defied the slogans of the Black Arts Movement demanding that a black author “must embrace Black nationalism and cultural separatism,” and literary works should have “social protest overtones, either strident or muted” (Virágos, “Myth and Social Consciousness” 228). To substantiate my claim that Kennedy’s protagonist anticipates the cultural mulatto archetype, I will use Suzan-Lori Parks’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Topdog/Underdog* (2002) in comparison as a point of reference since it fully qualifies as a typical post-soul work. Parks’s play is not concerned with the usual signifiers of black experience such as institutionalized racism and crippled black identities. Instead, she focuses her play on the feud of two brothers over money and power. The brothers happen to have the names of Lincoln and Booth (intended by their father as a joke and inevitably evoking the historical figures of the 16th President, Abraham Lincoln, and John Wilkes Booth, his assassin).

2 It has already been noted that Kennedy’s work defies conventional definitions of blackness, yet no in-depth analysis has been written on this subject. See, for instance, Elin Diamond’s claim: “Kennedy’s major texts of the 1960s-1990s produce an impossible identity, a hybridity” (108); and in the email correspondence integrated in Ashe’s essay Jerry W. Ward suggests that Kennedy’s drama evokes a post-soul aesthetic (Ashe 618).
The brothers enact the destinies of their namesakes: in a final fatal fight Booth shoots Lincoln over a dispute about money.

It must be noted, though, that articulations of mulattoesque existence as well as hybrid images of black identity – departing from the usual assimilation-separation impulse – frequently occur in African American thought and literature even in the heyday of the Black Power Movement. James Baldwin, for instance, stresses the inevitability of appropriating white culture as part of his black existence. When explaining the special attitude he developed to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, the stones of Paris, and the cathedral at Chartres, he remarks:

These were not really my creations, they did not contain my history, I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper, this was not my heritage. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use – I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe. I would have to appropriate these white centuries, I would have to make them mine – I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme – otherwise I would have no place in any scheme. (4)

Similarly, certain revered icons of the black avant-garde movement helped forge the New Black Aesthetic, as Ellis maintains, since “incorrect images of blackness” were presented by novelists like Ishmael Reed, Clarence Major, Toni Morrison, and John Edgar Wideman, who, “stripping themselves of both white envy and self-hate, […] produced supersophisticated black art that either expanded or exploded the old definitions of blackness” (237).

In the same vein, as I will argue, Kennedy’s drama, especially in the 1960s, thwarted all the traditional expectations with regards to notions of blackness. In highlighting the extent to which selected works by Kennedy and Parks display impulses and identifiable features of a post-soul aesthetic, I will rely on a triangular post-soul matrix to identify post-soul texts, as put forward by Ashe. The first feature he proposes is the presence of the cultural mulatto archetype, though he fails to elaborate on the specificities of this archetype, which is of key importance for a better understanding of the literary manifestations of this archetypal image. I suggest that the cultural mulatto archetype, which is non-genetic by definition, is endowed with the following features: (1) a quintessential representative of the post-Civil Rights Movement era, the cultural mulatto possesses a composite identity that evinces bi-raciality
and bi-culturality; (2) the cultural mulatto’s identity is never stable but always in flux; (3) the cultural mulatto transforms the former no man’s land, the *wild zone* between the white and black worlds, into an intercultural sphere, a *contact space*, thus securing a long-desired space in between the two cultures; (4) the cultural mulatto crosses the color line and re-inscribes himself/herself in the history of America; (5) the cultural mulatto embraces the iconographic signifiers of both white and black cultures and histories; (6) the non-genetic cultural mulatto echoes the genetic tragic mulatto stereotype, a widely used stereotypical image of light-skinned people of mixed origin. It should be noted though that the literary representations of this archetype are usually depicted with darker colors than Ellis’s “healthy, self-aware cultural mulatto” (Ashe 614).

The mere presence of the cultural mulatto archetype in its “messy, hazy, difficult manifestations” is a crucial point, as Ashe points out (614), yet what really counts is “blaxploration,” namely “the execution of an exploration of blackness,” which is the second feature operative in post-soul texts (613). Blaxploration involves examining the extent to which post-soul artists and texts depart from earlier articulations of blackness that give prominence, for instance, to the necessity of establishing and sustaining a coherent black identity (614). The third element of the matrix constitutes the so-called trope of “allusion-disruption” (613), deployed in many post-soul texts as a literary strategy to make fun of “the nationalist elders” (616) in the Black Power Movement.

Kennedy’s genetic mulatta in *Funnyhouse* and Parks’s non-genetic mulattos in *Topdog/Underdog* display several features of the cultural mulatto archetype. The hybrid and *composite* nature of their identity can best be illuminated by the protagonists’ identification with historical figures from white history and culture. In a tormenting process of identification the protagonist Sarah, the Negro (as designated by Kennedy) in *Funnyhouse*, identifies herself with two white historical figures: Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg; and two male martyrs,

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3 There is a long line of tragic mixed-blood characters in American literature penned by white and black writers alike ranging from J.F. Cooper, George Washington Cable, Mark Twain and Dion Boucicault down to creations by William Faulkner, and black writers like William Wells Brown, Charles W. Chesnutt, and Nella Larsen.
the Congolese liberator Patrice Lumumba and a hunchback, brown Jesus Christ. Accurately revealing her multi-layered identity crisis, Sarah’s four different selves, her imagoes, display her troubled and tormented mental state, yet the cultural-historical figures fail to solve or give solace to Sarah’s problem, namely to come to terms with her mixed legacy. As regards Lincoln, he dresses up every day as President Lincoln (white face makeup, stovepipe top hat, familiar coat) and works as a Lincoln impersonator in an arcade and lets visitors shoot him.

The presence of historical figures whose names evoke fear and terror (Queen Victoria) or whose reception in African American history is rather problematic (Lincoln) suggests that these controversial figures are also part of African American history. Yet, the identification with women of royal descent and the controversial figure of the 16th President implies that both Kennedy and Parks re-write the history of the United States in an ironic fashion.

In her desperate attempt to find a space for herself in the much-idolized white culture, Sarah chooses white women of imperialist regimes, Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg, because their power promises invulnerability and inaccessibility. As she herself defines her ultimate objective: “it is my dream to live in rooms with European antiques and my Queen Victoria, photographs of Roman ruins, walls of books, a piano, oriental carpets [...]” (Kennedy 563). Constantly reminding her of her idol, the statue of Queen Victoria is placed right opposite the door of Sarah’s room, which is also the queen’s chamber. Ironically, the power and the image Sarah intends to endow herself with are based on colonization, which is remarked upon by Raymond, her Jewish boyfriend: the replica of Queen Victoria is “a thing of terror, possessing the quality of nightmares, suggesting large and probable deaths” (563). Similarly, Sarah’s identification with the Duchess “seems an odd choice for a figure of female power,” Claudia Barnett comments as “she was beautiful and powerful but she was childless, miserable, and ultimately insane” (379).

In like fashion, the historical reception of Abe Lincoln among African Americans has long been problematic: he has been both glorified as the Great Emancipator and criticized as a white supremacist. A sense of utter disgust and contempt for Lincoln, the President, is evident in the
opening scene of the play, when Linc walks into the room, surreptitiously disturbing Booth practicing his three-card monte scam. The stage direction says: “Booth, sensing someone behind him, whirls around, pulling a gun from his pants. While the presence of Lincoln doesn’t [sic] surprise him, the Lincoln costume does” (Parks, Topdog/Underdog 9). Booth explodes: “And woah, man don’t [sic] ever be doing that shit! Who thuh fuck you think you is coming in my shit all spooked out and shit. You pull that one more time I’ll shoot you!” (9).

The effective use of the polysemous “spooked” accurately shows the ambiguous perception of Abe Lincoln from the perspective of the black community. The word “spooked” not only refers to a ghost-like figure haunting the present, but also connotes ‘eccentric’ as well as a black person, as used in slang. With one word that seriously resonates with American history Parks achieves what has become her dramatic credo, namely re-placing and re-writing African Americans in the history of the United States. In her essay “Possession,” Parks claims that “so much of African American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, that one of my tasks as playwright is to – through literature and the special relationship between theatre and real life – locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, hear the bones sing, write it down” (4). Indeed, the combined effect of the verbal and dramaturgical, namely, the ingenious use of the word “spooked,” accompanied by Booth pulling a gun and threatening to shoot Lincoln, anticipates the tragic end both in the actual present (Booth shooting Linc) and the historical past (the assassination of A. Lincoln).

In both plays identification involves the characters projecting themselves and/or assuming the role of white historical figures, which not only indicates the characters’ uncertain and insecure identity but also interrogates the notion of a fixed identity, another staple feature of the cultural mulatto archetype. Identification by itself is essential for the construction of identity. The distinction between the two, as Elin Diamond formulates, is that “identity is imagined to be the truthful origin or model that grounds the subject, shapes the subject, and endows her with a continuous sense of self-sameness or being” (106), whereas identification is a means of identity-building. A valid concept of identity cannot be removed from the political and ethical realities in
which human agents actually live. In defining the subject, M.M. Bakhtin argues for an essentially process-like nature of identity constitution:

If I am consummated and my life is consummated, I am no longer capable of living and acting. For in order to live and act, I need to be unconsummated, I need to be open for myself – at least in all the essential moments constituting my life; I have to be, for myself, someone who is axiologically yet-to-be, someone who does not coincide with his already existing makeup. (13)

The dangers of identification, however, lie in the fact that “identification creates sameness not with the self but another,” and while “identity operates through logic of exclusion – my being or consciousness affirms its self-sameness by not being you – identification is trespass, denying the other’s difference by assimilating her behavior, taking her place” (Diamond 107). In her desperate attempt to integrate her mixed legacies, Sarah struggles with her identity crisis. The torment of Sarah’s liminal existence, her in-between state is presented through multiple selves, by her imagoes, and “Negro-Sarah is not an ‘I’ but always an I-as-other” (Diamond 118). Eventually, her self-imposed alter egos become estranged, weaned, as it were, from Sarah and “far from empowering her, these character masks trap Sarah in a role of self-hatred, fear, and inability to integrate her personality” (Meigs 174). Sarah’s conflicting selves could be imagined as satellites revolving around her inner self.

Lincoln’s constant fluctuation between roles, names, and clothes in *Topdog/Underdog* underlines the fluidity of his character. He is adamant to assert his own separate and equally significant identity: “Fake Beard. Top hat. Don’t make me into no Lincoln. I was on my own before any of that” (Parks, *Topdog/Underdog* 30). Yet, his “words, actions, and mere appearance foreground the discrepancies between surface and meaning, nature and mimesis” and the roles he plays and his real self (Dietrick 56). The divisions between the roles he enacts in the arcade are blurred with his real self; thus the Lincoln role creeps into his everyday life. In a hurry to catch a bus home, Linc does not have time to take off his Lincoln “get-up,” and a kid on the bus asks him for an autograph. Linc tells the story to Booth: “I pretended I didnt [sic] hear him at first. I’d had a long day. […] They’d just done Lincoln in history class and he knew all about him, he’d been to the arcade but, I dunno, for some reason he was tripping cause there was Honest Abe right beside him on the
bus‖ (Parks, Topdog/Underdog 11). In addition to being an “uncanny reminder of the performativity of identity,” Linc dressed as the President also “makes us intensely aware of Lincoln's (and the actor's) ‘blackness’” (Dietrick 57). Both Sarah and Lincoln are condemned to re-live a representation of history they cannot remake.

Sarah's and Lincoln's oscillating between their masks and selves as described above adequately illustrates the theme of “blaxploration” as well as the “allusion-disruption” trope operating in both dramatic texts, thus further reinforcing the elaboration of a post-soul aesthetic. Establishing specific features of post-soul texts, Ashe comments “that these texts trouble blackness, they worry blackness, they stir it up, touch it, feel it out, and hold it up for examination in ways that depart significantly from previous – and necessary – preoccupations with struggling for political freedom, or with an attempt to establish and sustain coherent black identity” (614).

A vital element of identification, clothing becomes a paradoxical signifier of identity in both plays. Lincoln attempts to make a distinction between his ‘real’ identity and the one that he assumes when working. He says, “they say the clothes make the man. All day long I wear that getup. But that dont [sic] make me who I am” (Parks, Topdog/Underdog 31). Yet, as Jon Dietrick contends, “Lincoln’s statements and actions regarding clot...” indicate doubt as to the seemingly hard line he would draw between surface and reality,” since Lincoln’s act of burning his father’s clothes is “at odds with his statements downgrading the importance of clothes to the making of identity” (58). Dietrick may be right in highlighting this discrepancy. However, Lincoln’s act of burning his father’s clothes must be read as a ritualistic act of distancing himself from his father’s heritage. The meaning of this gesture can perhaps be fully illuminated when it is compared with the mentally disturbed act of Sarah’s bludgeoning Patrice Lumumba, who stands for her black father’s legacy, which she wants to get rid off.

Similarly, clothing becomes an integral part of constructing identity in Funnyhouse. Sarah’s female alter egos, Queen Victoria and the Duchess of Hapsburg, “are dressed in royal gowns of white,” while they also wear headpieces that “are white and of a net that falls over their faces” (Kennedy 563). The paradoxical nature of empowering herself
with rather controversial figures from white history is indicated by symbolic means: the whiteness of the royal gowns is of “the material cheap satin” and “from beneath their headpieces springs a headful of wild kinky hair” (563), all signaling diminishing power. Her kinky hair falling out in patches serves as a constant reminder of Sarah’s black heritage that she is eager to suppress.

The spaces to which the cultural mulattoes are relegated in both plays are rather limited. Sarah is confined to a mental space, while Lincoln and Booth are crammed into a very small physical space. Interestingly enough, the characters act out the fate destined to them, and violence (self-afflicted as in the case of the tragic mulatta or Booth shooting Lincoln) seems to be inevitable. Rejected by the white community and repulsed by her own black legacy, Sarah is pushed into (non)existence, to a “borderland,” a no man’s land, thus she is forced to create an alternative place for her selves, a mental place of refuge, a funnyhouse. Lincoln and Booth live in a “seedily furnished rooming house room” with no bathroom or kitchen (Parks, Topdog/Underdog 7). Displaced from both the white and the black worlds (Sarah) and marginalized by white society (Lincoln and Booth), these characters (cultural mulattoes) live in a wild zone, not being able to convert it to a contact zone. The lack of mental, physical, and spiritual freedom leads to violence.

The elimination of the usually sentimental treatment of the cliché figure of the tragic mulatta further supports the cultural mulattoesque quality of Sarah, the Negro. A university student of English and living with her Jewish boyfriend in a brownstone in New York, Sarah does not arouse sympathy like other tragic mulattoes before her, because she has chances of upward mobility. Yet, she cannot become a true cultural mulatta as she is not able to negotiate between her divided legacies. In spite of her character’s failed attempt to integrate into the white community, Kennedy radically departs from the usual black and white binary structures arbitrarily set up in society. By emphasizing the interface of black and white cultures and history as forces shaping her protagonist’s personality, Kennedy dismantles cultural and racial boundaries. I believe that Kennedy had a much clearer vision concerning the space and place of the African American community during the turmoil of the 1960s
The “Cultural Mulatto”

than many of her contemporaries did. Her muted revolution lies in her insistence on acknowledging racial mixing as a legitimate part of African American heritage and American history.

Though it is not within the scope of my paper to draw formal parallels in addition to the thematic ones, I find it important to note that both playwrights benefit from constant experimentation with dramatic form and both employ a postmodern style. Their innovative methods and techniques are most obvious in their handling of theatrical space.

The observation pertaining to Parks’s use of the stage that it is an “accumulation of places […] in which characters from various historical times and locations can appear” and thus have “multi-spatial and multi-temporal existence” (Wilmer 444) is equally valid for Kennedy’s stage. They both populate the theatrical space with historical, imaginary and real characters, which creates a peculiar synchronic presence of various generations. Kennedy’s postmodernism in Funnyhouse manifests itself in the fusion of different theatrical styles such as expressionism, symbolism, and absurdism and the creation of a dramatic stream-of-consciousness technique which allows her to enter Sarah’s mind, while Parks’s apparent realism of characterization, dialogue and setting in Topdog/Underdog is twisted and fraught with meta-theatrical elements.

“In a matter of less than four decades,” Zsolt Virágos writes in 1996, “the focus of American culture has clearly moved from once-hypothesized melting pot to the boiling pot” (“Diagnosing” 16), referring to the multicultural scene in America. Speaking now and nearing the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, I may add that in less than two decades since the 1990s American culture is now approaching a form of symbiosis of different cultures. The cult of ethnicity celebrated earlier has now been replaced by the cult of the cultural mulatto. Fluent in both the white and the black worlds and navigating easily between the iconic signifiers of both cultures, the new type of African American identity, the cultural mulatto, helps break down barriers arbitrarily set between white and black cultures.
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For a long time I thought [multiculturalism] was a vacuous term, but I have to say that, increasingly, I think it is perhaps the most accurate term we have because it is the only one that really makes sense of all our realities. We are all products of the multiplicity of influences, of cultures, wherever we are in the modern world. It is impossible to think of oneself as a culture closed off from other influences. And, certainly, if we are migrants, or have a migratory history, that sense of the multiplicity of cultures is accentuated, and made more overt. So, strangely enough, it is more accurate than ‘cross-cultural’ or ‘intercultural,’ which presuppose the singularity of culture.

That’s a problem, especially in a world, or in an era that, perhaps, is more wrapped up in fundamentalist philosophies than were other eras. In such an era, it is even more important to begin to mind the value of this term. I am thinking here of the Hindus in India who might suddenly claim a Hindu reality to the exclusion of Muslim, Christian, and Jewish influences. It would be a mad project because it would defy the reality that is India and that you can see in front of you all the time, let alone hear in all the multiple languages of India. The problem with ‘multiculturalism’ is that it is not a sexy word; it is a clunky word. If someone can invent a better word – fine. (Verma 210)

The term ‘interculturalism’ has been in use with specific reference to theatrical/performance theory/practice since the early to mid-1970s. When questioned about its origins (by Patrice Pavis), Richard Schechner

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**England People Very Nice:**
Intercultural Confusions at the National Theatre, London

For a long time I thought [multiculturalism] was a vacuous term, but I have to say that, increasingly, I think it is perhaps the most accurate term we have because it is the only one that really makes sense of all our realities. We are all products of the multiplicity of influences, of cultures, wherever we are in the modern world. It is impossible to think of oneself as a culture closed off from other influences. And, certainly, if we are migrants, or have a migratory history, that sense of the multiplicity of cultures is accentuated, and made more overt. So, strangely enough, it is more accurate than ‘cross-cultural’ or ‘intercultural,’ which presuppose the singularity of culture.

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dated Peter Brook’s usage from around 1970 and traced his own use (to mean “national exchanges” rather than “internationalism”) from shortly after, relating it to Eugenio Barba’s notion of “barter” and to the work of Jerzy Grotowski from the mid-70s (Pavis 42-43). It has proved a politically contentious area of debate, as best exemplified by Rustom Bharucha’s Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture, where he reconstructs Schechner’s ‘anthropological’ notion of intra-national barter as one of cultural appropriation.

However, although I will inevitably be concerned with matters that touch upon the areas discussed above, this paper will be centrally concerned not with interculturality and performance but with an attempt – along with all its attendant problems – to consider the issues relating to the debate about societal interculturality within a particular performance. This will, however, necessitate some consideration of the separability of the two terms that Verma conjures with in the opening quotation, ‘multicultural’ and ‘intercultural,’ for, whilst they may appear to have an overlapping identity in the context in which he writes, in relation to societal history they have a sequential rather than an arguably simultaneous existence.

The date is Friday, February 27, 2009. The time 6.00 pm. The place, the Olivier auditorium of the National Theatre on London’s South Bank. An audience is gathered to listen to Christopher Campbell, the National’s Deputy Literary Manager, discussing a new play, England People Very Nice, with its author, Richard Bean. I have been to many such events: normally there are forty to fifty people present, tops. Today the entire stalls area of the theatre is packed. As the playwright takes the stage, an angry man strides down the aisle shouting repeatedly, “Richard Bean is a racist.” He is, it transpires, Hussain Ismail, founder of the Tower Hamlets-based Bangladeshi theatre company, Soulfire. Eventually, Ismail clambers on to the stage and proceeds to harangue Bean, the first time a platform invasion has ever happened at the National. After a delightfully liberal delay, with various members of the audience shouting, “Get out!” and, “Get security and throw him out,” the protester agrees to be led away by security guards. He was one of
two protesters.\textsuperscript{1} Campbell’s first question to Bean is “Richard, tell me, how do you feel about the reception of the play?” Bean: “I thought this was about \textit{War Horse} and the treatment of the Germans.”

Earlier, before being allowed entry, the audience had been instructed that large bags were not to be taken in. My mind flipped back almost exactly twenty years, to the first night of \textit{Iranian Nights}, a play written by Howard Brenton and Tariq Ali as a rejoinder to the \textit{fatwa} declared on Salman Rushdie as a result of the publication of \textit{The Satanic Verses}. On that occasion I had been in the queue directly behind Sir Michael Grade, then the head of Channel 4 television,\textsuperscript{2} and had watched as he was frisked before being allowed to enter and, after receiving similar treatment myself, followed him into the theatre. To be so nearly touched by greatness.

On this occasion, the first sight that greeted the audience on the otherwise empty stage, were two chairs, and a hand-written placard, “PROUD OF MULTICULTURAL EAST LONDON,” evidently placed there by the second protester. That placard provides the impetus for the start of my paper, for the theme of this conference is not multiculturalism but interculturality. It would be useful to attempt some distinctions between the two terms. Here is a very recent attempt to define the second:

Interculturality is ‘a dynamic process by which people from different cultures interact to learn about and question their own and each other’s cultures. Over time this may lead to cultural change. It recognises the inequalities at work in society and the need to overcome these. It is a process which requires mutual respect and acknowledges human rights.’ (Baring Foundation)

This definition of interculturality was agreed upon after much discussion by the Baring Foundation in 2007. It is a useful starting-point because it suggests a clear division between the notion of multiculturalism – offering a model of parallel but possibly separate social identities within a community/nation, or whatever – and interculturality – offering a potentially more idealistic dialogue between the various compo-

\textsuperscript{1} After Ismail had left, a white teacher, Keith Kinsella, briefly sat on the platform before also being escorted off.

\textsuperscript{2} Grade was there to consider broadcasting a televised version of \textit{The Satanic Verses} on Channel 4, which bravely he subsequently did.
nents of that multicultural entity with the conscious intent of some degree of unification. There is one important difference between the two cultural models: whereas interculturality can only be understood in terms of practice, as a goal to be striven for, multiculturalism can be seen as simply an observation of how things are or, again, in terms of practice, as a goal to be striven for. That is to say, between them they encompass both the difference between a passive and an active view of societal organisation, ultimately the difference between observation and intervention, and also all the confusions inherent on that ambiguity. In relation to multiculturalism, Rajeev Bhargava makes the distinction quite clearly: “multiculturalism embodies the politics of collective goals as well as a politics of difference. […] it hasn't exactly helped Western political theory to have operated with an idealised model of the polis in which fellow citizens share a common descent, language and culture” (11). A useful if perhaps slightly controversial parallel would be to say that in their most active embodiments, multiculturalism is to interculturality as separatist feminism is to socialist feminism.

It is worth stopping for a moment to stress the significance of the distinction that I have just been making; for, a perfectly straightforward response to my positing of an ambiguous model of multiculturalism would be to say, for instance, that Britain is a multicultural society and all the richer for it. Now, as it happens it was a very appropriate moment for this conference to be taking place because, as it proceeded, Elections were being held across the European Community. A number of British political parties put up candidates whose platform was one of opposition to the very idea of the Union and whose attitude to multiculturalism is very different from that offered immediately above. In the electoral handout of the far-right BNP, the British National Party, the first two bullet points were as follows: “NO to EU rule & the Euro” and “NO to Immigration & Unemployment”; whilst those of UKIP (the self-explanatory United Kingdom Independence Party) were “Say NO to European Union” and “Say NO to unlimited immigration.” For both parties, then, the issue of nationalism is inexplicably linked to that of continuing integration, and multiculturalism is seen by them as a divisive rather than a unifying entity. It is a measure of how current the area of debate is that, in the event, UKIP received 15% of the British vote, beat-
ing the Labour Party into second place behind the Conservatives; and both UKIP and the BNP have succeeded in winning seats in local elections in recent years.

This is not, of course, a new situation. The constitution of the BNP declares its commitment to “stemming and reversing the tide of non-white immigration and to restoring, by legal changes, negotiation and consent, the overwhelmingly white makeup of the British population that existed in Britain prior to 1948” (“British National Party”). The date, 1948, is significant for it was when the British Nationality Act passed into law, creating legally for the first time a new status, Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies, to cover all those British subjects who had a close relationship (either through birth or descent) with the United Kingdom and its remaining colonies, thus removing many of the existing barriers to Commonwealth immigration into Britain. The British National Party has a number of antecedents but it was originally a splinter-group of the National Front, which was formed in 1967. The following year, 1968, saw the arrival of about 1,000 British passport-holding Kenyan Asians a month, fleeing from persecution in their own country. The National Front was, partly as a result of this sudden exodus, particularly active, and the Labour Government bowed to pressure, rushing through the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in March, an act which sought to reduce the flow.

This is the immediate context for what was to prove to be one of the most significant pronouncements on multiculturalism in modern British history. On April 20, 1968, the MP Enoch Powell addressed a Conservative Association meeting in Birmingham: his attack on unlimited immigration, and specifically black immigration, caused shockwaves on both sides of the political spectrum:

The other dangerous delusion from which those who are wilfully or otherwise blind to realities suffer, is summed up in the word ‘integration.’ To be integrated into a population means to become for all practical purposes indistinguishable from its other members. Now, at all times, where there are marked physical differences, especially of colour, integration is difficult though, over a period, not impossible. There are among the Commonwealth immigrants who have come to live here in the last fifteen years or so, many thousands whose wish and purpose is to be integrated and whose every thought and endeavour is bent in that direction. But to imagine that such a thing enters the heads of a great and growing
The majority of immigrants and their descendants is a ludicrous misconception, and a dangerous one. (Powell)

The National Front was not alone in praising Powell's stance. At the end of April a Gallup poll found that 74% of the British population agreed with the MP's sentiments, and earlier London dockers had come out on strike in support of him. But analysis of the twists and turns of the NF and then the BNP on racial issues is instructive. Originally heavily anti-Semitic, the party has latterly come to adopt a pro-Israeli position. After the London bombings of July 7, 2005, the enemy within became redefined:

The BNP has moved on in recent years, casting off the leg-irons of conspiracy theories and the thinly veiled anti-Semitism which has held this party back for two decades. The real enemies of the British people are home grown Anglo-Saxon Celtic liberal-leftists who seek to destroy the family as the building blocks of society and impose multiculturalism on a reluctant indigenous population and the Crescent Horde – the endless wave of Islamins who are flocking to our shores to bring our island nations into the embrace of their barbaric desert religion. (Barnes)

Meanwhile, back in the theatre on February 27, 2009. Later that evening I attended a performance of England People Very Nice, a play that had opened at London's National Theatre on February 12, 2009. Described in the theatre publicity as “a riotous journey through four waves of immigration from the 17th century to today,” the play traces the arrival and settlement of the French Huguenots, the Irish, the Jews, and the Bangladeshis in London's East End, offering to demonstrate that “white flight and anxiety over integration is anything but new.” Nicholas Hytner's production has created a critical controversy of a sort not seen at the National Company since it took up residence on the South Bank in 1976. Interestingly, the last time that there was anything near such a public uproar over a National Theatre production was in September 1980, with another Howard Brenton piece, The Romans in Britain, a play that was actually the subject of an unsuccessful private prosecution of its director, Michael Bogdanov.3 I say “interestingly,”

3 He was accused of having “procured an act of gross indecency by the actors Peter Sproule and Greg Hicks on the stage of the Olivier Theatre” contrary to the Sexual Offences Act of 1956.
because Brenton’s play, which addresses the issue of the British presence in Northern Ireland, also considers the early colonisation of Britain. Discounting the parts of it set in a contemporary Ireland, Richard Bean effectively provides a flippant résumé of Brenton’s narrative at the end of the “Prologue” preceding the first act of England People:

(Enter Roman.) First came the Roman with his rule
(Stabs man.) And steeled the cockney with his tool
(Rapes woman.) This seminal act improved the tribe
(Literate man/wife.) And issued forth a learned scribe
(Men killed…) The Saxons came and came again
(Same woman raped.) Were followed by the lusty Dane
(Men killed.) They fought and fought eternal wars
(Woman raped again.) The ladies loved the conquerors

Both plays have a central narrative concern with immigrant arrival in Britain, although in The Romans it is effectively the period of history contained within the prologue of Bean’s play and the process of colonisation, seen in both plays in terms of rape, but in England People as uncomplicatedly comic, where before it had been uncomic to the point of litigation. Bean skates over the earlier periods and the problematics of colonisation because his interest lies rather with issues of assimilation and intercultural relationships than with the politics of appropriation and rule. In The Romans it is always the outsiders, the others, who will seize power: in England People it is the outsiders, the others, who (as Bean would argue) can only survive by assimilation.

The air of flippancy in this prologue will give some idea of the overall tone of the play. The narrative is presented in a deliberately simplistic manner. In his pre-production platform Bean talked of its “cartoon” quality and said that “the form of the play is very carefully drawn: it is an amateur production.” It presents itself as, perhaps, the dress rehearsal for a play about successive waves of immigration into Britain, written and performed by a mixed group of asylum seekers in the Pocklington Immigration Centre. There are obvious points of connection between the T.I.E. format of England People and other more agit-prop efforts, and a lot of the deliberately knock-about humour may seem reminiscent
of 7:84’s *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (1973), for example.

HIGHLANDER 2: Now, at that time, Lord McDonald was driving the people down to the shores…
HIGHLANDER 1: What shores?
HIGHLANDER 2: Oh, I’ll have a wee dram.
Roll on drum.

(John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* 30)

In *England People*, towards the end of Act I, we have a convicted murderer being pulled behind a wagon on which are stood the hangman and the judge. The doomed man accepts a drink, but the hangman refuses saying, “No, ta, I can’t. I’m on the wagon” (29-30). It is a joke, the peculiar English quality of which had already been stressed in the prologue of the play-within-the-play’s producer, Philippa, in an argument with the Palestinian character, Taher:

PHILIPPA: Yes, the wagon joke is back in.
TAHER: We are putting a joke back in which is not funny?
PHILIPPA: Taher, if we let you stay in this country, and after thirty years working as a driving instructor in Kettering you develop a drink problem – a) you’ll understand the joke, and b) you’ll find it funny!

(England People Very Nice 14)

The simplistic music-hall nature of the jokes is, in both cases, a conscious strategy in what is the central aim of the narrative, a populist retelling of history. The essential difference, however, is that McGrath develops his narrative from a directly socialist analysis. It is not just that Bean does not: rather that ideologically *England People* is a very confused play, unclear in its intentions and by no means consensual in its reception. I want to argue that, whatever its merits as a piece of theatre, it is precisely this lack of ideological clarity that makes it such an important event in England’s National Theatre.

The play, then, relies heavily on the presentation, and the supposed deconstruction, of racial stereotypes. For example, in Act II, after the arrival of the Irish proletariat, complete with a pig for each family, as the Hoolihan brothers (and for ‘Hoolihan,’ read ‘hooligan’) are seen fighting in the street over a stick (“it’s my stick, so it is”), an Irish couple of superior extraction give their verdict:
ANNE: The Irish that give the Irish a bad name are here before us John.

JOHN: Aye, we'll have to grin and bear it as usual. (37)

Or later, news of a mixed marriage receives the following rejoinder: “Irish and Jewish, that’s the worst mix. You end up with a family of pissed up burglars run by a clever accountant” (77). The problems attendant on juggling with racial stereotypes are well summed up by Bhargava:

The failure to respect difference and a pronounced tendency to misrecognise [it] is often underpinned by the process known as stereotyping. A stereotype is a one-sided description generated when complex difficulties are reduced to a simple cardboard cut-out. Different attributes are condensed into one, crudely exaggerated and then suffixed to an individual, group or culture. At the end of this process the subject is viewed exclusively through this cut-out and any evidence challenging it is brushed aside. […] It is a commonplace that communal politics thrives on false stereotypes which constrain rather than help intercultural understanding. (14)

The director, Nicholas Hytner, has attempted to justify the use of stereotypes, in terms of its even-handedness and what he claims is its obviously self-regulatory presentation:

The play lampoons all forms of stereotyping. It is a boisterous satire of stereotypes of French, Irish, Jews, Bangladeshis, white East End cockneys, Hampstead liberals and many others […] Every stereotype is placed in the context of its opposite and it clearly sets out to demonstrate that all forms of racism are equally ridiculous. (qtd. in “On-stage protest”)

Whilst Richard Bean was also quite clear on the issue in his platform performance, arguing that his use of stereotypes is intended to be treated critically – that they are voiced by various of his characters, and not by him – but, as I will argue later, as we move into the final act it becomes progressively more and more difficult to separate the political sentiments uttered in the play from those of its author. We might usefully compare Bean’s treatment with Trevor Griffiths’s masterly demolition of racial stereotypes in his 1975 play Comedians. When, in the course of a session on the use of stereotypes, the teacher, Eddy Waters, offers a particularly grotesque account of the Irish, concluding “Send ‘em back to the primordial bog they came from. Potato heads,” it is left to the Irish comedian, Connors, to respond: “(slowly) Would that be Southern Irish or Northern Irish, Mr Waters?” (Comedians 19).
There seemed anyway to be a clear gap, at least on the night that I saw the play, between its potential to offend in its conjuring with the worst excesses of racial stereotypes at a time of perceived heightened racial tension and the reaction of the audience, whose loud appreciation culminated in a standing ovation at the end. Now, doubtless that reaction occurred in part because the audience had had constructed for them a liberal vehicle it perceived as being in need of defending, and therefore applauding. Another way of putting this is to say that because it is a play within a play there are effectively two audiences for the piece: the actual audience at the National Theatre, an audience totally unfamiliar with the day-to-day activity of a real Immigration Centre, and that imaginary audience, including the people playing the roles in the play within the play, who are to be found in the Immigration Centre. The two audiences are to be targeted in slightly different ways, as the producer, Philippa, is clear about in the supposedly real-life prologue to the first act. She interrupts an argument: “Stop! You’ve spent six months devising this play. Six months learning how England became a liberal, tolerant, democratic society. It would be a shame to cancel the show, but I can, because the work was in the work” (12).

It is impossible to underestimate the importance of this speech, especially when we learn in the counterpart prologue to Act IV that it “includes a portrait of your marriage. St John and Camilla, St John and Philippa [...]. Camilla is a liberal, and you make her an idiot.” In Act IV, these two characters represent the bourgeois arrivistes:

CAMILLA: What I love about Spitalfields, is the eclectic mix, all humanity is here.
ST JOHN: And the houses are cheaper than Hampstead. (96)

He is almost immediately mugged by a Bangladeshi gang – one of the things objected to by Hussain Ismail: “Richard Bean is making it seem like all Bangladeshis are drug dealers or users, muggers and marry their cousins” (qtd. in Adams) – and it is hard not to find in the character of St John a rather sardonic representation of the play’s author, Richard Bean, himself a recent arrival in London’s East End. And it is this connection between a national vision of societal change and its specific location in Bethnal Green that is both central to the structuring of the play and to the mixed reactions it has had, particularly outside of the theatre.
This is because, as the narrative of the play affirms, London’s East End has been, and continues to be, a contested area in racial terms.

One of the difficulties of the play is that the various histories are not treated equally, either in terms of the amount of coverage they receive or in the theatrical style in which they are presented. Although the play consists of four acts, it is actually divided, where the interval is taken, between the first three and the final acts. The first half goes all the way from the seventeenth century to 1904, and the second only from 1941 to the present. The central narrative thrust of the first three acts, after the initial rapes-and-murders sequence is over, is towards integration. The Huguenots (Act I), the Irish (Act II) and the Jews (Act III) are introduced into the East End and into the play and, after a period of territorial dispute, settled there. In each act a pair of young cross-racial lovers is introduced, played by the same actors and their first eyes-meeting-across-a-crowded-stage moment being accompanied by the same lovers’ musical refrain. If it sounds familiar, then Bean has his Palestinian, Taher, ram home the point at the end of the first half: “The play is like four Romeo and Juliets” (69). The point of the recurrent plot motif is to demonstrate symbolically the main tenet of Bean’s discourse on integration: in his own words on the platform, “Love consumes hate. That is the essence of the play,” and again, “Integration means marrying and becoming English” – or in Philippa’s response to Taher’s Shakespearean allusion above, “the truest measure of racial and cultural integration in any society is the rate of inter-marriage” (69).

There are, however, other recurrent motifs. In Act I we have our first meeting with the mob of male bullies that will pop up each time new immigrants appear:

 […] A gang of apprentices armed with knives and scissors arrives […]
HUGO: One on one, the Frogs, they’re fucking nothing! (21)

This threat of violence against the newcomers is accompanied by another, more sinister, repeated refrain. It echoes the most infamous declamation against immigration to Britain in the modern period, already cited above. In the seventeenth century, the character Rennie greets news of the arrival of the French Huguenots with, “There’ll be rivers of blood boy! War, across Europe!” (18). And in Act II the same character declares of the arrival of the Irish, “The rivers of London will run with
blood boy.” The echo is, of course, to Enoch Powell’s Birmingham speech of 1968, and in particular to his emotive use of the Virgilian prophecy “wars, terrible wars, and the Tiber foaming with much blood” from the *Aeneid*:

‘The Sikh communities’ campaign to maintain customs inappropriate in Britain is much to be regretted. Working in Britain, particularly in the public services, they should be prepared to accept the terms and conditions of their employment. To claim special communal rights (or should one say rites?) leads to a dangerous fragmentation within society. This communalism is a canker; whether practised by one colour or another it is to be strongly condemned.

All credit to John Stonehouse for having had the insight to perceive that, and the courage to say it. For these dangerous and divisive elements the legislation proposed in the Race Relations Bill is the very pabulum they need to flourish. Here is the means of showing that the immigrant communities can organise to consolidate their members, to agitate and campaign against their fellow citizens, and to overawe and dominate the rest with the legal weapons which the ignorant and the ill-informed have provided. As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see ‘the River Tiber foaming with much blood.’ (Powell)

Bean’s careful echo serves as an ominous reminder of the fate that awaits both the individual and the nation if the inter-marriage/intercultural strategy is not pursued. It is ominous because, whether by intent or not, Powell’s stance on immigration was seen as virtually indistinguishable from those of racist organisations, such as the National Front, on the far right of the non-parliamentary agenda. Furthermore, Powell was a member of the same Conservative Party, for whom the notorious Peter Griffiths had been successful in Smethwick, next door to Powell’s own constituency of Wolverhampton, against the then Labour Foreign Minister, Patrick Gordon-Walker, in 1964, running with the slogan, “If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour.”

This is not the only significant recall of right-of-centre Conservative Party rhetoric that the play makes, however. In the first act an English Protestant Bishop meets with a newly arrived French counterpart, De Gascoigne. Anticipating the accession of the protestant William of Orange, the English Bishop asks a key question: “If he were to become King, William will lead us in war against France. Will you cheer for England or cheer for France?” and receives the following answer from him:

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4 The connection is made explicit in Act IV (107).
“That would be a test” (20). And, indeed, in a very brief stage time the war with France is on, and De Gascoigne is well on his way to becoming a true Englishman, as he points out to his congregation – “Watcha! Turned out nice again! Cheer up love, it might never happen! Worse things happen at sea! Yes, I am speaking English! If you have difficulty understanding me I might ask you why. Some of you still have the fleurs de lis tattooed on your hearts. Your children, born here, cockaneeyes, still speak French – why?” (29). And this from a man who had entered the act with separatist ambitions!

Bean’s reference point here – and again it is important to note that it is a quite deliberate echo – is to the Tory politician Norman Tebbit’s infamous formulation in 1990 of what came to be known in popular discourse as the “Cricket Test.” In an interview with the Los Angeles Times he said: “A large proportion of Britain’s Asian population fail to pass the cricket test. Which side do they cheer for? It’s an interesting test. Are you still harking back to where you came from or where you are?” (Howe). Bean’s immediately previous play, The English Game (2008), had developed the question to punctuate the entire narrative of a play about a game of cricket. In Act III, Theo’s determination to fit in when he makes his permanent retirement move to France is countered by his friend Will’s increasingly frenetic displacement of the argument back onto aggressively defended British territory: so strong is the force of his anger that it is scarcely touched by Theo’s liberal connection with the war in Iraq:

WILL: You’ve got ten years before you retire to France.
THEO: Yes, but when we go to live there permanently, we’re determined not to do that ex-pat thing of whist drives, and –
WILL: – Cricket?
THEO: There are cricket teams in the Perigord but I’m determined not to play.
CLIVE: You should play it on their village greens! Under their noses!
WILL: Every immigrant community that comes into this country – we bend over backwards to encourage them to keep their lousy cultures ticking over […] Not just ticking over, flourishing, expanding and yet you, with the most beautiful gift on earth […] daren’t play it in France for fear of offending the locals…
THEO: Yes, but we want to fit in. To be at least Frenchish.
REG: (On his Blackberry) Oh bloody hell! One of them London bombers has left hundred and fifty-seven thousand pounds in his will.
WILL: I hope they confiscate that money and build a bloody synagogue... They nearly killed me that day. They're racists, they're fascists, and they're bastards.

THEO: Oh come on! If we hadn't got ourselves involved in an illegal war in Iraq (The English Game 96)

Whilst in Act II this move to designate the real contemporary threat to Britain is carefully globalised:

WILL: [about his three student children] None of them have been taught to think, and consequently all of them are morally illiterate. The only thing any of them will be able to do is get a job.

NICK: They're students, sex and drugs and rock and roll.

WILL: I hope they are doing sex and drugs and rock and roll. It's the way my children seem to accept, unquestioningly, that all Israelis are Nazis; America is evil, obviously; Hamas are – (70)

It is a theme that is made unambiguously clear, and re-linked with Britain and Europe, in Act III:

CLIVE: Will just suggested that this country's pusillanimous liberal left political elite have established the orthodoxy of multiculturalism to such an extent that the nation is sleepwalking towards the establishment of a European Islamic caliphate. (100)

Again, the extremity of Clive's rhetoric might be attributed to the fact that he is presented as the most explicitly racist character in The English Game. However, whereas in plays such as David Edgar's Destiny (1971), for example, racist sentiments are given to characters in order that they might be questioned and, indeed, demolished by the responses of other characters, here there is no such clear sense. And this is where the complications really begin with England People; and to properly appreciate the nature of these complications necessitates an understanding of the difference between the first (the first three acts) and the second half (Act IV) of the play. Put simply, the further Bean gets away from the present the easier it is for him to impose a simplistic pattern of immigration and integration onto his narrative. But it is a theme that is already wearing thin by the end of Act III, where Morrie announces a move towards separatism and to what will become a largely Jewish community: “My uncle, he's moved out to this little village. Very quiet. Hendon” (63). In Act IV, Bean's particular version of interculturalism (via assimilation both symbolised and realised by inter-marriage) comes
increasingly up against its counterpart, multiculturalism in its most separatist form: that is to say, a refusal to integrate.

This change is a result not only of the greater complexity of events close to, and contemporary with, the playwright, including his own residence in Bethnal Green. It comes also from the intrusion of external factors that, as we have seen, have preoccupied Bean in The English Game and are evidenced almost from the outset in England People. In the prologue, the Palestinian character Taher bad-mouths the Israelis, to which the liberal director Philippa responds with a somewhat problematically jokey, “Taher! If you mention Israel again today, you’re back in your cell […] If you’d like to go to Guantanamo Bay it can be arranged" (11). Furthermore, the first half ends, as does the prologue to the second half, with similar reactions to Taher from Philippa: “Taher, would you, could you, please just fuck off out of my sight” (69), and, explaining her non-understanding of a scripted joke, “because it’s my English humour not your Gaza strip humour” (72).

‘Israel,’ ‘Guantanamo Bay,’ the ‘Gaza strip’: in his platform interview, Richard Bean said that “the last two or three plays I have written have all been about the state of the nation.” The question starts to arise: which state and which nation? The notion that the action on stage might in some way represent a larger social entity – as put characteristically pithily by Richard Eyre: “a room becomes a world, a group of characters become the whole society” (qtd. in Callow 68) – is, of course, a commonplace but, given the apparent simplicity of England People’s structure, the process of decoding this relationship is surprisingly complicated. The whole of the play is concerned with events that are both specific to Bethnal Green and of general relevance to the nation as a whole. In the first three acts the fact that there is not a perfect fit – that there might be factors related to East London that do not apply in quite the same way elsewhere – is not particularly important. The narrative is so simplified that the particular and local series of waves of immigration can be taken metaphorically, to represent that “larger social entity.” However, by the fourth act – and on occasions signposted in advance in the first three acts – the construction of this ‘metaphorical relationship’ has altered completely.
The immigrant groups in the first three acts are presented by Bean as initially, and very briefly, associated with their roots of origin (though in a much more complicated way in the case of the Jews in Act III), but they are all quite quickly able to be equipped with British personae. This does not happen in Act IV. Although the Romeo and Juliet stand-ins – in this case Deborah and Mushi – end the effective action of the play together and en route to the safety of Redbridge (122), in the second half of the play the process of integration is played down in favour of an overall presentation of separatism. The mechanical symbolism of an individual inter-marriage, symbolism that worked adequately well in the pantomimic happy-ever-after context of the first three acts, is just not strong enough to excise the general tenor of the fourth act.

For the audience, the difference, to a large extent, arises from the distance, or lack of distance, between the events, but it is also coloured by the way in which Bean presents the characters’ speech. In Act I, the French priest De Gascoigne, quoted earlier, delivers his isolationist rhetoric:

> Like you, I am here in Brick Lane, in England this foul smelling swamp, only because I want to worship my God free from the constraints of Papal instruction, and the threat of death. Like lovers in exile, we must maintain French culture. The English are drunks, incapable of intellectual discourse, they make a god of common sense, they hate their children, and would always rather be ‘unting. We French are superior in all things, watchmaking, textiles, armoury, and, of course, love. […] Londoners fear our style, our sophistication, our romancing. They will not allow us through the gates into the city. So, outside the gates, right here, let’s build French homes, in streets with French names, and through extraordinary and relentless love making, let us populate these streets with French children, and create a new Nimes, a new Perpignan, a new Paris! (21)

Even before the audience hear De Gascoigne’s rapid conversion to cockney dialect (referred to above), it perceives this discourse as uncomplicatedly comic not only because historical distance, as well as historical events, make it so unthreatening, but because it is playing with well-rehearsed and safe national stereotypes of both the French and the English. In contrast, the rhetoric of the militant Imam in Act IV raises real problems for an audience:

> You Muslims living in the West, you care more about how often your bins are emptied, than how your women dress. If a farmer wants to judge a bull, he does
not look at the bull, he looks at what the cows are up to. And Allah will judge you! In *Jew York*, (Laughs.) my little joke, in *Jew York* the women there had no discipline. (Laughs.) And then they were disciplined! (Laughs.) A woman must suck the snot from your nostrils if you ask her to! (120)

It is just about impossible to argue for this as yet another stereotype set up for audience laughter, and it is almost equally difficult to believe that Richard Bean expected such a response. It may be seen by many as a grotesque caricature but it is unclear whether it is intended to be. If it is a joke, it is – to quote Eddy Waters from Griffiths’ *Comedians* – “a joke that hates women” (22), as well as being anti-Semitic, in both cases in a way which effectively creates audience hostility towards not only the character but also to what he can be seen to represent. But, above all, the scarcely veiled glance at 9/11 and New York (“And then they were disciplined”) moves this particular representation of Islam onto a world stage, in a manner comparable to the connection made with the London bombings of July 7, 2005, in *The English Game* (97). Given that the London bombings are experienced and the television footage of the destruction of the Twin Towers witnessed by characters in Act IV makes the connection between immigration in London’s East End and international terrorism quite explicit. The original concern with events in Bethnal Green is not only eventually linked to terrorism in London and to 9/11, but it is so linked in a play that increasingly re-contextualises events in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict: the local, the national and the international events are knotted together. That it should be the Palestinian, Taher, who provokes the only politically-motivated responses from the play’s director – a Taher who is made to end the play apologising to Philippa (124) – is in itself significant. Moreover, the point is reinforced by another event in contemporary London theatre. On March 12, 2009, almost exactly two weeks after I saw *England People*, David Hare first performed his one-man piece *Wall* at the Royal Court Theatre. A companion-piece to *Berlin*, with which it was subsequently performed as a double bill, it was an attempt – from a purposefully non-partisan position – to talk about the wall constructed between Israel and Palestine, a wall that “will one day be over four times as long as the Berlin Wall, and in some places twice as high” (31). Hare’s direct response to the conflict had, however, already been preceded by another Royal Court production that had opened on
February 6, pre-dating the first night of Bean’s play and making no secret of its partisanship. Caryl Churchill’s short piece *Seven Jewish Children* consists of a series of addresses from Israeli “parents and if you like other relations of the children” (1) attempting to explain and to justify the measures taken against the Palestinians. There is never any doubt as to Churchill’s intent. The last monologue and the piece concludes:

Tell her they want their children killed to make people sorry for them, tell her I’m not sorry for them, tell her not to be sorry for them, tell her we’re the ones to be sorry for, tell her they can’t talk suffering to us. Tell her we’re the iron fist now, tell her it’s the fog of war, tell her we won’t stop killing them till we’re safe, tell her I laughed when I saw the dead policeman, tell her they’re animals living in rubble now, tell her I wouldn’t care if we wiped them out, the world would hate us is the only thing, tell her I don’t care if the world hates us, tell her we’re better haters, tell her we’re chosen people, tell her I look at one of their children covered in blood and what do I feel? Tell her all I feel is happy it’s not her.

Don’t tell her that.

Tell her we love her.

Don’t frighten her. (6)

In his platform interview, Richard Bean twice referred disparagingly to what he called “the Hampstead Hamas,” to the kind of enthusiastic response from a section of the audience that made clear that it understood very well his angry nod towards the Royal Court Theatre. Bean’s support for Israel over Palestine is unambiguous, and it is very hard for him or for an audience to separate it from his treatment of the implications of Muslim immigration into Bethnal Green and into Britain in the play that followed the interview.

It would be very foolish to make a direct connection between Bean’s distaste for, amongst other things, Churchill’s play and the sentiments of his own, however, for there are many different voices to be heard in *England People*. For instance, in Act IV the Council Housing Officer, Barry, is specifically associated with the BNP and paraphrases its re-worked dogma: “It won’t be long before my party does have a black candidate. After 9/11, and today, skin colour is irrelevant” (107). What it does mean, though, is that the fact that the play becomes palpably less even-handed as it progresses, and that the arrival of the most recent
wave of immigrants does not receive the same kind of treatment as that accorded previous ones, makes Bean’s construction of contemporary Bethnal Green extremely problematic at the very least; indeed, many might have varying degrees of agreement with Hussain Ismail’s contention that it is more than problematic. The fact that St John, the character who is clearly intended as a kind of sardonic representation of the author, only appears in the final act gives his interventions a very particular significance. Confronted with a niqab-wearing mother at his child’s nursery school, his response is one that seizes, in a carefully calm manner, on the question of intentional separation over the desired model of integration that is at the core of the play ideologically: “I refuse to be lectured to about ‘normality’ by a woman wearing a two-man tent. [...] The girls in this nursery wear headscarves. Is it normal for a British five-year-old to feel the sun on the back of her neck? You refused to shake my hand. Is that ‘normal’ behaviour for a grown up?” (115).

In his platform interview Bean described himself thus: “Politically I am a liberal hawk… a wet liberal too... What I am absolutely prepared to do is to defend liberalism.” After St John has tried to defend himself before being mugged in Act IV of the play, he is similarly labelled by Mushi: “Only a liberal blames himself when he gets mugged” (100). Bean also said that “the last two or three plays I have written have all been about the state of the nation.” The import of these two statements is reflected precisely in *England People*, for what it accurately reflects is the current national confusion over issues of multiculturalism and interculturality. That is why its presence in the National Theatre in the nation’s capital city is so significant. It offers itself as a public contribution to that national confusion. Although the play posits a simplistic answer (in Bean’s own words, “Love conquers hate. That is the essence of the play”), it actually leaves an audience with nothing but questions, both about the subject under discussion and about the playwright’s own position, as an asylum tourist in a strange country.
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England People Very Nice: Intercultural Confusions

Cross-Cultural Similarities and Intra-Cultural Hybridity in Richard Bean’s *The God Botherers*

1 Introduction

Look at my play *The God Botherers*, there’s a really violent criticism of Islam in that play. There’s clitoridectomy as a plot device, there’s a severe deconstruction of Christianity in Africa and everything. But all it got was nice reviews and a full house and then it was all over. I was expecting to be killed, I was expecting a fatwa, which only proves you can’t excite anybody really.

(Richard Bean; qtd. in Sierz 41)

This comment on his black comedy *The God Botherers*, which received its world première at The Bush Theatre in London in November 2003, was made by Richard Bean in an interview with Aleks Sierz in 2004. Though merely a brief description, it hints at the sometimes latent, sometimes shockingly explicit xenophobia and religious intolerance expressed by the characters in his play.

That Bean did not encounter any public recrimination for the outspokenness and irreverence of his play might have several reasons. First of all, the discriminatory remarks have an ironic undertone and by deliberate exaggeration turn actual stereotypes and expressions of racism into ridicule – although it might be debatable whether this parody of stereotypes is actually amusing for those at the receiving end of such cynicism. Secondly, such invidiousness is by turns directed at all parties involved, no matter what religion, nationality or culture they represent. Most of
all, however, Bean undermines common stereotypes by illustrating that the reductive perception of intercultural differences is based on a disregard for similarities and for interrelations among cultures. By shifting the focus from intercultural differences to cross-cultural similarities as well as to intra-cultural hybridity, he challenges the notions of cultural authenticity and nationhood and proves these inflexible categories to be inadequate to account for the actual diversity and variety of individual relationships.

2 Intercultural Conflict

The plot of *The God Botherers* deals with the encounter between the English human aid workers Keith, Laura and Harsha and a local community in the fictional country of Tambia, which is vaguely set “somewhere in the developing world” (13). Not only is Tambia’s location undefined, the very name of the country remains imprecise throughout the play. Laura, for example, wonders whether it is called “the Tambia” or merely “Tambia,” only to conclude with the comment “Who cares if I’m in the wrong country” (13). This indifference to the name of the country suggests that the exact fictional location is irrelevant, since Tambia merely functions as a representative of the so-called Third World. Thus, the frequent references to AIDS, famine, poverty, bribing (22-23, 35), ballot rigging (50, 64-68) and poor infrastructure (14) serve to enhance the impression of a generally backward and underdeveloped country. This Third World setting is juxtaposed to an equally stereotypical First World as represented by the English human aid workers. They conceive of England as the epitome of progress and harbinger not only of law, order and human rights but also of cultural achievements such as Shakespeare, cricket etc. (80).

At the outset, religion – more than national differences with regard to progressiveness and standards of living – appears to be a bone of contention that diametrically opposes England and Tambia in a seemingly unbridgeable contrast of Christian West and Islamic East. The strict regulations of Sharia law, such as the prohibition of physical contact between men and women (18), clash with more liberal Christian morals with regard to sexuality and alcohol and thus hamper coexistence and
Richard Bean’s The God Botherers

collaboration. Consequently, Laura wonders despairingly: “How do you get anything done in this country if there’s no touching?!” (34).

Yet, religious conflict in Tambia is not presented as a new phenomenon but turns out to have a long tradition. As the title The God Botherers suggests, Keith, Laura and Harsha are cast in the roles of modern missionaries. Their local assistant and cultural go-between Monday not only implicitly links their development project to the first violent encounter between white missionaries and natives (58-59), but his name is explicitly referred to by Laura as being “a Missionary name” (18). Moreover, Monday’s name is reminiscent of Robinson Crusoe’s Friday, who was converted to Christianity and is often interpreted as a symbol of imperialist oppression. In a way, contemporary development aid thus appears to be a modern version of Western missionary zeal: in the name of Westernisation, the human aid workers’ new mission is to instil faith in the ‘God’ of Western culture as represented, for example, by modern technology and glossy magazines. Religious conflict persists also in prejudices and lack of respect, as illustrated by Laura’s disrespectful and offensive likening of Muslim heaven to a pornographic fantasy (71). Although Laura tries to understand local Islamic practices, such ignorant judgements are merely based on her rudimentary knowledge of a few pages of the Koran (25) and “The Idiot’s Guide to Islam” (29).

Prejudices and intolerance, however, are also common within the Muslim community as, for instance, in Monday’s remark that “Islam is the top religion. Except Shi’a Muslims. They’re all coconut heads” (21). Moreover, intercultural misunderstandings and discrimination are not exclusively triggered by religion and are not restricted to the relationship between English and Tambian characters. Scandinavian blondes (14), vegetarian Buddhists (60), Spanish Nazis (80), Libyan human rights violators (81), “Dutch transvestites” (81), “bloody Americans” (81) etc. – all receive their share of racist insults.

3 Cross-Cultural Similarities and Acculturation

In the course of the play, Bean challenges such prejudices and expressions of xenophobia and subverts the initial opposition of Christian
West and Islamic East by directing his attention to cross-cultural affinities and religious parallels.

To begin with, a common basis is claimed for different religions. Accordingly, Monday, who himself combines various faiths, observes that the question of faith “doesn’t matter because my God is all the same man!” (19). In an atheist inversion of Monday’s claim, Laura asserts that Christians and Muslims are equally deluded because they believe in “the same God that doesn’t exist” (74). Moreover, many Islamic practices that are criticised by the supposedly Christian characters turn out to have their equivalents in other religions and cultures. Laura, for example, asserts that clitoridectomy is not an Islamic idiosyncrasy but also exists in certain Christian countries (39-40) and she wonders whether stoning according to Sharia law is any worse than executions as practiced in America (29-30). Polygamy, strictly speaking, is not restricted to Islamic countries either, because Keith entered a new relationship before divorcing his wife (34). And whereas it appears to be a question of interpretation whether the Koran allows or even commands fustigation of women (21, 65), Keith and Laura claim to have been abused in Christian institutions (49). Thus, contrary to first appearances, Islamic and Christian cultures seem to have more in common than initially assumed.

Additionally, in the course of the play both cultures converge through acculturation and indigenisation of aspects of the ‘other’ culture. The process of acculturation, however, turns out to be unbalanced; although no unilateral assimilation, it still mostly proceeds from the Tambians’ adaptation to Western culture. This is illustrated, for example, by the excessive spread of mobile phones and an uncritical fascination with Laura’s *Cosmopolitan* and Heat magazines. Although the title of *Cosmopolitan* ironically suggests global orientation, it becomes obvious that it represents Western sexual morals and is only concerned with Western celebrities, whom Monday considers to be far too skinny for local taste (32). Nevertheless, the Tambian customs officers apparently confiscate the copies out of personal interest (69), and Keith’s local lover Ibrahima enjoys sharing the reported indecencies and gossip with her friends to an extent quite inappropriate for a Muslim woman (45). A similar imbalance and dominance of Western culture can be detected in Keith’s relationship with Ibrahima, which borders on
prostitution and sexual exploitation (72), and in Laura’s affair with a coloured Tambian, which she apologetically explains with the discriminating remark “If you shut your eyes he could be English” (35).

Western impact on local culture is explained as being fuelled by a thirst for adventure as well as an altruistic wish to improve the local standard of living. As Harsha explains in a rather unsophisticated manner, “I guess, I kinda just needed to do something adventurous, you know, even a bit scary. And of course, you know, I really really do want to try and make some kinda contribution, you know, on a global level” (93). This contribution is constituted not only by the import of magazines but also by an implementation of Western technology, capitalism, music and food. Yet, while most of the measures introduced by the human aid workers signify an improvement, they simultaneously confront the Tambians with formerly unknown problems. The support of local retail trade boosts the poor economy (41) but also makes it subject to Western capitalist schemes, as expressed in Keith’s succinct motto: “Improve productivity. Cut costs. Find new markets” (25). The installation of the first tap with running water allegedly corrupts local women by affording them additional time for sinful activities, because they no longer need to go and fetch water (64), and it causes Monday to lose his income from selling water (51-52). The introduction of mobile phones leads to independence from the apparently unreliable service of British and Tambian phone companies (37, 41) and improves communication, especially among women, but the mobile phones also clash with local traditions when their ringing disturbs prayer (79). Likewise, internet improves communication and solidarity as in the global chain prayer for the pregnant Ibrahima (78), while also delivering sexually explicit spam mails (76). Finally, television offers dubious entertainment by broadcasting pornography (61) and video footage celebrating the collapse of the World Trade Centre (64). That well-intentioned global aid sometimes rather aggravates local problems is moreover ironically hinted at in the last scene, when a smoking and drinking Laura enthusiastically describes her next human aid project of stopping the spread of nicotine and alcohol abuse in Bhutan (92). Hence, Western influences are neither positive nor negative in themselves but range from encroachment to enrichment of local conditions, depending on their specific contexts.
Yet, the English characters are not altogether immune to influences from the local culture either. Consequently, Laura and Keith internalise local practices such as haggling over water-prices and bribing and revise their initial judgement that these procedures are pointless or criminal (22, 26, 32-33). Moreover, they easily absorb elements such as clothing and food. Laura, for example, welcomes the Islamic veil as a sign of respect for women (21, 29) and declares Yam foo foo to be her favourite dish (22). Cross-cultural acceptance and convergence eventually culminates in Monday and Laura’s marriage. Love thus appears to be an efficient remedy against cultural conflicts that bridges the cultural divide for good.

At times, both English and Tambian characters even display an uncritical and exaggerated enthusiasm for the other culture. I want to use the term ‘hyper-assimilation’ to refer to this cultural self-denial that implies an excessive identification with the foreign culture and occasionally even exceeds the level of identification on the part of the representatives of that foreign culture themselves. This applies to Laura’s extolling of veiling as an expression of respect for women (21, 29), her justification of stoning (29), her acceptance of clitoridectomy (45) and her denial of the link between terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism (29). Similarly, Monday displays tendencies that are more Western than the behaviour of any of the actual Western characters. He listens to the BBC World Service (28), quotes Richard Nixon when being threatened by a python (18) and prefers building a CD-rack to devising a maize-crib that would prevent the corn cobs from rotting (62). Possibly, Monday and Laura’s shared propensity to hyper-assimilate explains why they do not shy away from the intercultural engagement of marrying each other.

In spite of the examples of mutual acculturation and hyper-assimilation, none of the characters completely sacrifices his or her own culture in favour of the foreign culture. In the spirit of give and take, customs are exchanged, indigenised and combined: local defence-strategies of intimidating wild animals with the excrement of lions exist alongside Western weapons (28), and high heels are nonchalantly combined with burqua and veil (13). Occasionally, tolerance is reached even in spite of opposing beliefs and convictions. Thus, Laura accepts
Iibrahima’s faith that the Earth Spirit will decide on her baby’s sex (66, 77), and, in return, Iibrahima requests her to pray to the Christian God to give her a son (78); but although both Laura and Iibrahima accept the other’s faith they basically stay true to their own beliefs or atheism.

4 Glocalisation and (Re-)Invention of Locality

By stressing cross-cultural similarities and by presenting acculturation as involving concessions from both cultures, Bean criticises ‘hyperglobalist’ positions that too easily and superficially equate contemporary globalisation with Westernisation or even Americanisation. Instead, his fictional perspective on globalisation presents it as a reciprocal or even multi-directional process. For although the Tambians shift more towards Western culture than vice versa, there are counter-currents of Western adjustments to local culture that could be interpreted as instances of orientalisation.

In fact, Bean’s rejection of the hypothesis of globalisation as a one-way street of Westernisation challenges reductive polarisations of West versus East and global versus local. His perspective is therefore in keeping with the concept of ‘glocalisation’ as introduced by sociologist Roland Robertson. Robertson criticises the idea of a global-local antinomy as “false consciousness” (Globalization 165) and questions simplistic hypotheses according to which the spread of the global threatens the local. Consequently, his coinage ‘glocalisation’ implies both the “universalisation of particularism and the particularisation of universalism” (Globalization 100), meaning that local trends spread globally at the same time that global trends are localised to conform to local circumstances. This observation is in line with the argument of sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse, who also discards the reductive view of globalisation as standardised Westernisation by arguing that globalisation involves mutual influences between Western and non-Western cultures as

1 Held et al. establish a tripartite distinction of attitudes towards globalisation, according to which “hyperglobalizers” predict cultural homogenisation, “sceptics” insist on heterogenisation, and “transformationalists” complement these positions by arguing that globalisation engenders new hybrid cultures (327).
well as cultural exchange among non-Western cultures; moreover, he points out that Western influences are not usually transferred one to one to local cultures but tend to be indigenised and adjusted in order to conform to local circumstances (Nederveen Pieterse, “Globalization as Hybridization” 53). Accordingly, globalisation entails localisation and produces an amalgam of global and local, Western and non-Western influences.

Yet Bean further deconstructs the notion of a juxtaposition of a dominant, homogenising global culture and threatened local cultures by illustrating how global influences can even have a strengthening effect on local communities and create a renewed interest in, and appreciation of, locality. In The God Botherers, this re-evaluation of local customs proceeds from both within local culture and from the outside. On the one hand, the religious conflicts between Muslims and Christians temporarily make both Ibrahima and Monday turn to Tambia’s original religion in the form of the local Poro Earth Spirit (79, 83-85). On the other hand, Laura successfully markets the local circumcision festival as an event for Western tourists (43), because she recognises the Western fascination with supposedly authentic traditions in a world that is perceived to be increasingly homogenised by global culture. That expressions of locality are attractive to outsiders and tend to be romanticised and idealised as primeval and authentic traditions also becomes apparent in Laura’s enthusiasm for her supposedly traditional accommodation, which is in fact anything but authentically local due to its adjustment to global standards through the addition of air-conditioning, carpeting and a toilet (14).

Rather than posing a threat to the local, globalisation therefore enhances the interest in local cultures and at times not only causes a re-evaluation but even a (re-)invention of locality. As Robertson observes, “globalization has involved the reconstruction, in a sense the production, of ‘home’, ‘community’ and ‘locality’” (“Glocalization” 30).

Ethnologist and anthropologist Arjun Appadurai goes even further in his assertion that, irrespective of tendencies of globalisation, locality is always and necessarily threatened by adjoining cultures and is therefore never a finished product but constantly reconstructing and reinventing itself in defence against external influences. Thus he argues:
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Much that has been considered local knowledge is actually knowledge of how to produce and reproduce locality under conditions of anxiety and entropy, social wear and flux, ecological uncertainty and cosmic volatility, and the always present quirkiness of kinsmen, enemies, spirits, and quarks of all sorts. (Appadurai 181)

Among the mechanisms of (re-)production of locality, Appadurai explicitly mentions “rites of passage” such as circumcision, which he sees as an “inscription of locality onto bodies” (179). In this light, the Tambian circumcision festival can be interpreted not only as a staging of locality for Westerners but also as a production of locality by the locals themselves.

5 Intra-Cultural Hybridity and Cultural Authenticity

Bean illustrates the idea that cultures and nation-states are mosaics of disparate influences from various cultures, which form a loose assemblage rather than a coherent whole. In The God Botherers, such intra-cultural hybridity is symbolically expressed, for example, in the widespread consumption of “Sun beer,” a product of various cultures and hence a global mélange. As Keith explains, “it’s a wheat-based German recipe made under licence in Morocco. Nigerian army deserters driving diesel Peugeot 405s smuggle it through as far as Lakpat. It’s got added sugar to suit the Tambian taste for sugar” (15-16).

Above all, however, intra-cultural diversity features prominently in the potpourri of religions. On the one hand, the English characters are anything but devout and observant Christians. Although they officially claim to be members of the Church of England in order to be exempt from Islamic Sharia law (16), their religiosity amounts to little more than Christmas celebrations complete with turkey-dinner (89). Whereas Laura, for instance, denies the existence of any deities (74), Harsha comes from a Hindu background (93), yet merely believes in an abstract “spiritual dimension” (94) and classifies herself as an agnostic (93). On the other hand, Tambia is not presented as an exclusively Islamic country either, although Laura initially conceives of it as “pretty much all Muslim” (19). As Keith explains, the locals are not only split into Sunni Muslims and Shi’a Muslims but also combine their Islamic faith
with the Poro and Sande cult and, occasionally, Christianity (19). Moreover, even within the Muslim community Sunnites and Shiites quarrel and assault each other (27). Monday, however, provides the best example of hybridity in the sense of a transcendence of religious borders: born as a Muslim, raised as a Christian, circumcised according to Jewish tradition, yet also adhering to the Poro religion (18-19), he opportunistically chooses his faith and stages its external manifestations according to circumstances. Thus, he simply exchanges his fez hat for his Christian “drinking hat” (20), whenever he wants to be exempt from the strict regulations of Sharia Law with regard to alcohol, and alternately claims to be Christian or Poro when being beaten up for having consumed alcohol (77). Religious affiliation, in other words, is not predetermined by his entrenchment in local culture or territory at all but rather appears to be a mere role or costume that can be put on and cast aside according to personal preferences.

Apart from its religious diversity, Tambia is also presented as a heterogeneous conglomerate of different ethnicities and tribes that thwart the development of a communal spirit and solidarity. Accordingly, Keith complains: “Nobody has any loyalty to Tambia as a nation state cos they’re all Kebbe first, or whatever their tribe is; they’re Muslim or Christian second; and only ever fucking Tambian when the football team’s on telly” (23). This lack of a shared identity is further illustrated by the gender divide as expressed in attempts to exclude women from elections (50, 64-68), but even more so in the gendered naming of the country as “Tambia” and “Tambekistan” (31) respectively. England as a nation-state, however, appears to be an equally fuzzy concept: whereas globetrotter and cosmopolitan Keith has given up residence in England long ago in order to travel the world for the NGO, the fact that Harsha’s parents are Hindus suggests that they are not originally of English descent.

Bean’s concern with intra-cultural hybridity also shows in his more recent and highly controversial play *England People Very Nice*, which was first performed at the National Theatre in London in February 2009. It portrays the successive arrival of several generations of immigrants from different countries and various religious backgrounds, who successively settle in a single community in London’s Bethnal Green. In
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this sense, it illustrates Bean’s observation made in a Guardian interview in January 2009: “England is an immigrant culture. We’re all immigrants” (Costa). The English nation is thus presented as a hybrid conglomerate of different ethnicities and religions. This is also exemplified by the alternating use of the local house of prayer as church, synagogue and mosque (England People 57, 90), which illustrates again that Islam and other religions are widely spread in the allegedly Christian West. The colour-blind casting of the 2009 production at the National Theatre in London further relativised the differences among these hybrid elements and underlined that, after all, they are all indiscriminately part of a deeply heterogeneous English culture.

Interestingly, in The God Botherers and England People Very Nice intra-cultural hybridity is by no means an exclusively modern phenomenon brought about by a contemporary interference of global trends with local cultures. Instead, it is presented as being deeply rooted in history, which is illustrated by Keith’s argument that the natural sciences were long ago imported from ancient Greece into the Arabic world (50-51). Accordingly, globalisation is to be understood as a continuation of earlier processes of intercultural exchange and is not to be deplored as a sudden disappearance of an earlier cultural authenticity and purity.

This presentation of the long history of globalisation corresponds to Manfred Steger’s observation that although globalisation has increased dramatically over the past decades in what he refers to as a “quantum leap in the history of globalization” since the early 1970s (35), globalisation is a much older process, in fact “as old as humanity itself” (19). Roland Robertson and Kathleen White agree with this statement and argue accordingly that “one might well say that when the first two ‘tribes’ met, then began globalization” (32). Yet, if cultures never existed in hermetically sealed isolation because religious, economic, geographical and political exchange among cultures dates back to time immemorial, it becomes clear that the notion of an initial state of pristine, authentic culture is inappropriate. Instead, it follows that cultural hybridity and métissage are the primeval state of cultures. Nederveen Pieterse develops this thought further by arguing that the encounter of inherently hybrid cultures cannot possibly result in global homogenisation as Westernisation but causes further hybridisation. To quote
Nederveen Pieterse, “contemporary accelerated globalization means the hybridization of hybrid cultures” (“Globalization as Hybridization” 64).

Thus, culture is no longer to be seen as an abstract and stable given, but results from historical and contemporary encounters and negotiations among cultures and individuals. As social anthropologist Jonathan Friedman observes, “culture is practised and constituted out of practice” (81). Yet, due to the theory of hybridisation not only notions of cultural purity and authenticity become obsolete. Race, ethnicity and nationality are equally exposed as elusive, socio-historical constructs or performative products. For although nation-states are undeniable political realities, nations are made up of various races, ethnicities and tribes. Accordingly, Appadurai observes a “contradiction between the idea that each nation-state can truly represent only one ethnos and the reality that all nation-states historically involve the amalgamation of many identities” (156). Hence, Appadurai declares the nation-state to be in crisis – though not completely outdated (19, 169) – and proposes to focus instead on “ethnoscapes” of groups and individuals who constantly move between nations (33). The decline of the nation-state and the decreasing relevance of national borders are also confirmed by Nederveen Pieterse, who consequently announces an era of “postnationalism” (Globalization and Culture 110). The dwindling relevance of concepts such as culture and nation, however, does not result in an indistinguishable and homogeneous mass of like-minded, interchangeable persons but instead makes way for an increasing importance of other categories such as religion, consumerism and individuality. Thus, religious differences and the negotiation of compromises among existing faiths function as a pivot of intercultural understanding in The God Botherers. Accordingly, the impact of religious conflict and fundamentalism is felt both locally in the extremism of the new Imam (20, 64) or the attacks and counterattacks among Christians and Muslims in Pakistan and Tambia (85) and globally in the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York (64).

Although Bean’s play perfectly illustrates the notion of cultural hybridity and the receding relevance of nation-states in a country like Tambia, where individual, ethnic and religious differences outweigh national solidarity, the characters prove to be much indebted still to the
idea of authentic, homogeneous and principally self-contained cultures and nations. In her endeavour to express acceptance and tolerance of Tambian culture, Laura rattles out the trite and hollow mottos she was taught by her supervisor at the NGO. “Work ‘in’ the culture, and ‘with’ the culture, not ‘against’ the culture” (26) or “the first responsibility of any culture is for its own survival” (30) admittedly are well-intended mantras, but they are based on a vague and simplistic concept of culture as a sharply delineated category. Similarly, Keith’s statement of “we can’t get involved” (72), with which he tries to persuade Laura to keep out of local affairs such as Ibrahima’s marriage, completely misses the point because it disregards the fact that English and Tambian culture are already interwoven and were never self-contained anyway. Instead, Laura’s answer of “we are involved” inadvertently gets to the heart of the matter.

6 Conclusion

Although Bean initially evokes cultural stereotypes in order to set up a binary opposition between global West and local Tambia, he is careful to paint a more differentiated picture of Tambian and English culture in the course of the play. By concentrating on cross-cultural similarities rather than on intercultural differences, he makes the differences between cultures appear to be relative and affirms their parallels instead.

Moreover, he presents the dynamics between cultures as multidirectional processes of intercultural acculturation, indigenisation of external influences and (re-)production of locality, which illustrates that globalisation is not simply to be equated with homogenisation, Westernisation or a wiping out of local cultures. Instead, Bean favours the concept of ‘glocalisation’ as a mutual interpenetration of global and local, Western and non-Western customs and attitudes.

Simultaneously, Bean’s depiction of intra-cultural hybridity challenges the notion of cultures and nation-states as homogeneous, authentic and self-contained entities and thus implies that glocalisation is a process that merges already hybrid cultures into a new amalgam rather than replacing one unified culture with another dominant culture. While the importance of categories such as culture, race, nation or territory
therefore recedes into the background, new categories such as religion and individuality gain new impact and illustrate the importance of looking beyond cultural stereotypes.

Obviously, *The God Botherers* is not to be misunderstood as a mere adaptation of current theories on globalisation to a fictional frame. Moreover, it does not end in a perfect and possibly utopian vision of successful intercultural understanding or a harmonious fusion of the global and the local as the eventual cultural inter-marriage of Laura and Monday might suggest. In *England People Very Nice*, love repeatedly transcends racial divides because “love laughs at the manufactured made up madness of religion and culture” (*England People* 113). Accordingly, the character Philippa claims that the “truest measure of racial and cultural integration in any society is the rate of inter-marriage” (*England People* 69). In *The God Botherers*, however, Bean paints a less optimistic picture of the power of love in inter-marriages. Here, intercultural relations constantly need to be negotiated anew and demand concessions and compromises. Consequently, by marrying Laura Monday has to give up his dream of having two Muslim wives who cook for him and instead has to content himself with a single atheist wife he has to cook for (95).

Most importantly, however, the intercultural understanding that is eventually achieved among human aid workers and locals on an individual and interpersonal micro-level does not necessarily transfer to the macro-level of foreign policy and international economic relations. As Laura cannot emphasise often enough, she and Keith are employed by an NGO (16, 35, 78) and are therefore independent of the British or any other government. Yet, as Keith points out, the Tambian government is in the hands of international oil companies who have established a “kleptocracy” (23), and he insinuates that France infiltrated government troops disguised as staff of a local French company (27). On the macro-political level, therefore, globalisation according to Bean still has Westernisation on its agenda. Moreover, with Islamic and Christian fundamentalism and the destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York looming in the background of the play, the characters’ relative religious indifference and tolerance are not more than a drop in the ocean. Instead of offering simple solutions to intercultural conflicts, Bean thus
Richard Bean’s The God Botherers raises questions about how to achieve intercultural understanding on a broader level.

Works Cited

Primary Literature:

Secondary Literature:


Introduction

When the National Theatre of Scotland, a critical endeavour pursued by the Scottish authorities for decades, was launched in February 2006, it was not really able to open its own doors to a theatre-going public. The reason for this is as simple as it is curious: the National Theatre of Scotland has no manifest premises; it follows a wholly different and distinct concept of ‘national theatre’ instead. As its Manifesto summarises:

> The National Theatre of Scotland has no building but instead will tour work to venues large and small all around Scotland, from Shetland in the north to Dumfries and Galloway in the south. [...] We are working across Scotland, independently and with local authorities, to bring drama in all its forms to schools and communities. [...] The National Theatre of Scotland will tour work internationally and will work in collaboration with the best international companies. (Featherstone)

It appears that the launch of the National Theatre of Scotland was the culmination of a development in Scottish theatre towards a drama which stresses and combines communal, national and international elements, i.e., a drama of inter- and intraculturality. Although they were never actually staged ‘in’ the National Theatre of Scotland, the plays of Henry Adam are exemplary of this development.
Adam, born in Wick, Caithness, Scotland, in 1964, began his work in youth and community theatre in the Highlands and in the north east of Scotland. In 2002, he received the prestigious Meyer Whitworth Award for *Among Unbroken Hearts* (jointly with Gregory Burke for *Gagarin Way*). According to the *Playwrights’ Studio* website, the award is made to the writer whose play shows “promise of a developing new talent,” is of individual quality in the writing and – most importantly – “embodies Geoffrey Whitworth’s dictum that ‘drama is important in so far as it reveals the truth about the relationships of human beings with each other and the world at large’” (“Playwrights’ Studio”). This paper will concentrate on this notion of ‘truth about the world at large’ in the context of Adam’s drama of interculturality.

Since Adam received the award, the playwright has constantly shifted his focus, moving from a local to a more global perspective, thereby touching upon different aspects of interculturality. His drama fulfils Christine Regus’s broad definition of intercultural theatre, namely that it combines elements of distinguishable cultures – whatever they may be – making this combination a central theme of the play (42). By identifying these manifold elements in Adam’s work, I would like to show that his shift in focus, while it seems to be a movement away from Scottish national issues, is at the same time paradigmatic of the emergence of a Scottish national theatre. I will first present a close reading of Adam’s plays *Among Unbroken Hearts* (2001), *The People Next Door* (2003) and *Petrol Jesus Nightmare #5 (In the Time of the Messiah)* (2006), the only three of his plays which have been published so far. Then, at the end of my paper, I intend to assess Adam’s drama of interculturality in terms of a contemporary Scottish theatre and what it stands for in the context of a national theatre.

2 Among Unbroken Hearts

The play *Among Unbroken Hearts*, partly written in thick Scottish dialect, is about the return of the main character Ray to the far north of Scotland, to a croft that used to be his childhood retreat for the school holidays and that he recently inherited from his grandmother. Ray is accompanied by his friend Neil. Both are twenty-something heroin
Henry Adam’s Drama of Interculturality

addicts, trying to get a break from dealers, junkies and the death by suicide of their friend Christie. During their escape into the countryside, Ray meets Chaimig, his former mentor and father figure, who is now seventy-four, blind and becoming senile. He is cared for by Amanda, the younger sister of Ray’s ex-girlfriend. She is a bright young girl who has decided not to go to university because Chaimig cannot manage on his own. Near the end of the play, Amanda is persuaded by Ray to accept Glasgow University’s offer as he would look after Chaimig. Ray even tries to get clean by going cold turkey. However, at the end he overdoes intentionally. This way, he does not only end his life but also destroys the chance of a future for Amanda, who is now forced to stay with Chaimig.

On account of its setting, theme and dialect, the first intertext that comes to mind when reading Among Unbroken Hearts is that of Trainspotting (1993/96), Irvine Welsh’s novel-turned-play-turned-film about heroin addicts in Edinburgh. However, as Ian Shuttleworth points out, Adam’s play is not so much Trainspotting as Croftspotting (Shuttleworth). Adam is much more concerned with the unfulfilled dreams of these youths and their struggle to grow up in a world in which they are unable to strike roots. As Neil points out at the very beginning of the play:

NEIL. Nobody has roots any more Ray. It was on the news. Did nobody tell ye?
RAY. Is that the new dictate?
NEIL. Yeah, welcome to the marketplace. You’re an individual now boy, a free man in a free land. You thought you had no future, fact is you’ve got no past. Nobody cares who you are anymore. They just want to know what you want to buy.
RAY. Suits me. (8)

Ray cherishes this rootless individuality, which in his case has turned into self-destructive egoism (27). He missed his grandmother’s funeral (19), and he did not deem it necessary to inform Neil about their friend’s death (47). When Chaimig tells Ray about the ghosts that haunt northern Scotland, i.e., about the history of the men and women dispossessed over the centuries and therefore possessing nothing, “noh even a voice,” Ray apathetically answers: “A dinna think yur richt or wrong. A chaist dinna care” (41). While “everything recoils from death,” Ray shoots up heroin to recoil from life (49). And with Nietzsche’s demon
of eternal return, it becomes clear that Ray will end his apathy, one way or the other. As he tells Neil,

I said it to Christie once, you know... gave him the whole spiel. And what if a demon should come unto you, into your loneliest loneliness, and say – ‘This life as you now live it you will have to live innumerable times more, all in the same sequence, with nothing changed; every joy, every frustration, everything, no matter how inconsequential, over and over, again and again.’ Would you fall upon the ground and curse that demon, or was there a moment, a single moment, when you would have said – ‘You are a god, and never have I heard anything more divine?’ And Christie just looks at me – you know at look? [sic] – an he says ‘I donno know who this demon thinks I am, but he’s obviously got me mixed up wi’ somebody who actually gives a fuck.’

RAY laughs bitterly to himself and shakes his head. (27)

Ray’s death looms above the play from the very beginning, underlined by the set design in both the Traverse and the Bush Theatre productions, “a blue neon strip and a huge backdrop of the […] illustration from [J.M. Barrie’s Peter and Wendy (1911)], complete with the caption ‘To die will be an awfully big adventure’” (Shuttleworth). Among Unbroken Hearts constantly refers to Barrie’s novel. At the very beginning of the play, Ray finds the book – a school prize his father won – in the croft, and Neil starts to read out loud:

‘All children, except one, grow up. They soon know that they will grow up, and the way Wendy knew was this. One day when she was two years old she was playing in a garden, and she plucked another flower and ran with it to her mother. I suppose she must have looked rather delightful, for Mrs Darling put her hand to her heart and cried – ‘Oh why can’t you remain like this forever!’ This was all that passed between them on the subject, but henceforth Wendy knew that she must grow up. You always know after you are two. Two is the beginning of the end.’ Jesus. I thought I was a fucking pessimist. (9)

The intertext of Peter and Wendy explains Neil’s and Ray’s issues with the world. They do not know what kind of a life to live (35) and they are unable to deal with what is expected from them by society, i.e. to get a job, marry and start a family or, in more general terms, to strike roots and grow up (24-25).

Near the end of the play, Ray finally admits that he actually misses all that he used to deride, namely a wife and children and growing up to be a man (67). He intends to assume responsibility for the first time in his
Henry Adam’s Drama of Interculturality

life by deciding to look after Chaimig. But it is again Peter Pan who epitomises Ray’s angst of growing up and striking roots. During his cold turkey, when Neil reads to him the end of Peter and Wendy, i.e., the passage when Peter starts crying about Wendy having grown up, meaning that she is no longer “gay and innocent and heartless” (Barrie 259-260), Ray decides to curse Nietzsche’s demon. He has realised that he has already repeated the life of his grandmother, who also left the north of Scotland “lookin for better things [...] lookin oot fie e prison o her life, wantin til be free” (39). And like his grandmother, who returned “chiynged. Niything left o e laskie it she wiz” (39), Ray returned like a lemming (10), but changed (43, 52) and lost (59). Hence, before Neil can continue reading about Peter Pan’s eternal return to the Darlings, generation after generation, Ray sends him away under false pretences. He ends his life in order to stop the cycle of eternal return. Ray has realised that he does not want to grow up, that he is unable to strike roots in an uprooted world and that he does not want to continue the way he lives. The play ends with Neil leaving for the city, and the audience wonders if at last he is going to start a programme to get off the drugs as he promised before.

In Among Unbroken Hearts, Adam depicts a lost and directionless generation of adolescents on the brink of adulthood, unable to negotiate a way between their ancestors’ past and their own future in modern-day Scotland. While desperately trying to find their own way in order to live a different, better life, the young generation appears to unconsciously follow the path of the older generation and to repeat their choices and mistakes. Hence, Among Unbroken Hearts is intercultural with regard to the clash of different generational cultures as well as intracultural with regard to the similarity of young and old Scottish men and women and their dreams and wishes in the far north of Scotland.

3 The People Next Door

The multicultural farce The People Next Door revolves around Nigel Brunswick, “a big lanky man of mixed, indeterminate race,” living in a “small housing association flat in modern-day Britain” (3), next door to the elderly Scottish widow Mrs MacCallum and the teenager Marco, also
“of mixed race, predominantly Afro-Caribbean” (12). Nigel is on welfare, receiving a disability living allowance, which he invests in marijuana and his Xbox. He is also oblivious to how the world has changed since the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, and so is Mrs MacCallum. The global war against terrorism is imposed on them by Phil, a ruthless policeman who wants Nigel to set up his half-brother Karim, a devout Pakistani Moslem and alleged terrorist. The policeman blackmails Nigel to become his undercover source in the local mosque, and, in order to get results, Phil wants him to plant a gun in the mosque so that the police can raid it. However, Nigel has found self-respect and strength in the Muslim community and refuses to do so. When Phil threatens to kill him if he fails to comply, Marco and Mrs MacCallum – who are currently staying in Nigel’s flat because Marco’s prostitute mother abused him with a coat hanger and Mrs MacCallum’s flat blew up because of a gas leakage – overpower the policeman, and Marco shoots him. At the end of the play, all three make up a (more or less) convincing story about Phil’s death and watch Only Fools and Horses happily ever after in a farcical “picture of domestic bliss” (84).

The drama text of The People Next Door opens with a quotation from Art Spiegelman’s 9/11 graphic novel In the Shadow of No Towers, which reads: “God’s name got taken in vain a lot that morning” (1). Hence, from the very beginning of his play, Adam addresses a local event of global proportions. But while he has broadened the focus from his home region of northern Scotland towards Great Britain, Adam’s concern remains communal by showing how global issues affect the individual locally.

The People Next Door describes what it could mean to live in a multicultural modern-day Britain. All the characters living in the housing association have a different cultural and family background. It was not until he was fourteen that Nigel, who always thought of himself as English, learnt that he was at least partly Pakistani (32-33). Now he would like to carry the African name Salif, although he has no idea what it means (1); he dresses like an American and talks like a Jamaican (79) and listens to British pop music (19). Nigel’s father left soon after his birth and his mother abandoned him when his mental illness broke out (54). Similarly, Marco has no real family of his own, only a prostitute
mother who maltreats him (53). The third tenant in Adam’s play, Mrs MacCallum, is originally from Bridgeton, Glasgow. In her soliloquising chat with her dead husband, she reminds the audience of a time when German-English citizens were persecuted in Britain during World War II because they were suspected to be “fifth columnists” (46) and when curry was still considered an exotic dish in Britain. But although she likes to eat “Mince and Tatties” (68) and watch the Scottish soap opera *High Road* (67), all this was a long time ago. Nowadays, she is “au fait […] with unfamiliar cuisine” (46) and her multicultural neighbourhood.

Phil, the policeman, intrudes into the lives of Nigel, Marco, and Mrs MacCallum and introduces them to his version of living in multicultural Britain, which is dominated by fear of the other and egoism. Phil makes it clear that his fight is to protect individualism and that he would stop at nothing to do so when he says:

> They don’t want to be decent Nigel. They want a worldwide Islamic state. They want us all to be fucking Moslems, whether we want to or not. I don’t know about you, but I don’t want some Mullah shoving his stone-age monkey religion down my fucking throat. I’ll stand up and fight. I’d do the same if it was the fucking Christians. I’m my own man. A fucking individual. I don’t need anybody telling me how to live. I don’t need it, I don’t want it, and I’m not fucking having it. Okay? (64)

But Nigel, enlightened after visiting the mosque, identifies Phil’s problem: “You know your trouble, Phil? […] You ain’t got no respect, man. […] Yeah, you don’t respect nothing. And when you don’t respect nothing you don’t respect yourself” (64-65). This conversation summarises Adam’s main concern in *The People Next Door*. Despite the farcical elements and the black comedy at work, the playwright’s answer to global threats and egoistical individualism appears to be communal respect. The play suggests that in order to live in a multicultural society, it is necessary to first and foremost converge interculturally. This is shown at the end of the play when a mentally sick half-Pakistani, an abused teenager of mixed race and a Scottish widow move closer together on the couch to watch a British television show. Instead of living in a multicultural society and thereby possibly creating a parallel one, Adam’s play proposes that it is more fruitful to interculturally engage with your neighbour directly on a communal level. In a nutshell, *The
People Next Door epitomises in many ways the famous phrase ‘think globally, act locally.’

4 Petrol Jesus Nightmare #5 (In the Time of the Messiah)

This concept is continued, albeit in a somewhat twisted manner, in the third and final play I would like to discuss: the apocalyptic ‘clash-cultural’ Petrol Jesus Nightmare #5 (In the Time of the Messiah). In this play, another local action is supposed to have a global effect, although this time with devastating consequences. The play opens with two worn-out and filthy Israeli soldiers, Buddy and Slomo, barricaded in “some poor guy’s living room. A flat block in occupied territory” (3), somewhere in Jerusalem. They are fighting off an unusually large number of Muslim fighters, wondering what made them so mad (13). The young Armenian captain Yossariat brings two refugees from a tourist group that he accompanied earlier to this shelter. They are a prophetic Texan “in his late middle age, immaculately dressed in cowboy casual, a large white Stetson hat setting off the ensemble” (15), and the permanently intoxicated wife of a Rabbi. While the soldiers call the Texan “George-Bush” (16), he introduces himself as Daniel: “Like the prophet. Like the book” (20). He believes that the Second Coming is nigh. The Rabbi’s wife, on the other hand, is actually the widow of an ultra-Zionist Jew who was assassinated by an Israeli agent in New York on account of his radical views (69). It becomes apparent that their tourist group actually threw stones at Muslim shop windows in the Old City of Jerusalem, beat an old man with sticks and tore the clothes from his elderly wife in order to humiliate  

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1 This background story is very similar to the life and assassination of the historical Rabbi Meir Kahane, who, according to Ehud Sprinzak, was rumoured to have planned “a very provocative act of sabotage on the Temple Mount.” Furthermore, the day after he had won a seat in the Knesset in 1984, “Kahane and his supporters held a victory parade to the Western Wall in old Jerusalem. Passing intentionally through the Arab section of the old city, Kahane’s excited followers smashed through the market, overturning vegetable stalls, hitting bystanders, punching the air with clenched fists and telling the frightened Arabs that the end of their stay in the Land of Israel was near” (Sprinzak). Kahane was assassinated in Manhattan in 1990.
them, thereby provoking the conflict the soldiers find themselves in (26).

In the course of the play, the audience learns about the true plans behind the visit of the apparently displaced holiday makers. The Texan suspects oil in the Dead Sea which he wants the state of Israel to have so it will be strong for a future war (57–60). And this war is as nigh as the coming of Jesus Christ, thanks to a little help from the Texan. His church in the US funded the Rabbi so that he would arrange for the Al-Aqsa mosque to be blown up in order to rebuild the Third Temple in its place (70–74). The Temple is of course essential for Christians, as the prophecy is that Jesus will return through its East Gate: “Their little Jesus can’t come back without us – the Jews – rebuilding our shabby old temple for them” (70). Nonetheless, blowing up the mosque will mean war. As Buddy explains: “As long as there’s a mosque on top we’re still alive. The minute something happens to that mosque we’ve got every Mohammedan scumbag from Saudi to Indonesia buying themselves rocket-launchers and getting on the first plane for the Lebanon. We got the Third World fucking War” (62). The Rabbi and his wife embezzled the Christians’ money (72), but after her husband’s death, the Rabbi’s wife is now supposed to continue with the plan on her own (71). However, the soldiers will not allow this. At the apocalyptic ending of the play, Slomo tries to rape the Rabbi’s wife, encouraged by Captain Yossariat. When the Texan tries to prevent this, he is knocked unconscious by Yossariat and Buddy shoots the woman. In the final scene, the soldiers “have strung the TEXAN up on the wall in a parody of Christ” (80). And to the sounds of Kris Kristofferson’s song “If You Don’t Like Hank Williams (You Can Kiss My Ass),” Yossariat prepares to burn the Texan alive. As Slomo comments: “Whole world’s on fire” (82).

Like The People Next Door, the play text of Petrol Jesus Nightmare #5 (In the Time of the Messiah) also starts with a quotation, this time from Lewis Carroll’s Through the Looking-Glass And What Alice Found There (1871): “‘What a thick dark cloud that is!’ she said, ‘And how fast it comes’” (1). This quotation is originally from the chapter in which Alice encounters Tweedledum and Tweedledee, the (twin!) rooks of the chess game described by Carroll at the beginning of his book. According to the nursery rhyme, they fight over a rattle until a monstrous crow
– the dark cloud from the quotation – frightens them.² In Adam’s play, then, Tweedledum represents the Jews and Tweedledee the Muslims, and their rattle the Temple Mount or the Noble Sanctuary, as the case may be. The Christians are the crow, which is re-emphasised by the fact that it represents one of the red bishops in Carroll’s game of chess. With this allusion to *Through the Looking-Glass*, one could expect a light, maybe child-like treatment of a political issue. But ‘contrariwise,’ to use Tweedledum’s and Tweedledee’s favourite expression: Adam paints a cynical and disturbing picture of the conflict in the Middle East, an intercultural dialogue gone awfully wrong.

The crow is personified by an American from Texas, a Christian fundamentalist who uses his alms and oil money to destabilise a region and to give Israel the power to bomb its Arabic neighbours to kingdom come. The Texan identifies difference in language as the main problem between cultures. As he explains to Slomo, who does not speak English: “Language is the curse of mankind, son. It cleaves us asunder. We are one, and yet divided, and language is at that core” (22). At the same time he calls the captain “Yossarian” (17) – probably confusing him with another captain, viz. the main character from Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22* (1961) – and he only uses English, which he calls “God’s American” (17), to soliloquise about the Second Coming (60-61). However, Yossarian makes it clear that it is not so much the Babel of languages that is the core of the matter, but rather the Texan’s insensitivity towards his interlocutors, when he explains to him: “You’re a bit insensitive, you know? […] You’ve got a tendency to talk without really considering how your words might appear to the person hearing them. You’re not entirely sensitive to their needs. Thus? Insensitive” (63).

Tweedledum, or the Jewish side, on the other hand, is personified by the intoxicated and obscene wife of a Rabbi from New York who cast the first stone, although she is definitely not without sin. She also has a problem with different languages. When the captain insults her in Armenian, she replies: “What is that? Russian? Some barbaric, guttural

² “Tweedledum and Tweedledee / Agreed to have a battle; / For Tweedledum said Tweedledee / Had spoiled his nice new rattle. // Just then flew down a monstrous crow, / As black as a tar-barrel; / Which frightened both the heroes so, / They quite forgot their quarrel” (Carroll 192).
Slav monkey noise. Listen to me. Don’t speak that language in front of me again. I mean it. Not another word. You treat me with respect. I demand that you treat me with respect” (25). At the same time, she constantly insults Yossariat and cannot communicate with Slomo, as she does not speak Hebrew.

Nevertheless, while the Christians, Jews and Israelis at least all have a voice in Adam’s play, the Muslims do not. Their side is reduced to back-stage extras, the unknown enemy whom the Israeli soldiers fire at and who fire back in return. While one could read this as Adam’s interpretation of a one-sided intercultural dialogue scotched from the start, I think the reason for Tweedledee’s or the Muslim’s silence is that the playwright rather wants to concentrate on the soldiers’ side of the conflict. They are shown to be the real victims of this politico-religious intercultural clash, regardless of the side they are on. Soiling and wetting themselves (13), they have lost their minds (10) so that, as they explain, even when there’s nobody left to kill in this war, they will go home and kill everybody else:

BUDDY. We're the only ones who can stop the war.
SLOMO. Yeah.
BUDDY. We'll kill and kill until there’s nobody left to kill.
SLOMO. Yeah.
BUDDY. Then what’ll we do? Eh? Then what’ll we do?
SLOMO. Go home.
BUDDY. Yeah. We'll go home. We'll go home. And we'll kill them too. What do we do?
SLOMO. Keep shooting.
BUDDY. Yeah. Keep shooting 'til the gun's empty. 'Til all the guns are empty. Keep shooting 'til every fucker's dead. (21)

War has become the soldiers’ ersatz-sex, their synthesis of eros and thanatos. After having shot a child, for example, Slomo heads into the other room in order to masturbate, and “BUDDY collapses onto the floor. For a second, lying there, trousers down, he looks post-orgasmic” (14). Adam depicts the Israeli soldiers as traumatised children (10, 16, 22, 73), dehumanised by a conflict they have no say in. They are similar to the White King’s soldiers on their hopeless mission to reconstruct Humpty Dumpty – another rook in Carroll’s game of chess – as described in Through the Looking-Glass:
The next moment soldiers came running through the wood, at first in twos and threes, then ten or twenty together, and at last in such crowds that they seemed to fill the whole forest. [...] they were always tripping over something or other, and whenever one went down, several more always fell over him, so that the ground was soon covered with little heaps of men. (230)

5 Conclusion

In his three plays, Adam touches upon many different aspects of interculturality. *Among Unbroken Hearts* is a youth drama located in Adam’s home region of northern Scotland and is partly written in Scottish dialect. It broaches the issue of a generation of adolescents trying to distance themselves from the older generation. Nevertheless or because of this, this uprooted generation is unable to grow up and to come to terms with their Scottish identity in a globalised world. But whilst the protagonist fails to establish an identity for himself, Adam writes, in many ways, a traditional Scottish play, albeit for the *Trainspotting* generation, by relying on Scottish dialect and by referring to Scottish classics such as Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy*.

However, with his multicultural farce *The People Next Door*, Adam shifts his focus from local youth drama to multicultural community drama, mixing different dialects and sociolects and referring to more globally known intertexts, especially from the pop-cultural domain. Adam leaves behind the idea of a Scottish theatre traditionally written in dialect and following the classics. After 9/11, the playwright turns towards more global issues, whilst still addressing them from a local, Anglo-Scottish perspective. In a world on the verge of going to pieces, he shows how on a communal level people can put into practice the idea of a multicultural modern-day Britain, namely through neighbourly support and respect.

In *Petrol Jesus Nightmare #5 (In the Time of the Messiah)*, then, Adam truly writes globally. Depicting the conflict in the Middle East and the fight for Jerusalem, he shows a world that – like Humpty Dumpty – has finally gone to pieces. But while he critically depicts the many parties involved in the war, the playwright identifies the soldiers as the true victims of ‘glocal,’ i.e. both of global and local, actions. They are
the pawns in a global game of chess played by powers for which the end justifies the means. Adam’s cynical politico-religious drama becomes a parable of sorts for a possible clash of cultures. It shows that it is not language which is the problem for different cultures to get along, but rather the failure to listen.

However, despite its development from local Scottish youth drama via multicultural Anglo-Scottish community drama to global Middle Eastern politico-religious drama, Adam’s theatre does not really depart from the idea of national drama. On the contrary, it is actually paradigmatic of the emergence of a national Scottish theatre – despite the fact that it apparently contradicts the goals formulated at the beginning of the twentieth century by the new Glasgow (Theatre) Company and the Scottish National Players, the former aiming for the production of plays “national in character,” the latter for plays of “Scottish life and character” (McDonald 198, 200).

Adam’s drama of interculturality is consistent with a development in the last decades of the twentieth century in Scottish playwriting. The major aspect of this development is a shift in the cultural dynamic, i.e. changes of the common understandings, meanings and behavioural patterns which render coexistence as a collective possible. As Adrienne Scullion remarks, contemporary Scottish dramatists are “telling stories […] that are both international and outward-looking and essentially and immediately committed to work within and about Scottish society” (Scullian, qtd. in McDonald 223). Director Sandy Neilson already hinted at this development in 1981, when he said in a television interview:

In any form of development in drama, you’re going to go through … playwrights writing about, first of all, their own identity … [a] fairly introspective sort of drama – who are we?, who are the Scots? … Surely we have an identity and a voice of our own. Then, eventually, that gets written out and … we can then go on and expand the subjects to become truly international, yet with a distinctive Scottish voice. (Neilson, qtd. in McDonald 223)

This development described by Neilson is exactly what Adam seems to trace with his three plays Among Unbroken Hearts, The People Next Door and Petrol Jesus Nightmare #5 (In the Time of the Messiah). It is
also continued with his latest play ‘e Polish Quine (2007), and this despite the fact that its action again takes place in Scotland and that it is again written in broad Doric dialect.

‘e Polish Quine is about the return of David Gordon to his father’s farm in Kincardine, Aberdeenshire, after his tour of duty during the Second World War. He hopes to find peace and quiet there in order to get over the nightmares he suffers from as a result of his taking part in the liberation of a concentration camp. After he becomes involved with Anna of the Rosicki family, a family of Polish refugees who has taken the lease of a farm in the neighbourhood coveted by the husband-to-be of David’s own sister, he has to face the xenophobia of his home town and family. It appears that Adam has come full circle with ‘e Polish Quine, which is actually a major rewrite of a play he wrote in the early 1990s (Mathieson). With regard to the development of his oeuvre, the return to his beginnings, but from an intercultural angle, absolutely makes sense. Moreover, by reassessing and consolidating the concept of national identity, multiculturalism, communal life and glocal politics, Adam reveals that in order to be truly national in character, drama or theatre has to be first and foremost intercultural.

Works Cited

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3 I am indebted to Matthew Zajac, the Artistic Director of the Dogstar Theatre Company Scotland, for sending me the unpublished manuscript of ‘e Polish Quine.

*Secondary Literature*


Nicholas Grene

Contemporary Irish Theatre: The Way We Live Now?¹

In the summer of 1897 W.B. Yeats, with the help of Augusta Gregory and Edward Martyn, drafted the manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre. At this distance in time, it is easy to recognize that manifesto as a characteristic document of cultural nationalism. Theatre is to be used as a decolonizing instrument of self-expression, raising national consciousness and self-esteem: “We will show that Ireland is not the home of buffoonery and easy sentiment, as it has been represented, but the home of an ancient idealism.” Culture will provide a unifying force for the whole nation: “We are confident of the support of all Irish people, who are weary of misrepresentation, in carrying out a work that is outside all the political questions that divide us.” And the nation so imagined will be not only unified but unitary. The stated objective of the Irish Literary Theatre is “to bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland” (Gregory 20). Ireland is one nation that will be properly represented when her “deeper thoughts and emotions” find theatrical form. Is it still possible to think of Irish theatre as expressive of the national life in the way the 1897 manifesto-writers conceived it, or are we in a post-nationalist mode where any such monolithic concept

¹ This paper is related to a research project on ‘The Internationalization of Irish Drama 1975-2005,’ funded by the Irish Research Council for Humanities and the Social Sciences, whose support is gratefully acknowledged.
is inappropriate? In what ways does theatre reflect its society, and in what ways ought it to do so? Has Ireland developed to a point where it too can stage interculturality?

Such large rhetorical questions were prompted by my experiences as one of the judges for the Irish Times Theatre Awards in 2006, when, along with my two fellow judges, Sinéad Mac Aodha and Maureen Kennelly, I attended (as near as possible) every single professional Irish production of plays and operas on the island of Ireland. Our function was to come up with a shortlist of nominees in twelve different categories (Best Actor, Best Actress etc.), and finally to decide winners for each. It was a fascinating experience. By the end of the year, I had notched up a total of 122 shows and had accumulated five fat ring-bound folders of notes and programmes. This provided ready-made research data for an overview of Irish theatre in 2006. But besides yielding a snapshot of a single year’s theatrical production, it might be used to canvass larger questions. What, if anything, does one year’s theatre in Ireland tell us about the way we live now? Does it properly express the contemporary state of the nation or is that actually the business, even the duty, of theatre within a community?

Early in our term of office, I remarked to my fellow judges that the one prophecy I had about the theatrical year to come was that we would be seeing very few plays about old fellows telling stories in a pub in the West of Ireland, a traditional topos of Irish theatre in the past. And so it proved. The season began instead with a rash of plays about people trying to make a film or a video, and ended with no less than five shows featuring child sexual abuse. Ireland in 2006 was a changed country and theatre reflected those changes in multiple ways. There were recurrent efforts to represent the then brashly successful urban world of economically prosperous Ireland, that much-vaunted Celtic Tiger who by 2009 has gone whimpering back into his lair. Two early, unsuccessful efforts were Nicholas Kelly’s The Grown-Ups at the Peacock, the studio space of the Abbey, Ireland’s National Theatre, and Paul Mercier’s Homeland on the Abbey main stage. Kelly’s play, the text blurb tells us, “casts a sharp eye on contemporary Dublin and the malaise of a generation seduced by money, status and self.” But the very self-consciousness of that attempt doomed the play to banal moralizing, not helped by a weak
Homeland was more interesting for its attempt at a satiric parallel with the myth of Oisin, the epic hero of pagan mythology who spends three hundred years in the land of faery and returns to find Ireland converted to Christianity and the heroic age gone. The central figure is a political spin-doctor, Gerry Newman, who has had to flee the country after having spilled the beans to one of the corruption tribunals on all the dirty tricks in which he was involved. He is back in Ireland for one day, but must not leave the airport terminal, the equivalent in the original story of Oisin’s continuing unageing status being dependent on his not touching the soil of Ireland. The heroic Ireland Newman remembers, the Ireland of the political party Fianna Fáil, ironically recalling the Fianna, Oisin’s mythic band of warriors, turns out to have been the fakest of fake legends. The play exposes contemporary Ireland as a series of imagined solidities attached to the nothingness of spin-doctors, predatory capitalists, and crooks talking themselves into believing their own myths. Homeland did not really work as a play, making only intermittent contact with the Oisin story: Niamh, Oisin’s fairy temptress, is an AIDS-afflicted junkie prostitute met at a party complete with green dress and blonde wig. What is most significant about it is the need Mercier felt to anchor his play in the myth at all, still surprisingly common as a resource for Irish playwrights, reaching back to the still felt desire to “bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland.”

Of course, the most important political change in Ireland of the last ten years has been the Northern peace process, depriving Irish playwrights of one of their most prolific subjects from the decades before that, the Troubles. However, the Troubles have not altogether gone away. Gary Mitchell’s Remnants of Fear and Rosemary Jenkinson’s The Bonefire were there to bring home to us the continuing culture of violence particularly within the sub-world of Ulster Loyalist paramilitaries. Remnants of Fear in itself was pretty clunky, like an old-fashioned TV play, full of gritty urban realism and moral good will. It was given political edge by the circumstances of its production by the company Dubbel-Joint at the Rock Theatre in West Belfast, very much a Republican heartland. Gary Mitchell, himself from a Loyalist paramilitary background, had been driven from his home in Belfast due to threats to the
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safety of himself and his family. For Loyalists, Remnants of Fear and the auspices of its production would have been felt as a betrayal. The Bonefire, a first-time play staged in Dublin by Rough Magic, brought out the terrible costs of the Loyalist ideology, particularly on women, illustrated graphically in the poster image used for the production and for the cover of the text (Jenkinson). Against a background of the Belfast shipyards, a blonde woman draped in the Union Jack had a red hand (traditional symbol of Ulster Loyalism) implanted on her crotch.

Contemporary Ireland may be only partially post-Troubles, but it is beginning to be multi-ethnic and multi-racial. It is a country that has gone from a century and a half, during which it lost much of its population through emigration, to a decade in which it has begun to attract substantial numbers of immigrants. It is now, for the first time, beginning to stage interculturality. This issue was addressed most directly in Dermot Bolger’s The Townlands of Brazil. The townlands of Brazil were a part of the area of North County Dublin where the Ballymun tower blocks were built, Ireland’s one (very unsuccessful) attempt at a high-rise housing development used to re-locate working-class families from Dublin’s inner city. Bolger’s play parallels two stories of young women, one a local girl from 1963, when the apartments were just being built, the other a Polish woman living there in 2006, as the buildings were being demolished. A leading Polish actress, Julia Krynke, was cast in the latter part, and sections of the programme were given in dual-language Polish/English versions. Staged at the Axis Theatre in Ballymun, it was notably successful in attracting a local audience with a real interest in the subject.

Another approach to the same phenomenon was to be seen in Arambe’s production of Jimmy Murphy’s Kings of the Kilburn High Road. The play, originally produced by Red Kettle in Waterford in 2000, is about a group of Irish immigrant workers living dead end lives in North London, nursing obviously unreal fantasies about returning to Ireland. Played by the Nigerian/Irish company Arambe with an all-black cast, it had a piquancy in the parallels implied to the situation of Africans working in Dublin. The one problem with the production came from the youthfulness and vigour of the actors; these were no has-been middle-ageing immigrants of twenty years’ standing but energetic and
physically confident young men. One can only hope that 2026 will not find their African-Irish counterparts in the condition of Murphy’s alienated London Irish.

Irish theatre in 2006 not only reflected changes in Irish society and culture, it was itself changed in the idioms and media it used. The tradition of Irish drama has long been held to be text-based, formally conservative, dominated by the author rather than the director, designer or acting company. That is certainly changing. Many of the 2006 shows were devised rather than scripted pieces, several of them site-specific rather than staged in a conventional auditorium. Thus, I went to a play called The Waiting Room produced by Belfast-based Kabosh, where we had to be ferried in a bus to a non-disclosed venue that turned out to be a warehouse somewhere in the depths of East Belfast. I watched Drive-By, a show about boy-racers, sitting huddled in a car in the darkness of the Cork docks, with the dialogue coming to us through the car radio, as the souped-up machines of the young men roared in and out of the playing space. I was moved with the rest of the audience from room to room through the atmospheric building of what used to be the Sick and Indigent Room-Keepers Association in centre-city Dublin watching the unfolding ghost drama God’s Grace, staged by the group called Semperfi.

The best example of this form was Whereabouts, presented by Fishamble as a series of mini-plays encountered on a walkabout tour of the inner-city Temple Bar area. The plays themselves by different authors were sometimes quite weak, but the experience was a striking one. With “Lament for Joseph” we met a woman showing an image of her son who had gone missing, asking passers-by if they might have any information about him; several of the people she stopped, with no notion that this was a play, became genuinely concerned. With “My Brother is Disappearing,” we stood in a record shop watching the actress Catriona Ni Mhurchu sitting silently over a cup of coffee while her unspoken words of distress were relayed in to us on a sound system. The overall effect – for which Fishamble won a Special Judges’ Award at the end of our deliberations – was to make you see the whole Temple Bar urban area as a place alive with human stories. You looked at everybody
you saw differently when any one of them might turn into a play before your eyes.

Theatre in Ireland, as in most other countries, is an art struggling to survive in a culture dominated by other media. The attitude of many theatre companies and directors towards this problem of the electronic competition seems to be ‘if you cannot beat them, join them.’ Mixed media productions are now a notable feature of contemporary Irish theatre. Sometimes this is purely irritating, with TV monitors and projected screen images thrown into the mix as a gratuitous display of post-modernity. At its most successful it yielded one of the great events of the year, the Canadian film director Atom Egoyan’s stage version of *Eh Joe*.

This was one pulled back from the opposition, Beckett’s television play transformed into theatre. I went along deeply sceptical, remembering the deliberate effect of the successive close-ups on Jack McGowran’s silent face in the original as he listened to the taunting words of the woman he had apparently driven to suicide. Bearing in mind Beckett’s reluctance to have his work moved from one medium to another, I was convinced that it was wholly perverse to try to put the television play on the stage. And I was proved absolutely wrong. Upstage, behind a transparent scrim, we saw an evidently paranoid Joe (Michael Gambon) in dressing-gown and slippers check doors and windows, look under the bed of his bedroom to make sure he was alone. Sitting at last on the bed, in profile, staring at the wall, he began to hear the voice-over speech of Penelope Wilton – her magnificent English tones exactly corresponding to the description in the text of that “voice like flint glass” (Beckett 363). And then, on the scrim in front, appeared full-face Gambon’s wrinkled, haunted features registering in small tics of facial movement, in a single gathering tear, the impact of the accusatory words. His hands raised in appeasing horror at one moment represented a huge gesture in this minimalist landscape of intense emotion. One felt privileged to be watching a great live performance, experienced there in the Gate Theatre, but only as mediated through this delicate technical wizardry of amplification and projection.

Among the other multi-media shows of the year nothing else came near this one in quality, but several others were interestingly sympto-
matic. The Drogheda-based Calipo theatre company has a mission to produce “dynamic mixed-media theatre that is relevant to a younger audience between the ages of 17-35” (Wunderkind programme notes). One example of this was Wunderkind, a one-man show written by Darren Thornton, Calipo’s founding artistic director. Fairly obviously based on Thornton’s experience of directing his own play Love is the Drug as a six-part TV series, it is about the experiences of a young film director trying to make his first movie. The play dramatizes the aspirations, horrors, and humiliations of the writer/director at the mercy of the producers, the editors, the money men, and all the other agents on whom he is helplessly dependent. The production made very intelligent and witty use of a bank of TV monitors and screens to echo and counterpoint the actor Owen McDonnell playing out all the parts in the story. Once again, the effect was to bring out the virtuosity of the live performer’s ability to act on the imagination of the audience contrasted with the battery of visual images being technologically generated behind him. Significantly, though, the film that the film-maker was making had the captain of the Cavan hurling team as its central figure. The contemporary film director in the play and the traditional hurling hero in the film-within-the-play were afflicted with the same provincial’s dreams of fame and fears of failure at a national/international level.

A fairly obvious forerunner of Wunderkind was Donal O’Kelly’s brilliant 1995 one-man play Catalpa, in which he acted out all the parts in an epic film about the nineteenth-century rescue of Fenian prisoners from Australia. The occasion of the ninetieth anniversary of the Rising in 2006 gave O’Kelly the opportunity for Operation Easter produced by the company called Calypso, not to be confused with its near-namesake Calipo. Calypso has a tradition of topical issue-based political theatre, emigration, race relations and human rights, but Operation Easter was concerned with a re-imagination of the past, specifically the Easter 1916 Rising. Contemporary Ireland, represented in an opening induction set in an up-to-the-minute Moore Street alive with West African street-traders, is diagnosed as suffering from “historyalis,” stuckness in the past. A surgeon operates on a patient to extract from her head the fixed images of the Rising – a pistol, a Tricolour, a copy of the Proclamation of Independence. The events of the Rising itself were then played out in
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a theatrical collage which caught its momentousness, its absurdity, and its poignancy. The play was staged in Kilmainham Jail in the space immediately in front of the actual cells where the leaders were held before being taken out and shot. As you sat in the long, high exercise yard on a May evening and watched this enacted piece of theatre against the fading daylight coming in through the high glass dome, you were acutely aware of the clash between the actualities of history and their representation in memory and imagination.

Retrospects on the past, revisionist perspectives on history, are nothing new in the Irish theatre: one thinks back to Denis Johnston’s *The Old Lady Says No* from the 1920s or, in more recent times, Stewart Parker’s *Northern Star* (1984). The twenty-first century has perhaps only made for a more self-conscious meta-theatricality. This was certainly a notable feature of Enda Walsh’s *The Walworth Farce* produced by Druid in Galway. A mad father, Dinny, and his two brain-washed sons, Blake and Sean, holed up in a flat on the Walworth Road in London, play out a crazy violent farce which is (somehow) based on the real facts that drove them into exile from Cork. Dinny as crazed amateur actor-manager forces his sons to compete in an acting contest in which he plays himself, they play all the other parts, and he always wins the trophy. The layers upon layers of fiction and meta-fiction are such that it is never possible to be entirely sure which bits one is intended to take as ‘real.’ The catalyst for the action in the play is Hayley, the black British supermarket check-out woman, who arrives in the flat to return the shopping the younger, dopier son, Sean, has mistakenly left behind, the shopping which represents the edible props for the play, the roast chicken and sliced pan that are daily consumed in the interests of art. Hayley, in her relative normality, exposes the violent psychopathology of the men within. The London-Irish ghetto mentality is given grotesque expression in the men shut in the flat, in terror of the world outside, while the play-within-the-play allows for the notion of compensation, a re-writing of the traumas of exile, displacement and alienation. Beyond that, the play seems to act as a knowing parody on a whole tradition of black comedy in Irish theatre from Synge to McDonagh.

Walsh was shortlisted for the award for best original Irish play for 2006, but this finally went to Tom Murphy for *Alice Trilogy*. The play
shows the central character Alice (played by Jane Brennan) at three crisis moments of her life over 25 years. But even though those three separate episodes are dated from the 1980s to 2005, almost nothing in them specifies the period in any significant way. They are about existential states of despair, not about the socio-cultural situations that precipitate them. *Alice Trilogy* is by no means Murphy’s best play, but it was better than any other new Irish play we saw that year. As the 71-year-old Murphy himself said, as he collected the award, “where are all the young ones?” It is an issue about contemporary Irish theatre – what appears to be a comparative dearth of achieved new plays. It may relate to a phenomenon mentioned earlier, the tendency to move away from the scripted text towards non-language-based, ensemble-devised pieces.

The case of Michael West’s *Everyday*, produced by Corn Exchange, is a significant one in this context. West is an accomplished writer for the theatre, whose plays include the elegant one-man show *Foley* and the very successful *commedia dell’arte* style *Dublin by Lamplight*. He used the commedia idiom again for *Everyday*, a series of sketched-in ordinary lives as they interact over the course of a day, observing the minute alterations brought about by their casual contacts with one another. The *commedia* masking, along with the completely bare stage used in the play with only a changing sky-scene backdrop, was intended to heighten the sense of a-historical universality. But the principle of the devised show, in which each actor developed his or her own character, inevitably brought in representative types of contemporary Irish society, from the exploited Ukrainian child-minder to the brash Australian real-estate agent. The result was a play that escaped the control of its writer and turned itself into what he was not trying to write, another examination of the state of contemporary Ireland.

Contemporary Irish theatre is very much part of a global theatrical marketplace; that much was very clear from what was on offer in 2006. A very large proportion of the productions were imports from other countries, and in that sense Irish theatre does indeed stage interculturality. There were translated texts from contemporary European playwrights: the German Falk Richter’s multi-media *The System*, Juan Mayorga’s Spanish drama of the concentration camps, *Way to Heaven*, the Norwegian playwright Jan Fosse’s Beckettian *Dream of Autumn*. 
There was a generous offering of English-language texts from other countries as well. It was good to have the chance to see Peta Murray’s quirky Australian ballroom dancing fantasy *Wallflowering* or a revival of Sam Shepard’s *True West*. Too often, however, you had the feeling that Irish theatre was just doing cover jobs for British and American hits. I myself thought there was a great deal to be said for the Gate’s production of *Festen*, even though this was quite clearly a follow-up to the London success of David Eldredge’s adapted play, inspired by the original Danish film of Thomas Vinterberg. The devastating exposure of the apparently paternalistic patriarch as an appallingly compulsive child-abuser, like the other plays about sex abuse in the year, seemed to me to speak to real contemporary concerns in Ireland. But other people, who were admirers of the original film, or of other earlier stage productions, could see nothing in it but a cash-in imitation. Too often, I felt, we were getting reach-me-down versions of Britain’s theatrical sensations of the 1990s. So, for example, there was Terry Johnson’s *Hysteria*, with Sigmund Freud meeting Salvador Dali, originally staged by the Royal Court in 1993, or Joe Penhall’s *Blue/Orange*, produced by the National Theatre in 1998. These were good productions – there was a brilliant theatrical transformation scene in *Hysteria* where you saw the set of Freud’s book-lined study turn miraculously into a surrealist Dali painting and back again. But the arguments about racism and psychiatry in *Blue/Orange* appeared very much of their time and place, end of twentieth-century Britain, not of ours. And there was no excuse, to my mind, for the slavish reproduction by the Abbey of John Patrick Shanley’s *Doubt*, a completely manufactured example of the Broadway well-made play.

However, the international theatrical marketplace involves two-way traffic: there are exports as well as imports. So the Gate Theatre Beckett Festival, designed to celebrate the centenary of Beckett’s birth, was shown in London’s Barbican as well as in Dublin. And the revival of Friel’s *Faith Healer*, also by the Gate, was part of a long-meditated plan to get that play back to Broadway where it was originally unsuccessfully premièred in 1979 with James Mason in the lead. Ralph Fiennes is a fine actor, but I thought he was miscast in the part of Frank Hardy, though not as badly miscast as Cherry Jones in the Broadway version of the
production. However, that casting was absolutely essential to take it to New York in the first place. People who would not have crossed the street to go to Brian Friel’s greatest play *Faith Healer* were prepared to queue to see Ralph Fiennes live in the flesh. It is hard to balance out profit and loss on something like this: a classic Irish play that deserves a wider audience gets a wider audience but only in a version skewed by the need for movie-star casting.

The Irish national theatre movement had from the start a twin mission – to generate a native school of “Celtic and Irish dramatic literature,” as that founding manifesto for the Irish Literary Theatre put it, but also to stage classics of world theatre. This has always remained a feature of Irish theatre from Lady Gregory’s adaptations of Molière and Yeats’s versions of Sophocles in the early twentieth century to the many re-stagings of Greek tragedy and Irish re-imaginings of Chekhov in more recent times. 2006 brought an elegant Abbey Theatre revival of Brian Friel’s *A Month in the Country*, based on Turgenev’s original play, and (also at the Abbey) Conall Morrison’s *Bacchae of Baghdad*. The *Bacchae of Baghdad* was relentlessly contemporary, Euripides’ tragedy re-located to the Green Zone of modern-day post-invasion Iraq. You could see where Morrison’s idea came from. Pentheus was seen to stand for an insistent, dogmatic belief in law and order, Western reason and logic, opposed to an alternative Eastern religion of faith and enthusiasm. The result was, in my view, a model of how not to make an ancient text comment on current politics, how not to stage interculturality. At the very simplest level, to play Pentheus as a thuggish, crew-cut, five-star American general was to belie the original in which he is the legitimate King of Thebes: it is after all Dionysus who is the invader, not Pentheus. It made nonsense also of the scene in which Dionysus mesmerizes his antagonist into dressing up in women’s clothes to spy on the Bacchantes. The subtlety of Euripides here is to suggest the feminine within Pentheus that he has sought to repress, emerging in distorted form in the voyeuristic need to watch the Bacchic celebrations of the female worshippers. All this was rendered incomprehensible, merely grotesque in Morrison’s version. Conall Morrison is an extremely gifted director who has been responsible for some wonderfully imaginative productions; this is one for him to forget.
By contrast with this, the show that eventually won the award for best production was the version of *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by Lynne Parker for her Rough Magic theatre company. Shakespeare has tended to be a difficult presence in Irish theatre. The plays set for examination on the school curricula are regularly staged by companies such as Second Age in somewhat dutiful productions. The major plays are produced from time to time in the Abbey or the Gate. But Irish theatre professionals have shown an anxious awareness that this is the great canonical playwright of the neighbouring island, where generation upon generation of actors have been schooled in the playing of his specially dense and difficult poetic language. What does an Irish director do in tackling England’s most classic dramatist?

Parker’s answer was to appropriate *The Shrew* for Irish audiences by setting it in 1970s provincial Ireland. Her set designer Monica Frawley took inspiration from the picture postcard scenes of John Hinde, specifically his images of Butlin’s Holiday Camp, Mosney, redolent of a past Ireland: what was the Holiday Camp is now a holding space for Irish asylum-seekers. The long traverse stage space in the Dublin Project Arts Centre became the lounge bar of a pub owned by Baptista, father of Katherina and Bianca. It could be turned into an imagined ballroom by the descent of a revolving crystal ball. Katherina herself, re-conceived as an Irish Caitriona, was to be seen depressingly wiping down tables, a sort of latter-day Pegeen Mike from *The Playboy of the Western World*. The Synge reference made imaginative sense of the figure of Katherina within an Irish dramatic context, placing the shrew as the sharp-tongued, bossy publican’s daughter who is at the same time lonely and vulnerable. The patriarchal world of Baptista cutting deals on marriage and dowries for his daughters was made credible by its association with a pub-and-mart ambience of all-male huckstering. And the costumes were wonderfully familiar – all those ill-cut and ill-fitting suits and brashly tasteless attempts at style. The effect of the re-location was to make the play workable by affording the comedy both the distance and the familiarity necessary for laughter.

What was most striking, however, was the way the Hibernicization brought the original language freshly alive. While Parker placed the action in a satirically rendered 1970s Ireland, she made no alterations to...
the text to domesticate it to that changed setting. Padua remained Padua and Verona Verona, those Italian places that Shakespeare also took over wholesale when transplanting his source story to the English stage. Shakespeare’s Elizabethan verse lines, his clotted and allusive prose, were spoken by the Irish actors effectively and un-self-consciously without any attempt to ‘Irish’ them up. Instead, however, the casual oaths and profanities which are part of the ordinary stuff of the characters’ language – “Would to God,” “God be blessed,” “O mercy” – which sound merely inert and lifeless in most modern stagings of Shakespeare took on a new credibility as uttered by these Irish midlands characters. For such people, as (one suspects) for Shakespeare’s own contemporaries, these pious lardings of speech were testimony to an accepted faith that shaped popular discourse while not in any significant way informing their behaviour. Shakespeare’s text felt more alive not just because it had been displaced to a familiar Irish setting for an Irish audience but because the original play, written over four hundred years ago in another country, was once again tuned into a living language.

So at the end of this whistle-top tour of Irish theatre in 2006, what can we say about the ways in which it expresses the life of the nation? In one respect, the aims of the Irish Literary Theatre founders have been successfully achieved. They sought “that freedom to experiment which is not to be found in the theatres of England […] without which no new movement in art or literature can succeed” (Gregory 20). After a prolonged period through the mid-twentieth century in which Irish theatre was notably without such freedom, tended to be formally and politically conservative, it is now happily free of such constraints. In fact, ironically, the adventurous experimentalism of contemporary theatre – site-specific shows, group-devised work, multi-media drama – often now comes from the theatres of England, or Europe. A case could be made that we have become all too eager to follow the lead of the avant-garde elsewhere, just as we are still inclined to try to duplicate the mainstream theatrical successes of London and New York. There is perhaps a danger of writing out the writer, so long the dominant figure in the Irish theatrical tradition, in the interests of more modish forms of drama. But I do not think it is a very great danger. If we currently import many of
our plays and our styles of playing from abroad, what we still have to export are some of the most talented dramatists working in English.

What seems to me a much more real weakness in current Irish theatre is its political good intentions. There is an anxiously felt need to reflect the way we live now, which may, curiously, be a legacy of the early national theatre movement. Gregory, Yeats, and Martyn wanted to “bring upon the stage the deeper thoughts and emotions of Ireland,” to provide the emergent nation with a new sense of itself. Given the early exit from the movement of Martyn with his Ibsenite ideas, this aspiration became largely a backward-looking impulse, in so far as it looked for those deeper thoughts and emotions in a pre-colonial life of the nation as figured in myth and folk culture. As Ireland has urbanized and modernized, with extraordinary rapidity in the last decade in particular, there is a widespread feeling that Irish theatre has an obligation to reflect those changes. Though we may still have issues to work out in our relationship with the past — the past history tackled in Operation Easter, for example — the more traditional forms of the Irish theatrical tradition have come to be regarded with ironic scepticism, reflected in the meta-theatre of The Walworth Farce. Instead, Irish dramatists, directors, acting companies want to show Ireland as she is now, the new varieties of Irishness and interculturality that are so apparent in greater modern Dublin and beyond. It is here that one tends to find the dead hand of dutiful good intentions. It was very good in 2006 to find a reasonable number of non-white, non-Irish actors on the Irish stage: Eastern European, Nigerian, black British or American performers. But there was sometimes an air of tokenism about it. We need to reach a stage when a black actor, or a Polish actor, is cast for a part because he or she is simply the best person to play that part, rather than because the multi-ethnic casting self-consciously reflects a multi-ethnic society. And the real theatrical disasters of 2006 came from the attempts to present a solemn anatomy or indictment of our current social condition. We will become a truly postcolonial society when we are liberated from the need to express the essence of Ireland or even “varieties of Irishness” on stage, when we come to accept that Irish theatre, whether it is revivals of Shakespeare or re-workings of Greek tragedy, as imagined and enacted
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by our most skilful theatrical practitioners, is itself a crucial part of the way we live now.

Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature

Performances
[Details for most of the unpublished scripts for the following performances can be found on the Irish Playography website: <http://www.irishplayography.com>.]

Nicholas Grene

Contemporary Irish Theatre


The Whiteness of Irish Drama:
The Irish and Their Black Other

I got my hair cut in Alice Springs
In Head Hunters on the Todd River.
White man: Aboriginals have a lot in common with the Irish.
Aboriginal: Yes – we even look like the Irish.
(Paul Durcan, “Head Hunters”)

1 Introduction

In the foreword to his short story collection The Deportees, published in 2007, Irish novelist Roddy Doyle writes that he “went to bed in one country and woke up in a different one” (xi). This experience is representative of the change in Irish national identity since the mid-1990s, in which Ireland was transformed from Europe’s poorhouse to the ‘Celtic Tiger,’ a change which has been reflected in both economic and social circumstances as well as in cultural production. Instead of being a country of emigration, poverty and unemployment, Ireland has become a country of immigration, tax incentives and a thriving economy, although the current financial crisis may transform Ireland’s position in Europe and the world yet again. When a country changes profoundly in a very short time, the national sense of self might not always be up to the pace of such a development, or, as Terry Eagleton has provocatively stated: “Ireland is a First World country with a Third World memory”
Nostalgia, a longing for the seemingly golden days of an imagined past, is often one of the dominant reactions to such rapid change. In this context, Roddy Doyle comments:

Three or four years into our new national prosperity, I was already reading and hearing elegies to the simpler times, before we became so materialistic – the happy days when more people left Ireland than were born here; when we were afraid to ask anyone what they did for a living, because the answer might be ‘Nothing’; when we sent our pennies and our second-hand clothes to Africa but never saw a flesh-and-blood African. (xii)

Nevertheless, prosperity is nothing that you would like to exchange for poverty. Contemporary Irish drama illustrates this conflicting position of Irish identity by depicting situations in-between nostalgia for the simpler, seemingly mono-cultural past and the complex, multicultural present with vivid plays about intercultural conflicts, a changing view of history and the first glimpse of a new sense of self. What Richard Pine says about Brian Friel can therefore be applied to all three playwrights that I will analyse, Brian Friel, Declan Gorman and Donal O’Kelly. What they combine in their plays is “the tension between a known, secure, but receding and fading heritage, and an unknown, beckoning, tantalising future which baits and challenges. Between these two matrices the playwright is left to work out the relative values, properties and affiliations of these ‘concepts of Irishness’” (Pine 5-6).

In the following the focus will be exactly on this relativity of Irishness with respect to the question of whiteness and its other. All three plays depict intercultural encounters that take place in Ireland. Here, whiteness does not primarily refer to the physical fact of skin colour but to the many evaluations and categories that are attached to it. The thesis of this paper is that skin is much more than a biological fact. What I want to show is that skin is “profoundly shaped by history and culture” and that it is “not an ontological category but rather a relationship that always relates to something else” (Benthien ix). Just as Irishness is a relative construction, skin is relative skin because it only becomes visible through comparison, difference and interchange.

In this context, the paper will look at the relative whiteness of the Irish, because they occupy an ambivalent and paradoxical position between white and black. On the one hand, the Irish have always been
seen as the darker race when compared with their English colonisers, and the Irish have themselves often “sought analogies between Ireland’s experiences of colonial oppression and the experiences of black people in slavery and subjugation” (Brannigan 230). On the other hand, Ireland has now become a country of immigration with an increasingly multicultural structure. This has led to multiple intercultural encounters with darker-skinned people to which the Irish have often reacted by ‘whitening’ themselves and ‘darkening’ the other. By analysing the shifting constructions of Irishness, the blind spots of whiteness in general can be revealed and questioned.

In order to analyse the relative skin of the Irish, the paper will first put forward theoretical concepts from critical whiteness studies, a young subdivision of postcolonial studies emerging since the late 1990s, and then give a short overview of the relative position that the Irish have taken up in history and culture. The three plays will then be analysed in the second part, which will first deal with Brian Friel’s Dancing at Lughnasa (1990), which focuses on the hybridity of Irish life between African, Christian and Celtic traditions. The second play is Declan Gorman’s At Peace, first performed in 2007, which takes a look at the inter-Irish conflict in the context of Northern Ireland and compares it with the intercultural conflicts that Ireland faces today. The third play is Donal O’Kelly’s The Cambria, first performed in 2005, which connects contemporary Ireland and its immigration policy with the history of the African-American slave and author Frederick Douglass, who came to Ireland in 1845. The three aspects which will be discussed here are in-between-ness and border-crossings, nostalgia and the impossibility of returning home, and finally whiteness, blackness and Irish history.

2 The Relativity of White Skin and Irish Identity

2.1 Coloured Skin and Whiteness Studies

At a first glance, our skin seems to be a simple biological fact. It is our largest organ and it has a specific colour, depending on our environment and our genetic makeup. Next to categorising people as either male or
female, skin colour is usually one of the first things we notice in another person’s appearance. It is “putatively self-evident to the naked eye” (Nishikawa 1725). Yet, beyond biology and its visual self-evidence skin has telling metaphorical meanings. A look at some of these metaphors reveals that “we still believe that something is true if it is naked, the absence of makeup is still seen as a mode of authenticity, and nakedness is still the ideal of the natural. ‘Only skin deep’ connotes superficiality, and only that which gets under one’s skin can truly touch or arouse a person” (Benthien ix). Skin therefore is interpreted as a sign of personal and collective identities and becomes what Claudia Benthien calls “a place where boundary negotiations take place” (ix). In a similar vein, Michel Serres writes that skin is the place “where the ego is decided” (17, my translation).

One of the main aims of whiteness studies is to show that the point of view from which we assess the skin of the other is by no means as objective and neutral as science, theory and history make us believe (see Benthien 145-153). In this context, whiteness studies tries to fill a gap which has become more and more obvious in studies of colonial and postcolonial literatures and cultures. The problem is what Richard Dyer has called the invisibility of whiteness as a specific, raced position (3). The point of whiteness studies therefore is to make whiteness visible through making it strange. The final goal is to reveal that its invisibility has turned whiteness into a position of power whose contingency must be revealed, or as Richard Dyer says: “As long as race is something only applied to non-white people, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people” (1). Ignatiev and Garvey go so far as to state that we not only have to focus on whiteness and “white-skin privilege politics” (1) but that in the sense of a new abolitionist movement we have to “abolish the white race from within” (2).

The paradoxical invisibility of white skin already shows in the habit of speaking of non-white people as ‘coloured,’ a fact which implies that white is not a colour and that there is a simple dichotomy between white and non-white. Following hard on the heels of such thinking is what Robyn Wiegman has called an “epidermal hierarchy” (8), what Frantz Fanon has termed “a racial epidermal schema” (112), and what
Homi Bhabha has described as “the peculiar visibility of colonial power” (83). A Manichean dichotomy of good vs. evil and mind vs. matter is mapped onto the seemingly neutral perception of physical difference (see JanMohamed). The black skin of the colonised is connected to savagery, barbarism and emotionality and is therefore linked to an irrevocable inferiority. In return, the white skin of the coloniser signals rationality, intelligence, and therefore superiority and supremacy, albeit in a strangely invisible and therefore extremely powerful form.

The main point of whiteness studies is to reveal that social positions are allocated to both white and black people according to their skin. Colonial discourse creates not only an Other but also a Self which is dependent on, and afraid of, that which it seemingly dominates. The ego that is thus created is presented as “white and whole,” as Bhabha formulates (76), and becomes an ideal which everybody has to aspire to in order to become a human being. Nevertheless, this ego is as raced, dependent and coloured as its black counterpart, an idea which whiteness studies aim to foreground by pointing to the relativity and chromaticity of white skin, which is “coloured white” (Dyer 42). A thinking that focuses on relativity therefore complements the goal of whiteness studies, which is to make whiteness visible as a coloured position.

2.2 The Relativity of the Irish

In this context of white skin as relative skin, the Irish and their racial position is central and interesting. The Irish can be positioned in-between white coloniser and black colonised, as they have taken up both roles in history, often at the same time. Matthew Frye Jacobson illustrates this relative position with an illuminating example from a US context:

it is one of the compelling circumstances of American cultural history that an Irish immigrant in 1877 could be a despised Celt in Boston – a threat to the republic – and yet a solid member of The Order of Caucasians for the Extermination of the Chinaman in San Francisco, gallantly defending U.S. shores from an invasion of ‘Mongolians.’ (5)

The Anglo-Saxon image of the Irish and their racial identity, especially in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was dominated by the idea of the ‘missing link’ between ape and Englishman, a mode of represent-
tation that intensified with the rise of the Fenian movement and the arrival of the first chimpanzees and gorillas in London in 1860. Periodicals and political caricatures began to “picture the Irish political outrage-mongering peasant as a cross between a garrotter and a gorilla” (Curtis 31; see also Dyer 52). This “process of simianizing Paddy’s features between 1840 and 1890” (Curtis 2) and “Negrization” (Cheng) led to the representation of the Irish people, and especially of Irish Catholics, not as a nation or as part of a national history, but rather as a race which was known as “native Irish, Celts, or Gaels” (Ignatiev 35). An illustration from Harper’s Weekly from the mid-nineteenth century shows this racialisation and blackening of the ape-like Irish (see Dyer 53). In this illustration, three profiles are depicted in black and white, the Irish Iberian, the Anglo-Teutonic, and the Negro. In the middle of the three and therefore representative of the cultural, political and social centre, the Anglo-Teutonic stands for the ideal, which, in Bhabha’s terms, is white and whole and obviously connected to civilisation and rationality: his high brow, straight nose, clear eyes and neat clothes all attest to the Anglo-Teutonic’s intelligence, civilisation and superiority. On his right and left and therefore at the margins of white mainstream Anglo-Saxon society, his racial others are depicted, the Negro and the Irish Iberian. They share a low, heavy brow, a prognathous, ape-like jaw and short, upturned noses. While the Irish Iberian wears common, rough clothes, the Negro only wears beads around his neck.

The pseudo-scientific style of this illustration and its accompanying caption form the basis for a metaphysical evaluation of the Irish as “low forms of life” which have to be civilised because they are missing out on “the healthy struggle of life on their isolated island” (Dyer 53). This type of social Darwinism creates an epidermal hierarchy with the Irish as the darker and lesser race, a thought which was often perpetuated in the countries that Irish people emigrated to, e.g. the US, where “Irish immigrants […] were referred to as ‘White Niggers’” (Bornstein). In the same vein, Noel Ignatiev observes that “in the early years [of Irish immigration to the US] Irish were frequently referred to as ‘niggers turned inside out’; the Negroes, for their part, were sometimes called ‘smoked Irish,’ an appellation they must have found no more flattering than it was intended to be” (41). Here, it becomes apparent that al-
though these characterisations as a race are based on seemingly distinct racial properties such as skin, build and mentality, the same characterisations can be used in an inverted form. Although the Irishman is white on the outside, he may be black on the inside. Thus, skin turns into a multiple signifier for racial inferiority that gains much of its power through being volatile and flexible (Bhabha 66). The darkness of the Irish race was especially linked to religion, which was in turn related to a lack of education and civilisation: “The putative backwardness of Catholics, manifested in tribalism and dogma, was diagnosed as symptoms of popery” (Garner 122). The so-called ‘Celt’ was described with what were considered typically ‘black’ characteristics: wild look and childish manner, barbarity, rampant sexuality, lack of control and intelligence, superstition and immoral character. As Steven Garner observes for the nineteenth century, “the incompatibility of the Irish with modernity became a cliché in American commentary” (122).

But the parallels between Africa and Ireland were not only drawn by those who wanted to point out the negative, backward characteristics of both. Often enough, the link between African slave and Irish colonised was made to point out the injustice of both their conditions: “A French traveller to both America and Ireland reported that ‘I have seen the Indian in his forests and the Negro in his chains, and thought, as I contemplated their pitiable condition, that I saw the very extreme of human wretchedness; but I did not then know the condition of unfortunate Ireland’” (Bornstein). The Irish have themselves often sought to underline this connection between black slavery and their own colonial experience.

Nevertheless, the Irish were often white enough to be included in dominantly white societies and were keen on aligning themselves with the white majorities (see Ignatiev). This underlines the relativity of the Irish position as they are black enough to be seen as definitely not British or Anglo-American, but white enough to serve as a bulwark against races perceived as even blacker. One example is that factory owners in the nineteenth century often hired Irish workers first in the attempt to avoid darker groups like Native Americans, African-Americans or other, darker European migrants. Thus, integration did not need to extend beyond a visually white boundary (Dyer 53). But
this whitening of the black Irish also extended to the Irish sense of themselves. Again, in the American context and the history of Irish immigration to America, this becomes obvious: “For Catholic Irish immigrants, becoming American meant becoming white: and proximity to African-Americans, whether spatial, cultural or political, was inimical to such a process” (Garner 121). The important phrase here is “becoming white,” an expression which again stresses that whiteness is not a physical fact but something which is a cultural, political, social, economic and legal construct. Similarly, Theodore W. Allen talks about the “invention” of the white race in the title of his study. This invention or “becoming white” also takes place in contemporary Ireland, first and foremost through regulations on immigration, naturalisation and asylum. Immigrants of a darker skin are often seen as more threatening than, for example, the large numbers of immigrants from Eastern Europe, who are visually and culturally seen as whiter. Since the mid-1990s the Irish in Ireland have been thrown back onto a white identity that strongly dissociates itself from any connection to blackness:

The state’s input into the process of racing Irish nationality, in which non-white bodies were being demarcated for verbal and physical violence, was to affirm the otherness and the threat of such bodies to Irish national cohesiveness. After being Catholics, Celts and Gaels, the Irish (in Ireland) had become white [...]

3 The Plays: Friel, Gorman and O’Kelly

The following three plays focus on the way that Irish characters in Ireland construct a lighter or darker identity when faced with the other. Father Jack in Friel’s Dancing at Lughnasa stands for an intercultural encounter that is successful until he returns home to Ireland. The characters in Declan Gorman’s At Peace find that the act of crossing borders is still dangerous today, both for inter-Irish relations as well as for people from Africa or Eastern Europe. Finally, in Donal O’Kelly’s The Cambria the Irish compassion with the fight against slavery in the nine-

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1 On the legal construction of whiteness, see López; on economic constructions, see Roediger.
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teneth century is contrasted with Irish immigration laws of the twenty-first century. What all three plays outline is that the Irish are neither white nor black. Instead, they inhabit a relative skin which is created by the cultures and selves they meet. Whiteness is not an invisible norm any more as the contingency of whiteness on stage makes clear. What all three plays share in this context are the motifs of in-between-ness and border-crossings, an inversion or subversion of common associations with whiteness and blackness, and the relative and sometimes conflicting position of the Irish in the construction of whiteness and blackness. The main assumption is again that the Irish anti-colonial struggle with its identification with oppressed, often black peoples conflicts with “the comfortable ‘whiteness’ of Ireland” and an “implicitly white, nationalist, usually Catholic, masculine and heterosexual identity” (Brannigan 232, 230). All three plays are set against the background of transgressions. Most of the characters in the plays cross borders, come back after having left their homes, transgress cultural rules and norms and find themselves in a state of in-between-ness due to these transgressions. The borders they cross include geographical, national, temporal, psychological, physical, moral, religious, racial, generational but also theatrical borders.

3.1 Brian Friel’s Dancing at Lughnasa

Brian Friel’s hugely successful Dancing at Lughnasa, first performed at the Abbey Theatre in Dublin in 1990, takes place in a space and time that is recreated in, and framed by, the memory of the grown-up narrator Michael, thus creating a “juxtaposition of narrative and drama” which transcends generic boundaries (Grene 207). On stage, Michael reminisces about two days in August 1936, when he was seven years old and lived with his unmarried mother and her four unmarried sisters. This memory is heavy with nostalgia, which shows in the “very soft, golden light” with which the stage is lit in the last tableau (Friel 70) and in Michael’s admission that “in that memory, too, the air is nostalgic with the music of the thirties” (Friel 71). Here, the reality of the past and present is outshone by a remembered past that is good and whole: “In Lughnasa, memory conveyed in language […] embraces everything in a ‘golden’ mist as opposed to the dire facts of poverty, deprivation
and destitute death in exile” (Bertha 163). This wholeness of the past as ‘golden’ “becomes engraved in the mind of […] Michael as something precious, something life-enhancing” and points out “the necessity to preserve memory” (Kurdi and Bertha 187). This is also stressed by Nicholas Grene, who describes the play as conforming to those audience expectations that look for a “nostalgic period-piece” (218), and by Mic Moroney, who evaluates the atmosphere of the play as creating “the amber world of gentle Donegal accents and soft emotional cadences” (250). This memory therefore not only mixes narrative and drama but also fact and fiction as it “owes nothing to fact” (Friel 71). Although the audience sees, and therefore implicitly witnesses, what happens in the two acts, we can never be sure whether it really happened like this. The place where this staging of nostalgic memory is set is “the home of the Mundy family, two miles outside the village of Ballybeg, County Donegal, Ireland” (Friel ii). The village of Ballybeg is itself an invention, a creation from the Irish for “small town” (Lojek 177). Friel’s Ballybeg is the “locus for many of the plays, and central to his fictive Ireland, past and present” (Corbett 3). In-between fact and fanciful memory, past and present, just outside but not exactly close to a small town that stands for every small town in Ireland and Ireland itself, a whole number of border-crossings are performed. Most of these border-crossings are intercultural ones in which a seemingly white Ireland faces up to its internal and external black other. As the narrator tells us at the beginning, one of the strongest memories is tied to the wireless set that the sisters bought in August:

And because it arrived as August was about to begin, my Aunt Maggie – she was the joker of the family – she suggested we give it a name. She wanted to call it Lugh after the old Celtic God of the Harvest. […] But Aunt Kate – she was a national schoolteacher and a very proper woman – she said it would be sinful to christen an inanimate object with any kind of name, not to talk of a pagan god. So we just called it Marconi because that was the name emblazoned on the set. (Friel 1)

Through the radio Marconi, a name that has an exotic and outlandish ring, the outside world seeps into the rural homogeneity of the household, whose wholeness is deconstructed as being an illusion or rather a

2 Guglielmo Marconi (1874-1937), the Italian pioneer of wireless communication.
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nostalgic construction of the remembering narrator. The radio and the music broadcast thus produce ambivalence as they create comfort for the sisters as well as danger and anxiety, an ambivalence that would later be mirrored by governmental regulations on radio programmes during World War II or ‘the Emergency’ (Wills 187–188). Most of the songs that are played in the two acts refer to foreign countries and situations in which order is undermined. The songs are, in original order, “Will you come to Abyssinia,” “The Isle of Capri,” “Play to me Gypsy,” and, most prominently, Cole Porter’s “Anything Goes.” Although these songs were written by white composers and played by white musicians for white audiences, they imply sexuality, licentiousness and transgressive bodies in a non-European space, all of which is linked to a Eurocentric stereotype of blackness. As the play is set in 1936, the songs, especially “Will you come to Abyssinia,” also foreshadow the war soon to start, as Mussolini had invaded Abyssinia in 1935, an invasion which was one of the events eventually leading to the outbreak of World War II.

Kate, the oldest sister, “embodies the inward-looking Ireland of the 1930s and 1940s: detached, Catholic, morally superior in attitude, clinging to respectability, attached to an idealised past, repressing or denying those aspects of life which do not fit their model” (Corbett 147–148). The date of 1936 for the events which the play depicts is meaningful in this context. In 1936, Eamon de Valera was drafting the constitution of the Irish Free State, Bunreacht na hÉireann, that came into effect in 1937. This constitution not only “reflected the Catholic tenor of the country” (Pašeta 93), but also famously emphasised that a woman’s life was to be “within the home” and that one of the major goals of the state should be to “ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home” (Pašeta 94). This image of Ireland in the play and in the constitution is closely linked to all aspects that above have been connected to whiteness, superiority and control. Nevertheless, this vision of whiteness and control is at the same time undermined by the Mundy sisters’ unconventional way of life, which is epitomised in their transgressive singing and dancing. Kate tries to hold on to the comfortable whiteness of Ireland by censuring her sisters for this singing and dancing to the
‘black’ tunes of Marconi, while ironically her own obligation to work outside their home makes her the most unconventional of the sisters.

However, this attempt at suppression and control is not successful. In the famous dancing scene in Act One, the sisters, even Kate, release their pent-up energy and frustration. In the stage directions to this scene, Friel writes that “with this too loud music, this pounding beat, this shouting – calling – singing, this parodic reel, there is a sense of order being consciously subverted, of the women consciously and crudely caricaturing themselves, indeed of near-hysteria being induced” (22). The order that is being subverted is that of a white, male and Catholic society that the Mundy sisters already defy through their not being married, their wage-earning and the youngest sister’s love-child, who is our narrator. It is very telling that the tune to which the sisters are dancing here is not an exotic song about a foreign place but an Irish reel called “The Mason’s Apron.” This links the ‘blackness’ of Marconi’s other songs to Ireland’s Celtic pagan past, which is already featured in the play’s title. The harvest festival of Lughnasa is celebrated with fires, dances, drink and ritual sacrifices that defy Christianity and its mind-body split, which is typical of the Western construction of whiteness (see JanMohamed). Ireland’s blackness, which surfaces in the sisters’ subversive dance, is therefore linked to its pagan past.

In the character of Father Jack, the Mundy sisters’ missionary brother, Christianity, Celtic heritage, and blackness meet even more obviously with Ireland’s colonial past. Michael explains: “For twenty-five years he had worked in a leper colony there, in a remote village called Ryanga in Uganda. The only time he ever left that village was for about six months during World War One, when he was chaplain to the British army in East Africa” (Friel 1). Father Jack is an Irish Catholic priest who was part of the British Army and who has finally ‘gone native’ in his African village. As much as Ballybeg is a remote village in Donegal, Ryanga is a remote village in Uganda. The rites that are performed in Ryanga, for example during the harvest festivals, are very similar to what is happening in the back hills of Ballybeg during Lughnasa. In this vein, Jack explains to his appalled sisters: “Oh, yes, the Ryangans are a remarkable people: there is no distinction between the religious and the secular in their culture. And of course their capac-
ity for fun, for laughing, for practical jokes – they've such open hearts! In some respects they're not unlike us” (Friel 48). Jack’s description of the Ryangans perfectly matches what we have just seen of the Mundy sisters. Nevertheless, Jack’s transformation, the fact that he speaks Swahili better than English, that he confuses Ballybeg with Ryanga and that he time and again refers to himself and the African people as “we,” “us” and “our people” (Friel 47), makes the sisters afraid. “He’s not our Jack at all. And it’s what he’s changed into that frightens me,” says Kate (Friel 49). The relativity of their whiteness and their position in-between blackness and whiteness is exposed through Father Jack’s hybridity and the pagan rites of Lughnasa. Additionally, this in-between-ness points out the ambivalent position of the Irish priest, who is a part of the colonising mission of the English and who comes back home to find his sisters transgressing social norms through ritual dances to the sounds of Marconi. Both the sisters as well as Jack have left the safety of being white by acknowledging the parallels between Ballybeg and Ryanga, however reluctantly:

These potential similarities imply that in Ballybeg Dionysiac forces are largely repressed, yet in Africa, despite colonial rule, they have retained a dynamic resilience. The sisters’ anxiety about Jack’s behaviour may be an unconscious recognition of their potentially parallel situation and of such transgression, which they both fear and desire. (Llewellyn-Jones 37)

*Dancing at Lughnasa* shows that hybridity is a result of intercultural encounters. The Ireland of 1936 and the Mundy sisters are only able to catch a short glimpse of its potentials through Jack and Marconi, but they are not ready for it yet. Consequently, Father Jack must die at the end of the play, the radio breaks down and the sisters’ community breaks up as well.

### 3.2 Declan Gorman’s *At Peace*

In Declan Gorman’s *At Peace*, first performed in 2007 by the Upstate Theatre Project in Dublin’s O’Reilly Theatre, the motifs of borders and transgression are even more obvious. It is a play about borders, border-crossings and the potentials and dangers of such crossings. Some of these borders are between the cultures of the Nigerian, Latvian, Irish and English people who work together on a road construction site.
Other borders include Northern Ireland and the Republic, as these people are building a road, or rather, a metaphorical bridge, across the border. But these borders also include the dead and the living, gods and men, borders between cultural, social and political assumptions, men and women, and past, present and future. Beyond these differences and borders, the play as a whole implies a cyclical structure by dividing the plot into three parts: spring, summer and autumn. The seasons promise that their cycle will begin anew in the following year. As in Dancing at Lughnasa, a harvest festival is celebrated; here it is a festival that combines Irish, American and African traditions. These festivals and their celebration of fertility frame the multiple acts of transgression and point to the future of Ireland as a multicultural society.

The setting of the play is “a cross-border road construction project and continues in and around the fictitious town of Ballyrain, two miles South of the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland” (Gorman 2). It is interesting that again a fictitious town – echoing Friel’s Ballybeg – is the setting of the play and that the main plot is not set in Ballyrain but outside Ballyrain. Similar to Dancing at Lughnasa, which mixed fact and fiction in Michael’s memory, At Peace is a play that is “part-realistic, part myth” (Gorman 3). Some of the scenes take place in realistic settings such as town meetings or pubs, but some of the scenes are encounters with ghosts and spirits in the woods and on the border itself. These ghosts and spirits come from African, Latvian and Irish myths and appear to the characters in situations where they have to decide how and whether to go on with their lives. Accordingly, the three main male characters have names that link them to myth and legend. The Latvian character is called Martins and “is based loosely on the mythical Latvian deity Martins who was the Protector of Horses during the Winter months” and “Protector of the Latvian people” (Gorman 3). The Irish-American character Oisin is based on “the ancient legend of Oisin who travelled to the Land of Eternal Youth to be with his lover” (Gorman 3). When he comes home to Ireland 300 years later, “the landscape and community had changed beyond recognition,” and Oisin dies of instant aging when he tries to assist a distressed workman to lift a heavy stone (Gorman 3). The Nigerian character Ogunseyi, finally, is based on the Yoruba god of iron, Ogun, who was
also the first builder of roads. According to Yoruba legend, Ogun cut a road through the dense jungle that separated the world of the gods from the mortal world (Gorman 3). All these legends are concerned with bridging gaps and transgressing boundaries by cutting roads, lifting stones, returning home or surviving the winter.

This mixture of legends from three cultures connects the characters to what Gorman in the stage directions calls “certain hidden, subconscious, primal undercurrents that can inform human behaviour across cultures” (3). Although the play never talks about whiteness or blackness, Irish, African and Latvian folklore as “primal undercurrents” are connected with blackness and its connotations of a more primitive stage of human development. The play seems to evaluate this primitivism as positive. However, it keeps the associations of blackness with wildness and nature. This is stressed by Gorman’s phrasing that Martins’ meeting with Latvian spirits “may be the invasion of irrational folk superstitions residing in his subconscious brought on by alcoholic delirium or temporary madness and guilt” (3). Thus, although the play on the surface attempts to invert traditional evaluations of blackness and primitivism, associations of myth and folklore with irrationality, superstition, alcohol and madness perpetuate negative images of blackness that can be found in the analysis of the Irish as black, ape-like primitives prone to drinking and violence, as outlined above.

At Peace also crosses linguistic borders as it is performed in three languages, English, Yoruba and Latvian. When the actors speak in Latvian or Yoruba, sur-titled translations are projected onto the set in English. This implies a glimpse of the other cultures in their respective languages and makes it possible to stage problems of translation and exchange in the language in which they occur. Nevertheless, the fact that sur-titles are only provided in English shows that the target audience are native speakers of English or persons who should at least be able to understand English. The projected audience is therefore a largely white one. Here, the conflicting evaluations and goals of Gorman’s play come to the fore again. On the one hand, he wants to show that traditional, white images of blackness are cultural constructions that must be overcome just as the workers on the construction site try to overcome borders. Especially Ogunseyi, who
teaches Yoruba drumming and dancing to the Irish ladies of Ballyrain, stands for this attempt to reform the image of black people in white societies. He declares that blacks are more than “circus monkeys” (Gorman 32) who perform for white people’s amusement and in his disappointment he sees himself as “their cultural toy boy, like a mantelpiece trophy” (Gorman 37). What Ogunseyi therefore fights against is the image of Africans as talented dancers who are in tune with their primitive roots but who cannot be taken seriously when it comes to more civilised activities. Mrs Reilly, the policeman’s wife, says: “Lovely. I mean they’re all so lovely … the Blacks, the way they can dance …” (Gorman 32). She establishes a clear hierarchy between her white, observing self and the black, performing and observed other of Ogunseyi. Here, Gorman criticises a view of multiculturalism as a superficial supermarket in which one may pick a Chinese or Nigerian meal, but which will leave one’s white identity basically untouched. The same goes for the Latvian addition to the St Patrick’s parade that Mrs Reilly is planning. Instead of the Latvian national hockey team’s jerseys, which the Latvians want to wear, Mrs Reilly thinks that “the traditional would be better. […] Wouldn’t that be a great novelty for us to see the Latvians in their traditional costumes and doing a dance” (Gorman 9).

On the other hand, Gorman implicitly assesses the other, its myths and traditions as negative by presenting them as primal undercurrents, superstitions or primal belief systems. The implied blackness of Latvian, Irish and Yoruba culture therefore perpetuates exactly the hierarchy that the play seems to criticise. Through the personality and behaviour of Martins, Oisin and Ogunseyi all three cultures are linked to violence, childishness, primitivism, religion, nature and uncontrollable sexuality. The superficially positive re-evaluation of these characteristics is therefore not entirely successful in broaching the issue of whiteness and blackness as cultural constructions that are tied to a Manichean hierarchy of good and evil. In this sense, the play is adding elements of other cultures to the Irish background of the setting, but it does not combine them into truly intercultural theatre. Rather, Yoruba and Latvian folklore remain exotic and visually as well as linguistically separate ingredients to a more or less homogeneous, white, Catholic and male image of Ireland, thus merely turning them into a “raw materials warehouse” to
enrich the familiar aesthetics of Western drama (Regus 267-268, my translation).

3.3 Donal O'Kelly's The Cambria

Donal O'Kelly’s *The Cambria*, was first performed in Dublin’s Liberty Hall on St Patrick’s Day, 2005. The play starts out in present-day Ireland and moves on to present the journey of Frederick Douglass, African-American fugitive slave and writer, from Boston to Ireland in 1845. As in Friel's and Gorman’s plays, it transgresses the border between past and present. Also very similar to Friel and Gorman, O’Kelly transcends generic boundaries through having the central character of Frederick Douglass narrate rather than act out what and how he feels about his journey. The title of the play, *The Cambria*, refers to the name of the paddle-steamer on which Frederick Douglass crosses the Atlantic. This setting already hints at the prominence of liminality and in-between-ness, the ship being the main site of transition and a metaphor for the possibility of an “other space” (Foucault 27).

When the ship leaves Boston harbour, Frederick exclaims: “I laugh out loud. But I still feel shackled and confined. I decide I’m going to go out, damn it, to advance into the God-given light, to leave the darkness behind. I want to look at the coast of America fading away far behind. I want to shout and roar in the sea wind. I want to jump” (O’Kelly 8). The metaphors of whiteness and blackness that are used here to describe Frederick’s feelings are interesting. America is associated with darkness, evil and captivity, while the sea and the wind are movement and the light on the sea is God-given and available to everyone. In the course of the play, additional metaphors that invert the usual connotations of white and black are used. The white sails that Frederick sees during his captivity are “shrouded ghosts” that have come “to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition” (O’Kelly 36). Judkins, the captain of the *Cambria*, has visions of white icebergs, snow, and fog or “blind light. White sail covering” (O'Kelly 38, 40). And in the climactic scene in which Frederick is hunted by a Southern plantation owner, the ship’s deck is covered with white fog that hides everything and that creates confusion (O’Kelly 42). All these images of whiteness imply death, stiffness, coldness, confusion or chains. These
associations subvert the traditional connection of whiteness with revealing light, enlightenment and a clear view. Not only is Frederick in-between slavery and freedom, in-between America and Ireland, the language and the metaphors of the play themselves transgress the common connotations of blackness and whiteness and make us aware of our expectations by not fulfilling them.

*The Cambria* also blurs the distinction between the different characters by having two characters called Colette and Vincent play all the roles. Colette, who is herself already a fictive character, plays five roles, while Vincent plays four. Captain Judkins is played by both characters. This hints at a blurring of boundaries and at a flexibility of roles that can be taken up and changed. The roles in *The Cambria* are not only multiple roles but are also performed across gender (an actress playing a male character) and across skin colour (a white actor playing a black character).

The journey itself links the fight against slavery to the Irish fight for independence. Frederick escapes from his owner, a shipbuilder from Maryland, and is on a sea-voyage to Ireland where he hopes to become a free man. On the ship, the Irish steward Dignam is the most open-minded person towards Frederick, who has a first-class ticket but has to leave his cabin due to the white slaveholder's prejudices. Arriving in Ireland, Frederick is not only greeted by a whole crowd of people and a marching band, but also by Daniel O'Connell, ‘the Liberator,’ who introduces Frederick as “the Black O’Connell,” orator, writer, ex-slave and hero among all freedom-loving people (O’Kelly 50). Quotations from original letters by Frederick Douglass let his experience among the Irish appear as an entirely positive one:

I have travelled from the Hill of Howth to the Giant’s Causeway […] I live a new life. The warm co-operation extended to me by the friends of my despised race; the liberal manner in which the Press has rendered me its aid; the spirit of freedom which seems to animate all with whom I come in contact, and the entire absence of prejudice against me, contrasts so strongly with my bitter experience in the United States, that I look with wonder and amazement on the transition. (O’Kelly 51-52)

This association of slavery and colonial oppression and the analogy between Black Americans and Irish people make both the Irish blacker and the Black Americans whiter. The establishment of a clear dichotomy of
white vs. black traits therefore becomes impossible. Skin colour and its connotations are obviously relative and depend on the context. They have no essential meaning. By travelling from the USA to Ireland, Frederick changes his colour, not because his skin physically changes, but because the cultural constructions of his skin have changed. In this vein, Frederick comments at the end of the play: “I find myself regarded and treated at every turn with the kindness and deference paid to white people” (O’Kelly 52), a remark that not only shows that Frederick has become a new person in Ireland but that also points out that he has internalised the epidermal hierarchy of whiteness as the human norm to which everybody must aspire in order to become a human being.

However, this positive ending with its unity of all freedom-loving people in an Ireland that is both black and white is countered by the play’s beginning and ending. At the beginning, we find Colette, a history teacher in O’Connell’s school, sitting at Dublin airport, where she has protested against the deportation of one of her pupils, Patrick from Nigeria. The history of Irish colonial oppression, poverty and emigration is here contrasted with the Irish present of asylum and deportation, as Colette states: “Think of where you come from, generations of Irish flung around the globe … But – no use. The plane was gone to Lagos. Nigeria. Chartered direct” (O’Kelly 4). That the deported child’s name is Patrick, that he played Saint Patrick in the school pageant and that his “party piece” was Robert Emmet’s “Speech From The Dock,” all point to the same thing: Ireland has whitened itself through economic growth and immigration laws. It has not learnt its lesson from a past in which the Irish themselves were called “white niggers” and were likened to apes (O’Kelly 4). The question that Colette asks at the point when the story turns to 1845 is therefore addressed at the contemporary audience: “if Frederick Douglass … came to Ireland NOW …” (O’Kelly 4). This question is again taken up at the very end of the play, where the final sentence is: “Frederick Douglass, one-time asylum-seeker and refugee” (O’Kelly 52). The play’s pessimistic evaluation of Irish aspirations to whiteness has a parallel in the historical Frederick Douglass’ retrospective assessment of his own experience in Ireland. Having met with a warm welcome in Ireland in 1845, Douglass, after his return from Ireland, wrote in 1853: “The Irish, who, at home, readily sympathise
with the oppressed everywhere, are instantly taught when they step upon our soil to hate and despise the Negro … Sir, the Irish-American will one day find out his mistake” (qtd. in Ignatiev v).

4 Conclusion

The thesis of this paper was that skin and its colour are not mere biological facts. Multiple hierarchies of good and evil, male and female, mind and matter are projected onto the coloured skin, which then make up an epidermal hierarchy of power. The white point of view has always remained invisible and has therefore turned into a seemingly neutral norm of humanity. To make the contingency of this assumption explicit, whiteness needs to be made visible to make real intercultural encounters possible. Skin becomes a relative skin. The examples from Friel, Gorman and O’Kelly have shown that the relative position of the Irish opens up perspectives onto the role of coloured skin in cultural studies and that contemporary Irish drama discusses questions of identity by referring to questions of skin colour and racial characteristics. These characteristics are exposed as cultural, social and political constructions which can be undermined and transcended through depictions of intercultural encounters. The three plays all focus on meeting and facing the other. These encounters are difficult, but they also include a positive potential for self and other. What the characters in the plays experience can therefore be summarised with the help of Roddy Doyle’s diagnosis of the state of contemporary Ireland in general:

Someone born in Ireland meets someone who has come to live here. The love, and the horror; excitement, and exploitation; friendship, and misunderstanding. The plots and possibilities are, almost literally, endless. Today, one in every ten people living in Ireland wasn’t born here. The story – someone new meets someone old – has become an unavoidable one. (xiii)

If interculturality is staged in this manner, these unavoidable encounters can become productive for relative beings with relative skins who have their subjective, changing and hybrid points of view.
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Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature


Mapping Polish Identities on the British Stage

The heightened influx of Polish immigrants into Britain after the enlargement of the European Union in 2004 generated ongoing debates concerning the impact of East Europeans on Western economy, demographics and culture. In view of this, it is not surprising that the theatre (both in Poland and in Britain) has also recently taken up the problematics of Polish labour migration. Especially the Gappad Theatre’s RE-ID, Re-Identification, Re-Identyfikacja (Gappad, 2007) and Cherry Blossom (Traverse, 2008) – a co-operation between the Traverse Theatre Company and Teatr Polski Bydgoszcz – focus on contemporary tribulations of Polish immigrants in the British Isles. Interestingly, both plays share certain formal and thematic elements. Both are instances of verbatim theatre: Cherry Blossom evolved from a number of interviews that the writer Catherine Grosvenor and the director Lorne Campbell undertook among Polish migrants, their families and the receiving country’s communities. These stories were combined into one fictional account of Grażyna Antkiewicz’s migratory project. The Gappad Theatre, on the other hand, used the experience of its members – partly Polish migrants – and interviews with their friends as a source for a number of parallel stories concerned with Polish economic migration. In these stories, retold in both languages, RE-ID and Cherry Blossom intertwine realities of economic migration with their metaphorical significance. Despite these similarities, both plays use the above-mentioned elements differently.
The Gappad Theatre explores the impact of migration on personal identities through “physicality and live music” (Gappad Theatre Company). *RE-ID*, as an instance of physical theatre – somewhere between Jerzy Grotowski’s formula of poor theatre and DV8’s physical aesthetics – resists detailed description. It combines a number of more or less anonymous stories which resound with a cacophony of distinct voices: voices that belong to those who are on the verge of migration, those who try to adapt and those who want to come back. The characters, constructed within the tradition of Sławomir Mrożek’s *The Emigrants* (1974), are nameless types. Unlike *RE-ID*, *Cherry Blossom* concentrates on and combines only two stories – the fictional story of Grażyna Antkiewicz and her first steps in Britain and a ‘true’ account of Robert Dzikański’s death at Vancouver airport in 2007 – to highlight the equivocal character of trans-national identities.

*RE-ID* and *Cherry Blossom* touch upon a number of issues such as representation of different ethnicities, relationality of identities and the concept of mobility and travel. What they bring into relief, however, and what I focus on in this paper, are theatrical manifestations of Polish identities – not in the sense of how Polish migrants are perceived by the British, or how they perceive themselves, but rather Polish migratory identities as transformable through the experience of migration. In the attempt to analyze the presentation of Polish experience onstage, I use the notion of the “contact zone,” as explored in what Susan Stanford Friedman identifies as “the new geography of identity” (17). The framework that she proposes highlights the relational character of identities:

> identity [is] a historically embedded site, a positionality, a location, a standpoint, a terrain, an intersection, a network, a crossroads of multiply situated knowledges. […] [It is] the mapping of territories and boundaries, the dialectical terrains of inside/outside or centre/margin, the axial intersections of different positionalities, and the spaces of dynamic encounter. (19)

Understood as a positionality, trans-national subjectivity is a dynamic space established through a ceaseless negotiation of borders.

These borderlands are at the same time potential contact zones – spaces where “the always already heterogeneous belies the fixity of imagined authenticity” and where “clear demarcations of difference”
(Stanford Friedman 26) are continuously blurred. Contact zones can effectuate an intermingling of apparently and allegedly stable identities and contribute to their hybridization. Such identities are nothing else but ongoing dialogues and negotiations between difference and otherness, on the one hand, and similarity on the other.

It is precisely the concept of Polish identity as a dynamic, dialectic positionality and its theatrical reconstruction that interest me here. In this paper I am looking at three contact zones – i.e. at three “social spaces where [Polish and British] cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (Pratt 34) – the contact zones of economy, place and language. Undoubtedly, there are many more such contact zones, but these three have been frequently used by the British media and can be distinguished in a majority of Polish and British plays on Polish post-accession migration.

What I would like to determine is how the parameters of economy, place and language are presented onstage. In how far are they devised as positive spaces of interaction as opposed to the enclaves of isolation; can they be seen outside these binaries? It is my contention that both plays spotlight the equivocal character of contact zones, which helps them to demonstrate the difficulty and complexity of Polish trans-cultural experience. These discursive spaces are also used by contemporary media in geopolitical narratives of Polish and British relations. Thus, before addressing the issue of Polish trans-national identity in British theatre, I will briefly summarize media depiction of the spaces of Polish/British contact to demonstrate how they were used by the British media to underscore the cleft between economic migrants and the “British nation.”

1. Non-Theatrical Contact Zones

With the joining of the European Union in 2004, Polish citizens were given open access to Western labour markets, which generated an influx of economic migrants into Great Britain and Ireland. According to the “Accession Monitoring Report, May 2004 – March 2009,” Polish nationals have constituted about 66 per cent of the registered new immigrants, which is about 600,000 people (“Accession Monitoring Report”)
The fourth largest ethnic minority in the British Isles, Polish post-accession immigrants have mostly taken jobs in administration, business and management as well as hospitality and catering with agriculture constituting only the third field of employment ("Accession Monitoring Report" 23). Geographic indiscrimination is regarded as a characteristic trait of post-2004 migratory projects: Poles settle both in urban and rural centres, anywhere between Aberdeen and Plymouth, with a particular penchant for "the Scottish Border regions and Central Valley, the industrial North East much of Wales and the South West" (Ford).

Even today, when the "reverse tide" sweeps Polish immigrants back, journalists discuss their impact on British life. Interestingly, the emphasis in the British media is often given not necessarily to the demographic transformation of the British Isles but rather to the economic and cultural impact of the "Polish Pound," i.e. to the not insignificant amount of money that Polish workers siphon out of the country. In the effort to reintroduce the Polish Pound to the British market, attempts have been made at profiling the Polish purchaser (Grzegorczyk and Malik) and at accommodating the British market to his/her needs, which has brought about a transformation of the consumerist landscape. Cahal Milmo and Laura Pitel thus summarize the impact of Polish post-accession migration on Britain’s economic landscape:

The bid for a slice of Polish immigrants’ disposable incomes follows similar moves by Britain’s big retailers. Sainsbury’s, Tesco and Asda have all added products from sauerkraut soup to chocolate-covered marshmallows while Heinz and Nestle have started selling products made by their Polish subsidiaries in the UK. Lloyds TSB earlier this year followed HSBC and Barclays by offering current accounts tailored to the needs of recent Polish immigrants while budget airlines such as easyJet and Wizz have seen demand on routes to and from Poland rocket.

This metamorphosis of the economic and geographical landscape is accompanied by an introduction of the Polish language and culture industry. New Polish dailies ("Polish Express," "Życie na Wyspach," and "Metropolia") and weeklies ("Gazeta Niedzielna") have now been joined by Polish literature and cultural events. Thus, as Milmo and Pitel acknowledge, "it seems culture has joined food, banking and aviation as

1 See, for instance, de Quetteville.
the latest sector of the economy to catch on to the power of the ‘Polish Pound’. In 2009, the Polskayear was inaugurated – “A Year of contemporary everything from Polska!” which “comprises over 200 projects introducing the most interesting achievements of Polish culture and works of the most outstanding Polish artists” (“Polska! Year”). Considering this influx of Polish people and their culture, it is not surprising that to some observers “parts of London [and other cities seem to have been transformed] into Slavic and Baltic enclaves where pickles and Polish beer are stacked in delicatessens and Polish can be heard on the streets almost as often as English” (Fuller).

Despite the proliferation of cultural initiatives, Polish immigrants are granted little national visibility other than their support for the British economy. The inspection of the three possible contact zones of Polish immigrants and other ethnicities in Britain – economy, place and language – shows little trans-national cultural or social exchange. The insularity of Polish immigrant communities, their fairly easy adaptation due to existing co-ethnic networks as well as British attempts to re-introduce the Polish Pound give the impression that Polish transnational identities are regarded as borderlands where traditional values of this ‘imagined community’ are maintained and supported by actions which privilege the differences both on the Polish and on the British side. The question arises whether this emphasis on difference rather than on socio-cultural exchange is also characteristic of theatrical depictions of the Polish immigrant experience in Britain. In other words, are the three discursive spaces explored as dynamic positionalities of interpersonal and intercultural exchange or are they regarded as territories privileging difference – as socio-cultural enclaves?

2. Theatrical Contact Zones

2.1 Economy

As far as the economy is concerned, it is precisely its ambiguous status as a space of exchange and an abyss in inter-human relations that is explored in both plays. Although they acknowledge the role of economy in geo-cultural exchanges, they both concentrate on exemplary interper-
sonal ties, whose character appears strangely economically-bound. They show the value of interpersonal relations as often measured by the yardstick of financial gain. Transnationally, this means a dilution of Polish family bonds and social networks. In RE-ID the decisions behind individual mobility are intrinsically economically-bound, which is symbolized by a scene in which immigrants fight over a twenty-pound banknote. When the character B announces that he is going home, A prevents him by handing him the note. In effect, the note spurs an outbreak of chaos and Polish quarrelsomeness, which also loosens fragile co-ethnic bonds in the receiving country. The stage directions emphasize this: “They stop talking and just keep stealing the note one from another. F enters. She gets the note, and starts looking at it. The rest tries to steal it. F tears the note to pieces and throws is into the group. Fight. F leaves” (Gappad Theatre 8). Economy here, then, should be regarded as a contact zone in the sense that it renders mobility (and hence, also trans-cultural meetings) possible but, at the same time, endangers the quality of interpersonal exchange through the fragility of ties that it promotes.

The significance of economy as a driving force behind intercultural mobility is also highlighted in Cherry Blossom by a rhythmic, sequential reference to the changing currency exchange rate, which precedes every scene. Rather than portraying only the evils of economically coloured social bonds, this play accentuates their equivocal character. Here the economy also influences intra-familial ties and contributes to their degeneration. When Grażyna informs the family that she will make it home for Christmas, their materialistic demands prevent her:

If a woman needs to purchase one copy of “Business Environment” by Wetherly and Otter, priced £32.99 [...] if she can pack eighty four packets of sausages in bacon in one hour, how many sausages does she have to wrap in bacon before she can buy the books? [...] If a woman lives in a stupid country which celebrates Christmas an entire day after it is celebrated in Poland. [...] If a woman has to put sausages in trays until the 24th of December to be able to afford the books and the playstation and the bus ticket, how can she leave Edinburgh on the 26th of December and arrive in Poland on the 23rd? (Grosvenor, Draft 2 25)²

² The text of Cherry Blossom has been published almost entirely in English. In order to bring closer to the reader the intertwining of both languages, I also use a script of the play which is more representative of its staging; this text is hereafter
Her husband, Paweł, resolves her quandaries by asserting: “I’m sure the kids would rather you came later, but with the things they want” (Grosvenor 47). Thus both plays point to alienation, displacement and instability of intra-cultural bonds as produced by the economy.

Yet, the economy is also regarded here as an interconnecting space which gives Grażyna a solid footing in Edinburgh. Her working in a factory contributes to her slow but inevitable acquisition of language skills, while her self-confidence is boosted by the amount of money she earns: “£197.20! 1,425 złoty! 1,425 złoty in one week. Ja, Grażyna Antkiewicz, lat 43, dotychczasowa historia zatrudnienia, zero, dotychczasowe doświadczenia życiowe, zero. 1,425 zł!” (Grosvenor, Draft 2 13). Both her work in the factory and the money she earns add to Grażyna’s self-assertiveness which results in her setting up of counselling services for Polish immigrants who have legal, tax or accommodation problems in Britain. The economy then serves as a platform for co-ethnic and trans-ethnic exchange as well as strengthening individual economic bonds and networking in the receiving country. Through the exchanges with her landlord and, most particularly, with John, an Edinburgh councillor, Grażyna’s identity is enacted as a dynamic positionality, susceptible to the external socio-legal and economic forces and undergoing hybridization as a result of trans-cultural contacts.

2.2 Place

Like the economy, places are seen as ambiguous spaces where the dynamics of exchange are intertwined with the affirmation of difference and otherness. The limitedness of such exchanges is highlighted both by Cherry Blossom and RE-ID, and appears to be typical of other plays on

referred to as Draft 2. I would like to thank Lorne Campbell for granting me access to this text.

3 “Jestem przekonany, że dzieci woląby, żebyś przyjechała później, te rzeczy, które im obiecała...” (Grosvenor, Draft 2 26).

4 “£197.20! 1,425 złoty! 1,425 złoty in one week. Did you hear? Earned by me. Grażyna Antkiewicz, forty-three, previous employment history: nothing; previous life experience: nothing, 1,425 złoty!” (Grosvenor 30).
Polish post-accession migration.\(^5\) Places under consideration are the venues of everyday exchange – the functional spaces of everywhere and nowhere – a factory, a bus-station, a toilet, a job centre, a park, the airport but also the telephone, the internet and cyberspace – which often become platforms for petty and limited interaction, but which are also often regarded as borderlands whose crossing is equivocally marked as both a potentiality of bonding and as a dangerous transgression. This first possibility – the possibility or failure of bonding – is symbolically presented in RE-ID by a dichotomized depiction of collective and individual spaces which are nonetheless negotiable due to individual attempts at integration. Collective spaces in the receiving country are often conceptualized as physical borderlands:

The other figures slowly start rising up, as one organism, breathing together. She goes to them and tries to fit in but every time she fails, pushed away by the group. After her fifth try the figures say:

\[F: \text{Fuck off, you fucking foreigner.}\]

One of the figures breaks through and goes to hug her. Other figures start approaching, taking power and energy from the helping figure. In the end he’s left alone, surrounded by the other figures, with their backs turned on him. (Gappad Theatre 6-7)

Thus, here, the physical enclosure of the collective space is shown as potentially dynamic, transformable and negotiable; yet, at the same time, it is a process which is very difficult and not always successful.

This significance of place to self-definition is more vividly explored in Cherry Blossom, where Grażyna’s space – especially, the flat she lives in – becomes the space of opportunity, transition and hybrid self-identification. Her dilapidated lodgings force Grażyna to seek legal advice and transform her subject position in relation to her landlord and, in effect, to the uncooperative segment of British society. This spatial hybridity – as a potential site which fosters intercultural exchange and transforms identity – is underlined on the formal level of the play. The setting realized by Fifty Nine Productions (Leo Warner and Mark Grimmer) highlights the negotiable and unfixed character of spatial

\(^5\) See, for instance, Polish plays such as Michał Zadra’s From Poland with Love (2005) or Łukasz Ripper’s Zabić Superwajzora Jak 14 Tysięcy Kurczaków (2008).
borders and identities that are dependent on them. Mobile horizontal panels stress this fluidity: as a projection space, they only latently refer to inter-cultural and inter-personal borders but when they are turned into a vertical position they suddenly erect physical, tangible boundaries. These panels are also used as screens on which maps, streets and rudimentary interiors are projected and which thus underscore the dynamic and imaginary character of the places that the dramatis personae traverse. The projections also blur the differences between distant geographic realities and imaginary dreamscapes which are often coinages of home and of the receiving country. In this context, identities are like the places that inspire them: full of latent borders but also very malleable and heterogeneous.

A stark opposition to this conceptualization of place as a dynamic potential contact zone is provided by the integration of Robert Dziekański’s story, which is recounted between the scenes of *Cherry Blossom*. This element visualizes the link between place and language and their inevitable interchange in the processes of identification and negotiation of visibility. Dziekański was a Polish tourist who travelled to Vancouver in 2007. Unable to communicate with Dziekański, who became visibly agitated after completing migratory procedures and being transferred to the international arrivals reception area, the airport security guards tasered him several times and did not take up any resuscitation action when he lost consciousness, as a result of which Dziekański died. Lorne Campbell, the director of *Cherry Blossom*, spotlights the significance of Dziekański’s story as a metaphor of the inherent ambiguity and dangerous character of potential contact zones to the identity of trans-cultural subjects:

‘In the morning this man was still Mr. Dziekański, had his plane ticket and passport. When he landed in Vancouver, he transformed into a lost, terrified person who does not speak the language. Ten hours later police identified him as a dangerous, drunk Russian, while in fact he was only a disorientated emigrant, tired by security procedures.’ (qtd. in Pawłowski, my translation)"

6 “Jeszcze rano ten człowiek był panem Dziekańskim, posiadał bilet i paszport. Kiedy wylądował w Vancouver, stał się zagubionym i przerażonym człowiekiem, który nie zna języka. 10 godzin później policja wzięła go za groźnego, pijanego..."
Dziekański’s story illustrates the danger that arises when interpellation that precedes the formation of a subject position is hindered by the ignorance of signifying systems. It also shows how a place of contact – the airport – can easily become a dangerous space of difference.

2.3 Language

The inherently equivocal character of language as a contact zone is highlighted by both plays, especially by their bi-lingual structure. The mixture of Polish and English is used to make clear that language can be another potential middle ground but can also be a big hindrance in the creation of trans-cultural identities. The danger of linguistic incompetence that *Cherry Blossom* encapsulates in Robert Dziekański’s story is also evoked in *RE-ID*, in the reconstruction of individual integration attempts. In one scene, confronted by the rhythmically moving body of the surrounding group, one character called Stranger begins to imitate the characters that surround him a polyphony of English phrases: “He repeats words after the group. He says ‘home.’ Then, in order to check him, the group gets him to say ‘blah’ (it means as much to him as a proper word)” (Gappad Theatre 3). While in this case the power related to linguistic performance is strictly unidirectional, this gradually changes in the course of the play, as the Stranger gradually acquires linguistic competence.7

This idea is taken further in *Cherry Blossom*, in the exchanges between Grażyna and John where language not only functions as a place of their trans-cultural self-expression but also as a space where they confer

their relationship to/with each other. Language for once becomes a playground for inter-personal self-negotiation:

Grażyna: You can cook haggis?
John: Aye lassie! An if you’re really lucky I’ll gie ye a squeeze ae ma tatties an aw.
Grażyna: No Scottish!
John: Nae Scots, nae haggis.
Grażyna: I don’t understand what you are saying me.
John: Then learn.
Grażyna: No.
John: That’s very rude.
Grażyna: Why?
John: It’s my language.
Grażyna: It’s not language. It’s “ew ooo u”.
John: I’ll learn your language.
Grażyna: Impossible.
John: Teach me something. Something I can say to you. Nothing rude.

Too rude.

Grażyna: “Jesteś cudowną kobietą.”
John: What does that mean?
Grażyna: I don’t tell you.
John: Oh ho. Say it again?
Grażyna: “Jesteś cudowną kobietą.”
John: Yestesh.
Grażyna: Cudowną kobietą.
John: Pseudo –
Grażyna: CU – DOW –
John: Soo dov
Grażyna: Cu, cu, nie soo.
John: Tsoo?
Grażyna: Cudowna.
John: Sooodova.
Grażyna: CU.
John: Soo.
Grażyna: Cu.
John: Tsoo.
Grażyna: Yes, this one. Cu-dow-na.
Grażyna: Cudowną kobietą.
John: You’re going to kill me.
Grażyna: Kobietą.
Monika Pietrzak-Franger

John Cob-yet-on.
Grażyna “Ą”.
John O.
Grażyna A. A.
John A.
Grażyna Yes! That it! say it again! Just like this.
John A.
Grażyna Jesteś cudowną kobietą.
John I can’t. My mouth doesn’t work that way.
Grażyna Cudowną kobietą.
John And what does it mean?
Grażyna Ha! I don’t tell you what it means! You so clever, you can find out yourself. (Grosvenor, Draft 2 27-28)

This playful banter is also a sort of foreplay, which is confirmed by the next scene, in which John attempts to find out how seriously Grażyna takes her own marriage. The play consciously underlines the ambiguous character of language as a contact zone in another scene, in which Grażyna, after a day spent in a factory, demands to be told something “nice,” to which John responds with a story of Edinburgh’s past. The exchange is entirely in Polish; John’s linguistic competence, his Polish, is that of a native speaker, whereas Grażyna speaks Polish with a Scottish accent. The confusion that is thus introduced contributes to the perception of trans-cultural identities as fluid, inter-personally and trans-linguistically negotiated. The significance of the hybridity of identities thus constructed is further underlined by Campbell’s decision to make actors switch roles, thereby emphasizing the relational character of self-definition.

At the same time, these linguistic and cast exchanges also make clear that the process of identity creation, especially in a trans-national context, is never a coherent development but rather a struggle with incompletion, self-loss and misunderstanding. Although both plays refer to this ambiguous character of language, Campbell emphasizes it in Cherry Blossom by providing only fragmentary translation of the Polish parts. Although English versions of Polish passages are projected on stage panels, these are mobile and often in fact disguise the words. In addition, the text disappears quickly and the actors moving on stage hinder the visibility of the projection, thus inevitably causing frustration.
among audience members who do not speak Polish. This linguistic confusion has been devised as a way of demonstrating the complexity and difficulty of trans-cultural experience.

Fig. 1: Malleable boundaries in Cherry Blossom, courtesy Fifty Nine Productions.

3. Theatre as a Trans-Cultural Contact Zone

RE-ID and Cherry Blossom both aim at a re-construction of the experience of Polish economic migration into Britain. An examination of the parameters of economy, place and language shows that the plays convey the ambiguous character of these spaces as potential contact zones between Polish immigrants and British communities. Through the recourse to physical theatre and symbolic generalization in Gappad's case and latest technologies in the case of the Traverse, both projects highlight the hybrid character of trans-national identities created in the process of economic, spatial and linguistic negotiation. Both use the mixing of languages as the primary means through which the potential

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8 See, for instance, Nowak and Bogucka.
but also the danger of Polish/British negotiations can be seen. Thus, both attempt to “highlight the contact zone without obliterating difference” (Stanford Friedman 78).

However ambitious both these projects are, the question remains whether they succeed in conveying the message they so carefully construct. Although many reviewers have acknowledged their agenda, many were also critical. Especially Cherry Blossom was criticized for simplification and overgeneralization, stereotypical presentation, tediousness coming from a too extensive use of the Polish language and the Polishness that was ‘lost in translation.’ Such remarks prove that theatre – as a contact zone – is also ambiguous. Nonetheless, it has a potential to bring different nationalities together, which both theatre groups recognized. Agnieszka Bresler, artistic director of Gappad, summarizes their mission thus:

As far as language is concerned [...] we wanted to give ourselves the chance to reach the Polish and the British public. We wanted a Scot to sit next to a Pole, and even if they could not talk to each other because of the language barrier, they could see the performance together and understand it.

This idealization of the potential that theatre, as a contact zone, has for trans-cultural exchanges between audiences and the first elation that the gathering of multicultural audiences inspires clash with the feeling of incomprehension arising from the use of the Polish language and the isolation of Polish and British spectators. Lucy Jackson’s reaction is characteristic here:

while the extent to which a two-sided conversation may be understood when experienced from one side only is surprising indeed, it remains rather easy for non-bilingual audience members to become distracted during all-Polish passages, which proves detrimental to the action as a whole.

Even if it was difficult for parts of the audience to recognize the positive potential of these theatrical events, at least the cooperation between Polish and British actors and theatres can be regarded as evocative of the integrative and dialogical character of theatre as a contact zone. Perhaps the plays do not obliterate differences in trans-national points of view because of the stereotypical depiction of national identities, but they

9 On this, see especially Łubecka.
definitely “epitomize the desire for connection of one difference to another” (Stanford Friedman 79), as the director of the Traverse, Mike Griffiths, suggests:

‘Initially it was going to be the project designed for people in Edinburgh, whether they are Scottish or Polish. Meeting Paweł Łysak and talking through the project has added a huge dimension to that and had given the project a really strong foundation as a piece of work and a lot more credibility as a project because it has the involvement of a theatre company in Poland and we’ve used their actors and their dramaturge and so it’s turned into something extraordinary.’ (qtd. in Kubicki)

Nonetheless, despite all the attempts at bridging the gap between Polish and British audiences, Cherry Blossom and RE-ID show that theatre today, like the economic, spatial and linguistic zones that it explores, remains an equivocal contact zone. On the one hand, it can be considered as a potential trans-cultural space of exchange where the difficulty and complexity of trans-cultural identities – the continuous oscillation between exchange and incomprehension – can be acknowledged onstage and experienced by multicultural audiences, and where Polish and British spectators can be brought together. On the other hand, these idealistic precepts are contradicted by theatrical realities (financial requirements and audience behaviour) and discourage trans-cultural exchange and integration.

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As long as negotiations and representations of interculturality tend to place their emphasis on portrayals of cultural alterity in the lives and circumstances of the individual, as long as they focus on characters and their back-stories, on the dynamics between minorities and the dominant cultural surroundings they find themselves in, they seem to form a habit of making political and moral choices in their audiences’ stead. After all, siding with minorities, with those who have to cope with unfamiliar surroundings and those whose cultural identity is – as a consequence of these situations – being negotiated on stage, would seem to be the natural impulse for the educated theatregoer. As Merle Tönnies points out with particular reference to the portrayal of conflicts between the West and the Islamic world in turn-of-the-millennium British drama, such plays tend to offer “the easy option of feeling on the side of multiculturalism throughout” (83).

Of course, the situation is somewhat different in the case of cross-cultural adaptations of texts deemed canonical in one of the cultures concerned. Instead of a meeting of characters from different cultural backgrounds, such plays tend to negotiate aspects of interculturality in terms of the tension generated between text and pre-text; but here, too, cultural identity is usually easily identifiable and the line between the familiar of the domestic culture and the unfamiliarity of a perceived
Patrick Gill

Other is anything but obscured. It is the present essay’s contention, however, that this particular line is blurred in exemplary fashion by Anglo-Kuwaiti playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam, to arrive at something that is here termed *intercultural stagings*. And nowhere is this effect achieved more resoundingly than in his Shakespearean adaptation entitled *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. While another of his plays, *Kalila wa Dimna or, The Mirror for Princes*, may be seen as a comparable effort on his part and will also be discussed here, it is on *The Al-Hamlet Summit* that the present essay will concentrate.

In order to determine the intercultural dimensions of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, this essay will look at two separate aspects of the play, i.e. that of the play’s text and that of its performance history, though it will become apparent that this clear-cut differentiation between text and performance history is an even more artificial one in this play than in most. Having discussed these two aspects of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* as a prime example of intercultural stagings, the essay will then turn to a brief discussion of a more recent example of Al-Bassam’s stagecraft, *Kalila wa Dimna or, The Mirror for Princes*. A final assessment of this kind of theatre will conclude the present discussion. Since it is an Arabic *Hamlet* adaptation that we will turn to first, however, a few remarks on *Hamlet* in the Arab world would appear to be in order.

As Graham Holderness points out, *Hamlet* was first performed in the (geographical) Arab world in 1608 on board an English ship in the Gulf of Aden, but its domestication, its entry into the Arab world, really only started in the late nineteenth century (142). For many years, the most prominent Arabic *Hamlet* translation was that of Tanius Abduh, and the fact that he is thought to have fashioned his text after a French version of the eighteenth century, which in turn was produced by a man who spoke no English (Holderness 142), already hints at the complex phenomenon of cultural cross-pollination at work in this particular case. At any rate, at no point can we speak of a ‘faithful’ rendering of Shakespeare’s text into Arabic. Indeed, Arabic *Hamlets* were conscious adaptations, appropriations, instances of creative reception from the

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1 As a critic, Holderness enjoys a privileged position with regard to Al-Bassam’s *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, not only having published a perceptive essay on the play but also having provided the introduction to its bilingual edition.
very beginning. Factor in their concern for the domestic audience’s taste and expectations, and significant deviations ensue. As Al-Shetawi comments on Abduh’s Hamlet:

First, [he] deleted whole scenes […]. Second, [he] added songs. Third, [he] introduced new scenes in which Hamlet expresses his sentiments towards Ophelia in a language drawn from Arabic love poetry. He also purged the text of bawdy language in consideration of Arab moral sensibility. Finally, [he] ended the play with Hamlet’s triumph and the defeat of his enemies. Hamlet does not die; he ascends the throne of his father while the ghost blesses him. (78-79)

As Margaret Litvin demonstrates, there have been many new Arabic Hamlets since then, and certain traits (as, for instance, the strong interest in a powerful and dominant Claudius figure) may be seen as typical of these (198). Arising from this tradition and at the same time contradicting it, is Sulayman Al-Bassam’s The Al-Hamlet Summit, which, as Holderness’s summary of its stage history attests, enjoyed popular as well as critical success:

The Al-Hamlet Summit [was] first performed in English as part of the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival, in August 2002, where it was awarded the Fringe First Award for excellence and innovation in writing and directing. It was subsequently presented at the 14th Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre, in September 2002, where it won Best Performance and Best Director Awards. Subsequently it moved into Arabic and played at the Riverside Studios in London (March 2004), the Singapore Arts Festival (June 2005), Elsinore Castle in Denmark (August 2005), and other festival venues around the globe (Seoul, Tokyo, Warsaw, Tehran). (143-144)

As its title suggests, The Al-Hamlet Summit transposes the Hamlet plot into the domain of a political conference organised among the ruling family of an unnamed Arab country. In doing so, it reconfigures certain characters without massively changing the overall action portrayed in the Shakespearean play. The Al-Hamlet Summit opens to “the characters seated behind desks as though at a summit, complete with name tags and headphones. This set[s] the scene for an evening of power struggle,

2 Incidentally, it is this diverse and divergent tradition of Shakespearean adaptations that would appear to contradict Peled’s assertion, made in 1979, that the translation of canonical Western texts into Arabic should be seen “as a conscious effort of Arab society to learn and acquire certain facets of Western culture and civilization” (128).
negotiations, compromise and tragic chaos” (Culshaw). Claudius remains a power-hungry and devious ruler, but he takes on the very specific role of a secularist tyrant in league with the West. That he cares for little besides his own wealth and power is perhaps most impressively exemplified in the prayer scene, in which he addresses an amalgamation of Western capitalism, governments and societies as “God”:

Your plutonium, your loans, your democratic filth that drips off your ecstatic crowds – I want them all, oh God; I want your Vaseline smiles and I want your pimp-ridden plutocracies; I want your world-shafting bank; I want it shafting me now – offer me the shafting hand of redemption – Oh God, let us be dirty together, won’t you? Without you, I cannot bear to be myself, cannot, cannot bear it. (71)

Claudius’s corrupt secularism is counteracted here by a couple of young lovers increasingly radicalised by the corruption and secularism at play in this state. But while Hamlet has to fulfil his function as the focal point of those wishing to resist Claudius, Ophelia ends up a suicide bomber at the end of the fourth act (80). The most telling addition to the cast is perhaps that of the Arms Dealer, a mysterious entity spurring on all potential conflicts in order to profit from them. In selling weapons “to anyone prepared to pay, even if arming opponents” (Holderness 144), the Arms Dealer may be seen as a representative of global capitalism in terms of the geopolitical ramifications of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*; in terms of a Shakespearean adaptation, this character represents an interesting take on the Ghost, the instigator of all actions (and, in a roundabout way, procrastination) in the early modern play.

Of course, the very notion of an Arabic *Hamlet* will probably elicit a few stock responses, as it did in the British press, but I would like to stress that while the play’s intercultural aspects may be specifically realised in the relation of Western and Arabic culture, norms, ideas, and politics, the present essay is interested in Sulayman Al-Bassam’s work as a specimen of what is termed here *intercultural stagings* in general. Thus, it is the artistic and aesthetic strategies at work in these plays rather than the plays’ more or less explicit commentary on a concrete cultural or political situation that the present essay is primarily concerned with. In

3 Witness the headline “Shakespeare and the Suicide Bombers” Peter Culshaw chose for his review of the play.
order to discuss these strategies more lucidly, this essay offers separate discussions of the text of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* on the one hand, and of the play in performance on the other. That this clear-cut dichotomy is an artificial one in the case of any play and in this more than in most, can be accepted as a given, yet for reasons of argumentative economy, making this distinction would appear the only viable way of approaching this discussion.

Clearly a part of what Al-Bassam himself terms “that area of intercultural dialogue which allows for a keener perception of the Self through the eyes of the Other” (Author’s Introduction to *The Mirror for Princes* 7), the text of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* offers a veritable minefield of literary, cultural, and political allusions: quotes lifted from a book on the wars that have ravaged Lebanon (52), a “rough translation of a Bosnian folk song” (62n), quotations taken from George Bush Snr. (75), Osama bin Laden (82), Palestinian and Iraqi poets (78, 83). As such, it may all too easily be thought to be a faithful representation of “the cultural ‘hybridity’ that occurs when an imperial discourse penetrates a post-colonial culture and merges with local and native materials to produce a synthetic fusion” (Holderness 147). However, as in the case of these infusions of literary and non-literary sources, the relation between text and pre-text is kept vague enough to invite multiple readings. Thus, for instance, the fact that the five acts are given the names of the five daily prayers in Islam may appear like a fairly straightforward substitution of unequivocal meaning, but this analogy breaks down the minute it is given some serious consideration. After all, the action of Hamlet famously does not take place in a single day and neither is the archetypal dramatic structure easily reconciled with the names of these prayers. As Al-Bassam points out, rather than forming a neat and univocal analogy, the prayers are invoked here as “descriptions of mood” (33n), and as such are much more open to interpretation than one might at first have thought.

Similarly, when Claudius proclaims that “[t]he New Democracy begins today!” (34), ideas of supposedly democratic rulers in the Middle East and the Maghreb may abound among a European audience, and they may find it difficult to take Claudius at his word. The very fact that
Western democracies have long been actively engaged in propping up puppet regimes throughout the world, usually citing a desire to bring democracy to the countries in question, however, complicates the formation of univocal judgements in response to this exclamation.

Easily conceived liberal prejudices are also confounded by *The Al-Hamlet Summit*, as the play goes out of its way to undermine “the basic West-East dichotomy” so prominent in, for instance, British plays of the 1990s dealing with the Arab world (Tönnies 80). In the absence of clear-cut simplifications and generalisations, “the easy option of feeling on the side of multiculturalism” (Tönnies 83) turns out to be an inadequate response to the complexities of the contemporary geopolitical situation, as is demonstrated in the scene in which Hamlet hears of his proposed place of exile: “Ah! London! I will not be alone. I will eat little, grow thin, write tracts and become the prized animal of European liberals” (76).

Thus *The Al-Hamlet Summit* goes far beyond the idea of substituting individual aspects of its pre-text with clearly identifiable analogies, and when the audience or readership perceive such an easy analogy, there is a good chance they will soon be introduced to its true opaqueness and complexity. To be sure, some minor aspects are mere translations from one culture to the other or from past to present, as in the case of Hamlet’s correspondence with Ophelia, which has here been turned into a collection of “tapes” rather than letters, in a clear modernisation of a well-known aspect of the Shakespearean play (37). But as has been demonstrated, the most significant changes elude easy categorisation and by no means engender a simple “writing back”—instead, they forcefully reaffirm what has by now become a critical truism: that “all texts are potentially plural, reversible, open to the reader’s own presuppositions, lacking in clear and defined boundaries” (Allen 209).

This impression is further conveyed by the effect of constant linguistic alienation the play produces. To a significant degree, this is the result of its genesis and performance history. But even the physical appearance of the printed text offers an impressive reminder of the linguistic and cultural diversity negotiated in the play: published by the University of Hertfordshire Press, the play is offered in a bilingual edition that can be read from left to right (if it is to be read in English) or from
right to left (if it is to be read in Arabic), both texts ending in the middle of the volume. Apart from its undeniable novelty, the presence of both languages in the printed text affords readers the opportunity to undergo at least some of the effects an Arabic performance with English surtitles would have. Thus, when the Arms Dealer accuses a group of being “terrorists” in the English text (55), the Arabic text is conspicuous for using the same, English word as a form of denunciation. The concept of terrorism applied here, the text of the play adroitly implies, is that of Western powers and not indigenous to the Arabic language. This constant to and fro between literary and cultural traditions is supported by a similar negotiation between languages in the text and in the final analysis creates an intermediate space in which neither can claim exclusive dominance. But as has already been pointed out, it is in the various performances the play has undergone that its intercultural aspects really come into their own.

Although Al-Bassam had experimented with Hamlet adaptations before, the play entitled The Al-Hamlet Summit was first produced at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2002. Two years later, an Arabic version of the play premiered at the Tokyo International Arts Festival. This Arabic translation “was made by many hands” (Al-Bassam, Author’s Note to The Al-Hamlet Summit 25) and in turn led to changes in the English text. Thus the English text now, for instance, contains puns on Arabic words that were not there before the Arabic version of the play existed.4 Some of the “many hands” that helped create the Arabic text were the Arabic actors themselves – actors from “all over the Arab world including Syria and Iraq, something unique in Arabic theatre” (Culshaw), where actors are usually recruited to companies strictly operating on a national basis. And the multinational cast has performed in all corners of the globe, their “most extraordinary performance” taking place in front of “600 American troops in Doha,” where “the backdrop was seven huge American tanks” (Al-Bassam qtd. in Culshaw). Their participation in many international festivals meant that the troupe frequently played to audiences who could claim neither Shakespeare nor Arabic literature among

4 Witness the play on the somewhat similar Arabic words for “kiss” (qubla) and “bomb” (qumbila) (64-65) that – despite attempts at literally explaining it – for obvious reasons fails to work in English.
their personal cultural heritage. And even when they played to what could have been considered a ‘home’ audience, the language barrier – partly by design and partly of necessity – remained. As Al-Bassam explains:

The only reason [the play] got permission to perform [in the Arab world] in the first place was because it was in English and any potential threat in its content was neutered by the language barrier. Since that time, [it] has been performing in Arabic across the world but never, ever, has it been performed in Arabic within the Arab world. (“Bard of Basra”)

Thus, *The Al-Hamlet Summit* has been performed in English in the Arab world and in Arabic (with English surtitles) in Britain. And while the first half of this assertion may be due to censorship issues, the overall aesthetic effect of a certain linguistic alienation cannot be denied. But it is not only the play’s language that depends on the place in which it is performed. The central character of the Arms Dealer, for instance, is illustrative of the way in which performances of *The Al-Hamlet Summit* are maximally dependent on their respective audiences. A man and the only native speaker of English in the Arabic version (which, it has to be recalled, is habitually performed in the English-speaking world), the role is taken on by a woman in the English-language version (performed in the Arab world).

But it is not only the major cultural differences that the play adapts to depending on the context of its performances; even the local context of individual performances is taken into account, as the following discussion of where to send Hamlet demonstrates:

Claudius: [...] Where to, Madame?
Gertrude: Beirut?
Polonius: Too many militias.
Gertrude: Damascus?
Claudius: Too many thinkers.
Polonius: Cairo?
Gertrude: Too many liars (62)

As Al-Bassam points out in a note on this passage (63n), there are variations on this theme based on the immediate context of the performance, and thus Baghdad, Kuwait, Dubai, Qatar and other places all offer viable alternatives to be included in the above list.
While these can be seen as relatively superficial alterations with no great impact on the overall meaning of the play, their existence and frequent application demonstrates once more the fluidity and interpretive openness of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. No exact equivalence is sought for, or indeed needed, as the interpretation of the play is largely left to the audience. While it is typical of rewritings of canonical texts to “foreground what is in the background, [to] centralize what is marginal, […] [to] articulate what is implied” (Stein 296), it is difficult to unreservedly accept these clear-cut dichotomies in the case of *The Al-Hamlet Summit*. Another such dichotomy not easily identified here is that of “Self” and “Other” within which “attempts at defining the ‘Other’ are […] attempts at self-definition” (Tönnies 77). That dichotomy is hardly discernible at all in *The Al-Hamlet Summit* – at least not on a structural level beyond the outward trappings of veils, oil wells and so on. In fact, as Cavendish aptly observes, “there is a two-way exchange going on here.” All the characters’ fates are intertwined in a conflict that extends far beyond the borders of this fictional Middle Eastern nation, and the play refrains from passing any open judgement on them. The bilingualism of the play, the variations in its performances and the literary allusions serve to elevate its action to a level beyond that of “the current explosive state of Middle East politics” (Gardner).

That these complexities may on occasion be lost on the observer is documented by one cultural commentator writing for the *Guardian*, who, in her review of the play, noted that “the lack of specificity is a serious problem: we don’t know what land we are in, where to place our sympathies […] The result is an interpretation that shrouds the play, and the world in which it is set, in darkness” (Costa). That the uncertainty with regard to the allocation of our sympathies and to recognisable settings is part of the point of the play rather than its irredeemable weakness is something that should by now have become absolutely clear.

Another project of Al-Bassam’s, which may be said to pursue the same ambitious agenda of an intercultural stage, has received rather less attention, perhaps because it hearkens back to the eighth-century Abbasid Caliphate and takes as its pre-text the writings of Ibn Al-
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Muqaffa, a pioneer of Arabic literary prose, and thus does not offer a frame of reference immediately familiar to most Western audiences. \textit{Kalila wa Dimna or, The Mirror for Princes} premiered at the Tokyo International Arts Festival in 2006 and shares some of its central concerns with \textit{The Al-Hamlet Summit}. Where \textit{The Al-Hamlet Summit} is concerned with the entanglement of all states, governments, and individuals in a global spectacle presided over by the Arms Dealer, though, \textit{The Mirror for Princes} seems primarily interested in writers and their relation to those in power.\footnote{In this context, it is interesting to note that the published play bears a dedication to Sheikha Hussa Al-Sabah, a member of Kuwait’s royal family.} Otherwise, some familiar features prevail: statements by many of the characters may refer to an eighth-century revolution but are equally applicable to the contemporary situation, as in this exchange between Al-Mansour, the Caliph’s brother, and Abdullah Bin Ali, his more belligerent uncle:

\begin{quote}
Al-Mansour: There is a limit to the effectiveness of war.
Abdullah Bin Ali: Not in the next ten years there isn’t.
Al-Mansour: One has to start thinking about what happens after wars. (27)
\end{quote}

Many of the exchanges here contain definitions of terms such as “fanatics” (61) or “heresy” (62) that belie the play’s historical setting. Like \textit{The Al-Hamlet Summit}, then, \textit{The Mirror for Princes} invites constant comparisons with our contemporary geopolitical situation. How could this be otherwise when part of the play is set in the middle of political upheavals in, for instance, Basra or when, in an attempt at flattery, the character of Abu Muslim is said to “rise next to the Caliph like a twin tower of Faith” (62), thus conjuring up a powerful verbal echo? The presence of several languages may not be as pronounced as it is in \textit{The Al-Hamlet Summit}, but it occasionally serves as a reminder that the Caliphate about to be created here will comprise more than one language or culture (cf. 48, when Abu Muslim and Abu Ayyoub briefly converse in Farsi).

Despite these obvious pointers, \textit{The Mirror for Princes} proved too opaque and alien a play in the eyes of many critics, one of whom described it as “a heroic failure” and went on to describe her night at the theatre as follows: “For most of the evening I felt as if I were fighting
my way through an impenetrable forest where all the signposts are in a code I couldn’t crack. Even with the help of a two-page synopsis, I kept getting lost” (Gardner). Unfamiliar names and characters as well as a lack of knowledge regarding oriental history on the part of the audience clearly prevent easy recognition of the uncanny parallels constructed by the play. And even the printed edition, which provides an introduction (7), a glossary of names, places, and religious terms (94-95) and an excerpt from the Encyclopaedia Britannica (6), fails to provoke the same instinctive response The Al-Hamlet Summit clearly gives rise to.

Here, then, we have reached the limits of what has been termed intercultural stagings in the present paper: the absolute prerequisite of at least a sense of partial familiarity – one enjoyed by all spectators regardless of their cultural background. This familiarity is needed in order to allow the audience to emotionally engage with the play in the presence of much less familiar aspects and it is needed to encourage the audience to form their own judgements. And while The Al-Hamlet Summit manages to offer a sense of familiarity and accessibility to members of diverse cultures (and on diverse grounds, too), The Mirror for Princes – though generally not dissimilar in its aims and strategies – must seem like a story from long ago about places far away on which few members of a London audience would feel qualified to comment.

This is not to say that adapting Shakespearean texts is the only viable option for the intercultural endeavours discussed here. But it would certainly appear to offer the safest ground, as Al-Bassam’s most recent play, Richard III: An Arab Tragedy (2007), demonstrates. However, it is safe to assume that this particular playwright’s future output will continue “to add a small pinch of mental ‘benzene’” to our “inter-cultural dialogue” (Author’s Introduction to The Mirror for Princes 7) – with or without the help of the Bard of Avon.
Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature


1001 Nights Now: 
Diaspora Narratives on the English Stage

Introduction

Over the last few years theatre productions dealing with pressing social issues, such as global migrancy, displacement, the plight of refugees and asylum seekers have begun to make their way onto the British stage. A very selective and by no means exhaustive list might include the work of the London-based East Asian company Yellow Earth and their 2004 play 58, based on a real-life event, the discovery of 58 dead illegal Chinese migrants in the back of a lorry at Dover; the Exodus Refugee Theatre Season in Manchester in 2006, bringing onto the stage the reality of refugee lives in Greater Manchester, or the Birmingham-based company Banner Theatre, producing a series of theatrical events under the project title of Migrant Voices between 2002 and 2006. These themes have received growing attention by playwrights as well. As Gabriele Griffin has noted in her 2003 book Contemporary Black and Asian Women Playwrights in Britain, the theme of diaspora, along with stories centred around the figures of refugees and asylum seekers, has become increasingly apparent in the recent work of black and Asian women playwrights as proof of these writers’ commitment to reflecting a changing Britain in their work.

The production this article discusses is part of this cultural landscape and represents what I believe to be a rather interesting attempt to stage interculturality, while drawing attention to both the plight of refugees in
Britain and the fragile position of Muslims in the post-9/11 Western world. Though it was of special relevance at the time it was produced in 2005, *1001 Nights Now* is still significant today in the light of increasing globalisation and in the aftermath of both 9/11 and 7/7.

*1001 Nights Now* premièred at the Nottingham Playhouse in October 2005 and then toured England, visiting various theatre venues across the country before its final staging at the Lowry Theatre in Salford in February 2006.¹

As the title suggests, the play draws on the *Arabian Nights* and attempts a contemporary rewriting of the Scheherazade tales, which provide both the texture of the play – constructed as it is of a sequence of stories narrated by actors to each other and to the audience – and the subject matter, as some of the original Scheherazade tales are retold or freely elaborated on. In this modern revision each of the stories examines the vexed cultural experience of Muslim immigrants into Western Europe, whose tales covering “anything from contemporary life in the Middle East, to political struggle and life in exile” are offered as narratives of survival (Lyddiard et al. 2005).

The origin of this play is fairly complex and is worth retracing briefly, before I move on to an analysis of the production which will stress the centrality of the narrative element and discuss how the various tales unfold on the stage. As this paper will argue, by foregrounding the narrative element as a survival strategy and by bringing together echoes and features of diverse cultures, the play succeeds in re-creating a diasporic or translational space on the stage. In this respect *1001 Nights Now* also invites reflections on intercultural theatre, as it is posited “at the crossroads of culture,” according to Patrice Pavis’ definition (1992), and on its suitability to offer a space for visualising current experiences of migrancy, displacement and “cultures in translation,” echoing the etymology of ‘translation’ as the process of being borne across, being moved from one place to another.

¹ The show, directed by Alan Lyddiard of Northern Stage, was co-produced by Northern Stage of Newcastle, Nottingham Playhouse and The Albany in London. Information on the cast, the authors and contributors to the production are detailed in Lyddiard et al. 2005.
1001 Nights Now from Denmark to England

In her review of the play the *Guardian* critic Lyn Gardner stated: “This is not your average evening’s entertainment” – perhaps wishing to warn prospective audiences not to expect a light piece of theatre or a play that could easily fall into neatly defined categories (Gardner). This impression is confirmed when we look at the complex process that led from the play’s original conception to its actual staging across Europe. The play had its origin in Denmark and was envisaged as a strongly collective work with many theatre artists from several European countries involved through different stages that led to its first production at the Betty Nansen Theatre in Copenhagen in 2001. The Danish *1001 Nights Now*, directed by Alan Lyddiard, who would subsequently direct the English production as well, was meant to be part of an ongoing and broader project to be shared with other European theatres, entitled *The Thoughts of the Others*, whose aim was to place Middle Eastern drama on the European stage. The project had a clear political agenda in that it tried to counteract the growing resistance towards the arrival of migrants and refugees in Europe by making their voices heard on the stage. This issue was felt to be increasingly important in Denmark, particularly in the wake of the 2001 general elections, which had been fought around the issue of immigration, but seemed to be of growing concern in other European countries as well. The play that finally opened at the Betty Nansen Theatre had a Danish cast and management and drew on stories written by prominent Middle Eastern writers, who freely reworked their assigned model text, the *Arabian Nights*. The Danish *1001 Nights Now* eventually managed to attract attention in Britain as leading producing theatre houses, such as Nottingham Playhouse, Northern Stage and The Albany, offered to sponsor a British leg of the project.

Hence, the original idea, which had become a fully fledged production in Copenhagen through the cooperation of European theatre artists and Middle Eastern writers, was transferred from mainland Europe to Britain. In the journey some of the Danish stories were retained, while others were left out in order for UK-based writers to contribute new material to the script that would reflect the experiences and struggles of Muslim refugees in Britain. Finally, a completely new cast of actors based in Britain was selected for the English production.
This short overview of the early stages and transformations of the play suggests that the themes of travelling, translation and migrancy, which are variously explored in the play, are also inscribed in its history. The English 1001 Nights Now is a reworking of disseminated materials from various countries, loosely modelled on The Arabian Nights, originally gathered and staged in Denmark as part of a rather ambitious project that, as Lyddiard recalls, involved working with several languages and across different cultures and would eventually “bring the reality of globalisation” onto other European stages (5-7). It could be argued that when translating the play to Britain there was also a clear attempt to rework it for a British social and cultural context. This aim was achieved by drawing on individual and communal experiences of migration in Britain, as they were recreated by writers and theatre practitioners of Muslim background who had then either recently migrated to Britain, such as the British-Jordanian writer Fadia Faqir and the Nottingham-based Kurdish writer and activist Abas Amini, or who belonged to more established diasporic communities in Britain, such as the Birmingham-Pakistani actress Shazia Mirza.

In the words of director Alan Lyddiard, the play was born out of a desire to “listen to the thoughts of others” (4). By transplanting the original theme and the magic of storytelling of The Arabian Nights onto the contemporary Western stage, the play enacts the thoughts and desires of the many invisible and all too often silent “others” that inhabit the West. The choice of The Arabian Nights was felt to be a contentious one, especially when an English version was offered and the play ‘translated’ to Britain. As is widely accepted, Western – mainly French and English – appropriations and translations of The Arabian Nights have had a crucial role in both producing and sustaining orientalist versions of the East (the orientalist scholar Sir Richard Burton, who also translated the Mahabharata, providing the key English version in 1885).

Duska Radosavljevic, who was the dramaturge of the project, expresses the awareness of all those involved in the productions of this vexed choice but suggests that the resilience of this text is itself a testament to its main theme: the struggle for survival, survival through cultures and epochs as the many existing versions of the Arabian Nights in various art and media forms show, but also, and perhaps most signifi-
cantly, survival through storytelling, which, as an art form, lends itself effectively to the chronicling of contemporary displacements and cross-cultural encounters.²

The Play and Its Stories

Set in a Christmas decoration factory in Britain around Christmas time, the play shows a group of eight migrant workers, five men and three women of mainly Middle Eastern origin, who are performing simple and repetitive tasks such as neatly piling cardboard boxes or filling them with baubles. Occasionally taking short breaks from their chores and perched on their steel working boards, they tell each other stories as a means of remembering their past lives and, like Scheherazade, trying to survive isolation in an alien and often hostile environment by resorting to the soothing power of storytelling.

They come to occupy the interstitial spaces of a “disseminated nation” that, in the words of Homi Bhabha, emerge out of “the scattering of the people […] in the nations of others,” but through the staging of their diasporic lives a “time of gathering” in its many guises is ushered in (291).

Gatherings of exiles and émigrés and refugees; gathering on the edge of ‘foreign’ cultures; gathering at the frontiers; gatherings in the ghettos or cafés of city centres; gathering in the half-life, half-light of foreign tongues, or in the uncanny fluency of another’s language. (Bhabha 291)

Memories are collected on the stage and projected beyond “the fourth wall,” investing the audience with the role of witness to often harrowing stories. Languages and tones differ greatly as the “uncanny fluency” of English, the language that has been acquired as part of the process of cultural translation, yields at times to Arabic or Farsi, and

² The theatre programme includes a four-page ‘factfile’ on The Arabian Nights, highlighting the text’s main themes and retracing its major European translations and adaptations. In conclusion it argues that the text remains “a constant subject of debate, especially in the context of such literary theories as feminism and post-colonialism. The debate is as complex as the text itself” (Lyddiard et al. 11).
neatly delivered prose gives way to the melancholy of songs, to reinforce the impression of a symphony for many voices, conveying different cultures and identities. Memories are painful and even tragic and the repetitive business of work adds to the suffering inscribed in the condition of each character, as we catch glimpses in the seams of their narratives of “other worlds lived retroactively; gathering the past in a ritual of revival; gathering the present” (Bhabha 291).

The space the actors occupy on stage is bare and rather unwelcoming, just as the location of many of their stories, which span from fraught domestic settings – often the home of violence and abuse – to cold, anonymous waiting areas at customs or immigration offices, to even more dehumanising spaces such as prisons or detention centres where individual and communal memories and histories can easily be obliterated. Yet, in order to resist oblivion, the characters exchange their stories and evoke “the gathering of people in the diaspora: indentured, migrant, interned; the gathering of incriminatory statistics, educational performance, legal statutes, immigration status” (Bhabha 291).

The set is made up of cardboard boxes, scaffolding, crates and other spare props, and its spartan monotony adds to the effects of alienation but offers also a visual complement to the action/narration and emphasises the humdrum activities the characters are carrying out. The different objects and the material at the actors’ disposal are constantly manipulated so as to suggest a different setting for each story. Big, translucent plastic Father Christmases – intended to associate the symbol of Christian festivity with materialism, even to suggest the presence of Christianity within the Middle Eastern world – loom large over dark stories of violence, love, murder and despair. And yet, these difficult stories are often accompanied by moments of theatricality and playfulness with the interpolation of a traditional Turkish Karagoz shadow play or Middle Eastern dances, which manage to create a show that is also visually appealing and more intriguing than a mere gallery of characters telling their stories would be. Intense stage action brings to life the fatigue associated with factory work on the production line and complements the predominantly narrative mode of the play. By skilfully manipulating the few props available, the actors create deeply evocative settings, such as a skyscraper landscape made from stacked cardboard
boxes, patently reminiscent of 9/11, or the transformation of the wire packing cases, which hold boxes of bright Christmas baubles, into Guantanamo cages.

As critics have suggested, the soundtrack also helps to recreate an atmosphere suggestive of the sounds and colours of the East, to which the lifeless white colour of the factory setting provides a sharp contrast (Cavendish). However, reviewers have at times failed to notice the complexity of the *mise en scène* and dismissed the play as a didactic sequence of monologues, lamenting “the fragmentary nature of the stories [that] work against the piece as a whole” (Gardner).

The trauma of displacement and rejection is at the heart of many of the stories. In one of them a man crosses the stage while he tapes up his eyes and mouth and re-enacts the actual experience of the Nottingham-based Kurdish poet Abas Amini, the author of this story, who sewed up his eyes and mouth as a sign of protest against the decision of the Home Office not to grant him asylum. Despite the rather undefined temporal and spatial location of the narratives, this brief scene is very evocative of the conditions and struggles of refugees in the West. One of the pieces focuses on the story of an Arab translator in the Iraqi war and re-figures images of Iraqi prisoners being abused by American soldiers, both male and female. The Iranian writer Maziar Bahari, the author of this piece, argues that he intends to make no apology for material that is deemed too inflammatory or shocking. “This is not a reassuring play, nor a plea for sympathy. I simply want to make clear that these things really happened, and to ask Western audiences: would you want to live here?” (qtd. in Hicking).

The final story is the one that has attracted most controversy. Originally presented as a short film directed by Iranian-Swedish director Reza Parsa and then adapted for the Danish production, this piece is about a father who is preparing himself to go out into a crowded stadium with explosives wrapped around his body and recording a video message for his little daughter. It offers a very moving and yet disturbing recreation of the figure of a suicide bomber, bringing to the stage a subject which is extremely controversial in post-7/7 Britain.

Fascinating female voices can be heard, too, who try to balance the mythical and the contemporary in their Scheherazade recreations. One
tells the macabre true-life story of a Teheran woman who carries around the severed body of her abusive husband and deposits the parts in bins around the city; another centres on a young Arab woman, forced into an arranged marriage, who kills herself and her husband on their wedding night. However, some of the stories try to go beyond the unrelentingly dark nature of most of the play. For instance, a bizarre interlude occurs when in one of the tales Scheherazade comes back to life and is strip-searched by airport security; she tries to resist the label of “ethnic” and describes herself as being part of a “mythic minority,” reinforcing in this way the archetypal significance of Scheherazade. Jordanian-British writer Fadia Faqir, who wrote this tale, says, “I think quirkiness is the best way to deliver a sad tale, because I honestly cannot see much scope for optimism right now” (qtd. in Hicking).

The comic note that pervades some of the stories is struck more resoundingly by Birmingham-Pakistani author and actress Shazia Mirza, who brings a distinctive British-Asian dimension to the play. She is one of the four Midlands-based writers who were commissioned to write a piece for the show and who also performed in it. She provides a comic interlude that was much appreciated by critics and audiences, and her story has generally been considered a welcome shift from the overall bleak tone of the play. Her tale is inspired by what she defined as one of the most curious experiences in her career as a stand-up comedienne when she was asked to perform for a group of lesbian Muslims in England. In her recreation the event becomes a moving and also funny story of forbidden love crossing social and gender boundaries between two Muslim women and is intended as a tribute to both the enterprise and independence of these women and, as Mirza argues, to “their amazing secret emotional life” (qtd. in Hicking). The choice of casting Shazia Mirza made the play resonate with British audiences who could engage directly with her humour, which was clearly influenced by her career in stand-up comedy. It is not surprising therefore that her name was used in advance publicity to promote the production and signal her familiar presence to prospective British audiences. She was presented as an award-winning comedienne with a well-established media reputation, which seems to have steadily grown after her not entirely easy beginnings in post-9/11 Britain, where, as a Muslim woman doing stand-up
comedy and dealing with difficult subjects, she attracted much controversy. The various strands of her identity and cultural background – Muslim, Pakistani and British, which have been a major source of inspiration and have been constantly explored in her solo career – were inserted in the more complex narrative framework of the play. In this respect both her presence and her story evoked the experience of women of South Asian origin in Britain and offered a gendered perspective on the themes of migrancy and cultural uprooting explored in the play.

Diasporic Space, Diasporic Stage

In *1001 Nights Now*, to echo Said, “histories intertwine and territories overlap,” directly addressing contemporary political issues, conflating the mythical elements of past and present Scheherazades and the horrors of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo and of the detention centres populated by global migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. Most reviewers failed to acknowledge the centrality of diaspora in this play and captured only the pain and desperation that the stories convey: “Here the stories act more like messages in a bottle, cries for help and understanding from people wrecked and stranded on the sand-banks between East and West” (Gardner). Yet, the possibility of survival and survival through telling one’s own story is central to the play. Suspended between the undefined status of insecure economic migrants and asylum seekers (we actually see the characters work hard in one of the many sweatshops of affluent Europe, while we listen to their distressing experiences which have led them to seek refuge in Europe), the characters and their memories occupy the fluid, translated space of diaspora and show that their experience can be recreated on the stage which, in turn, offers a home to “translated” people, their past and their stories.

3 Extensive information on Shazia Mirza’s international career and reception is available on her website <http://www.shaziamirza.org>. In her stand-up shows Mirza has often responded to criticism from within as well as outside the British-Pakistani community by incorporating excerpts from the numerous hate mails she has received over a number of years.
As Gabriele Griffin has argued with reference to the work of Black and Asian playwrights, it is possible to grasp through characters embodying the experience of forced migration the changing reality of migration histories and diasporic experiences, [...] through the plays the audience is drawn into that experience of uncertainty, humiliation, invasion of privacy and process of abjection that the refugee/asylum seeker undergoes. (224)

1001 Nights Now clearly retains this particular quality and works as an indictment of intolerance and social exclusion. However, 1001 Nights Now also manages to convey a more complex sense of contemporary migrancy and its impact. In her seminal work on diaspora, which emphasises the transformation of boundaries, places, and nations as a result of diasporic encounters, Avtar Brah states:

The word diaspora often invokes the imagery of traumas of separation and dislocation, and this is certainly a very important aspect of the migratory experience. But diasporas are also potentially the sites of hope and new beginnings. They are contested cultural and political terrains where individual and collective memories collide, reassemble and reconfigure. (193)

Both these facets are at play in 1001 Nights Now, which blends imaginative writing and present-day reportage in order to foster dialogue between different voices and cultures. It deals with the trauma of loss and displacement and how these are mitigated through the healing, generative power of myth-making and storytelling. As the director, Alan Lyddiard, argues:

1001 Nights Now is not a didactic piece of theatre, nor does it insist that we accept any single religious point of view. What I hope is that it will become a forum for further discussion. After all, taking the time to sit down and listen to one another's stories is the first step towards understanding our fellow human beings more clearly. (qtd. in Hicking)

Conclusion

In 1001 Nights Now the reconstruction of diasporic experiences invites us to reflect on intercultural theatre that has variously explored, both on a theoretical level and through stage practice, the intersection of two or
more cultures within the space of the theatrical event. Intercultural theatre in the West has often been criticised for validating misinterpretations of the East and hardly moving beyond orientalist recreations of the East, adding in this way to the West’s long history of cultural appropriation. The Orient – India, the Arab world, the Far East – has been a constant source of inspiration for major directors and theatre practitioners in the West, whose stage recreations of the East have fuelled much controversy and debate.

Models of intercultural theatre proposed by scholars and practitioners alike, such as the hourglass model offered by Patrice Pavis, often presuppose a clear-cut distinction between source and target culture, with the oriental source text remodelled for Western target audiences, and ultimately tend to provide a binary, polarised view of such theatre practice based, as Julie Stone Peters has noted, on the conventional distinction between “non western ‘ritual’ and western theatre” (206). A potential challenge to the East-West binarism is offered by the experience of migrancy and cultural translation, as Stone Peters suggests:

A positive interculturalism may emerge ‘the drama of immigrants’ […], in which it becomes impossible radically to subdivide the world into the “foreign” and the “familiar,” the “exotic” and the “Standard,” “them” and “us.” (209)

One should be alert to the danger that still exists of offering an unequal “barter” and take on board the difficulty of reaching a balanced cultural exchange, given that the encounter is often fraught with inevitable loss and dispossession. However, by offering a poetic recreation of traumatic individual experiences, 1001 Nights Now depicts cross-cultural encounters beyond set boundaries. The stage offers a space – albeit a rather empty one – for the scattering and gathering of people and their stories, which feed each other and resist oblivion. Here a diasporised version of

4 Peter Brook’s staging of the Mahabharata in 1986, based on Jean-Claude Carrière’s dramatic version of the original text, and Ariane Mnouchkine’s Indiade (1987), based on a play written by Hélène Cixous, are among the most quoted and debated examples of cultural (mis)appropriation of Eastern texts and histories by European authors and theatre practitioners. Barucha (1993) crystallised the discussion on the limits of intercultural performances by producing a scathing critique of the Brook-Carrière Mahabharata.
Giovanna Buonanno

‘home’ can be recreated where survival stories can be told, shared and ultimately, and perhaps most importantly, heard in Britain – one of the many stages of ‘Fortress Europe’.

Works Cited


Travellers in Globalisation: From Near to Elsewhere and Back

“I always want to know the facts about a place.”
(David in San Diego)

“The only place I feel at home anymore is with you.”
(Al in A Disappearing Number)

A man is on a plane travelling for the first time to San Diego, California. He is reading from a travel guide, because, as he says, “I always like to know the facts about a place” (San Diego 5). His name is David, a character based on the playwright David Greig, whose San Diego (2003) is one of the two examples that this article discusses. Before he arrives in San Diego, the fictional David Greig provides very important information about San Diego: “despite being such a great place to live, San Diego has featured in almost no fictions, films, novels or plays, but it has served as the un-named background for several episodes of America’s Missing Children” (5). From the start of the play, San Diego is presented as a place with an ambiguous identity and later on, it becomes a place that could be anywhere, an open space where a number of different characters pass by and meet. The play explores the idea of belonging in a changing, transformative place where every character is an Other.

In the second performance text that this paper explores, another man finds himself locked in a lecture hall somewhere in London, and since no one can hear him and get him out, he has to spend the night there. The
only things that he has with him are a box full of objects belonging to his dead wife and his mobile phone. His name is Al, the Indian-American businessman who falls in love with Ruth, the mathematician, in Complicite’s *A Disappearing Number* (2007). During that night, the lecture hall becomes a space that is filled –metaphorically, but in its theatrical articulation also literally – with Al’s memories of his life with Ruth, her passion for mathematics and particularly the story of the Indian maths genius Ramanujan and his relationship with the British professor of mathematics G.H. Hardy in the early 20th century. Even though Al does not physically travel the way that David does, he experiences the lecture hall in a similar way: as a space of memory and imagination, a space that is inhabited by a number of characters of different cultural and historical backgrounds. The lecture hall becomes the place for an encounter between these characters, who become Others for each other.

This article focuses on the theatrical manifestation of individual movements through different places, geographical locations like San Diego as well as places of everyday life like the lecture hall. It investigates the ways in which the meetings between characters who are traveling in these places are transforming their understanding of places, of themselves and of each other. Travelling, and in wider terms mobility, as a fundamental experience in a globalised world lies at the centre of this discussion. However, the emphasis is not only on the characters’ encounter of themselves and each other while they are moving through different places but also on the performance text’s potential of transforming audiences who are watching this process of travelling onstage.

Indeed, the two plays are quite different on account of their subject matter and the different poetics of a devised piece as opposed to original writing. However, the two texts share similarities: *San Diego* and *A Disappearing Number*, which are exemplary of Greig’s and Complicite’s work, respectively, are epic in scope, crossing borders, challenging linear understandings of time and space and presenting a number of challenges in performance. The intention here is not to cover all the different aspects of these plays, since their dramaturgies are quite complex, composed by interlocking narratives. For the purposes of the present discussion it may suffice to note that both examples respond to current ex-
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experience in the context of ‘globality’ (Beck, *What is Globalization?*) by means of an intricate use of time, space and place. Greig’s and Simon McBurney’s texts are acute manifestations of experiences in the “world society” (Beck, *World Risk Society*), encapsulating the dominant characteristics of the present moment: the notion of “time and space compression” (Harvey), what has also been referred to as time and space “in excess” as key characteristics of supermodernity (Augé). In both plays past and present merge: *A Disappearing Number* has two narrative strands, one in the early 20th and one in the 21st century, while in *San Diego* the stories are happening almost simultaneously. Similarly, notions of space are not structured in a linear way since the stories take place in a hotel room, a hospital, the motorway and the desert in Greig’s play, and the lecture hall, a hotel room, a temple in India and a library at the University of Cambridge in *A Disappearing Number*. In short, both plays are negotiating articulations of a world rapidly on the move and present this experience by means of an intricate theatrical language that defies conventions of stage representations of time and space.

Manifestations of mobility, particularly travelling, in contemporary English drama and theatre beg critical attention since mobility is a dynamic process that is intertwined with processes of globalisation, experiences of globality and the subsequent engagement with notions of interculturality. Interculturality signifies interaction between cultures, ways and practices of everyday life and subsequent sentiments of belonging to a specific place. It implies movement and can be approached as a manifestation of mobility that impacts on relations and experiences of Self and Other in a specific context. Thus, interculturality as a manifestation of “socially-produced motion” (Cresswell) challenges dominant conceptions of power and knowledge.

Travelling as a form of mobility in the context of both plays means a process of displacement from somewhere near and recognisable to an elsewhere. What is significant, though, is that the characters experience Otherness through a new understanding of themselves in a different cultural and geographical context. The majority of characters move away from home and realise the challenge of experiencing a feeling of belonging to a place that is not familiar. By the end of each play, a new order emerges which often involves the main characters’ return to the place
they departed from at the start; however, this return finds them significantly changed. By focusing on some examples from both texts, the article proposes that the process of travelling and subsequent exposure to the elsewhere and the Other paves the way for the emergence of a different kind of understanding of belonging that is closer to contemporary notions of utopia and debates about cosmopolitanism.

**Travelling and Non-Places**

The experience or possibility of travelling as a key element in both texts is manifested through action happening in airplanes, the sound of airplanes nearby or the pilot’s voice speaking from the cockpit. Setting scenes in hotels, apartment blocks and motels further complements the picture of people constantly on the move in an age of globalisation. These places are either anonymous or reminiscent of similar places anywhere. In *San Diego*, when Amy cannot locate the Pacific View Apartments, where the Pilot is planning to spend the night, he has to go out on the motorway and look for her. It is there that he meets David, who has been attacked by Daniel, the illegal immigrant who arrived in San Diego to find his missing mother, and tries to save him. The hotel’s anonymity and the Pilot’s subsequent adventure opens up the opportunity for a different kind of travelling, what Greig terms a “journey narrative” (“Rough Theatre” 208), which presents an experience of travelling that does not reinforce global capitalism, as newspapers’ travel supplements do, but presents a more complex picture of mobility. The Pilot as well as other characters in *San Diego* do not experience the place in a way determined by tourist guides or other narratives that present a place only as a destination; instead, the image of San Diego appears as a multi-dimensional one, depending on the way each character interacts with the place and the people inhabiting them.

While he spends the night locked in the lecture hall, Al remembers another night that he spent in a London hotel. An ironic tone about tourism and the expectations of global travellers echoes in this moment in *A Disappearing Number*, when information about tour guides is heard coming from the TV, followed by a conversation between Al and Surita, a student of African origin who works in the hotel. When they ask each
other about their country of origin, they answer America and Britain, respectively, before recognising the processes of displacement that their families went through in the past. The connection between them, though, is not only that they have been displaced from their cultural backgrounds but also that they meet in this London hotel that could be found in San Diego or indeed anywhere in the Western world. The anonymity of the hotel as much as the anonymity of the motorway and the apartment building provide the characters with the opportunity to interact and discover their similarities, beyond cultural difference.

Towards the end of the play, while he is travelling to India, Al meets Aninda, the Indian scientist who narrates the story of Ramanujan. While talking on the airplane, they realise that they lead similar lives.

AL: Where do you live?
ANINDA: India, Switzerland and London.
AL: We are everywhere, huh? (A Disappearing Number 84)

Being everywhere – in a place that is located in a specific corner of the globe but could also be anywhere else – is an underlying theme of both plays and encapsulates their response to current experiences of globalisation. However, later on, Al and Aninda realise that this globalised way of living is not the only aspect that they have in common. They are also united by personal loss and the return to their country of origin. The anonymity of travelling on the same airplane provides them only with a starting point for an encounter that is deeper, more personal and at the same time illustrates a universal, human condition.

Thus, most places in the plays are anonymous but also recognisable because they could be anywhere in the Western world. According to Marc Augé, hotels, airports and motorways are non-places, “spaces that cannot be defined as relational, historical, or concerned with identity” and are “the real measure of our time” (77-78). They are functional spaces that efface any possibility of expression of individual identity. Instead, they merely “create a shared identity of passengers, customers or Sunday drivers” (Augé 101), but that does not mean that they promote collective identities or the construction of communities. Augé associates the proliferation of “non-places” with travelling in the post-modern world, what he terms “supermodernity.” In his anthropological theory, travelling signifies a lack of relations, since the focus is not on
the place but on the ways in which individuals relate to themselves in rapidly changing landscapes.

For Augé, “the traveller’s space may be the archetype of the non-place” (86); it is a solitary, non-relational space where the only spectacle is not the place but the individual in the place looking at himself or herself. Greig develops a similar argument in his manifesto for a “rough theatre,” suggesting that this kind of travelling and experience of oneself while travelling becomes a tool for the growth of global capital.

We are encouraged to dream of destinations. Our imagination begins to place us in cities to which easyJet has opened up a new route. We take photographs of ourselves at the destination. The destination becomes a part of our self-description so that we can say ‘Prague is my favourite city’ just as easily as we might say ‘Nirvana is my favourite band.’ (“Physical Poetry” 214)

However, Augé’s argument should be revisited with respect to the two texts, because the ways in which travellers experience themselves in these non-places are not solitary but always involve someone else, someone different, an Other. Thus, even though the process that the characters go through is one of self-discovery and redefinition, this is not due to an introvert process of exploring themselves in a new place but it emerges through relations with other people in an unfamiliar place. During his aforementioned conversation with Surita, Al has to confront his own cultural roots, a process that is accentuated later in the text when he decides to travel to India and walk the last steps that Ruth made in her quest for Ramanujan. Al is going through a process of change that leads him to a better understanding of himself as well as his place in the world and to a sense of belonging among other people. While reading Hardy’s A Mathematician’s Apology – a text that was instrumental in the devising of A Disappearing Number – he imagines Ramanujan’s story, his travels and life after he left India. His own process of self-discovery is subtly linked to Ramanujan’s process of moving from India to Britain and in this way Al’s travel is not only a product of globalisation and its imperatives but is part of wider, historical networks of interaction between cultures.

While locked in the lecture hall and thinking through his past with Ruth, Al keeps on talking with Barbara, a BT customer service employee. Towards the end of the play, he realises that the centre she is
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calling from is also in India. Al is not the solitary subject who has to travel to India to reconcile himself with his wife’s death and his origins; he is one of many people who rediscover their identity and sense of belonging through travelling, mobility and displacement. It is due to this realisation that the lecture hall ceases to operate as a non-place and becomes an environment in which Al can open himself up to others and to a new kind of understanding of his belonging in the world. His imaginative, temporal and spatial travelling and experience of the lecture hall as an empty space where his memories momentarily appear are concerned with both identity and history – both his and Ramanujan’s – and thus defy Augé’s reading of the “non-place.” In an interesting yet paradoxical way, Al’s roots are tied to his movement in the world.

David in San Diego arrives having certain preconceptions about the place, based on his reading of the guide on the plane. San Diego is presented “through words,” thus constituting “an imaginary place, a banal utopia, a cliché” (Augé 95). This representation of San Diego as a “banal utopia” is further enforced by Andrew’s film in the desert, where a cliché story that bears no relation to the place unfolds. The French anthropologist suggests that the traveller is exposed to a plurality of places, which leads to a sense of disorientation. This disorientation – both in terms of location but also subsequent identity confusion – is demonstrated in Greig’s play through the various Davids that appear in the play, particularly after the death of the fictional persona of the playwright. David in the hospital as well as the three Davids in the consulting room are all creations of the playwright’s imagination and versions of his identity as it alters in new places through the experience of travelling and disorientation. In other words, David’s death is metaphorical and marks a turning point for the understanding of oneself and Others. At the end of the play, when the Pilot informs the passengers that they are about to land in San Diego, the reader or audience member

1 It is important to mention here that Greig in conversation with Caridad Svich acknowledges that San Diego was written as a response to his first trip to the US. A similar autobiographical trace underpinned McBurney’s ‘director’s note’ for the BITE07 production, subsequently published with the script, in which he is retracing his personal journey in India, in his quest for Ramanujan after reading A Mathematician’s Apology.
assumes that the fictional playwright never died on the motorway. Instead, the story that they witnessed was a dream or a hallucination that David Greig had while travelling. This dream, though, or the journey in his imagination revealed the potentiality of a different experience of San Diego, challenging the travel guide’s description of the place as a “banal utopia.”

The dramatic and theatrical representation of non-places not as limiting, a-relational places but instead as places full of possibilities is bound up with the ways in which the plays respond to different manifestations of a world on the move. The plays are inhabited by various kinds of travellers: the businessman-traveller (Al), the academic or artist-traveller (Aninda in *A Disappearing Number* and David), the illegal immigrants (Pious, Innocent and Daniel in *San Diego*), the Pilot, but also all the people who travelled, were displaced in the past, such as Ramanujan and Al’s ancestors in *A Disappearing Number*, or Daniel’s mother in *San Diego*. In many ways, their movements in the world are a consequence of globalisation or colonialism but they are not tourists, leisure travellers who are subject to the predicaments of global capitalism. Instead, all the characters experience travelling in a more complex way that moves beyond Augé’s critique of the non-place. When they pass from the non-places, they are not deprived of their identities, as the French anthropologist would argue. Instead, they encounter themselves in a new light and open up to a process of transformation, due to their encounters with the Other, both temporally and culturally.

The characters in Greig’s and McBurney’s texts are crossing borders in a quest for home and identity; thereby their travelling can be compared to a pilgrimage. David is looking for himself while Daniel, Pious and Innocent are searching for a sense of identity and purpose in San Diego. These characters embody some of the key characteristics of Greig’s work as the playwright himself has defined them: “lostness […]; homelessness; identity; not quite knowing who one is” (“Physical Poetry” 52).

Dan Rebellato, in his introduction to Greig’s *Plays*, has emphasised that “the imprint of globalisation is unusually deep in Greig’s work” (xiii). Discussing Greig’s earlier work, including *Europe* (1994) and *The Cosmonaut’s Last Message* (1999), Rebellato points out the significance
of Augé’s theory of non-places as “passing places, severed from history, functional, offering strictly temporary satisfactions” (xiii) for the analysis of Greig’s work. Following his argument, the non-place is a metaphor for Scottish identity and culture at the threshold of the third millennium. However, this association of the non-place with an exploration of the sentiment of national belonging cannot be employed in the context of San Diego, a play that interrogates more the global rather than the local or rather, to return to Beck’s conceptualisation of globality, is moving in “an axis between the local and the global” (What is Globalization? 96). This tension and relation between the two is aptly illustrated through the metaphorical story of the geese that travel from San Diego to other places, trying to find a new home.

As Rebellato has suggested, Greig’s work “insists on a global perspective as well as local engagement, sees what divides us as well as what connects us” (xxi). It is precisely in this local-global, Self and Other engagement and relations between different cultures and practices of everyday life that Rebellato locates “the evocation of a better world” (xxii). This better world appears towards the end of San Diego when David falls in love with Laura and manages to save her life. The connection between people creates a new sense of belonging in Greig’s dramatic world.

The same “evocation of a better world” underpins A Disappearing Number when Al remembers the message that he had left for his wife: “The only place I feel at home anymore is with you” (60). While Ruth develops her feeling of connection and belonging in her search for Ramanujan and the beauty of mathematics in India, she paves the way for Al looking for his roots in the same place. When Ruth dies, Al has to find a new home and the only way to trace it is by following Ruth’s last steps. At the end of the play, Al decides to throw a piece of chalk in the sacred river where Ramanujan used to swim, having understood his wife’s passion for numbers but also having come to terms with his own past and cultural roots. The device of mathematics throughout the play becomes a metaphor of Al’s inability to comprehend not only his wife but also Ramanujan as the epitome of a different culture where maths becomes a search for infinity and the transcendence of cultural difference. It is only towards the end of the play, after the night in the lecture
hall, that he realises the significance of the piece of chalk that Ruth had in her box: the chalk becomes a sign of the human body, indicating a universal, essentialist approach to human identity beyond cultural differences.²

David Williams has argued that “displacement, connectivity and the fluidity of memory and identity have become recurrent themes in McBurney’s work” (250), while Complicité’s devising can be described as “attempts to spatialise the topographies of internal journeys” (249). Using mathematics as an innovative device and pushing the boundaries of theatrical form even further, A Disappearing Number was another exploration of belonging and displacement, an issue that had also been explored in Mnemonic (1999). The aesthetics of A Disappearing Number, particularly due to its strong emphasis on visual imagery, was defined by this notion of a world on the move. During the performance, nothing stayed onstage for too long; the stage looked like it was travelling, presenting an apt metaphor for the mathematical treatises, the explorations of infinity as well as the central theme of an infinite search of identity and belonging. Those fleeting images contributed to the sense of transformation that underpinned the production. Like Greig’s playwriting, McBurney’s directing and Complicité’s devising articulate a strong belief in the possibility of change in the world of the performance as well as the actual world.

The transience of the theatre event and of the forms that are its building blocks asks us to engage with the precariousness and transformative possibilities of our own lives as social and creative beings. (Williams 251)

To borrow a phrase from David Greig’s manifesto on the imperative for a “rough theatre,” the theatre in the context of these plays becomes “a

² The company had emphasised the human body as a universal symbol for unity in Mnemonic. Rebellato, in his recent discussion of Theatre and Globalisation, refers to two opposing readings that the production had provoked, which could be further developed with reference to A Disappearing Number: for some scholars, the body is “an ethical base” (Freshwater 218), while for others this “return to universalism” is uncomfortable since the emphasis on the body as the element that defines what it means to be human – in a European context – effaces the possibility of change and the representation of difference (Reinelt 376).
space of endless possibilities” (“Rough Theatre” 211), a space for the emergence of a utopia.

Non-Places and Utopia
Augé concludes his critique of the non-place suggesting that “the non-place is the opposite of utopia: it exists and it does not contain any organic society” (112). This article has attempted to show how elements of relations between Self and Other can take place in such functional spaces, non-places, as airplanes, hotels, motorways or empty lecture halls. The plays’ significance lies in this reconfiguration of the non-place, in the way that they merge the representation of a world on the move with a notion of utopia. The reference to utopia here alludes to Jill Dolan’s groundbreaking analysis of utopia in the theatre and what she terms “utopian performatives” as

the small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as generous, aesthetically striking and intersubjectively intense. (5)

Dolan refers to moments in the theatre that indicate a process towards a time that has not yet happened. These moments emerge between stage and auditorium, actors and audiences, and are bound up with the feelings that the audience experiences while watching. Through travelling the characters open up to an experience of utopia that is bound up with various intercultural meetings that subsequently lead to the realisation of human essence. David, the leisure traveller-artist, meets Daniel, the illegal refugee, and he dies because he does not know how to relate to him. He is redeemed only at the end of the play when David, his double, manages to save Laura’s life, the girl who does not belong neither in San

3 Greig shares this approach, emphasising the affective dimension of his work in his conversation with Svich, when he differentiates between critics’ and audiences’ responses to his plays: “the critics love to do battle with the play’s intellectual themes which are, usually, rather flimsy, while the audience is busy experiencing the play’s feelings” (“Physical Poetry” 53).
Diego, nor anywhere else, because of her clinical condition. Similarly, it is only towards the end of the play when a piece of chalk indicates a new sense of place and “bestows a sense of peace” (A Disappearing Number 91) that Al realises what his past and present mean. He has also realised a feeling of home and belonging by meeting his double, Ramanujan. In both plays, the only way to transgress cultural difference is by returning to the human body; Laura offering her body to David – literally and metaphorically – and Ruth describing the anatomy of the human body in her last message to Al. Both moments are emotionally affective and encapsulate some of the principles that Dolan articulates with reference to utopia in performance.

Dolan discusses the ways in which utopian performatives appear in the here and now of the performance only to disappear at the end. However, for Dolan, the moment when the spectator experiences the utopian performative, a possibility opens up:

the affective and ideological doings we see and feel in the utopian performative critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm. (7)

Following her argument, the utopian performative in the theatre opens up the possibility for political action. The utopian element in meeting with Others in non-places underlines a political imperative of cosmopolitanism as a need to become citizens of the world and embrace an alternative form of belonging in the world. The plays’ engagement with notions of place and non-place signifies a transition from interculturality that involves interaction and mobility to a utopian sense of community that replaces representations and experiences of globalisation with the idea of a cosmopolitan society and belonging.

Cosmopolitanism has reappeared in the fields of political, social and cultural studies within the past decade following debates about globalisation. One could argue that the characters in Greig’s and McBurney’s

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4 For more on cosmopolitanism and cosmopolitics, see, among others, Vertovec and Cohen, Cheah and Robbins, Beck (Cosmopolitan Vision). Gilbert and Lo’s study is an important addition to the debate with respect to theatre and performance, the articles on globalisation and performance in the special issue of Contemporary Theatre Review (2006) cover a number of issues and debates in various contexts and practices, while Rebellato’s Theatre and Globalisation (2009)
work are cosmopolitan subjects in a derogatory sense, detached spectators merely observing the aesthetics of the place or the non-place. In short, someone could read both David and Al as mere leisure travellers in Augé’s terms. However, the ways in which they interact with Others and themselves as Others present the possibility of understanding them as cosmopolitan citizens in an embodied way that is bound up with geographical and historical contexts, mediated through the imaginative tools of theatre. In these plays, and at the crossroads of the place and the non-place, the cosmopolitan as a principle underlying these modes of existence

is not merely an abstract ideal like loving one’s neighbour as oneself but [is] a habit of thought and feeling that [has] already shaped and been shaped by particular collectivities that are socially and geographically situated. (Cheah and Robbins 2)

The cosmopolitan is the utopian performative in these plays insofar as they intellectually and emotionally provoke an audience that is on the move and confronts Self and Other all the time. The cosmopolitan signifies experiences in the here and now of the performance through the non-places that pave the way for the utopia of belonging. In other words, experiences of travelling and mobility as represented and embodied onstage lead to a new form of movement for the audience; a movement that is triggered in an affective way, through the emotions that the performances cause, but bears the potential of becoming effective in the public sphere.

Ramanujan says: “Ideas, like all human needs – food, sleep, warmth – require a search, a going elsewhere. In our imaginations we leave the immediately present” (A Disappearing Number 70). San Diego and A Disappearing Number invite us to leave our immediate present, our attachment to a specific place and imagine an elsewhere. McBurney has referred to the “collective imagination” (xi) as a principle defining the ensemble’s devising practices. Similarly, Greig approaches imagination as a “battlefield” and calls for a theatre that will introduce new ways of

offers a short but sound critique of the debate about globalisation and cosmopolitanism and their significance for an approach to contemporary theatre and performance.
imagining in order to resist powerful discourses and ideologies that determine what is imaginable and what is not. According to him, “the theatre is a very appropriate weapon in the armoury of resistance” (“Rough Theatre” 219) and by scrutinising travelling, which is often manipulated by the forces of global capital, the two plays employ imagination in order to present a strong political alternative.

The same principle applies to the ways in which we as audiences relate to what is happening onstage, as part of a community of imagination. Both plays are based on this idea of going elsewhere both in terms of narrative but also in terms of the construction of images onstage and the political imperative that seems to underpin them. The plays illustrate a tension between the need for a feeling of belonging both to the global village as well as specific communities, the tension between the need to move elsewhere and the quest for home. The plays conclude with a moment of realisation and change for the key characters; they are coming back from elsewhere, having been transformed. At the same time, the ending of each play finds the audience in a process of coming back from such imaginative travelling. Returning home signifies the realisation of a utopian world that existed in the context of the performance and raises the question whether audiences will follow some of these ideas in the real world. Even though this world existed during the here and the now of the performance, it is still in the realm of the imaginary and requires an active imagination on the part of the audience, during the performance and after.

The “Rough Theatre” of David Greig and the “collective imagining” of Complicité through the negotiation of mobility and belonging, place, home and non-place are calling for a cosmopolitan society by means of utopian performatives onstage. An image of transcendence transgressing cultural divides emerges at the end of each play, an image provoking strong emotions. David Greig’s passionate call for a “Rough Theatre” provides an apt conclusion:

What we glimpse in these moments [he does not use the term but he refers to principles that are close to what Dolan terms ‘utopian performatives’] we cannot then be made to un-see. What we feel we cannot be made to un-feel. Theatre cannot change the world but it can allow us a moment of liberated space in which to change ourselves. (“Rough Theatre” 220)
Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature
Marilena Zarouli

(There is Nothing) Outside of the Text?: Towards a Psychoanalytic Model of the Transcultural Spectator

For me, making theatre is an excavation of feelings long since buried, a journey of understanding [...] in my experience, our basic needs and desires are the same – to be communicated with, to be delighted, to be surprised, to be scared. We want to be part of something and we want to feel. We want to find meaning in our lives. (Emma Rice on Kneehigh Theatre Homepage)

What is it about a specific piece of theatre which engages spectators across a wide cultural and geographical range? Is there something about a particular play which engages the spectator in a particular way which transcends cultural and linguistic considerations, something about the play which is fundamental to the subjectivity of the spectator, something about the play which might be considered unchanging in the face of geographical or cultural difference?

Or might this ‘something’ have more to do with the spectator than the play itself? Something within the spectator that enables him/her to engage with the particular performance? What if there were something about a particular piece of theatre which might appeal to that pre-subjectal, pre-cultural trace within us all? Something which enables him or her to fulfil that need to “to be delighted, to be surprised, to be scared. [...] to be part of something [...] to feel”?
On first consideration, the level of engagement with a performance might rest on such elements as narrative, characterisation, or spectacle: a good story, or compelling characters, or something visually appealing might perhaps explain the interest of an audience in a particular production. But these elements alone do not explain why some plays remain within the culture and language from which they emerged, whilst others achieve a high degree of cultural mobility. An understanding of the relationship which exists between the representation and the spectator would appear to be crucial to an understanding of the allure of particular pieces of theatre across the boundaries of geography and culture.

One such example, of a piece of theatre which has achieved a fair degree of cultural mobility, is to be found in Rona Munro’s *Iron*; and at the CDE 2008 conference I explored the possibility of an ‘account’ of the transcultural engagement of the spectator, in relation to this specific piece, in terms of primal fantasy (Smith 239-252). Wendy Wheeler and Trevor Griffiths, in their paper entitled “Staging ‘The Other Scene’: A Psychoanalytic Approach to Contemporary British Political Drama” (1992), have observed that “the success of the theatrical mise-en-scène may […] depend partly upon the extent to which it puts into play in structured form the three primal fantasies of origin in which the audience invest” (188). In the case of Rona Munro’s *Iron* (first staged in 2002), I have argued that these fantasies – the fantasy of parental coitus, of seduction and of castration – appeared to permeate the structure and syntax of the play.

The focus of my enquiry was, in the case of Munro’s play, on the specific piece of theatre, and its ‘effect’ on the spectator; and the conclusion reached was that in re-enacting aspects of the process or journey of subjectivity, through narrative, syntax and context of production, it could be argued that the play addressed aspects of subjectivity, of the state of being human, aspects which transcend cultural or geographical context.

Having proposed a possible model of transcultural spectatorship in relation to a specific piece of theatre, this discussion now moves on to consider the aspects of subjectivity which form this model, and which might then be applied to the ‘reading’ of other theatrical representations, in an effort to offer an account of the ‘transcultural spectator.’
Jacques Derrida has suggested that “there is nothing outside of the text” (158). Clearly, this statement can be read and interpreted in a number of ways; but I would like to consider it in terms of the relationship between the (transcultural) representation and the (transcultural) spectator, speculating a little on the nature and boundaries of ‘the text,’ and on that which might exist beyond, or below, or outside it.

The term ‘interculturality’ immediately suggests the existence of separate cultures and divisions between them, which necessitates recognition of difference. The first part of this paper considers examples of the staging of interculturality in the UK, looking in particular at three examples of productions which highlight the complexity of encounters between different cultural groups. The second part briefly reviews several existing models available for the reading and construction of intercultural representation, models which imply (and rely on) a construction of the subject as occupying a fixed position within the symbolic, a position which requires a transformation of the representation from one cultural discourse to another. In the final part of the paper, there is an exploration of the possibility of reading representation from a position ‘outside of the text,’ from a space constructed as pre-symbolic and therefore non-divisive, a space where ‘difference’ is no longer an issue, and which offers the possibility of the assumption of a transcultural position in relation to the representation.

**Staging Interculturality**

The term ‘interculturality’ indicates the recognition of difference: the existence of different cultural groupings and identities; and one does not have to look far to find many examples across UK theatre of the representation and staging of these cultural identities, the exploration – through staging – of the complexity of encounters between different cultural groupings and of the moments of cultural exchange which ensue.

This discussion briefly focuses on three illustrative (but by no means comprehensive) groupings, looking first at Kneehigh Theatre as an example of a company with a multi-cultural influence, and specifically its 2004 production of *The Bacchae*; Graeae Theatre as perhaps the leading
UK example of a multi-abled company which uses various presentation strategies to accommodate multi-abled actors and audiences; and the National Theatre production of Mark Ravenhill’s *Mother Clap’s Molly House* as an example of a multi-orientated representation which explores issues of sexuality, subjectivity and difference.

Kneehigh Theatre, the Cornwall-based company founded in 1980, describes itself as

an ever-changing ensemble, a kind of strange family, many of whom come from, or have chosen to live in, Cornwall: the extreme South West tip of the British Isles – outsiders, left-handers – engaging with the world with a sense of community and identity. (Kneehigh Theatre Homepage)

The “Kneehigh Mission” states:

We have a commitment to the ongoing spiritual health of ourselves, our community and the theatre. We want to collaborate with our fellow human beings, whether they are adults or children, professionals or outsiders and are hungry to meet and work with new and vivid people from different backgrounds. We want to create event and offer experiences that can profoundly change people’s lives. We want to create relevant, innovative and emotionally charged work, to reach out in meaningful ways to the non-theatre going community, to build a non-elite audience and to celebrate our delicious time on the planet. (Kneehigh Theatre Homepage)

Kneehigh have created approximately eighty shows since 1980. They produce between one and five shows a year. They have toured to Columbia, Brazil, USA, Australia, New Zealand, China, Syria, Lebanon, Hungary, Denmark, Malta, France, Germany, Holland and Belgium. In the year 2007-8, there were 215 performances in four different countries; and over 120,000 people have seen a Kneehigh production in the past year (Kneehigh Theatre Homepage). So this is a prolific, popular and culturally mobile company.

This cultural mobility applies not only to the geographical locations in which their productions have been staged, but is also foregrounded in the composition of the company and the syntax of their work, which encompasses physical theatre, multi-cultural casting and, on occasion, multi-lingual text. Focusing on their production of *The Bacchae*, which toured in 2004, the writer Carl Grose observed that
as ever, Emma [Rice, the Director] approached the source material in her own personal and iconoclastic way. She wanted a tutu-clad all-male chorus playing the women of Thebes, and big Music Hall sing-along numbers for the audience to join in with. She staunchly disregarded the classical conventions Euripides had set up – characters were expanded, journeys threaded through with greater complexity, and there was even the invention of a few new faces (enter Pamela P.A. to King Pentheus). Gone was the archaic translation. In place, a combination of rap and poetry, Haikus and Hungarian god-speak (Grose et al. 65)

Elizabeth Stewart, in a review of the production, again mentions Hungarian, observing that

the struggle for power between Pentheus and Dionysus is expressed by their opposing views on boundaries. Pentheus rules by imposing boundaries, and believes that a man, and especially a king, must be aware of his boundaries because ‘Without them he is lost’ [...] But Dionysus argues the opposite: ‘Without them he is free’ [...] He infuriates Pentheus by breaking convention and setting people free. During a heated argument Pentheus is tricked into admitting that Dionysus is a god. The actor playing Dionysus (Robert Lucskay) was from Hungary and occasionally spoke in Hungarian, which Coryphaeus, the leader of the Bacchants, translated into English.

Two of the points made by Elizabeth Stewart are of particular interest: the first (mentioned also by Emma Rice) concerns the use of Hungarian by the Hungarian actor; the second concerns the opposing notions of boundaries as expressed by Pentheus and by Dionysus, which resonate the wider concerns of this discussion. There is a third observation, also, to which this discussion will return: the notion of men in tutus, and the resultant foregrounding of issues of gender and sexuality. Although not quite as beautifully outrageous and flamboyant as the subsequent production of the same play at the Lyric Hammersmith by the National Theatre of Scotland – featuring an unforgettable Dionysus played by Alan Cummings in a gold lamé kilt – this production of The Bacchae, true to the spirit of the original, challenged those fixed perceptions of gender and sexuality. And this production also challenged the hegemonic boundaries of national identity.

In Kneehigh’s version, Dionysus was played by a Hungarian actor (Robert Lucskay) as was Agave (Eva Magyar); and on several occasions the text is delivered by Dionysus, Agave and the Bacchae in Hungarian, none of which seemed in any way out of place within the context of the dream-like, nightmarish *mise-en-scène* created by the sounds, colours,
three-dimensional set, inventive props, costumes and movement of the piece, involving men in tutus, Dionysus in a pinstripe suit, corset, high heels and a tall, red, phallic hat, and – eventually – a white ballgown, and Agave in a tutu, stripped to the waist and covered in blood. Interculturalism, here, was characterised by the blend of different representative linguistic styles (rap, poetry, haiku), alternative representations of gender (men in combinations of tutus, high heels and dresses juxtaposed with the more ‘conventional’ costumes; Agave in a tutu, but stripped to the waist, juxtaposed with a more traditionally feminine and sensual attire), and the interweaving of different languages (English and Hungarian) – all of which resonate the central themes of the play itself, of the pleasures and dangers of negotiating and transgressing boundaries.

The dissolution of boundaries is in the foreground of the work of Graeae Theatre Company also; but in this case, the challenging of boundaries serves a different purpose. Graeae Theatre Company describe themselves as

a disabled-led theatre company that profiles the skills of actors, writers and directors with physical and sensory impairments. The artistic approach creates aesthetically accessible productions that include a disabled and non-disabled audience [...] Graeae promotes the inclusion of disabled people in professional performance, has developed a unique programme of theatre training and offers writing commissions and training to disabled writers. (Graeae Theatre Homepage)

The company website further observes that Graeae Theatre

[tours] nationally (and sometimes internationally) up to 3 major productions a year. The company works with disabled artists and creative professionals throughout the process and tries to employ disabled designers, writers and directors whenever possible [and] Jenny Sealey, Artistic Director, aims to create ‘aesthetically accessible’ productions. As part of this multi-sensory experience and dedication to making the type of productions we would like to go and see ourselves, our shows often fuse sign language interpretation and audio description into the action.

It is the fusion of sign language interpretation and audio description within the specific example of their production of Sarah Kane’s Blasted which is of particular interest, as an illustration of the inclusive nature of its politics of interaction between different cultural groupings. As described by Graeae Theatre themselves,
in *Blasted* by Sarah Kane, which toured in 2006/7, 3 Sign Language Interpreters (SLI) were projected onto a screen behind the actors. In addition the actors read aloud their actions, using Kane’s script to enhance the quality and drama of the description. The result was electrifying, as all the elements combined to create an engaging spectacle for the disabled and non-disabled audiences alike. (Graeae Theatre Homepage)

Accessibility is at the heart of Graeae’s work; and it is this attention to accessibility which provides the interface and interaction between cultures, engaging everyone within a common, inclusive space, no matter what their position within the culture. Each spectator reads a plethora of signs; and although the specific readings will vary, depending on whether the emphasis of the spectator is on the aural clues (the verbal descriptions of the staging which run alongside the dialogue), the visual staging itself (costume, scenography, kinesics, proxemics etc.), the alternative visual staging encapsulated within the signing (accompanied by the visual text of costume, gesture and expression, which provide a multi-layered set of additional signs), or within the visual representation of the written text (presented in a font similar to that used by a journalist with a manual typewriter), what is on offer is a multi-layered variety of points of entry into the performance, where no member of the audience is disadvantaged by their particular level of physical ability.

Graeae’s production of *Blasted* provided a sophisticated performance text which highlighted the complexity of encounters between different cultural groups, whilst simultaneously transgressing the boundaries between them, and

the whole production foregrounded the creative process as a coming-into-being; the sense of emergence of performance from scripted blueprint. With a simultaneity that contributed to the palimpsest quality of the production, the subtitling invoked the playwright who had typed the scenarios playing out in her mind. (Iball 64)

This transgression of boundaries is often foregrounded within the work of Mark Ravenhill; and the National Theatre production of *Mother Clap’s Molly House* in 2001 was no exception. The striking image of men in dresses again emerges, this time in a celebration of the mobility of cultural identities associated with gender and sexuality.
It’s London, 1726, and Mrs Tull’s got problems. The whores are giving her a hard time, a man in a dress is looking for a job, her husband has a roving eye and the apprentice boy keeps disappearing on midnight walks.

Meanwhile, in 2001, a group of wealthy gay men are preparing for a raunchy party.

Mother Clap’s Molly House, a black comedy with songs, is a celebration of the diversity of human sexuality, an exploration of our need to form families and a fascinating insight into a hidden chapter in London’s history. (Ravenhill, back cover)

This was a play and a production which challenged, through form and content, those fixed perceptions of cultural identity in terms of gender and sexuality and also made comparison between the cultural values of eighteenth-century London and London today, demonstrating that the passage of time has done little to change basic human values and desires.

The schisms and instabilities which existed between the physicality of actors, the characters they played, and the roles played by those characters were foregrounded through dialogue and staging. This was a playworld where the characters could choose their identities and slip seamlessly between identities, a world where identity was no longer a fixed state, but a state of choice. The death of Mrs Tull’s husband, in the opening section of the play, marked the dissolution of boundaries: the suspension of boundaries of gender, sexuality and the relationship between gender and capitalism. Mrs Tull, the ‘barren woman’ and ‘dutiful wife,’ became, through the death of her corrupt husband, free to experiment, to try on other identities and to discover what she wanted to be, rather than the role society dictated. And this theme was played out across all the characters, where the boundaries of cultural identity became blurred, the illusion of fixed identity was exposed, and cultural mobility was the order of the day. This was a world where the only thing of value was connection and real feeling, a world of play, a kind of utopia where the culturally imposed boundaries between people were swept away.

The stagings of The Bacchae by Kneehigh Theatre, of Blasted by Graeae, and of Mark Ravenhill’s Mother Clap’s Molly House at the National Theatre are just three examples of productions within the UK which – within the representation itself and within the relationship
facilitated between representation and spectator – foreground the complexity of encounters between different cultural groups.

But what actually happens when these different groups come into contact with each other? What does the process of reading/constructing performance involve?

There are, of course, a number of models available, developed by leading theatre theorists and practitioners, which attempt to address the process of cultural exchange, most notably, perhaps, those developed by Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba, Peter Brook (in relation to his work on, amongst other projects, *The Mahabharata*), Richard Schechner and Patrice Pavis.

**Reading Interculturality**

Peter Brook, speaking of his first encounter with *The Mahabharata*, commented on the challenge of the work, observing that

one of the difficulties we encounter when we see traditional theatre from the East is that we admire without understanding. Unless we possess the keys to the symbols, we remain on the outside, fascinated, perhaps, by the surface, but unable to contact the human realities without which these complex art forms would never have arisen. (160)

Work on the adaptation of the original Indian epic poem began as far back as 1974. Rehearsals began in Paris in 1984. The two original stage productions were first in French and then in English; and the stage version of the piece continued to evolve long after its opening in July 1985. The film version was made in 1988. Brook observed that

in the performance, whether in English or French, we are not attempting a construction of Dravidian and Aryan Indian of three thousand years ago. We are not presuming to present the symbolism of Hindu philosophy. In the music, in the costumes, in the movements, we have tried to suggest the flavour of India without pretending to be what we are not. On the contrary, the many nationalities who have gathered together are trying to reflect *The Mahabharata* by bringing to it something of their own. In this way, we are trying to celebrate a work which only India could have created but which carries echoes for all mankind. (162)

David Williams, writing on Brook, observes that Brook conceives of culture in two ways, firstly locating ‘culture’ as “an artificial delimita-
tion, an impoverishing shell of naturalized givens constructed from ossified stereotypes of superficial difference” (72), and secondly, he considers that “locked within this shell, ‘beneath the chatter of words,’ is another originary ‘culture,’ which demands to be restored” (72); and Williams himself further observes that “potentially, these diverse symbolic structures of feeling exist as the site both of radical alterity and of transcultural commonality” (72).

Richard Schechner, as Patrice Pavis notes, is one of the pioneers of intercultural theatre. Pavis notes that Schechner, rather than entering debates around political legitimacy of intercultural practice, “prefers to position himself in terms of exchange and professional ethics” and regards exchange as only being possible “as swap or barter, i.e. at a level of artistic equality between professionals who mutually recognise each other as travelling companions” (Schechner/Pavis 41).

Schechner, in an interview with Pavis, defines ‘interculturalism’ as a term to contrast with ‘internationalism,’ commenting that “the real exchange of importance to artists was not that among nations […] but the exchange among cultures, something which could be done by individuals or by non-official groupings, and it doesn’t obey national boundaries” (Schechner/Pavis 42); he identifies the work of Eugenio Barba, Jerzy Grotowski and Peter Brook as that which he considers ‘intercultural.’ Of Brook, Schechner observes that

the very fact that a leading British or English-speaking director would situate his work in France, to start with, is somewhat intercultural, but the real key to it was that he constituted a company of English speakers, French speakers, people from Africa, people from Asia. And ever since his work with Orghast in Shiraz, The Conference of Birds, The Ilks, there has been a whole series of works that I would say are ‘intercultural.’ (Schechner/Pavis 42)

Interestingly, Schechner regards his own practical work in regard to interculturalism as beginning with his production of Dionysus in 69, where the birth ritual was his version of an Indonesian tribal practice. Kneehigh Theatre, some decades later, have – as described earlier – used this story to similar effect.

Patrice Pavis attempted to give account, through his “hourglass of intellectual exchange,” of the process through which a piece of theatre might travel in order to move between cultures,
to imagine a theoretical model that would describe in as detailed a manner as possible the way in which the mise en scène presents and transmits a foreign culture to the public, and what operations come into play in this cultural transfer using theatrical means. (185)

The process, involving eleven stages, moves from the top of the “hourglass,” through to the bottom, from what Pavis terms as the “source culture” to the “target culture.” The first two stages (“cultural modelling” and “artistic modelling”) pertain to the source culture; stages three to eight (“perspectives of the adapters,” “work of adaptation,” “preparatory work by actors, etc,” “choice of theatrical form,” “theatrical representation/performance of culture” and “reception-adapters”) address issues of theatrical mise-en-scène; and the final three stages (“readability,” “reception in the target culture” and “given and anticipated consequences”) concern issues of audience and reading. Pavis explores the journey between these two points using four concrete and contrasting examples (Brook’s 1986 production of The Mahabharata, Mnouchkine’s 1987 production of Indiade or the India of Their Dreams, Théâtre du Soleil’s 1984 production of Twelfth Night, and Barba’s 1987 study of Goethe’s Faust).

This model is not without its particular issues. Pavis himself notes the risk of projecting western categories onto the foreign culture and of defining modelling systems which are not always specific to the source culture. Implicitly, too, there is an inherent hierarchisation in regard to ‘original’ and ‘adaptation’ in the conceptualisation of the hourglass as having a ‘superior bowl’ and ‘inferior bowl.’

The final stages of this model are, however, of particular interest, in their focus on the reactions in the spectator. Pavis speculates on the cultural identities of the “target groups,” noting that “intercultural communication obviously involves more than […] personal impressions or blank refusal, or on the contrary unconditional acceptance, of the aesthetic object,” and observes that “it makes more sense to calmly analyse the ‘reception’ codes of the target audience” (206), noting however that “One last – risk – factor remains: the way in which the work proceeds and undergoes modifications in the spectator’s consciousness” (207).

It is this ‘risk’ which this paper now moves on to consider, but with a view that, for the potentially transcultural spectator, the process of
‘reading’ is at an unconscious level, where similarity and identification rather than separation and difference comprise the syntax of the ‘reading’.

Transcultural Spectatorship

To this point, the discussion has centred on representations of cultural identities and theoretical perspectives on those representations. What has not been addressed is the process through which the spectator travels in order to make meaning. Transculturalism is not necessarily only about the way in which something is represented, but might also be understood in regard to the way in which something is read. One might consider the representation to be the element subject to mobility (as in Pavis’ description of the passage of the material through the hourglass of intellectual exchange); but one could equally view the representation as remaining static within this process, and the mobility being in fact on the part of the spectator – physically, perhaps, but more importantly, on a psychical level.

To return to the original discussion, which concerned the question of what it was that allowed a piece of theatre to transgress the boundaries of geography and culture and to appeal to spectators outside of the cultural group from which it emerged, the focus must once again return to the spectator and to that element within the psychical makeup of the spectator which compels him/her to engage with a particular piece of theatre. Pavis judiciously warns that there is something presumptuous or at best naïve in proposing a theory of inter-culturalism in contemporary mise en scène, given the complexity of factors at stake in all cultural exchange, and the difficulty of formalizing them. Every typology of cultural relations requires a metalanguage that would be, as it were, ‘above’ these relations, encompassing them all: it is hard to imagine where theorists would find this metalanguage, especially since they are themselves caught up in a language and culture from which it is difficult to disengage. (183)

This is, in my view, a central challenge of this project: acknowledging the difficulties inherent in the formulation of a definitive theory in regard to cultural representation because of, amongst other things, the requirement of the existence of a metalanguage – something ‘outside of
The project requires that one thinks – to use a colloquialism – ‘outside of the box’; and in doing so, to focus on the spectator as the site of reading, the construction of meaning, and on the interstice – the space of ‘nothing’ – generated by the coming together of representation and spectator and in which ‘meaning’ exists.

Pavis speaks of the spectator’s consciousness. Wendy Wheeler and Trevor Griffiths have (in the context of political theatre) suggested, however, that the engagement of the spectator relies on an allure which is not conscious, and they account for the allure of the theatrical mise-en-scène in terms of the extent to which it engages the three primal fantasies of origin, arguing that

in the theatre, and unlike film, the economy of seeing and hearing we are offered is just as immediate and as vital as the drama of the family from and through which we negotiate our precarious subjectivity. The danger of the theatre, the possibility of failing to maintain the illusion, of extraneous noises which should not be heard, of the collapse of the role and of the fiction of assumed identities, of fluffed or forgotten lines, of props which make noises which they shouldn’t, all combine to reproduce precisely the erotic, libidinal danger of the Oedipal family which the primal fantasies emerge to structure and contain. Thus we are arguing that the theatrical event, or rather its ‘other scene’ (ie of the primal fantasies), repeats and re-enacts the structural conditions which enable subjectivity to emerge by representing, with the same effect of danger, precisely the imaginary conditions of their emergence. The success of the theatrical mise-en-scène may then depend partly upon the extent to which it puts into play in structured form the three primal fantasies of origin in which the audience invest, and from which they gain satisfaction in the form of the representations of the boundaries of identity in the context of the story which the play then unfolds. (188)

The three primal fantasies, the fantasy of parental coitus (the ‘primal scene’ which ‘accounts’ for the child’s origins), the fantasy of seduction (which ‘accounts’ for the afflux of sexuality) and the fantasy of castration (which ‘accounts’ for the recognition of sexual difference) are, it has been argued, a part of the structural conditions which enable subjectivity, the ‘becoming’ of the subject. Every production facilitates a ‘reminder’ or ‘reactivation’ of this ‘other scene,’ to a greater or lesser extent (depending on the play), through the very syntax of representation, which places the spectator, like a child, in that position of danger, of not knowing, and of exploring (from the safety of the
audience), through the repetition and re-enactment of the structural conditions which enable the emergence of subjectivity, the very boundaries of identity. And here lies, to a greater or lesser extent, the allure for the spectator.

For the transcultural spectator, this point of entry requires a temporary suspension of enculturation and relocation on the edges of the symbolic. It involves a ‘reading’ of the representation from a contradictory position: from both within and without the symbolic and culture; a position which – theoretically – temporarily abandons notions of difference, on both conscious and unconscious levels. In the temporal space which theoretically exists in the process of subjectivity before entry into the symbolic, there is no recognition of difference, no boundaries, no ‘other.’

**Summary: Text and its Other**

This idea of abandoning the symbolic is probably (within the constraints of the symbolic) practically and literally unthinkable. But it is perhaps the unthinkable that is required in order to ‘think’ outside of the text. As Pavis has observed, it is hard to imagine where theorists would find this metalanguage (and presumably it would – if found – be drawn into ‘the text,’ ceasing, by definition, to be a metalanguage): a little like desire, which – by its very nature – is unobtainable.

It should perhaps be remembered, however, and particularly by those involved with the theory and practice of performance, that we are dealing with living bodies and lived experience, which sometimes presents us with things which are outside of the symbolic: experienced, undeniable, but indescribable within the terms available to us. And it is the very liveness of theatre, its ‘danger,’ which provides an opportunity to explore ‘outside of the text.’ Rona Munro’s *Iron* offered, in a quiet way, multiple points of entry and position within the syntax of the production, as did Graeae’s production of *Blasted. Mother Clap’s Molly House* and Kneehigh’s *The Bacchae*, in their carnivalesque constructions of slippage and transgression, provided a visceral, sensual context for the spectator: theatre which “repeats and re-enacts the structural conditions which enable subjectivity to emerge” (Wheeler and Griffiths 188).
This question of viscerality was again foregrounded recently in the performance of an extract from De La Guarda’s *Fuerza Bruta*, screened during the 2009 *Eurovision Song Contest*. This piece of performance involved the lowering of a large clear plastic flexible pool, containing actors and shallow water, from the ceiling of the auditorium to within arms-reach of the audience. This spectacle, viewed on television from various angles, appeared slightly detached and bizarre. Live, in performance, however, this was a quite different experience: having seen *Fuerza Bruta* at the Roundhouse in 2006, my visceral response – as a member of the audience underneath that huge plastic canopy – was one of claustrophobia, fascination, a sense of danger and immediacy. Later, rationalising the experience, attempting to ‘account’ for it in the symbolic, words such as ‘womb,’ ‘birth,’ ‘death,’ and ‘sensuality’ came to mind; but these did not actually describe what happened there. Rationality and enculturation gave way to something more basic.

We might accept that it is not possible to speak of that which is ‘outside the text’; but we cannot deny that such things exist; and in attempting to speak of them, we can continue (in the words of Samuel Beckett) to ‘fail better,’ and to appreciate the process. There is more to being human than we can possibly contain within language.

If one could temporarily relinquish a *fixed* position in the symbolic, then there would no longer be an ‘other.’ Clearly, however, we *do* occupy a space within the symbolic, but this paper tentatively suggests the possibility of a temporally defined space outside of this ‘text,’ facilitated by the very circumstances of the theatrical representation, a space which suspends the ‘otherness’ of the encounter with ‘different’ cultural groups, a space occupied by the transcultural spectator. Williams speculates that perhaps it would be possible for actors in a multicultural theatre group – others-to-each-other, and to themselves (to their ‘other’ possible selves) – to become cartographers of ‘other’ ways of feeling, seeing and representing, to rewrite the map of difference (‘the complete human truth is global’). And in the process, to locate the *dynamic* parameters of their own difference, their individuality – to become *more themselves* in relation to an evolving ‘culture’: a culture of becoming. (Williams 72)

This process of ‘becoming,’ however, is, arguably, not primarily located with the theatre group or with the representation, but mainly with the
s spectators; and, through an engagement with this process of ‘becoming,’ it is the spectator who can assume a position, in relation to theatre and performance, which is truly transcultural.

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Notes on Contributors

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