Contemporary Drama in English

Narrative in Drama

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

Edited for the society by Merle Tönnies and Christina Flotmann
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Merle Tönnies
Christina Flotmann

March 2011
Introducing Narrative in Drama

From the perspective of more traditional literary criticism, the title of the 2010 Paderborn CDE conference may seem like a contradiction in terms. However, in recent years the categorisation and analysis of narrative elements in drama is increasingly seen as a rewarding research topic (cf. e.g. Jahn 660; Richardson “Voice and Narration” 682), developing towards a “narratology of drama” (Sommer 120, 122–23). The conference as well as this volume of the collected papers addresses the issue with regard to contemporary English-language theatre and drama. It is important to note that the understanding of ‘narrative’ is not quite as broad here as transgeneric narratology sometimes has it, when the transmission of any kind of information in drama is studied in analogy to narrative texts, programmatically opposing the conventional opinion that the absence of a narrative agent is a typical genre characteristic of drama (cf. Nünning and Sommer “Drama und Narratologie” 106; “Diegetic and Mimetic Narrativity” 336; see also Weidle’s analysis of the ‘superordinate narrative system’ in drama and theatre). The papers collected in this volume rather focus on ‘narrative’ in the more limited sense of
Nünning and Sommer’s “diegetic narrativity”: “the representation of a speech act of telling a story by an agent called a narrator” (“Diegetic and Mimetic Narrativity” 338). Thus, concrete instances of actual story-telling in the plays are analysed, where narrative mediation takes precedent over immediate stage action.

Such cases may range from “internal” narrators (Richardson “Point of View in Drama” 210) who tell stories on the intradiegetic level to what Richardson terms “generative” narrators (“Voice and Narration” 685; “Drama and Narrative” 152). Such characters present dramatic events that they seem to produce themselves, directing and/or enacting their own stories and memories on an intradiegetic level or (to various degrees) rising to the extradiegetic level of a stage-manager mediating directly between the audience and the play (cf. also Fludernik 367).¹ Two cases are especially important in contemporary English-language drama: In documentary plays the ‘real’ stories told by the actual participants of the documented events seemingly stand in front of the spectators in their own right, while in monodrama monological structures dominate the whole play and the narrator/performer takes on the central position. In the extreme form of postdramatic theatre, by contrast, the narrative contributions are to some extent loosened from the characters and stand in the foreground, so that the script need not even explicitly include any characters at all.

Proceeding from this understanding of narrative, one observes a notable rise in both the frequency and the centrality of narrative

¹ It should be noted that the last instance has been used by Stefan Schenk-Haupt to challenge the applicability of narratological concepts to drama. He maintains that extradiegetic mediation is impossible in drama as the limits of the stage cannot be transcended. Stage-managers are thus at best “fake extradiegetic narrators” (32). For the opposing view see Hühn 237–38.
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structures in contemporary English-language theatre and drama across a wide range of dramatic genres (cf. also Bowles 197). This development is especially conspicuous from the 1990s onwards. While particularly British drama of the 1950s and 1960s was heavily influenced by Brecht’s Epic Theatre, narrative elements are now used with new functions which may even consciously oppose the Brechtian tradition.

Secondary literature has so far rather bypassed this trend and either mentioned it only briefly (cf. Holdsworth and Luckhurst 2) or dealt with specific narrative constructions in drama, especially in a German-language context (cf. Muny; Korthals). Hugo Bowles is an exception here, as his *Storytelling and Drama* provides a detailed analysis of stories told in drama from a linguistic point of view. He studies whether narrative is functional or dysfunctional here according to linguistic criteria for successful story-telling. This focus means, however, that the dramatic and theatrical contexts of the stories plays a rather less important role. These aspects are treated in greater detail in the recent collection *Worlds in Words. Storytelling in Contemporary Theatre and Playwriting* edited by Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera. The editors aim at elucidating parallels between storytelling in postcolonial drama and in European plays that position themselves outside the theatrical mainstream (cf. Borowski and Sugiera xxvii). The focus is much broader than in the present volume, as Borowski and Sugiera include examples in different languages and from the whole of the 20th century. The systematic overview attempted here, on the other hand, shows much more specifically which functions narrative is made to perform in post-Beckettian English-language theatre and drama and which desired effects on the audience are associated with it. Throughout the papers, central points in the analysis relate to the constructedness of the narrated events. In how far is this highlighted and in how far is it
covered up to evoke an impression of authenticity? Questions of subjectivity come in here as well, and it is a constant concern of the papers in how far it becomes possible to create a consistent ‘first person’ through the process of telling. Subjectivity also concerns the theatre audience. The plays analysed vary in the degree to which they address the spectators emotionally or deliberately aim at a ‘factual’ impression. Established genre and plot patterns are often instrumentalised to support these effects, which may result in audience members actually becoming co-producers of the dramatic ‘reality’ themselves.

The contributions to this volume can be divided into two basic groups according to which of these issues they address particularly prominently. The first one is entitled “The Authenticity of Theatrical Discourses” and focuses on the ways in which reality and meaning are produced via personal and political narratives in the theatre. Papers in the second part — “The Ambiguous Functions of Narrative in Drama” — concentrate on the in-depth analysis of narrative elements and their functioning in different kinds of dramatic genres. Both sections share a concern with the relationship between drama and its audiences. Can dramatists replace politicians and media representatives as moral authorities? Is drama capable of teaching audiences to be critical and question what is presented to them as ‘truth?’ These and other questions are raised and discussed in the volume.

The majority of the articles in the first section deal with either documentary or autobiographical drama — theatrical forms that are commonly believed to contain ‘authentic’ renderings of ‘real’ events. The writers explore the degree to which these dramatic approaches can be called ‘truthful.’ They also discuss the relationship between what is presented on stage, the actors and the audience. Many of the
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contributors identify (a subjective form of) ‘truth’ as originating from this relationship instead of residing in the narrative as such.

The article opening this volume is a joint one by Jonathan Bignell, Derek Paget, Heather Sutherland and Lib Taylor from Reading University. It results from their research project ‘Acting with Facts’ and addresses most of the concerns mentioned above. Bignell et al. focus on the analysis of stage and screen documentary between 1990 and the present and attempt to explain the popularity of the genre in contemporary culture. The article draws attention to the strategies documentary employs to ‘enlist’ audiences emotionally. ‘Enlistment’ primarily works via the actors who play characters from real life. The four researchers are specifically interested in how actors feel about ‘acting with facts,’ the degree of control they have over their roles and the ways in which they are determined by public tastes.

Margarete Rubik’s, Roland Weidle’s and Hana Pavelková’s articles also deal with documentary theatre, scrutinising the authenticity of the material presented in the plays they analyse. Rubik discusses Guantanamo: ‘Honor Bound to Defend Freedom,’ where audiences are confronted with genuine letters that inmates of the infamous prison camp sent home to their families. Narrative, Rubik contends here, restores the detainees’ status as human beings and thus has an enabling function, facilitating understanding and empathy. Roland Weidle and Hana Pavelková highlight the processes of selection and arrangement which documentary plays undergo before being presented on stage and the ways in which the narratives thus generated invoke ‘preferred’ readings. Often, the subjectivity of documentary is consciously veiled in performance. On a less positive note than Rubik, therefore, they point out how narrative can be manipulative.

Tom Maguire looks at the ways in which a ‘physical’ kind of narrative can influence audiences. He analyses two plays by Claire
Dowie, emphasising the significance of gestures, facial expressions and the use of space on stage. These physical elements of a performance already evaluate the content of what is performed and often support a certain (political) reading, for instance the questioning of fixed gender stereotypes in the case of Dowie’s dramas.

While Maguire foregrounds the actor’s role in the meaning-making process, Janelle Reinelt, who deals with autobiographical drama, emphasises that ‘truth’ is not necessarily ‘in the narrative’ but is produced in the interplay between story, narrator or performer and audience. In contrast to Maguire, who assumes the complicity of the audience, Reinelt stresses that while ‘suspension of disbelief’ is possible, spectators can also reject the ‘truths’ presented to them.

The second section of the volume then moves on to papers which do not so much foreground authenticity as enquire into the nature and functions of narrative and the ways in which stories are employed in contemporary drama.

Wolfgang Funk observes a ‘renaissance of storytelling’ in today’s theatre. He analyses Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem*, which contrasts a commodified contemporary England with a traditional one, steeped in legend and folklore. While both versions are criticised as inadequate, the play acknowledges people’s need for traditional narratives. At the same time, however, it questions the value of the old stories and asks in what ways spirituality can be reintegrated into modern society. *Jerusalem* leaves these questions open, thereby shifting authority from the writer to theatre audiences, who have to make up their own minds.

The following papers are more specific with regard to the various functions of narrative in contemporary drama. Sarah Grochala emphasises the meaning-giving role of narrative but questions whether it can truly generate understanding for ‘others.’ The two monodramas *The Experiment* and *Product* by Mark Ravenhill ‘disrupt’
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and ‘misappropriate’ stories in order to reflect back to the audience how much they are dependent on stories to make sense of the world. At the same time, spectators are shown how the narratives they create do not go beyond their own social and cultural frameworks and thus cannot produce true understanding. Stories, according to Grochala, function as anodynes as they alienate us from ‘other truths’ than our own. Nils Wilkinson, too, works with Ravenhill's plays. Product intends to make the audience aware of the fact that what they are presented with in the theatre is at best versions of the truth and often embodiments of dominant ideological discourses. Pool (no water) shows how individuality becomes contested in postmodern society. The characters enact what cultural representations have taught them as appropriate to a particular situation. Both plays are indicative of the power of ideology and the ways in which it obliterates the notion of a ‘true’ self.

This potential of narratives to do harm is also highlighted in Christopher Innes's article with a focus on story-telling in Irish drama. On the one hand, stories help the Irish deal with their turbulent history. On the other, several of the plays Innes analyses show the downside to this creation of national identity via narrative. Martin McDonagh's The Pillowman and Enda Walsh's New Electric Ballroom and The Walworth Farce depict story-telling as downright destructive, finally even resulting in heinous crimes. Narratives are ambiguous, generative of community spirit at times but limiting at others.

Using Black British drama as her subject matter, Deirdre Osborne also emphasises narrative hazards. Stories can be used to simplify or categorise. The Black community in Britain, for instance, is often associated with stereotypical images of violence and (sexual) abuse which are perpetuated by the media. Against this background, playwright debbie tucker green tries to show the complexity of Black experience by experimenting with language, breaking out of
conventional frameworks of grammar and style. Certain narratives, it seems, need to be disrupted to enable social change.

In contrast especially to Wolfgang Funk, Aleks Sierz deals with a playwright who radically experiments with narrative. He suggests that in *Attempts on Her Life* and *Fewer Emergencies* Martin Crimp not only disrupts grand narratives in a postmodernist fashion but even makes small ones collapse. With his ‘narrative games,’ Crimp emphasises the essential haziness of life and the fact that certainty is always an illusion. He brings us face to face with what Sierz (quoting Rumsfeld) calls ‘unknown unknowns.’ So while many of the dramatists studied in this volume question the way we make sense of the world via narratives, Crimp shakes the very basis of these narratives — a highly disturbing stance.

Finally, the interview with Dennis Kelly on his dramatic use of narratives sums up many concerns raised by the other contributors. For one, Kelly’s plays, like those of others discussed here, are highly political, reactions to the war on terror, the invasion of Iraq and life in a postmodern society dominated by economic interests. Furthermore, Kelly is strongly preoccupied with truths and falsehoods and draws attention to the ways in which narratives can be exploited for certain purposes. Therefore, he also highlights the ambiguity or even danger of stories. His invented documentary play *Taking Care of Baby* seems a contradiction in terms, but in fact, this makes perfect sense. A made-up documentary emphasises the point that Rubik, Weidle and Pavelková make: That although the genre claims to be true to the real events it deals with, it is ultimately fictional since its source material is ordered and arranged so as to fit certain narrative conventions. Finally, the interplay between playwright, production and audiences is also very important to Kelly. He, too, stresses that plays generate themselves in the interstice between performance and spectators. Thus, the interview shows yet again what has turned out to be a
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central concern of this volume across the different dramatic genres: After the end of the traditional ‘meta-narrative,’ the resultant ‘small’ narratives can only achieve authenticity and a certain subject-constituting consistency if they manage to generate some degree of audience participation. In contemporary theatre and drama, this is only possible when narratives acknowledge their own constructedness, while the genre and plot patterns of the story-telling tradition serve as much to undermine plausibility as to convey a coherent message.
Works Cited


I. THE AUTHENTICITY OF THEATRICAL DISCOURSES

JONATHAN BIGNELL, DEREK PAGET, HEATHER SUTHERLAND, LIB TAYLOR

Narrativising the Facts:
Acting in Screen and Stage Docudrama

Introduction: the ‘Acting with Facts’ Research Project

‘Acting with Facts: Actors Performing the Real in British Theatre and Television since 1990’ was a research project based at the University of Reading and funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council of England between 2007 and 2010. The Project Team — Dr Derek Paget (Principal Investigator), Professors Jonathan Bignell and Lib Taylor (Co-Investigators), and Dr Heather Sutherland (Postdoctoral Researcher) — has already published a number of academic articles arising from the research. With the research process now concluded, two special editions of the journals Studies in Documentary Film and Studies in Theatre and Performance and the publication of the second edition of Derek Paget’s book No Other Way To Tell It will further
disseminate information about the project and its findings. However, the presentation of aspects of the research at conferences around the world during the three years of the work has also been a key strategic aim for the research team. The June 2010 CDE conference in Paderborn offered an excellent opportunity for us to introduce European colleagues to our work. This article is an edited version of the four papers we delivered on a panel at the conference that the organisers and CDE kindly allowed to be preconstituted. Here we sketch the context of the research, present some initial findings, and seek to establish some of the theoretical markers that we believe indicate the growing importance of fact-based drama in screen and theatre performance to the wider Anglophone culture.

In the original application to the funding body the declared aim of “Acting with Facts” was to examine how and why, during the final decade of the 20th century and the opening one of the 21st, television docudrama and documentary theatre had grown in visibility and importance in the UK, providing key responses to social, cultural and political change over the millennial period. Actors were the prime focus for the enquiry principally because so little research has been done into the special demands that fact-based performance makes on them. The main emphasis in actor training (in the UK at any rate) is, as it always has been, on preparation for fictional drama. Preparation in acting schools is also heavily geared towards stage performance, and we wanted to know more about what actors do when they act on screen. Our thesis was that performers called upon to play the roles of real people, in whatever medium, have added responsibilities both towards history and towards real individuals and their families. Actors must engage with ethical questions whether they like it or not, and we found them keenly aware of this. In the course of the research, we conducted 30 interviews with a selection of actors ranging from the
experienced to the recently-trained. We also interviewed a few industry professionals and actor trainers.\(^1\)

In framing the project’s application, we had focused on theatre and television partly because our own research strengths have been established in these areas (Bignell and Sutherland in television; Taylor in theatre; Paget in theatre and television). However, we were also pushed towards these two media following advice from the funders’ referees. Once the interviews started it was clear that actors themselves made little or no distinction between how they set about their work for television and film. The essential disciplines for work in front of the camera, they told us, are the same whether the camera is electronic or photographic. Some adjustments become necessary, of course in the multi-camera TV studio. But much serious drama for the screen is made on film anyway (indeed, the docudramatic work we reviewed is entirely single-camera filmed). Thus the work about which interviewees such as Hugh Bonneville, Simon Callow and Timothy West spoke, was made on film even if destined ultimately for television. We became accustomed after about a year to speaking and writing — as we do here — about screen rather than television docudrama and we now consciously conflate film and television studies in our various articles and presentations.\(^2\)

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\(^1\) Apart from the main body of actor interviews, the team also interviewed a small number of writers, directors and actor trainers. Firm research links were established especially with the training institution the Central School of Speech and Drama in London, and the on-going interest in the project of the playwright David Edgar also deserves mention. In addition, see Cantrell and Luckhurst 2010. This excellent collection of sixteen actor interviews synergises with our research. We hope to have our own interview material available (on the University of Reading website) by mid-2011.

\(^2\) The – academic political – reasons for nominating ‘television’ in the first instance are too complicated to go into fully, but suffice it to say that they have
We found it was also the case that young actors now tend to get their first paid employment before a camera rather than on a stage. Indeed, many actors establish very good careers in which stage performance is markedly absent, and it is not unusual for established screen actors to seek theatre work in order, perhaps, to renew skills put at risk by the discontinuities inevitable in screen performance. The screen-before-stage tendency, along with the fundamental reshaping that has gone on in the British theatre since at least the early 1980s, had implications for actor training, and many training establishments now run courses on screen acting within degree programmes still fundamentally focused on the stage. We have also found that theatre work still tends to be most valued by actors. They usually followed this up by acknowledging that screen work pays better. For all the actors we interviewed, theatre was what they liked doing best because it was there they could practice and develop their skills, there they could work most collectively towards performance, and there they could more directly experience audience feedback in the real time of the stage play.

more to do with the academy’s tendency to protect its own subject paradigm boundaries. From an academic point of view, Paget and Bignell have written frequently on film, even if their primary research foci have not been in Film Studies, but one early referee in particular seemed anxious about the lack of Film Studies representation on the team.

3 This first became noticeable, perhaps, after Nicole Kidman’s foray into stage acting at the Donmar Warehouse in London in David Hare’s The Blue Room – his 1998 adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler’s La Ronde. Speaking about this experience to the Daily Telegraph in 2002, Kidman makes clear how she saw herself as the inexperienced junior reliant on the stage expertise of Iain Glen (see Wolf 2002).

4 A Reading PhD student, Trevor Rawlins, is currently researching this fact of actors’ lives and the implications it raises for actor training. Rawlins is himself an actor.

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The current world of television has been especially constrained with regard to rehearsal time in comparison to theatre (and, to a lesser extent, film). This has also affected actors’ valuation of their work. Most of our actors talked with far greater animation about their theatre experiences than they did about screen work. The latter was often alienating to some extent in its working methods (with little or no rehearsal, and actors hanging around more than they are performing). There were exceptions, of course — actor Bill Hoyland, who appeared in *A Mighty Heart*, was full of praise for the process that put this film together. But we found in general what we regard as a defining paradox about modern actors: theatre *is*, and is *not*, the most important medium in which they find work. Theatre is most important spiritually and intellectually, because theatre is collaborative, intensive, and involving; theatre is not as important in financial and career terms, because it is not as lucrative and not as visible to a large public as acting for the screen.

We also rapidly found a rule-of-thumb — that theoretical distinctions between film and television need not trouble us greatly in terms of our research into ‘acting with facts.’ This is not to say that there are not clear differences in the ways the dramatic texts of screen and theatre are prepared, put together, distributed and appreciated. Nor, indeed, did we ignore the institutional and historical factors that have given us our synergised modern screen industries. It was more that our focus on acting became the clearer once this craft skill/discipline was separated out for analysis from the rest of the process of making drama. For one thing, many actors took the view that, for all the industrial differences that do affect them and inevitably interest the academic, acting for the visible media of theatre, film and television involved fundamentally the same process with slightly different emphases. But there were special satisfactions,
for example, in the process of research for docudrama whether staged or screened.\footnote{Radio, an ‘invisible’ medium, so to speak, was perhaps the more different in terms of the approach taken by actors to their material. It should be emphasised, of course, that this was a subsidiary finding of the research; our brief was not to investigate radio performance even though British radio uses docudrama a good deal. It would need a new study to investigate this aspect.}

Paradoxically, a wider sense that theatre is somehow more valuable has led to a persistent undervaluing of screen performance in both the acting industry and the academy that studies it. Cynthia Baron and Sharon Marie Carnicke remark astutely that “[s]creen performance has often been viewed as something other than true acting” (11). We found this to be the case to some extent with those we interviewed. Baron and Carnicke argue for new academic attention to a comparison of screen with theatre acting. They contend, and we agree, that undervaluing of one kind of acting is profoundly unhelpful in determining what it is that actors do whenever they act, in whatever medium the acting takes place. This is not to say, however, that institutional differences between the television and film industries do not exist amidst the general trend of late 20th-century media convergence, nor is it to say that theatre is anything other than a medium that still punches above its weight in cultural terms.

\emph{A Television Context — the 1990 Broadcasting Act and the ‘Docudramatic Turn’}

The ‘docudramatic turn’ of the past twenty years has affected both stage and screen, but it was to the screen context that we turned to establish a start point for our research. We chose the project’s start date of 1990 in order to highlight the importance of the passing in the British Parliament of the UK Broadcasting Act. This legislation
signalled a fundamental realignment of the British television industry that altered its status as a player in the international market and reshaped the environment in which drama was produced. The Act reinforced tendencies already apparent in the industry before 1990. Networks and programme makers were already aspiring to become more competitive in an international market in which co-production was growing as a phenomenon (and in which fact-based drama became more and more a staple mode).

The Broadcasting Act affected existing television institutions by increasing competition and budgetary pressure. The Act reduced budgets for television programmes originated by BBC and commercial broadcasters because it required them to commission 25 percent of broadcast programme time from independent producers. The effect was to place greater emphasis on ‘value for money,’ and to increase internal competition between the departments within the major broadcasters, now competing against outsiders as well as each other (Born 172–73). Even in larger institutions such as Granada Television, support for conventional documentary waned. Reflecting on Granada’s docudrama output prior to and immediately following 1990, the company’s then Head of Current Affairs, Ray Fitzwalter lamented the reduction in resources for investigative programmes and the pressure on ITV to maximise revenue by courting mass audiences (85–86). Since the early 1990s this mourning of past times has often been heard from older programme makers.6

The 1990s were the period when the new genre ‘docusoap’ rose to prominence in prime-time, moving out of daytime programming to gain high ratings in part because of its focus on performance (Corner).

6 And yet the creativity of younger practitioners, coping better with the new constraints, has been remarkable – see Chapter 8 of the new edition of Paget’s No Other Way To Tell It (forthcoming 2011).
Programmes like *Airport*, *Driving School*, and *The Cruise* competed with long-running ITV drama series like *London’s Burning* or *The Bill* and some of its participants became media celebrities just like actors in popular soaps and series. In drama, the major broadcasters invested significant budgets in high-profile projects, but the escalation of cost above inflation led to risk-aversion and to strategies aimed at securing audiences by perpetuating strong formats or building projects around under-contract ‘star’ actors (such as Robson Green and Sarah Lancashire). In this environment, docudrama was able to attract co-production finance from, and distribution deals with, overseas television channels. Fact-based narratives, with their audience appeal, reduced risk and locked into news stories — they have ‘rootable,’ ‘relatable’ and ‘promotable’ attractions for TV and film executives alike (see Lipkin). Some docudramas (particularly those about famous — or infamous — people) could also be cast with strong and well-known performers with whom audiences could doubly identify (as character and as star). Docudramas rapidly became a staple of the ‘co-pro’ (industry shorthand for co-production films) deal, with America’s HBO a major player.

The production of docudrama can therefore be seen as part of a larger-scale strategy to draw on the perceived success of factual entertainment and the building of scripted drama around star actors. Convergences between the two, increasingly linked, screen industries resulted in the dual-purposing of film drama. Internationally, ‘co-pros’ could resource the kind of big subjects and star names only available through external production funding and overseas distribution. For instance, Georgina Born (167) reports that at the end of the 1990s, BBC single dramas co-produced with HBO could attract US investment of as much as £1.5 million, more than three times as much as the average hourly cost of a BBC drama series at that time. Marketing dramas at international trading fairs such as MIPTV in Cannes, British producers
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sell their product on the basis of its high production values and quality. These are selling points with which British drama production has become associated worldwide. With a high profile in franchised factual formats and drama, Britain is second only to the USA in global programme sales. UK television exports rose by 21 percent in 2005 to £632m. Exports to the US are by far the largest sector of the UK programme trade, generating £228m in 2005. BBC Worldwide was the largest exporter, earning £171m, although smaller producers improved their performance following new terms of trade introduced in 2004 which gave them more control over programme rights (Holmwood).

In the USA, there has been a parallel increase in fact-based drama over the period in which we are interested, and a transnational Anglophone market has developed in which docudrama holds a significant place in both television and film (see Paget No Other Way; Rosenthal; Lipkin). In short, across the screen landscape since the 1990s, the narrativisation of facts in docudrama, conventional documentary and television docusoap became more and more attractive to programme makers for a range of practical, institutional and aesthetic reasons. Moreover, the synergy of filmed television docudrama with film distribution led to some made-for-TV docudramas attracting simultaneous cinema distribution. An example of this was Bloody Sunday, a docudrama starring James Nesbitt. This film about the 1972 incident in which British paratroops fired on a peaceful civilian march in Derry (to which we refer further below) had a ready-made market at home and abroad owing to its proximity to a crux of 20th-century history — the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland. It is, of course, more often the case that a film unable to get cinema release will 'go straight to video,' but here, too, industrial convergence plays a role.

Docudrama makes the necessity of performance into its primary and acknowledged focus of interest, within a narrative that aims
simultaneously to inform its audience and to make often difficult events accessible (Lipkin; Bignell). Criteria that viewers bring with them often centre on questions of authenticity, but authenticity can depend on the match or mismatch between the expressive performance techniques used by actors and the factual base that legitimates them. Docudramas draw on performance modes from fictional television forms and invite audiences both to deploy their knowledge of fiction codes and to evaluate an often already-known narrative comprising real events, settings and personae. Research shows that increasingly sophisticated — indeed media-literate — audiences can make what amounts to intertextual comparisons in relation to other media representations of the events, settings and personae portrayed in factual entertainment (Hill). With the widening scope of factual entertainment, docudrama has become more legitimate in the eyes of audiences as well as more visible.

But as Tobias Ebbrecht notes in relation to German docudrama, actors validate docudrama narrative principally by inhabiting the identity of a person from the past, while the people whose lives they are reenacting validate the docudrama’s promise of authenticity via their witness testimony. In the examples of “Historical-event Docudrama” about which Ebbrecht writes, several representational modes combine: acted scenes, witness statements direct-to-camera, archive footage, and CGI-enhanced reenactment. By their focusing of the emotional aspect of the historical circumstances, actors, says Ebbrecht, “become part of [a country’s] contemporary memory culture” and docudrama thus “takes part in the construction of a national culture of public memory” (37). The formal developments Ebbrecht points to, and the conclusions he draws, apply equally to recent changes in British practice. A public narrative about past events works reciprocally with film and television representation of the past to construct a shared narrative. Docudrama has become so
Narrativising the Facts

central to current culture precisely because of the factual and fictional narratives that comprise it.

Film Context — Extensions to the History Film and the ‘Biopic’

Shifts in television towards fact-based narrative have coincided in the period under review with a similar docudramatic turn in the film industry. By 2003 docudramas were making up 10 percent of the top 100 films screened in the UK. Biopics (we include these films on the spectrum of screen practices) in the period 2005–06 included films about Ray Charles, Alfred Kinsey and Howard Hughes (Ray, Kinsey, The Aviator), Truman Capote and Johnny Cash (Capote, Walk the Line, Infamous) (see Custen). Docudramas in the cinema also continued to revisit events from recent history — often, as with Historical-Event Docudrama, employing the rubric of a historical anniversary. In 2006 9/11 was the focus of both the vérité-style United 93 and World Trade Center. The more distant past, too, was mined for suggestive parallels with current history. Good Night and Good Luck explored present-day American right-wing mendacity through the historical prism of Ed Murrow’s principled stand against the McCarthy-ite Right of 1950s America. The Wind That Shakes the Barley, winning a Cannes 2006 Palme d’Or, similarly coded its attack on modern British foreign policy through a docudramatic reflection on the formation of the modern state of Eire.

Synergies that now obtain between the screen industries of television and film have all tended to promote the docudramatic turn. For the television industry, “intergeneric hybridisation” can best be described as a continuum that stretches from a ‘mode of non-fiction’ (or ‘documentary’) at one end to a ‘mode of fiction’ (or conventional

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7 This is according to the Film Distributors’ Association Yearbook for 2003.
drama) at the other. And it must be said that even at the extremes of the continuum, purity of form has become less and less evident. Filmmakers freely mix conventions and structures, borrowing heavily from documentary in order to underpin attention-grabbing dramatic narratives, borrowing from drama to insert ‘characters,’ narrative arcs and three-act structures into ostensibly factual programmes and films. Recent TV docudramas featuring public figures negotiate between several narrative modes. They bear witness to public events at the same time as they promise an insight into personality and private psychology. They reference media representations of the central figures, and sometimes incorporate actuality footage alongside reconstruction, but have to adjudicate between representations that both converge with and diverge from their narrative spine. Star performers lend weight to the commissioning and marketing of the narratives in a complex relationship with the roles they have accepted. For docudrama narratives, the ‘talent’ (the UK television industry’s word for high-profile performers like James Nesbitt, writers like Jimmy McGovern, or directors like Peter Kosminsky) acts in conflicting as well as complementary ways. All this has directly affected the actors interviewed for ‘Acting with Facts’ (as is evidenced in the case study material on Irish Troubles docudramas below).

The Resurgence of Documentary Theatre — a ‘Poetics of Immediacy’

The docudramatic turn in British theatre became evident at around the same time as that in screen docudrama. Plays based on interviews, legal process and investigative journalism raised the evidential stakes

8 The phrase “intergeneric hybridisation” is, again, John Corner’s (1997). For more on the continuum between non-fiction and fiction screen drama, see the second edition of Paget’s No Other Way to Tell It (forthcoming 2011), which has the new sub-title Docudrama on Film and Television.
in a series of often controversial productions. Contemporary British theatre revisited traditions of Documentary Theatre established in previous eras and evident in Europe and the USA since documentary became a popular concept in the period between the two World Wars. The traditions were and are heavily dependent upon the dramaturgies of the great practitioners of the early period — Brecht, Piscator, Meyerhold et al. The methodology of ‘Verbatim Theatre’ began to be used in mainstream productions and houses (the National Theatre, the Royal Court) to dramatise current political and social issues (social tragedies, disputed political events).

In recent times Documentary Theatre has taken two predominant forms. Broadly, ‘Verbatim Theatre’ is based in the representation of the actual words of real people collected through, for example, interviews or letters. Recent plays in the ‘verbatim’ tradition include The Permanent Way, Stuff Happens, Talking to Terrorists, and The Power of Yes. All present key historical turning points or situations. These make use of interview material and documents, but the documentary material in these examples is heavily transposed and edited into theatrical text. Often, but not always, the verbatim material has been worked on by a playwright — of the plays mentioned above, three were ‘by’ David Hare (the other — the Royal Court’s Talking to Terrorists — is by Robin Soans). The ‘verbatim’ claim made by these plays is not as strictly governed by ‘pure’ verbatim protocols as some examples (see Hammond and Steward, Forsyth and Megson). This latter approach is considered further below in the discussion of the National Theatre of Scotland’s 2006 Black Watch.

Then there is “Tribunal Theatre,” which has become associated with the Tricycle Theatre in London. Examples include Justifying War — Scenes from the Hutton Inquiry, which reviewed the ‘illegal’ invasion of Iraq; Guantanamo: Honour Bound to Defend Freedom
(discussed in detail below); and *Bloody Sunday — Scenes from the Saville Inquiry*, one of a plethora of dramatic productions to review this iconic event. This latter was produced (as was the James Nesbitt film mentioned above) in the wake of a new inquiry into Bloody Sunday. One Tricycle production, *The Colour of Justice*, reconstructed the Macpherson Inquiry into the death of black teenager Stephen Lawrence. This incident was a key marker of racism in the UK. The play was televised by the BBC, an additional marker, perhaps, of its importance to British culture’s attempt to come to terms with racism. Tricycle plays are characteristically based on court and public enquiry transcripts, but in an extension of the methodology, the Tricycle constructed its own judicial hearing in *Called to Account* in order to examine forensically evidence related to the Blair government’s involvement in the Iraq War.⁹

The docudramatic turn in theatre can be traced to a wider crisis in the UK in the 1980s. Thatcherism’s political shift to the right and the failure of the political left, withdrawal of money for the arts, and a loss of confidence in theatre as a political arena, resulted in a nervous retreat from mainstream politics, and from the ‘State of the Nation’ play so much a theatrical feature of the earlier period. Into this conceptual vacuum moved forms of theatre less interested in political analysis and framing and more interested in ‘how it is’ or ‘how it was.’ This took two quite different, yet linked, forms. Chris Megson stresses that simultaneously in the 1990s there was a renaissance of new theatre writing based in ‘directness’ and ‘immediacy,’ and in a revival in Documentary Theatre (Peter Weiss’s “theatre of actuality”): “The

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⁹ This production brought Prime Minister Blair to a conjectural War Crimes trial, amassing evidence for the defence and the prosecution as a proper War Crimes tribunal would – so real lawyers were consulted and portrayed, real evidence collected and collated.
simultaneity here is important since it suggests that, in the distinct field of new playwriting and verbatim drama, what might be called a vigorous ‘poetics of immediacy’ emerged in British Theatre.” (530) Viewed in this light, and despite appearing very different as theatre forms, the so-called 'In-Yer-Face Theatre' (see Sierz) and the new fact-based theatre can be seen as responses to the same social, cultural and political impulses (indeed, similar again to those responses to new circumstances affecting screen drama adumbrated above).

‘In-Yer-Face Theatre,’ sometimes called a ‘new brutalist’ form of theatre, focuses on aggressive and provocative drama that confronts the audience in a very challenging — often offensive — way. The writers now grouped under this heading, such as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Anthony Neilson, shared an apocalyptic and sometimes nihilist attitude to the possibilities for change. They created work that aimed to confront audiences with the disconnection, despair and degradation of contemporary society. The theatrical means for presenting this vision of the present included violent physical action and heightened, often obscene language. Aleks Sierz summarised this by noting how In-Yer-Face Theatre used the resources of performance to create audience engagement. What he calls the ‘experiential’ element of ‘in-yer-face’ is, he contends, designed explicitly to bring a new level of emotional involvement to audiences — in effect, to enable in audiences the experience of the very extremes of emotion being enacted on stage. The motivation to show ‘how it is’ was not accompanied by a worked-through notion of how things could be different in social and political terms. On the contrary, the plays aimed to show the ‘new times’ and in particular the changed moralities and bleakness of the present, shorn of the kinds of theories of progressive agency evident — indeed, de rigueur — in the plays of ‘old times.'
Insofar as the new culture of upheaval produced a new underclass, new style cultures and new marginalised sectors, these groups crossed traditional dividing-lines of class and political allegiance and were often associated with single-issue campaigns and identity politics. Fact-based drama dealing with current or recent events often dramatises the failures of political, legal and other institutional systems to deal with injustice, but it still endorses the social role of those institutions. Its bleakness differs from In-Yer-Face Theatre in that, for the latter, there is no expectation of remedy for the situation portrayed and no assumption that the institutions of society are relevant to the worlds that are represented. Fact-based plays detail a specific issue, moment or group of people, but offer contextualisation — and here they also contrast with In-Yer-Face Theatre.

So the two forms look very different. But the more significant link is between the experiential, demonstrative qualities of In-Yer-Face Theatre and the emotional dimension of fact-based theatre. Despite a surface level at which many of these plays offer a sober, even clinical approach to the events they depict, they aim to engage the audience emotionally. What looks like a forensic analysis is calculated to stir up indignation, public protest and sympathy. Janelle Reinelt makes a valuable link between realism and experience in her claim that “[t]he value of the document is predicated on a realist epistemology, but the experience of documentary is dependent on phenomenological engagement” (7). She proposes that in watching fact-based theatre “[s]pectators come to the theatrical event believing that certain aspects of the performance are directly linked to the reality they are trying to experience or understand” (9). Her argument locates theatrical realism not as verisimilitude but as underwritten by the veracity of an experience, a recognition of a shared understanding which is at least partly found in an emotional response to a situation, which ‘feels’ connected to the experience of the spectator.
‘Strategies of Enlistment’ and ‘Flashing the Research’

Fact-based theatre deploys what we term ‘strategies of enlistment.’ These strategies are intended as a means of aligning audiences with particular political perspectives on recent events and controversies that are expressed in the plays (and which, of course, inhere in the interview material that feeds the plays). The productions of Black Watch and Guantanamo offer contrasting narratives about the War on Terror but both use emotional enlistment to engage their audiences in an active response to the factual material in the plays. Fact-based theatre is not a homogeneous theatrical form, rather it is an attitude to the source material used for dramatic construction. All types of fact-based theatre can work emotionally, but some work more at the level of emotional enlistment than others.

Black Watch was developed by the National Theatre of Scotland and directed by John Tiffany. The play was based on interviews with members of the Black Watch Regiment following its tour of duty in Iraq.\(^\text{10}\) Guantanamo wove together the personal stories of detainees in the US’s notorious illegal prison camp at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba, their lawyers and their families (Brittain and Slovo 3). Both plays address the global ‘war against terror’ by focusing on a group of characters who are presented as the victims or dupes of this large-scale international political strategy. In Black Watch, the protagonists are almost all soldiers who fight overseas in the British Army against so-called terrorist insurgents. The play presents action deriving from the descriptions and comments on serving in Iraq from the servicemen, and includes highly physical, stylised stage recreations of combat as well as formalised movement and realistic dialogue. In

\(^{10}\) The production was revived in 2010 for a new tour, with a planned extension of the tour to the USA in 2011.
Tricycle Theatre’s *Guantanamo*, the protagonists are people from the UK who are suspected of being Islamist terrorists, and who are detained and then held in the prison camp. The play shows their stories by means of letters they have written and letters and documents produced about their situation by lawyers, politicians and family members. The play’s form is similar to other Tricine tribunal plays, being based on relatively static staging and the reading of source documents — though what marks *Guantanamo* as distinct from a tribunal play is the critical absence of court, trial and judge.

*Black Watch* declares openly that it is fact-based drama. It is based on interviews with soldiers of the regiment and the actors went to the lengths of undergoing military training in marching, weapons drill and correct uniform protocols, for example, to enhance impression of realism.11 *Black Watch* is not peopled by either star performers or historical figures, and the characters depicted are almost all working class infantrymen. The play is realist (even reflexive) in its acknowledgement of the theatre space at the beginning of the play, and its placing of The Writer as a character on stage, seen gathering testimony from the soldier characters. It uses TV news footage and BBC radio to anchor its action to real events, as well as a kind of gritty realism of language and gesture. But there is also non-naturalistic movement, dance and music; the play is not illusionistic and not much concerned with individual psychology — although the focus on working-class infantrymen leads to a complex reading of the soldiers. They are poorly educated, heroically loyal to each other, and their vivid understanding and experience of the war they are fighting is not matched by a political analysis of their own role in it. Their reverence for regimental tradition runs alongside racist and homophobic aggression, a propensity to machismo, brutal violence and childish

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11 See in particular the director’s ‘Introduction’ to Burke (2006).
bravado. Yet, the play enlists the audience on the side of these flawed and exploited characters by using a theatricality based on music, lighting effects, ritual movement and *coups de théâtre*. The play ends with a military Tattoo, where stirring bagpipe music accompanies the soldiers moving together as a body:

The bagpipes and drums start playing “The Black Bear”. ... The parade formation begins to disintegrate, but each time one falls they are helped back onto their feet by others. As the music and movement climax, a thunderous drumbeat stops both, and the exhausted, breathless soldiers are left in silhouette. (Burke 73)

The effect at the end of the play is to enlist respect and sympathy for these men as individuals, in contrast to the political strategy they enforce. This fact-based drama offers an understanding of who fights, how, and what war feels like for the soldiers, but achieves this not by sober and analytical recreation but by spectacle, theatricality and pathos. The play demands as much physical and emotional energy as any in-yeer-face performance from its actors and wrings as much anguish and feeling from its audience.

*Guantanamo* works in quite a different way though it deals with the same narrative: the narrative of the War on Terror, this time explored through the experience of civilians accused of being involved in the planning of terror attacks. The play begins and ends with a speech by Lord Justice Steyn, followed by a factual voice-over. Steyn argues that detention at Guantanamo is illegal, and quotes John Donne’s stirring lines from the 1624 poem “Mediation 17:”

> any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind;  
> And therefore send not to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

This is counterposed with a factual voice-over announcing that UK citizens are “among more than 650 prisoners held in Guantanamo...They are being held indefinitely” (Brittain and Slovo
The play comprises statements from letters, interviews, press conferences and court transcripts which are not only dry and factual material but also describe the disruptions to the prisoners' working and family lives. The touching letters and appeals for compassion and understanding validate their apparent innocence by demonstrating their shared values with the audience. Juxtaposition works visually too, since the performers playing the prisoners are costumed in orange prison jumpsuits, with manacled ankles and wrists. This powerful stage picture immediately categorises the prisoners as de-humanised and undifferentiated, humiliated and without agency. But the language of the play, taken from transcribed real sources, reinvests the prisoners with strongly individual characterisations, mainly through the pathos of the stories of their capture and transfer to the prison, and the sympathy elicited through their remembrances of their family lives and the normal existence from which they have been snatched away.

Contemporary fact-based theatre presents the real but it eschews an analytical and theoretical meta-language. It is not that documentary plays lack a point of view, since the selection of testimonial discourses included in the drama is designed to be positioned close to or at a distance from the audience's expected knowledge. But fact-based theatre claims to focus on the presentation of 'what really happened' rather than framing the performance by a pre-existing point of view. The modes through which the real is represented may be different, as in the case of Black Watch and Guantanamo, but the material is offered in order to engage audience sensibilities, and if the experience of In-Yer-Face Theatre is one of confrontation or shock, fact-based theatre parallels this by replacing sensationalism with revelation or unveiling that derives its affect from its veracity. Max Stafford Clark commented (see Hammond and Steward 51): "I mean really what a verbatim play does is flash your
research nakedly. It’s like cooking a meal but the meat is left raw, like a steak tartare.” ‘Flashing the research’ might, in some moments in some plays, have a parallel effect to the confrontation found in the visceral climaxes of some new brutalist drama, and perhaps it does in Black Watch and Guantanamo plays that explicitly foreground their basis in documentation and testimony.

But it is not that the meat is unprocessed — steak tartare is as flavoured and produced as any other steak dish, but its rawness is its central characteristic. Fact-based theatre flaunts the distinctiveness of its raw-but-processed research to engage the audience emotionally. While we associate post-1990 British theatre with emotionally affecting and immersive confrontational theatre, it was accompanied by fact-based theatre that addressed the audience’s desire for affect and experience in quite another way. In-Yer-Face Theatre sought a politics of shock and disgust, if that could be called a politics at all. On the other hand, it neither revisited historical forms of emotional theatre nor the theatre of sensation. Writers did not look to the modes of naturalism most often connected to emotional and realist theatre, with its absorption in a realist world, and they eschewed the sentimentality of melodrama and its ally, the musical. They were not looking back to the bourgeois forms that still dominate commercial theatre, but which offer no discourse of resistance. Fact-based theatre, by contrast, addressed real-world events and issues that belonged squarely in the realm of political discourse, but treated these things by enlisting the audience emotionally in the detail of real stories.

‘Embedded Actors’ in Screen Docudrama

Enlisting the audience emotionally is precisely what realist screen drama has always sought to do. The ‘rootable’ and ‘relatable’ aspects of screen docudrama always were and still are key to audience
enlistment, and the issues portrayed through screen docudrama are similarly those current in the public realm. Screen drama in general, however, did not seem to generate the same level of felt ‘ownership’ in most of the actors we interviewed. Whilst it is easy to assume we know what actors do when they act for the screen, a number of writers such as Kim Durham and Patrick Tucker have pointed out that this is not the case, and some of the exigencies of screen acting contribute to a differential in felt ownership. At the point of production, for example, screen drama is focused so heavily on the camera that actors are constrained to act unnaturally. In the multi-camera environment of TV series such as *EastEnders* or *The Bill*, the actor often has to angle his/her face towards the camera and away from the other actors in the scene while appearing to hold a natural conversation. In addition, the discontinuous nature of filming, the reliance on other people’s (primarily the director’s) decision-making, and the lack of rehearsal time all result in the need for individual preparation. Indeed, an actor’s individual preparation is something on which the screen industry relies as rehearsal time gets cut more and more.

Such elements provide the grounding for arguments which point to the changing nature of what it is to be an actor. Reynolds argues: “The fact that television is a capital-intensive and complex technological process […] contributes to the marginalisation of the actors’ role in the creative process” (qtd. in Ridgman 161). With the actor starting out in the profession increasingly relying on the screen — especially the television screen — to provide work, has come a belief that “theatre is where ‘real’ actors belong and where ‘real’ acting is done” (160). As we remarked above, actors themselves continue to value theatre work precisely because the atomising pressures of the film shoot are absent, and the theatrical rehearsal still promises supportive collectivity and sociality. However, our interviews show
that the specific demands posed by 'acting with facts' add something positive. Work on screen docudrama for many actors has a significant added bonus: they experience an almost theatre-like sense of purpose through the seriousness of the docudramatic process.

A crucial factor rests on the relationship between actor performance and audience expectation. Beyond the demands of fictional drama was a sense of greater responsibility to the real person, and the real issues, being portrayed: all our interviewees expressed this. The camera’s greater demands in terms of physical appearance, the expectation that there will be a ‘likeness’ with the person portrayed, was accepted. Hugh Bonneville observed: “if there is photographic record of someone there is an expectation, certainly on film, of some physical similarity being attempted.”

The priority of media companies is to attract and retain audiences, and the portrayal of real people brings this 'look-alike' expectation, but it can inhibit an actor. For example, Timothy West has played Winston Churchill several times: “the first time I did Churchill, which was for the BBC, was a co-production with the United States […]; every morning I had to undergo just over two hours of makeup. Well, I just felt my face was a mask.” His view was that this “was entirely unnecessary” and actually obstructed his acting. This clearly demonstrates the dangers of an obsession with the visual in predominantly realist screen modes. It also shows how screen environments have a greater capacity to take away an actor’s control over their own performance, in exchange for satisfying the audience’s expectation of what a performed real person will look like. For theatre, this problem is not considered as pressing, partly because the illusion of reality does not need to be so strong. Ian McNeice, playing

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12 Unless otherwise indicated, all actor quotations are from ‘Acting with Facts’ interviews conducted 2007-10 and appear in the list of Works Cited.
the role of Churchill in the 2008 National Theatre production of *Never So Good* (a play actually about Harold Macmillan) told us that he believed theatre audiences primarily want to engage with the play, and because of this they accept structural elements. Thus, his role being secondary to Jeremy Irons’s portrayal of Macmillan, the interaction when they were on stage together was primarily clarifying the character ‘Macmillan.’ McNeice told us: “I think [when they see me] the audience go, ‘Oh, I see, he’s being Churchill!’, then they concentrate on the play.”

Our interviews have also uncovered a wider debate that we think of as ‘impersonation versus acting.’ This is a major concern for the actors working in factually-based drama. ‘Impersonation’ is not a comfortable word for actors; it implies a lack of depth, a fake-ness, and a lack of quality from which they are keen to disassociate themselves. Hugh Bonneville is representative of this tendency: “I’m not an impersonator because impersonation to me suggests [...] superficial.” What distinguishes ‘acting’ from the ‘impersonation’ of real people, our interviewees suggest, is that in playing a real person an actor adds *extra value* to any elements of impersonation. This idea, that they explore and enhance character rather than reproducing the instantly recognisable, enables actors to distinguish themselves from impressionist-performers, who ‘get the voice right.’ Actors see themselves concentrating on the *internal* rather than the external — what one of our actors (Phil Davis) termed “the gist of the character.” So for McNeice ‘being Churchill’ it was necessary to adopt various vocal and physical trademark features of the real Churchill — for example, his pronunciation of ‘Nazi’ (phonetically: ‘Nartsee’) as the
slurring ‘Narrzzi’ — but, given his overall role in the play, unnecessary to go further.\textsuperscript{13}

For actors playing very well-known figures, impersonation does on occasion present an enduring, and not always pleasant, pressure. The interview material has plentiful examples of actors articulating the feeling of restriction they get when what they want to do is hamstrung by the pressure to impersonate. Phil Davis played British actor Wilfred Bramble in a TV docudrama The Curse of Steptoe (examining the relationship between the two actors who played Steptoe father and son in an iconic 1960s BBC TV comedy series): “an impression [...] sometimes [...] can get in the way, because you become more concerned with the surface aspects of playing someone than actually finding [...] the motivational things that make a good performance work.” And key here is the way in which a ‘good performance’ within screen docudrama is judged. Davis interestingly drew attention to the way the TV industry has begun to reward actors who play real people: “there’s a lot of awards floating around for people who’re playing real people [they] say ‘Oh she was just like her, just like the picture!’ and so it must’ve been a good performance.” Much can depend, of course, on who the actor is playing. If it is a famous person, actors accept that an element of impersonation is involved, but they are then keen to express their sense of the value they can add. However, ‘if it isn’t a famous person’ one interviewee stated ‘the audience isn’t going to know anyway!’ The concentration for such ‘ordinary person’ roles

\textsuperscript{13} As well as talking about this in interview, McNeice mentioned it at the 2008 National Theatre ‘Platform’ event ‘Acting with Facts’, at which playwright David Edgar chaired a discussion with a panel comprising McNeice, Roger Allam, Siân Thomas and Derek Page. In a later interview, McNeice revealed the dangers for actors of talking about what you do. Platform events take place just before evening performances. Following the Platform, McNeice actually forgot to do the Churchillian pronunciation of ‘Nazi’
centres on getting them a \textit{sense} of that person. They all emphasised the importance of the script. Actors' failsafe position, we have found, is 'You have to play/trust the script!' and that whatever research they do (and they all told us they did a lot) 'If it isn't in the script, you can't play it.' This is particularly relevant for actors we have begun to refer to as '\textit{embedded} actors.'

In the phrase 'embedded actors,' we are consciously referencing the 'embedded journalist' of recent wars — professional individuals whose critical distance is complicated (not to say compromised) by their close association with those whose conduct they are reporting. Journalism, as the Iraq War proved, can easily be affected adversely by journalists being 'embedded' with troops, because it becomes harder to maintain a distance. For actors, whose stock-in-trade is empathising, this is not necessarily a bad thing. It can increase their sense of commitment and also highlight the ethical dilemmas they are sometimes forced to confront in factually-based work. We interviewed several Irish actors about their work for docudramas on stage and screen about the Northern Irish 'Troubles.' The docudramas with which they were involved all concentrate more on creating an awareness or understanding of issues and problems (as opposed to the life stories of public figures, etc.).

With the focus on understanding and imparting to the audience the experiences and emotions of ordinary fellow-citizens, physicality was not necessarily the first step in creating their roles — their own Irishness was a more fundamental factor. Paula McFetridge, who has featured in a number of docudramas dealing with the Troubles, told us: "I tend to be very internal first, I would develop either a sense of loss, a sense of sadness, a sense of anger, a sense of injustice first and then [...] create a physicality." This is not to say that the actors are not concerned \textit{at all} with impersonation if they are dealing with a publicly unknown person. Indeed, meeting the real person can act as a form of
`homework,’ as actor Bill Hoyland observed: “when you look at the way someone holds their hands or the way they scratch themselves or the way they fiddle with their ears — all those things ... they just tell you a little bit about the character.” When the public may not know the real person, the actor can use such behavioural elements as ‘hooks’ into the real character. Many of the actors we interviewed used this, or a similar, word to indicate the details they seek in order to fill out what is ‘there in the script’ and help them to construct the role.

The ‘job of acting’ (a phrase our actors often used) certainly comes with an extra ethical dimension when fact-based work is concerned. ‘Embedded actors’ arguably feel this more. Lloyd Hutchinson, for example, met the Brighton bomber Pat McGhee in the course of preparing his role as an Irish terrorist in the stage play Talking to Terrorists. He described to us the complicated and conflicting feelings involved:

[McGhee] believes that he planted that bomb because he had no choice than to plant that bomb because of what was happening to his people in Northern Ireland; that was the deal. So he’s never apologised for it, but he has arrived at that through, you know, that’s an intellectual decision: ‘How can I apologise for that?’ ‘I regret...’, you know, ‘but I’m not going to apologise for it.’ Which I kind of went with that decision ... We met first, he came to the rehearsal room in North London, you know, and it’s difficult, he comes along, quite quiet and he’s in a leather jacket and sweatshirt. But he didn’t have much money, you know, he’s on Social Security. He’s Dr. Pat McGhee now, he did this PhD in prison. And I felt sort of, well you’re fascinated, because you’re meeting somebody who very nearly wiped out the British Cabinet. He killed four people, plus whoever else he killed, you know, in the course of his time as a member of the, an active member of the IRA. It’s always weird, you know, fascinating to meet somebody who’s killed. But it never, it was never sort of, it was never macabre with Pat because, I mean, Pat’s reasons for doing what he did were always, very
much always to the forefront and, I mean, if you just put yourself in his position – not that I’m totally of the … again from a political space, I’m polar opposites to Pat, you know? I grew up … I’m a Protestant Loyalist. And these are men that you would have been very frightened of being associated with ten years before, but yet who now have given themselves over to a peace process and they’re dead serious about it. You owe a responsibility to these people, you know, because it’s serious. It’s not funny.

Here the various elements the actor must handle — especially in this case an actor so aware of his Irishness — are evident. The ‘actor’s responsibility’ is multi-faceted, and ratcheted up considerably in such charged situations.

Some actors, and Phil Davis was one, are clear that the actor must view the playing of a real character as they would any other job, their ultimate responsibility being to themselves and their career. In one sense, actors risk their careers every time they step on stage or stand in front of a camera. But embedded actors feel keenly their responsibility to their background. For example, the TV docudrama *Omagh* was, critically, very successful but Paula McFetridge told us she felt obliged to turn down the opportunity to act in it:

I think your sense of responsibility should be heightened when you’re doing plays about the conflict … you have to have an understanding of impact. It became very apparent the families weren’t in support of the project and that was against everything that I kind of believe in. I do not think the timing of *Omagh* was right. You have to only do something because you are acting responsibly … as a citizen. Obviously, y’know, there are times when you have to challenge both the people who’ve been involved in an incident as well as those who have never heard of the incident, but … there has to be a degree of sensitivity to it. Once I had the doubt in my head it was there and then I felt, ‘No, I can’t do this, I just can’t.’
The clearer ‘understanding of impact’ is, perhaps, the marker of the embedded actor.

It is interesting that in both press coverage of the broadcast, and in academic studies, the support the film had from the families involved in the tragedy is stressed. Blaney, for instance, highlights the “contract of trust developed by Omagh’s filmmakers with the Omagh community” (417). However, McFetridge points out that this was not, in fact, clear-cut and that, for her, this sense of timing was crucial. She argues that this cannot necessarily be determined by distance in time from the event, but rather by asking the question: “Does it feel appropriate for the context in which it is being produced in that present moment?” She was in the docudrama Holy Cross, which depicted the violence that erupted in North Belfast in 2001 when the residents of a predominantly Protestant suburb objected to schoolgirls walking through their neighbourhood from the Catholic area of Ardoyne to the Holy Cross primary school. For some in Northern Ireland, this film 'showed Belfast in a bad light.' The view was that 'by dramatising events like that we’re only going to keep ourselves in the past, we’re never going to be able to move forward, we’re never gonna have a progressive, equal society.' For the embedded Irish actor, then, being in such a docudrama brings with it questions beyond the usual ones. James Nesbitt illustrated this when talking about becoming involved with the Bloody Sunday docudrama:

I think I had resisted for too long the notion of what it meant to be from Northern Ireland ... I’d resisted the notion of growing up, not only as an actor, but maybe as a person from the North of Ireland and so I think timing-wise it was really perfect for me and ultimately incredibly important for me. (Bloody Sunday DVD Extras)

The question of ‘is it the right time for the individual actor?’ must also be answered, then, in as serious a manner as any questions about the appropriateness of the content itself.
As to playing someone one does not like, Caroline Blakiston and Timothy West were adamant that an actor should always ‘speak for the character,’ and concentrate on playing a ‘moment to moment truth.’ Their own emotional involvement should only be ‘as much as you think that the person is in, in that moment.’ It is not for the actor to inject views or interpret the real person for the audience. As McFetridge said to us “as an actor, no matter how big a bastard you're playing ... it’s really important you don’t judge the person.” Hugh Bonneville was one of several actors who pointed out that the responsibility does not end when the character being played is deceased. Bonneville’s account of his preparation for his role as former BBC Director-General Hugh Carleton Greene highlights how a real person’s family can increase the pressure on an actor. He met Greene’s son during his research and preparation for the docudrama *Filth: The Mary Whitehouse Story*:

He said he never heard his father swear in his entire life but [in] the script ... the only person who swears in the film is Hugh Carleton Greene. And so I thought ... where does one’s responsibility lie and ... what is the truth here? I am ... slightly queasy perhaps ... uneasy about, if you like, betraying the good name of Hugh Carleton Greene.

In general, Reynold’s suggestion that the screen production process leads to the ‘marginalisation of the actors’ role’ may be true, and we have found that some actors have less than pleasant experiences when filming because they feel their essential lack of control over the final product. But acting with facts does shift the balance. As Paget argues: “in an era when major players in the public arena [...] have forfeited and are continuing to forfeit public trust, it is to the realm of the artist that general publics have increasingly turned” (“Acting with Facts” 164) And given the increasingly “important cultural role [of docudrama] in dealing with social and political subjects often beyond the scope of ‘documentary proper’” (Paget *No Other Way* 2), the
actors involved in these productions are not merely props or always subject to the top-down commands of the off-screen team members; each ‘acting with facts’ experience brings specific practical and ethical challenges that actors must negotiate.

The case study on ‘embedded actors’ certainly highlighted that a felt commonality in terms of geography, personal history and experience helped to address the complexity of recent Northern Irish history. The Irish actors had ‘right sympathy’ for the dilemmas of the real characters they were portraying. The ‘outsider actor’, cut off from this source of motivation, is arguably at a disadvantage here. Having actors capable of not only portraying events but specifically understanding the emotions behind Troubles’ tragedies ultimately contributes to the historical record and to the representations that feed public memory. There was a feeling amongst all the actors we interviewed that, despite the challenges and complications, docudramas were often validating experiences. Actors are provided with a clear sense of purpose, an opportunity to ‘be part of something’ or to speak about something they feel strongly about. James Nesbitt describes feeling “part of a movement” when working on Bloody Sunday, and about Holy Cross McFetridge says, “it was something I felt was important to do and something I should be part of.”

*Documentary Impulses in a First-Person Century*

Through the docudramatic turn, ‘documentary impulses’ in culture have continued to have a purchase on social and political life at a time when documentary itself has been under threat. These impulses run across the arts, quintessentialising key artistic practices in theatre, film, photography, art, the novel, popular song — even classical opera. They are the result of millennial synergies and dichotomies: synergies between industries that need writers, directors and actors to function
— theatre, radio, film, television; dichotomies between belief systems that include but go outside what used to be called politics. The mixing of modes inherent to the docudramatic turn combines ‘ways of seeing,’ modes of understanding, and the faculties of both apprehension and comprehension. In short, the documentary impulse as a current phenomenon is most productively approached through an analysis that considers its products as material affecting, and affected by, those cultures and those histories within which the impulse is embedded and by which it is inflected and reinflected. It is not possible, we believe, to consider these products outside of their rootedness in history and culture, and it is this rootedness that anchors the narrative based on fact.

The past twenty years have seen the kind of increasing focus on individual expressivity (and performativity) within factual formats that might have been purpose-designed to be exploited by the actor. Jonathan Dovey’s book Freakshow, with its subtitle First Person Media and Factual Television, was the first published work to pick up on the change of expressive tense. The phrase ‘first person media’ is coined to describe TV programmes focused on often errant individuals, and dependent upon a kind of confessional narrative. The zeitgeist shift in cultural focus saw the question ‘How did/does it feel?’ become a cultural sine qua non. The burgeoning of documentary hybridity after 1990 leads Dovey to ask: “Why has intimate revelation become such a key part of the public performance of identity?” (1 emphasis added). In both theatre and performance art there has been a similar focus on subjectivity and identity — a turning towards the self as the object and subject of exploration.

A consideration of an essentially docudramatic turn across the arts seems to offer this possible answer: because becoming and being an individual (fundamentally a project of post-Enlightenment Western civilisation) has been repurposed as a goal within a privatised body
Narrativising the Facts

The new focus on individuality suits the predominantly capitalist hegemony that obtained from the various European Industrial Revolutions until the collapse of Soviet-style Communism in the final decades of the 20th century. The result of this is the centrality of a generic figure that can be characterised as the 'Sovereign Individual.' The 'Sovereign Individual' (or 'S.I.') has been interpellated as The Protagonist of 21st-century Western Art and now clamours for attention in one dominant and insistent register — the First-Person Singular. The S.I. can be at once Subject and Object, Observer and Observed, Maker and Performer, Consumer and Critic. Performance modalities have shifted to accommodate the S.I., whose characteristic narrative form is 'My Story.'

Reality TV's S.I. speaks as the strident 'Me! Me! Me!' of New Times — striving to be heard above the racket made by the legions of other S.I.s trying to 'live the dream' by exposing the most extreme character/performance quirks they can muster. But there are S.I.s on the more serious side of the narrative continuum, addressing Active Spectators eager to receive in the current conjuncture those voices that can claim participation in, or witness of, key events. These voices are currently taken as authoritative in a period in which no Official Voice is trusted to be telling the truth — unless, that is, they, too, are in confessional mode. Public trust in professional classes is in a state of profound disrepair. These are the S.I.s of the Troubles docudrama and the verbatim play, of A Mighty Heart and Black Watch. As in the Iron Curtain countries of the Cold War, an alternative samizdat culture is now looked to as a truth-teller in the UK because everyone

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14 This person is not, as Aleks Sierz quipped in post-panel discussion at Paderborn, to be confused with 'The Individual Sovereign' (that is, Her Majesty Queen Elisabeth II – though she, too, finds herself in film docudrama these days), but someone almost as regal in terms of his/her sense of his/her own importance.
else is taken to be ‘faking it’ or at best putting a positive ‘spin’ on what they have done (or more importantly not done). It is the very cultural centrality of social actors being caught out acting that has, again in Dovey’s phrase, turned “[the] Public Sphere [...] Inside Out” (21) and given a narrative form to a century. Thus it is that the Documentary Impulse has undergone a revival; on stage and screen it reanimates the stories we tell ourselves about the world that we live in. The Documentary Impulse, in keeping with its more sober history, has a more modulated voice — a voice of reason to set partly against voices that are emotionally moved, angry, regretful or reflective.

Docudrama on screen and stage now requires describing in a way more precise than that lazy journalistic favourite ‘blurred boundaries.’ This unfortunate phrase has tended to dominate critical discussion, and has confused the debate on documentary drama by proposing impossible-to-define limits on representation. Walter Benjamin’s notion of ‘porosity’ seems to offer a more enabling alternative (see Paget “Acting with Facts”). Dovey offers the not dissimilar ‘leaky genre boundaries’ (12) and John Corner’s phrase is “intergeneric hybridisation.” Hybridisation depends upon Benjaminian ‘porosity’ in both the making and the consuming, in both the acting and the reacting. The world would be a poorer place without concepts of the ideal that must necessarily remain unrealisable in practical terms. The concepts ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity,’ for example, are fundamental to documentary and to drama, but exist as a measurement and means to judge — not as achieved or achievable entities in any actually existing social, historical and political circumstances. Boundaries between

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15 Benjamin’s essay “Naples” was actually co-written with Asja Lacis in the 1920s, but can be found in Benjamin 1985.
documentary and drama are, we believe, also better conceived as an ideal. It is clear to us that performers as well as audiences negotiate actively within the terms of ideals when they act with facts, and that this negotiation is a powerful extra element that brings new challenges and satisfactions to their craft.
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Paula McFetridge, 14 September 2009
Ian McNeice, 23 June 2008
Timothy West, 15 February 2008
Panel: David Edgar (chair), Roger Allam, Ian McNeice, Derek Paget, Siân Thomas.
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Fragmented Biographies: Restoring a Voice to Guantanamo Prisoners: Brittain and Slovo’s *Guantanamo: ‘Honor Bound to Defend Freedom’*  

Documentary theatre may be called a post-dramatic form of theatre, since it foregoes the enacting of traditional confrontations between *dramatis personae* on stage. If anything, it is narrative rather than dramatic, since it confronts us with a plurality of arguments, official statements and private letters, which taken together can form a fragmentary puzzle of circumstantial evidence. The various text parts are not interrelated, not arranged in patterns of cause and effect, statement and response, but form a seemingly haphazard collage of opinions and experience. As the authors of docu-drama try to avoid falsification through emplotment, the story lines tend to be non-linear and fragmentary, being made up of snippets which each spectator has to piece together for herself without the aid of conventional structures of temporality or logic. However, since
documentary drama often deals with well-known news items — social scandals or famous cases of miscarriages of justice which have already received ample media attention — the audience’s basic familiarity with the ‘story’ can be presupposed. It is often unnecessary to give detailed information about the ‘fabula’; instead, authors tend to focus on facets and aspects of the case that have received little public attention to date, or have been misrepresented, suppressed or ignored.

_Guantanamo: ‘Honor Bound to Defend Freedom’_ by Victoria Brittain and Gillian Slovo deals with four British detainees in the Guantanamo Bay prison camp. In the course of the play, the audience pieces together scattered evidence to get glimpses of the civilian lives of these men before their imprisonment, as well as the events leading to their arrest, their incarceration in various detention centres and their treatment in Guantanamo Bay prison. The play quotes from the prisoners’ letters and from interviews with their relatives and lawyers, with human rights activists and a man who lost his sister in the World Trade Centre. It includes snippets of statements by Jack Straw and Donald Rumsfeld and excerpts from a lecture by Lord Chief Justice Steyn. The play achieves its dramatic effect by forcing divergent statements into proximity with each other, creating a new context in which each testimony refracts and comments on the others. The characters of _Guantanamo_ never directly interact but only address their testimonies to the audience.

Nicholas Kent, director of the Tricycle Theatre where the play was performed, claims that his productions never take sides, and only invite spectators to form their own opinions. However, he has conceded that, often enough, the choice of a given subject already implies a particular political stance (Kent). This is also true of _Guantanamo_. All the same the subtitle, _Honor Bound to Defend Freedom_, is not, as one might think, a programmatic agenda
announcing the purpose and intention of the play, but is also
documentary: it cites an inscription at the entrance of Camp X-Ray in
Guantanamo Bay and hence is a cynical subtext indicting U.S.
sanctimoniousness. In a wider sense, however, the subtitle also asserts
a moral imperative. The two playwrights want to redress prejudiced
media reports about supposed British terrorists and initiate an
intercultural dialogue at a time of cultural conflict and a ‘clash of
civilisations’ in the wake of 9/11.

The climate of fear and suspicion arose because it was not only a
case of foreign nationals ‘infiltrating’ the country, but also of second-
and third-generation immigrants, born and bred in Britain, being
suspected of, or found guilty of, planning or aiding terrorist attacks.
Merely having a Middle Eastern or Pakistani background or attending
a mosque has come to be read as an external marker of Islamic
fundamentalism and potential terrorist leanings. In this context
Victoria Brittain spoke about the demonisation of Muslim men by
Western governments, media and societies.

While formerly ‘invisible,’ the Muslim community has become an
object of public scrutiny and surveillance, and hence an object of high
media visibility — though hardly a subject that could articulate its
own views. Rather, its assumed religious and political sympathies
have been widely debated and analysed by ‘western’ experts.

This paradox of anonymity, voicelessness and disempowerment
despite high visibility and media attention was particularly pertinent
in the case of the inmates of Guantanamo prison camp. The pictures
of the hooded detainees in their orange suits became iconic of
America’s human rights violations in Cuba. Despite the proliferation
of images, the men behind the hoods were not identifiable as
individuals, nor were they given a voice. They were called terrorists
or, rather, illegal combatants, but the Bush administration refused to
divulge concrete information about their crimes or furnish evidence
about their guilt. Reporters were not allowed on the site and even the few lawyers admitted were severely gagged. Kept incommunicado from the rest of the world, the detainees depended on the protests of human rights activists on the outside to make their case heard.

Even before the Tricycle Theatre, in 2004, commissioned a play about the British prisoners in Guantanamo, human rights organisations and various media had protested about the infamous camp; Lord Chief Justice Steyn, who is also quoted in the play, had vehemently criticised it as a “legal black hole” (Guantanamo 7); and even the US military lawyers appointed to defend the alleged terrorists had expressed concern about the legal process. Ever ready to engage with legal scandal, the Tricycle Theatre restored individual voices and fates to some of the (British) detainees in this production, so that they regained their subjectivity. It undercut the Bush administration’s highly controlled visual and auditive censorship by quoting from the private letters detainees wrote to their families or from an interview with a released prisoner. For once, these men were not given a mediated voice speaking about them, or on their ‘behalf,’ but an authentic one. The theatre thereby created a space in which traumatic experience could be worked through. According to Feldman trauma “must be testified to, in a struggle shared between a speaker and listener” (qtd. in Hesford 37), that is, in the case of the play, between the prisoners (absent in body but present through their words) and their relatives on the one hand, and the audience on the other. The play Guantanamo, as Hesford asserts, “removes the spectacular hood and attempts to contrast the construction of detainees as pathological” (35). Their “individual testimonies”, she claims, create “a polyphonic subjectivity” that counters “official truths” (35).

Docu-drama often gives a voice to those silenced in official discourse and aims to form a counterweight to official cover-ups,
“doing an investigative [...] job [...] that conventional journalism is failing to do,” as David Edgar (109) puts it. It is no coincidence, actress Amy Smith points out, that the genre gained such popularity “in a period in which people are highly distrustful of journalists and politicians” (qtd. in Edgar 111). As *The Guardian* wrote, “people want from political theatre a clarity they are not getting from politicians” (Kellaway). Victoria Brittain, a former associate editor of *The Guardian*, whose job as a journalist took her to all the world’s major trouble spots in the last few decades, and Gillian Slovo, with her experience of the South African anti-apartheid struggle and its aftermath, are highly qualified to investigate and unearth counter-histories to official press releases and government declarations.

Yet the commendatory BBC review claiming that “[t]heatre has broken in where international law was locked out” (Arun) is sensational and untrue. The play *Guantanamo* does not really enter a space inaccessible to the media. It does not detail the daily routine in the detention camp and avoids any spectacular scenes involving torture, concentrating instead on the inner lives of the prisoners. It would be more correct to say that the play addresses aspects the media were not really interested in, namely the private correspondence of the prisoners and the feelings of their families. The details given about their lives prior to arrest, the wry irony of some of their descriptions of imprisonment (cf., for instance, Bisher’s depiction of “the seaside resort of Guantanamo Bay [...] with all expenses paid [...] plenty of sun and pebbles, no sand I’m afraid.” [*Guantanamo* 30]), their piety, courage and despair tend to humanise these men, forcing the audience to engage with their individual fates. The flood of images and newscasts in the media about human rights abuses led to an emotional blunting in which the informed public was unable to respond as long as the victims remained abstract and depersonalised. The play, in contrast, encourages the audience to
identify with them, mobilizing “empathy and not voyeurism” (Hesford 36).

At the same time the play does not level out the cultural differences. The men’s British-Muslim culture is emphasised in the regular calls for prayer punctuating the play, the devoutness and piety of some of the figures lending them dignity. Still, for a white audience, their Liverpool accent and their memories of normal British life serve to transpose them U.K.-wards as one of ‘us.’

It is essential to note that the text is not constructed as a courtroom drama and does not primarily try to establish the political harmlessness of the detainees, although by the end the audience is bound to harbour grave doubts about the legal justification for their captivity. The point, however, is not to clear the prisoners of any criminal charges. Since the play relies largely on the testimony given by the accused and their families, with some corroborating legal evidence, the audience is in no position to judge the veracity of their claims. After all, the public has been told by the American administration that one of the Guantanamo prisoners is the mastermind behind the attack on the World Trade Center. Details remain ambivalent: it is impossible for the audience to decide on the basis of the play whether, for instance, Moazzam Begg really gave financial support only to Afghani schools or also to Al Quaeda. (Indeed, after his release in 2005, Begg acknowledged “giving financial support for Muslim combatants, but insist[ed] that he never took a combat role [...] himself” [Global Jihad]). Similarly, it is impossible for the audience to know whether Bisher Al Rawi really wanted to set up a peanut oil plant in Gambia or organise a terrorist camp, as the Americans claimed. Rather, the intention of the writers is to allow the prisoners, their relatives and helpers to present their version of the truth — a different kind of truth from the one published by the American authorities or the British government. Theatre thus makes public
what secret services and military courts might suffocate and silence, thereby presenting an alternative to the “monolithic ‘us/them’ rhetoric of the War on Terror” (Hesford 39). It is an alternative, but not necessarily ‘the truth.’ Reality is forever constructed. “Governments,” as Martin says pertinently, “‘spin’ the facts in order to tell stories. Theatre spins them right back in order to tell different stories” (Martin 14).

If ‘the truth’ about the Guantanamo detainees must necessarily remain opaque, how are audiences supposed to form an opinion? What is assumed to be credible in docu-drama is often a matter of verisimilitude rather than veracity: it is about what seems plausible and believable to the spectators, plausible because it corresponds to their schemata and expectations. Yet how many members of the audience have any experience of terrorist activities or the secret service? We draw our frames of reference for such issues from fiction or action movies, hardly reliable guidelines for establishing plausibility. Indeed, normal common sense is a poor yardstick in such matters, considering that some of the detainees’ background stories have turned out to be more fantastic than the wildest fantasies. An example is the Iraqi Bisher Al Rawi, who was arrested in Gambia and imprisoned in Guantanamo until 2007, while in fact being an informant for MI5. Not only did the British government abandon him, but it denounced him to the Americans as a terrorist to be arrested.

In the absence of reliable world schemata, belief in the veracity of the testimony presented in the play is therefore likely to depend on the (moral) authority of speakers whom we regard as probably impartial and competent: a Chief Justice, for instance, rather than a lawyer speaking in favour of her defendant. Family members will seem less impartial than someone who despite his bereavement through 9/11 is pleading for justice for the Guantanamo detainees. We are also likely to be impressed when an American military counsel...
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(that is to say, the ‘other’ side, whom we expect to be inimical to the detainees) expresses doubt as to the legality of the proceedings.

Whether or not we believe the men to be innocent or guilty, we have no reason to doubt that the letters quoted in the play are genuine and were actually written in prison. Indeed, certain phrases in the letters are censored and blackened out and are hence mouthed silently by the actors. This authenticates these documents, dramatising the way their writers have been deprived of a voice, while simultaneously emphasising how carefully we should listen to the passages that have survived.

What does emerge unequivocally in the play is the fact that the men portrayed have not been charged, probably for lack of evidence. The brief testimonial glimpses of their horrific treatment in prison and the very absurdity of the manner of their arrest yield, if not proof, at least strong grounds for suspicion about systematic maltreatment and about severe human rights violations. The fact that the British Attorney General negotiated a separate agreement with the Pentagon under which British prisoners in Guantanamo would not face the death penalty, must count as further proof for the arbitrariness of the legal proceedings, with undertones of shady political deals being concluded behind closed doors.

Roger Lüdeke has claimed that unlike normal docu-drama, Guantanamo does not allow us to see the individual cases as representative and to deduce “general and recognizable rules or patterns of socio-political reality” (116) from the fates of the prisoners, who seem in the grip of “a dark fatalistic force” (118). However, though their arrest and detention may seem haphazard, they impressively illustrate the hysteria and xenophobia generated by the war on terror and the price paid in the curtailment of human rights both in the US and the UK. The very fact that no conclusive grounds are provided for the incarceration of the prisoners testifies to the absurd randomness
of arrests. The audience is left sensing that the sub-currents to the drama are paranoia and unscrupulousness (emanating from the Bush administration), or cowardice and secret collusion (on the side of the Blair government). Neither the men’s arrest nor their release are thus genuinely inexplicable — the latter was obviously the result of international pressure, including such plays as *Guantanamo*, which turned the detention centre into an embarrassment for the United States.

Although President Obama has decreed that the prison should be closed within a year of his inauguration, Guantanamo Bay is, in fact, still in operation. In 2004, when the play was commissioned, closing the camp was not even an option. At a time when the prisoners and their families felt completely disempowered by the system the US government had put into place, Brittain and Slovo’s play was a form of empowerment, and a counterweight to anti-Muslim xenophobia in the tabloid press. Of course, genuine authenticity can never be achieved in the theatre, no matter how faithful a documentary play may remain to its sources. Compiling documentary source material always includes an editing process of selection and rearrangement (cf. Martin 11; Rubik 70), and performance on stage always involves simulation: the Guantanamo detainees were impersonated by actors and the letters they originally wrote from prison were read from a stage, but at least the words testifying to their experience were authentic.

Before the play premiered in May 2004, five of the nine British prisoners held in the infamous camp had been released, including Ruhal Ahmed and Jamal al-Harith, who feature as characters in Brittain and Slovo’s play. As of today, all the men dealt with in *Guantanamo* have been freed, but one Saudi British resident is still held in the detention camp, despite a campaign for his release. Whether the world-wide notice the play attracted actually
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carried out the release of Moazzam Begg in 2005 and Bisher al Rawi in 2007 is impossible to gauge. At least one deeply moved British reviewer claimed that “[t]his kind of political theatre has the power to change lives and, in this case, to rescue people from a living hell” (Fisher).

Guantanamo was a great stage success in Britain and opened to standing ovations in America. It testifies to the ability of theatre not only to dispense with traditional forms of drama and narrative, while still creating spaces for transcultural exchange, but also to possibly affect political consciousness at large.
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Secondary Literature
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The last decade has seen a surge of works that are sometimes referred to as 'documentary plays,' 'verbatim theatre' or 'factual theatre.' After the years of 'In-Yer-Face Theatre' in the 1990s with violent, bloody, and some would even say outright offensive plays by playwrights such as Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill and Patrick Marber, we are now again seeing plays that tackle concrete political events, personae and backgrounds and rely more on dialogue, debate and discussion than on action or personal issues.²

¹ I would like to thank Tobias Duczak and Jennifer Riediger for helpful comments, proofreading and formatting the manuscript.

² Cf. for example plays like David Hare’s The Permanent Way (2004) and Stuff Happens (2004), Robin Soans’s Talking to Terrorists (2005), Alan Rickman’s My Name is Rachel Corrie (2005), Moisés Kaufman’s The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde (1997), or Peter Morgan’s Frost/Nixon (2006).
Where ‘verbatim theatre’ as originally defined by the playwright Rony Robinson and then two decades later by Alecky Blythe can be understood as a sub-genre of documentary theatre that employs specific means of quoting verbatim speech,3 ‘documentary theatre’ is generally understood as a broader category and a type of drama figuring ‘real’ people (like George W. Bush, Tony Blair, Richard Nixon, David Frost, Oscar Wilde and Rachel Corrie). Unlike verbatim theatre, which purports to repeat verbatim what people actually said, documentary theatre engages with history in a more creative manner which means that the plays “interrogate specific events, systems of belief, and political affiliations precisely through the creation of their own versions of events, beliefs, and politics by exploiting technology

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3 “The term verbatim refers to the origins of the text spoken in the play. The words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or research process, or are appropriated from existing records such as the transcripts of an official enquiry. They are then edited, arranged or recontextualised to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the characters of the real individuals whose words are being used” (Hammond and Steward 9). “Verbatim Theatre [...] is a form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with ‘ordinary’ people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things” (Paget 317). “Rather than learning a text, the actors copy the speech patterns and physicality of the interviewee” (Blythe 101). Cf. also Innes 436 and Hare “Obedience”, 28–29.
that enables replication” (Martin 9). In both forms, however, the pertinent question arises as to what claims are made when representing ‘reality’ and through which means this representation is achieved. Martin comments on the problematic relation between the documentary and its source, the archived material:

Most contemporary documentary theatre makes the claim that everything presented is part of the archive. But equally important is the fact that not everything in the archive is part of the documentary. This begs the crucial question: What is the basis for selection, order, and manner of presentation of materials from the archive? The process of selection, editing, organization, and presentation is where the creative work of documentary theatre gets done. (9)

The argument put forward in this paper is that by viewing documentary plays as narrations of historical events and by looking at how they tell their stories, we will be able to shed more light on Martin’s question regarding the basis of selection, order and arrangement of the material, and on how and with what intentions documentary plays deal with the archive. It was Plato in The Republic who first differentiated between two forms of narration, ‘diegesis’ and ‘mimesis,’ the latter being “narrative expressed through imitation” (392d). Narrating a story by means of mimesis is also the underlying idea behind Chatman’s broad understanding of narration:

4 The distinction between verbatim and documentary theatre presented here is anything but consensual. As early as 1971 Peter Weiss for example understood documentary theatre as a “theatre of reportage” that includes the same feature as verbatim theatre, such as “statements by banks and companies, government statements, speeches, interviews, statements by well-known personalities, newspaper and broadcast reports” (Weiss qtd. in Paget 335). Martin (13) on the other hand defines verbatim theatre as the British variant of documentary theatre.
It stands to reason that if shown stories are to be considered narratives, they must be “narrated”, and only an overly restrictive definition of “to narrate” – identifying it solely with telling – keeps that observation form being self-evident. To “show” a narrative, I maintain, no less than to “tell” it, is to “present it narratively” or to “narrate” it. (Chatman 113)

Narration understood in this broad sense is not confined to the act of telling but understood as a process of mediation, involving more than just voice. Or as I have argued elsewhere, drama also tells a story — and it does so through an extradiegetic ‘superordinate narrative system,’ which selects, arranges, and focalizes the story material.5

This paper will analyse two plays with respect to the ways in which they deal with the archive: Moisés Kaufman’s The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde (1997) and David Hare’s Stuff Happens (2004). Both are examples of documentary plays that employ verbatim material but each of them exhibits different narrative strategies in staging history and truth(s).

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5 For a detailed description of the superordinate narrative system and a summary of the various views and positions on extradiegetic narration in drama and film cf. Weidle “Organization, Presentation, and Participation” and Weidle “Organizing the Perspectives.”
I. Stuff Happens

David Hare’s *Stuff Happens* (2004) is a play in two acts (each consisting of twelve scenes) that focuses on the events leading up to the military occupation of Iraq that began on 20 March 2003. It covers the time between the attacks on the World Trade Center and the US government’s admission in the second half of 2003 that the evidence of Iraq possessing weapons of mass destruction was fabricated. The main characters in the play are the principal figures in the Bush administration: Colin Powell, Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney,
Condoleezza Rice, Paul Wolfowitz, and President Bush as well as the British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the Secretary-General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, and Hans Blix, head of the United Nations monitoring commission. Apart from these major figures there are a number of other prominent politicians who play minor roles in the drama (as, for example, John McCain, Ari Fleischer, Jack Straw, Robin Cook, Jacques Chirac, Dominique de Villepin, Sadam Hussein). When the play begins all actors are on stage and when it is an actor’s turn to perform, s/he steps forward and speaks his/her lines. He or she does so either in dialogue with other actors or in direct audience addresses.

In a prefixed note to the play Hare briefly explains his method and intention. He claims that

[the] events within it have been authenticated from multiple sources, both private and public. What happened happened. Nothing in the narrative is knowingly untrue. Scenes of direct address quote people verbatim. When the doors close on the world’s leaders and on their entourages, then I have used my imagination. This is surely a play, not a documentary, and driven, I hope, by its themes as much as by its characters and story. (Author’s Note)

Although Hare says that Stuff Happens is ‘not a documentary,’ his extensive use of verbatim material clearly places his play in the verbatim tradition of documentary theatre. He claims to combine factual and fictional material and differentiates between public scenes on the one hand, for which he says he drew on the archive of recorded speech, and scenes behind doors on the other hand, for which he states he drew on his ‘imagination.’ That such a clear differentiation between public and private, factual and fictional is problematic and difficult to maintain is almost self-evident and will be part of the play’s critical analysis in this paper.

In addition to the main characters, Hare’s play includes a narrator figure, who is simply called ‘An actor’ and whose narratorial function
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is taken over by various actors. This ‘actor’ addresses the audience directly and fulfils several functions, the most important of which are the following:

To begin with, he speaks the motto of the play, which comments on the absurdity of reality. While the audience are finding their seats, the actors assemble on stage and after a light change ‘An Actor’ steps forward and speaks the following lines:

An Actor The Inevitable is what will seem to happen to you purely by chance.
The Real is what will strike you as really absurd. Unless you are certain you are dreaming, it is certainly a dream of your own. Unless you exclaim – ‘There must be some mistake’ – you must be mistaken. (Stuff Happens 3)

Secondly, the actor-figures provide the audience with additional information in order to help them place what they are seeing on stage in its historic context. (At least they convey the impression that they do so.) For example, when a Journalist asks Donald Rumsfeld a question an actor informs the audience beforehand:

An Actor Stuff. Happens. The response of Donald Rumsfeld, the American Secretary of Defense, when asked to comment on the widespread looting and pillage that followed the American conquest of Baghdad – Friday, April 11th 2003. (3)

6 This is not clearly indicated in the drama’s paratext but can be inferred from the fact that when the narrator speaks a second time, the stage directions read “Another Actor steps forward” (Stuff Happens 3, emphasis added).

7 Cf. also “An Actor On September 17th the President signs an executive order authorising attacks on Afghanistan. Three days later he addresses Congress” (Stuff Happens 26) or “An Actor On October 7th the US and Britain begin air and missile strikes against thirty-one Al Qaeda and Taliban targets” (27).
Thirdly, the actor-figures also supply us with superfluous information. They tell us what we see on stage, as for example when the stage directions indicate that “The Cabinet breaks up and goes for soup and sandwiches” (22), ‘An Actor’ tells us “They stopped for lunch” (22). Similarly, when we read (and presumably see) that “in come the wives — Laura Bush, Joyce Rumsfeld, Nancy O’Neill” (25) to join the Cabinet, ‘An Actor’ informs us that their “wives joined them and they all had supper” (25). At other times the narrative intrusions by the actor-figures merely confine themselves to reporting verbs like “Not long after, the President remarks” (30) or “He asserts” (61), followed by a statement of the character in question.

Fourthly, besides merely telling us what we see in a more or less objective manner, the actor-figures also regularly summarise actions and statements of which we only see and hear parts. For example, when Bush introduces his doctrine of the pre-emptive strike, we see and hear the actor playing the President giving us part of the speech, but only after ‘An Actor’ has framed the verbatim material for our better understanding:

**An Actor** In June 2002, President Bush takes the passing-out parade at West Point. [...] In his address, he repudiates the core idea of the United Nations Charter which forbids the use of force not undertaken

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8 Cf. similar instances of simultaneous showing and telling: “There’s a silence. Then they break up. **An Actor** The meeting broke up” (Stuff Happens 25); “Blix stares at her. Wolfowitz comes in. **An Actor** Later, in the meeting, Paul Wolfowitz arrives” (81); “Rice goes to Powell’s office. **An Actor** At once Rice goes to see Powell” (96).

9 Cf. also “A second friend says” (Stuff Happens 5) and “Later, Blix comments” (106).
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in self-defence. He introduces a concept new in international law: the doctrine of the pre-emptive strike. (46)

Very often, however, the summary is coloured by the subjective perspective of the commentator. In these moments, summary turns into interpretation, thus endowing the actor-figure with another, and — as will be seen — more problematic function. For example, we are informed that by “August [2002], Colin Powell has become nervous of the direction his government is taking” (46, emphasis added), or that “America draws up the first draft of a startlingly tough resolution which insists on the right to send US troops into Iraq to guard inspectors as they go about their work” (79, emphasis added). At other times, these more or less subtle instances of interpretation turn into direct judgment and assessment of characters and actions. When France denies her support for an invasion, an actor remarks with a striking alliteration that in “response, the American people go into a frenzy of French-bashing” (97). Moreover, when it comes to judging the character of Donald Rumsfeld, it is not difficult to see on which side the narrator stands: “Happy to see the row [between the French and the U.S.] escalate, Donald Rumsfeld fans the flames when asked about European dissent” (98, emphasis added). Looking at the last examples, it also becomes evident that language plays an important

10 Another example: Before we hear Cheney speak his lines “Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now has weapons of mass destruction” (Stuff Happens 61), the commentator figure announces: “Cheney pre-empts the findings of any future inspections” (61).

11 Cf. also how the commentator introduces Blair’s decision to ‘order’ a dossier on weapons of mass destruction in Iraq from MI6: “Worried, uncertain, Blair issues a fatal order” (44).
function in manipulating the audience’s identification with and judgment of the issues and characters of the play.\footnote{It is for example interesting to see how Hare contrasts the Bushisms and Rumsfeld’s quizzical statements on the one hand with the matter-of-fact tone of the actor-figures, thereby stressing the difference between the politicians as subjective, reality-bending agencies on the one hand, and the narrators who, as it seems, have direct access to an objective reality.}

When one takes a closer look at the narratorial functions of actors operating as commentators, it becomes obvious that those functions (supplying the motto, filling the narrative gaps, providing superfluous information, summary and interpretation) all work hand in hand to manipulate the audience’s perception of the mediated events, in this case towards an explicit criticism of the Bush administration and their motives for invading Iraq. In defence of Hare’s claim to objectivity one could argue that the multiplicity of narrator figures stresses the relative character of truth. But the opposite is the case: By spreading the comments across to members of the ensemble, Hare raises the commentary from a single, intradiegetic, embedded narrative figure to a superordinate level, conveying the impression that the actor-figures, and thus the whole cast, are all spokesmen and -women of an underlying truth. By raising individual intradiegetic narrators to a superordinate level, Hare endows each of the actors with the authority to judge the actions and characters in the play and thereby also the historical events. This strategy is also reflected in the fact that Hare’s clear distinction in the “Author’s Note” between verbatim material addressed to the audience and behind-the-door material, does not work. Even in those private scenes, for which Hare drew on his imagination, characters address the spectators directly, and it becomes impossible for the audience to tell the difference between
verbatim and fictitious material.\textsuperscript{13} Compare for example the scene in which an unknown friend of Rumsfeld confides to us that “in locker-room terms, Don is a towel-snapper” (\textit{Stuff Happens} 5).

As regards the commentators’ function of providing us with additional information needed to make sense of what we see and hear on stage, that information is also, and always, the product of a process of selection. Although the actor-figures confront us with information that is presumably correct, the question still arises what kind of information we are not given. For example, what we learn about Cheney’s past from the supposedly objective narrators is exclusively unfavourable: In the 1970s he was “jostling for position” (5) in the White House, he “achieved a total of five student deferments in order to avoid being drafted to Vietnam” (5) and he proved “himself willing to take on responsibilities others shirk” (5). These ironic comments draw our attention to negative traits such as elbowing and a lack of responsibility that ‘frame’ and manipulate our understanding and judgment of Cheney.

The remaining two functions of the actor-figures discussed above (providing superfluous information and interpretive summary and paraphrase) are equally problematic. As regards the technique of stating the obvious, of ‘merely’ describing what we see happening on stage, this device does not only serve, as Christopher Innes observes, to create in the audience a distanced, more reflective stance towards the action and characters on stage.\textsuperscript{14} The technique also has the effect of reinforcing the actor-figures’, and thus the superordinate narrative system’s, credibility. By making the actor-figures state what everyone in the audience knows to be one hundred percent true (because we can see it in front of us) the audience is automatically made to assume

\textsuperscript{13} For this point see also Bottoms.

\textsuperscript{14} Cf. Innes 443.
that the other statements by the actor-figures (such as additional information, summaries, and even interpretation of events) must be true as well. As regards the function of summary, it is always, to some extent, interpretation. It is based on selection, and selection in turn means leaving out some things and focusing on others instead.

But Hare does not only use the collective of actor-figures to create the illusion of factual theatre. There are also other narrative and structuring devices which the playwright employs to manipulate our attitude towards the Bush administration under the guise of an objective approach and, as Hare says in his note on factual theatre, to signal a return to a theatre that confronts us with “authentic news” (Hare, “... on factual theatre” 112). The play also includes five so-called ‘viewpoints’, which are placed at quite regular intervals in scenes 5, 9, 13, 18, and 24 (the last scene). These viewpoints offer perspectives on the war in Iraq, beginning with an angry British journalist defending the invasion, moving on to a female Labour politician, still defending the invasion but admitting that mistakes have been made, to more radical positions expressed by a female Palestinian academic and a British immigrant in New York and finally an Iraqi exile, condemning the actions of the U.S. administration. Thus, Hare structures his narrative not only through the collective of the actor-figures but also through this other structuring device. The playwright therefore combines an increasingly critical attitude with a seemingly objective stance, and thereby mixes two things which do not quite go together.

II. Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde

Gross Indecency deals with the three court trials in April and May 1895 that put Oscar Wilde in prison for two years, where his health began to deteriorate so much that he died a mere three years after his release in 1900. To briefly summarise what the trials were about: After
Wilde had received a visiting card from the Marquess of Queensberry, the father of his friend and lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, accusing him of posing as a 'somdomite' (sic.), he took Queensberry to court and brought a charge of false libel. The case was dropped due to the evidence that Queensberry’s defence was able to produce (male prostitutes testifying). Queensberry was found not guilty and his accusation concerning Wilde justified. Against the advice of his friends, Wilde did not flee the country and was then arrested for acts of ‘gross indecency’ (i.e. homosexual acts). This second trial, however, concluded with the jury being unable to reach a verdict. The third and last trial found Wilde guilty. He was sentenced to two years prison with hard labour.

In Kaufman’s play the main place and level of action is the courtroom in which the three trials are held. The main protagonists are: Oscar Wilde, The Marquess of Queensberry, Lord Alfred Douglas, and the attorneys of the defence and prosecution Sir Edward Clarke and Edward Carson. In front of the stage, in Kaufman’s own direction of the play, four narrators are seated, who take on various functions. Most of the time they quote from the sources which Kaufman used when writing the play which are, among others, Harford Montgomery Hyde’s The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde (a protocol of the three trials compiled from shorthand notes), biographies and autobiographies of and by Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas, unpublished memoirs by Wilde’s attorney Sir Edward Clarke, newspaper accounts and articles, and Wilde’s works (his lectures, letters, prose, essays etc.). The play consists to a large extent of verbatim material from these sources, and, as ‘Narrator 2’ says at the beginning of the play, “sources will be indicated” (Gross Indecency 11). This happens in the form of characters (and not only narrators) naming the source of a document and sometimes holding it up for the audience to see (cf. picture below).
Fig. 3. Tectonic Theater Project, *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*, Dir. Moisés Kaufman, Minetta Lane Theatre, New York City, 1997.

The only non-verbatim material is spoken by the narrators when they provide the audience with information regarding the sources as for example — “From *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*” (41) — or when
they tell us what happened as a consequence of the trials: “On the same day, because of this letter, the Crown decided that a warrant for Wilde’s arrest should at once be issued” (67). Compared to the situation in Hare’s play, it seems much easier to separate verbatim from non-verbatim material in Gross Indecency. But it would be wrong to conclude from this that Kaufman presents us with an objective truth where Hare only tries to create the illusion of objectivity.

The difference between Hare’s and Kaufman’s plays lies in the different approaches to reality and how each work deals with the relationship between truth and fiction. Where Hare sees documentary theatre as a vehicle to capture and mediate truth, Kaufman acknowledges the fact that reality as such does not exist but is permanently constructed, quoted, and narrated. Theatre, for Kaufman, becomes a means of constructing “a separate reality on stage” (Gross Indecency xiv, emphasis added). “The truth,” as Wilde informs us, “is rarely pure and never simple.” It is no coincidence that Kaufman uses this aphorism as a motto for his play (1).

But Kaufman employs further strategies to stress the constructed nature of reality. In addition to the four narrators in front of the stage all actors on stage (except the one playing Wilde) also play narrators (Narrators 4 to 8), and the four narrators seated at the desk in front of the stage also play minor roles. The tidy separation of verbatim and non-verbatim material, of fact and fiction which is suggested by the set and staging, is undercut in this manner. By conflating the planes of commentary and action, Kaufman constantly draws attention to the textual nature of reality (on and off the stage). 15 This textual

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15 “Kaufman’s theatrical treatment of the material further foregrounds the question of text and its performative citationality” (Bottoms 63).
nature of reality becomes evident and is treated on several occasions in the play, as in the following example:

Clarke This is the letter in question. It was written on Sunday, 1st of April 1894, at the Carter’s Hotel. It reads:

Queensberry Alfred,
Your intimacy with this man Wilde. It must either cease or I’ll disown you. [...] No wonder people are talking as they are. If I thought the actual thing was true, and it became public property, I should be quite justified in shooting him at sight.

Douglas [...] If Oscar Wilde was to prosecute you in the Criminal Courts for your outrageous libel you would get seven years’ penal servitude.

Queensberry If I thought the actual thing was true, and it became public property, I should be quite justified in shooting him at sight.

(W. I. 18–19, emphasis added)

Wilde’s attorney Clarke quotes Queensberry’s letter to his son in court, asking him to cease the relationship with Wilde. The actual lines are spoken by Queensberry himself, who is also present in court. By making Queensberry quote his own letter in court, his testimony becomes a reference not to a signified outside language but to language itself. The matter is further complicated by Queensberry’s ensuing statement in which he repeats some of the lines verbatim, this time not in his dramatic function of acting out Clarke’s quotation but as a reply to his son’s letter to him. The lines written to his son thus become empty signifiers pointing to nothing but themselves. They constantly defer meaning in a Derridaean sense. This is a device Kaufman uses regularly, as, for example, when Narrator 4 quotes from one of Wilde’s letters to Douglas. The words are spoken by the actor playing Wilde on stage (outside the context of the trials), and then those lines are quoted again by Queensberry’s attorney Carson in the first trial, while Wilde only stands by and then replies to his own lines.
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quoted and spoken by someone else (17, 34). As we move through the play and the trials the textual character of reality becomes more and more evident. Regularly the attorneys in the second trial quote from the first trial, and what is presented as original material is in fact only a reference to previous statements. In that sense we can actually prove Kaufman wrong regarding his claim, stated in his introduction to the play, that he sees Gross Indecency in a theatrical tradition that does “not imitate reality” (xiv). By pointing out the textual character of reality he actually shows us its true nature.

Apart from the citational quality of reality and performance the play also draws attention to their subjective and relational aspects. Kaufman achieves this by juxtaposing scenes and accounts that contradict each other, as, for example, when the actors playing Lord Alfred Douglas and Clarke act out an exchange based on Lord Alfred Douglas’s biography, in which the attorney promises to Douglas that he can testify immediately after the attorney’s opening speech.

Douglas Sir Edward, you must put me in the witness box and allow me to testify against my father.

Narrator: From The Autobiography of Lord Alfred Douglas:

Douglas If not, we might as well throw up the case at once. He said:

16 A similar device is used when Wilde informs the court about his meeting with Queensberry (Gross Indecency 20–22) and both ‘act out’ the exchange on stage, with Wilde adding reporting verbs such as ‘I said’ and ‘He replied’ to the spoken direct discourse. Events that ‘really’ happened and words that were ‘really’ spoken become material for stories and are treated as such.

17 “[...] history [...] is of course the story of competing discourses, not unmediated facts. That point is again made brilliantly explicit by Kaufman’s dramatization of the second trial, in which the prosecution barrister, Charles Gill, is presented reading whole chunks of the transcript of the libel trial into the record of the new proceedings” (Bottoms 64).
CLARKE Make your mind at rest, Lord Alfred, I agree with everything you say [...] I promise you I will; you shall go into the box immediately after my opening speech.

NARRATOR 2 From the unpublished memoirs of the trial by Sir Edward Clarke:
CLARKE I made no such agreement or promise. (30–31)

Narrator 2 introduces the source “From the unpublished memoirs of the trial by Sir Edward Clarke” (31), which is then followed by Clarke’s statement: “I made no such agreement or promise” (31). Within a few seconds we hear the same character utter and act out conflicting statements and the narrators do not ‘help’ us in making a decision as to which party we should believe.

Finally, the narrative set-up of the play also helps Kaufman in investigating the genre’s claim to truth. In addition to the structures and layers already described (the court room action and the commentary) the play has a short scene before the beginning of the second trial which bears the title “An interview with Marvin Taylor.” In this scene a character named Moisés interviews Marvin Taylor, who is the director of the Fales Library at New York University and co-editor of the book Reading Wilde: Querying Spaces. It remains unclear whether the interview actually took place or not, but the fact that Marvin Taylor is not mentioned or thanked in the acknowledgments that come with the published play, indicate that the interview probably has a purely fictitious character.

At first glance, however, the interview seems to achieve just the opposite, namely authenticating and framing the play as something that shows us, in Hare’s terms, that ‘what happened happened.’ Not only does Kaufman consult an expert on Wilde, but in placing two actors on stage who play the interviewer Moisés and the interviewee Taylor, some of the latter’s expertise automatically passes on to the
playwright Kaufman and thus the play. In other terms: If Taylor is an expert and that expert is shown on another diegetic level authenticating what we have seen and will see on stage, then surely, Kaufman’s representation of the trials cannot be that inaccurate. But the question remains whether Taylor is really shown to be an expert. When asked by Kaufman what he finds most interesting about the trials, Taylor answers in typical academic fashion and diction, which conveys less expertise than imprecision, evasiveness and verbosity:

Well ... to me ... the thing that’s most fascinating about the trials is hum .... You know .... there is this real nexus of issues that are on trial with Oscar Wilde and they have to do with the role of art, with effeminacy, with homosexuality, with the Irish in England, with class .... So it’s not just the fact that Wilde was being tried for sodomy ... that’s not the ... major point of what’s going on. I truly believe that the sodomy charges are really less important. Wilde was being tried for his subversive beliefs about art, about morality hum ... about Victorian Society. (Gross Indecency 75)

The broken-off sentences, the hums, the typical academic jargon (‘nexus of issues’, ‘subversive beliefs’) — they all serve to paint a specific picture of an academic who may have read many books but who also may be slightly out of touch with reality. One critic saw in Taylor’s “lengthy Foucauldian speeches” (Schiavi 410) a parody of academia that instead of buttressing eventually sabotages the scholar’s credibility. By adding a narrative layer and bringing Taylor and himself on the stage, Kaufman pursues the same strategy as on the subordinate diegetic levels. He creates the illusion of authenticity

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18 Note also that Kaufman addresses Taylor as “Professor Marvin Taylor” (Gross Indecency 75) and that Taylor addresses Kaufman by his first name Moisés (77).
and facticity, while at the same time undermining it and drawing our attention to the textual character of ‘reality.’

It is also worth noting to what an extent non-linguistic devices structure and narrate Wilde’s story, or rather stories, and how these serve to obscure the facticity of the represented events. Consider for example the metaleptic scene where the audience simultaneously witnesses the auctioning of Wilde’s possessions, the court’s refusal to set Wilde free on bail and Douglas’s accounts of the auction and his visits to Holloway Gaol. The noises of the auction on stage make Douglas raise his voice when he informs us that “We had to shout to make our voices heard above the voices of other prisoners and visitors” (Gross Indecency 81). The simultaneous presentation/narration of various time levels dissolves the boundaries between past and present and foregrounds the problems associated with claims of capturing the past.

Both Hare and Kaufman employ similar narrative strategies in telling their stories (such as embedded narrations, simultaneous showing and telling, different diegetic levels), but they do so to different effects. Where Hare’s play claims to differentiate between reality and fiction, Kaufman’s piece embodies and self-consciously reflects on the problems attached to such a distinction. Maybe the different approaches to ‘reality’ are also due to the different story material both plays narrate. Where a courtroom setting seems appropriate for a discursive and dialogical approach to history, the politics of the Bush administration may automatically lend themselves better to a more simplified representation of what is true and what is false.

19 Cf. also the simultaneous hitting of the gavels by both the auctioneer and the judge presiding over Wilde’s trial in the same scene.
Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature
Theatre, Stage Reading or Journalism?
David Hare’s Performance of *Via Dolorosa* and *Wall*

When we think about the use of narrative in contemporary drama, the documentary or verbatim approach seems to be dominant, especially in the last couple of years. In his two monologues devoted to the Middle East crisis, *Via Dolorosa* (1998) and *Wall* (2009), David Hare took this inherently problematic technique one step further and entered the stage himself instead of the actors, thus making us ask even more questions about the nature of theatre and narrative. As a political playwright and a world-known public figure, the often-discussed question of the possibility or impossibility of an artistic response to the complexities of our political reality and its form has always been of immense importance for Hare. His plays famously deal

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1 See for example Hare, *Verbatim Verbatim: Contemporary Documentary Theatre*, 2008.
with such diverse subjects as the privatisation of British railroads, the war in Iraq, the era of New Labour or, most recently, the current economic crisis. Throughout his career he has been trying to discover the most effective form of conveying his thoughts and ideas to the audience which — in a gradual abandonment of the traditional mimetic theatre — has led him not only towards his specific use of docudrama, but importantly also to essays and lectures, which are an essential part of his artistic œuvre. While he is an active commentator on the domestic political situation, it is the crisis in the Middle East, which is so urgent, pressing and personal for Hare that he wrote the autobiographical monologues *Via Dolorosa* and *Wall* for himself to perform. “I am a playwright and I did it purely and simply because it was the only way to convey what I wanted to say about the region” (qtd. in Boon 156). In her essay on autobiography and theatre Susan Bennett described the advantage of this theatrical form: “When there is a coincidence between the subject of the autobiographical performance and the body of the performer for that script, then the frenzy of signification produced along this axis has, for audiences, an unusually strong claim for authenticity” (35). In *Via Dolorosa* Hare was so convincing that even his colleague, the playwright Arnold Wesker, identified the character Hare performed with the actual David Hare and wrote him an open letter in which he expressed his worries about his friend and the opinions expressed in the play. With this notion in mind, one might ask whether our understanding and

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2 Hare was for example commissioned by *The Guardian* to cover this year’s general elections in Great Britain in a blog that was read by thousands of the newspaper readers.

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interpretation of these monologues is different when Hare does not act himself, as in *Via Dolorosa*, but presents/performs his latest autobiographical text *Wall* as a stage reading. With *Wall* it seems that at least for Hare, a ‘mere’ reading is enough; the text works very well also in other media — as a newspaper article or a radio reading. Hare claims that a traditional play about such a complicated subject as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would never achieve “anything you could call ‘authentic’ or ‘real’” (*Acting Up* 75). Both plays might thus be viewed as his polemics with “the elaborate conventions of theatre” (*Hare, Via Dolorosa* 3), but they also provoke general questions about the function of theatre and the role of playwrights and media in contemporary society. This paper will try to answer at least some of the issues raised by Hare, with a special focus on the implications of his use of autobiographical monologue.

In 1997 the international department of the Royal Court Theatre initiated a challenging project dedicated to the 50th anniversary of the State of Israel. They asked David Hare and two other playwrights from Israel and Palestine to write a play about the British Mandate in the 1930s and 1940s. Hare set out for a modern pilgrimage and visited the region where he met many people from both sides of the conflict — the Israeli settlers in Gaza as well as the people from the West. Instead of “conventional scenes [about the assigned topic which] would introduce an element of falsity, [and] pollute the subject matter” (*Hare, “Why Fabulate?”*78), Hare rejected enactment and wrote a self-reflexive monologue after his return to Britain in which he questions his position as a playwright. With *Via Dolorosa* the Royal Court Theatre thus literally became the playwright’s theatre. Hare hoped that “the play [would] be seen as a meditation on art. The test of *Via Dolorosa* will be whether the audiences respond to the questions that certainly intrigue me. What does art add to this
situation in the Middle East? How, if at all, does it illuminate?” (“Why Fabulate?” 78).

He introduces his doubts ironically at the beginning of his monologue, but as we can see from his diary Acting Up, which he kept throughout the rehearsals and the subsequent performances of Via Dolorosa, the use of mimesis and the problematic relation between facts and fiction is extremely important for Hare. In his view, traditional theatre based on mimesis has its limits when one wants to write a play about Israel.

And it's a preference, a long-held preference, what you might call a 'habit of mind' – putting words into other people’s mouths. And those people are played by people whose profession it is to pretend to be other people. [...] The elaborate conventions of theatre, so loved – by me at least – so treasured. So much the very heart of my life. And yet. Asked to go to Israel, I think ‘And what? Go to Israel and write a play?’ (Via Dolorosa 3)

Hare says that he “could never write so-called ‘scenes’ which would one day be played by British actors on a British stage. [...] It would seem ridiculous” (Acting Up 75). Mimetic representation and enactment are associated with artifice and viewed as inherently false. Yet, as a playwright, David Hare needs “the elaborate conventions of theatre” to construct all the characters he plays, including the autobiographical version of himself. For Via Dolorosa personal evidence exists by the real people from the play who confirm that the words Hare uses on stage to represent them are true: “Yes, those are the things we said” (Hare, Verbatim 72–73). We also know that Hare sent them their sections of the text to check whether they agreed with the way he represents them (Verbatim 73). As in docudrama, such authentic material may “cause the audience to forget that verbatim theatre is a lesson in suppression; more material is recorded than can ever be used. It is manipulated, crafted and edited to create an effect”
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(Jeffers 5). In other words, in *Via Dolorosa* Hare combined documentary and autobiographical approaches, both of which use facts, but necessarily in a mediated way. To Hare’s credit, he did not try to hide behind the authentic material and admitted that “the play did not literally correspond to the letter of my experience, but it conveyed the spirit of that experience more faithfully than a ‘mere’ diary would have been able to” (“Why Fabulate?” 79). Hare believes that “people think more deeply when they think together. That’s what theatre does. [...] I could have written an article... but journalism doesn’t stick” (Boon 154). *Via Dolorosa* is therefore not a mere transcript of the interviews. To make the play work dramatically, Hare took some chronological liberties. “The feelings the encounters aroused in me did not in fact precisely represent the reality of my first journey to the area” (“Why Fabulate?” 79). Hare insists that a monologue based on real life experience takes as much effort to write as any other play and that it was similarly crafted: “I tried to order their words in the most dramatic and effective way possible” (“Why Fabulate?” 79). In the monologue itself, however, these artistic ‘intrusions’ are skilfully subdued. “It had to seem artless, natural” (*Acting Up* 7). An appearance of artlessness was also a key of the actual theatre performance. The bareness and simplicity of the play were stressed by the sparse and minimalist set design in both the British and American productions. Only two significant moments were accentuated by sound effects. First, when Hare crossed the border of the Palestinian territory, the audience could hear the sound of muezzins calling the Muslims to prayer. And second, the climax of Hare’s personal pilgrimage was emphasised by the symbolic appearance of a model of Jerusalem’s skyline at the end of the play, accompanied by lyrical music. Although Hare strove for artlessness, it is ironically this embellished theatrical moment described in almost
poetic language and sharply contrasting with the austerity of the whole play, which is undoubtedly very powerful.

I have felt ever since I arrived that Jerusalem doesn’t need my admiration. Enough people are obsessed with it already. [...] But even I, inside the Arab sanctuary, taking the cleanest, most oxygenated sun-dazzled air you ever breathed, looking across to the Mount of Olives, yield to the splendour of the place and realize: oh I see, how provoking it is to own beauty, to own the most breathtaking space of them all. (Via Dolorosa 37)

Because of the ‘artless’ way Via Dolorosa was written and performed some critics wondered whether it is still a theatre play, describing it more as a travelogue or a diary delivered in a theatre venue. (Spencer 1) At first sight, Via Dolorosa really resembles a diary, because after a short introduction, Hare describes the sophisticated city of Tel Aviv and his drive across the desert to the Israeli settlements in Gaza. After that he continues to Palestine and finally visits Jerusalem, the spiritual centre of all the three main monotheistic religions. In a brief epilogue divided by an abrupt change in lighting and also a change in his style of narration, Hare captures his confusion and amazement after returning to his home in London. By focusing on telling instead of showing, Hare is able to give a complex account of the problematic situation in a very short time-span of 90 minutes. He lets the audience hear various opinions of people who otherwise would not have the chance to speak, carefully contrasting and orchestrating the individual voices to create a vivid mosaic of people with strong beliefs. Hare does not give opinions about Israel and Palestine. He draws attention, through his personal impressions, to the similarities and differences between the two communities which, in his view, “stopped people finding [the play] unbalanced” (Boon 156). Via Dolorosa oscillates between his rendition of other people’s comments, i.e. passages in quotation marks and reported speech, and his reactions
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and feelings during these particular situations. This double focus is a crucial structural and also rhythmical device of the actual performance, and the swift changes are emphasised by slight changes in voice, movement and lighting.

On the one hand, Sarah is telling me that the Jews have to be here. On the other hand, she says they are surrounded by people who will always want to kill them. What is the way forward? 'Not pieces of paper called Oslo.' 'No, I know what you think the way isn’t. I am asking what the way forward is.’ ‘I look at my children and I want them to live in a peace I haven’t had.’ ‘But how is it to come?’ ‘I don’t know.’

More walking, more silence, this time gloomier. (Via Dolorosa 18)

Though not a professional actor, Hare has played 33 different characters. Despite his humorous comment on this difficulty — “I’m not Peter Sellers, I can’t impersonate people” (Boon 156) —, his approach to acting is consistent with his polemics against the traditional use of mimesis. The style of Hare’s acting in Via Dolorosa was carefully adjusted to the desired ‘simplicity’ of the show. Together with Steven Daldry, who directed Hare in Via Dolorosa as well as in Wall, he decided that instead of “putting-on-one-hat-and-then-another” (Boon 156), which Hare would not be able to do anyway, he could “give the [characters] intonations or characteristics, which is perhaps the most [he] can give them. [...] [He] hope[s] [he] became a sort of medium for these people” (Boon 156). Daldry made sure that Hare “didn’t become too good” (Fisher qtd. in Boon 199) as an actor and storyteller. “If Hare got too good and too clever and too smooth, some of that may have gone, because it would have been just depicted instead of lived” (Fisher qtd. in Boon 199). According to David Spencer, “Hare’s acting is a mixture of things that are brilliantly professional and starkly amateurish” (1).

In Via Dolorosa Hare created a very paradoxical situation in which his stage presence actually subverts his arguments. At one point in the
play he describes his visit to the Holocaust museum and explains why he finds art inappropriate in such a situation and advocates facts. Contrary to Aristotle, who famously wrote in his introduction to _Poetics_ that “objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when _reproduced_ with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies” (Aristotle 3), Hare views _mimesis_ as an intrusion of the artist in-between the viewer and the experience one can get from the records, the objects, the photographs (cf. Boon 157).

The museum’s power is in its very simplicity, a bleak photographic record [...]. The only false notes in the museum are hit by works of art. Sculpture, painting. They seem superfluous. In every case the gesture seems inadequate. What is a painting, a painting of a starving man? What is a painting of a corpse? It’s the facts we want. Give us the facts. *(Via Dolorosa 38)*

_Via Dolorosa_ presents us with the following paradox: on stage we see a playwright acting an autobiographical version of himself, i.e. a fictional character criticizing works of art and requesting facts. The same playwright, however, admits in interviews that the play involved fictionalizing. Hare’s monologue does not give us ‘a bleak photographic record’ nor pure facts, though during the performance it seems to do so, as I explained above.

His self-reflexivity is even more evident when he rhetorically asks whether literal truth matters. Although Hare presents this episode as an anecdote illustrating the complexity of the religious disputes in Jerusalem, this passage might be interpreted as a comment on the complex narrative technique of _Via Dolorosa._

Where was Calvary indeed? Nobody agrees. So for now – look, is anything certain? – let’s just do as the family next to me and drop alarmingly to our knees, on the working assumption – let’s just _assume_ – X marks the spot, and kiss the stone. After all, does the literal truth
The tension between the words Hare delivers and the stage situation intensifies when he questions the relevance of his own medium — the theatre. He tells a story of one Jewish actress who became religious and gave up acting because she thought it was wrong. “All theatre is wrong, all fiction is wrong. God makes the stories. Why do we have to invent new ones?” (Via Dolorosa 11). In the lecture “Why Fabulate?” which was inspired by Via Dolorosa, Hare elaborated upon the last question. He suggests that the late 20th century saw a shift “in how the public wanted its cocktail, in exactly how many parts lies it was prepared to tolerate mixed up with how many parts truth” (“Why Fabulate?” 76). It can be assumed that a conventional play about the Middle East might be added to the list of inadequate artistic responses and Hare, in a way, seems to agree with the actress’s opinion. On the other hand, Via Dolorosa, “for all its unusualness of form, is nevertheless operated by all the conventional measures of fiction” (“Why Fabulate?” 79). In other words, Hare’s approach seems appropriate because he took great pains not to invent fictional scenes and distract the audience from the subject matter, but at the same time, he needed fabulation to make the play really work. As Paul John Eakin said, “[t]he self that is the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (qtd. in Bennett 33). In Hare’s view, even in a verbatim play it is important to “dramatise things that needed to be dramatised — and which were true — but which didn’t necessarily happen in the events or in that order” (Verbatim 69).

Having said that, I would now like to go back to the question I asked in the beginning: Is our understanding and interpretation of such autobiographical monologues different when the author does not act himself, but reads? In Wall the narrative technique is basically
similar to *Via Dolorosa*. It is a colourful collage of Hare’s subjective impressions of the newly built wall and his encounters with various people on both sides. The stage presence of the playwright was aptly described by one critic as “professorial” (Blog on *The Playgoer* 1), since *Wall* sometimes really resembles a lecture on the recent Israeli-Palestinian events. The self-reflexive level, however, crucial to the complexity of *Via Dolorosa*, is missing, as if Hare did not feel urged to justify his choice of theatrical form anymore. In the analysis of *Via Dolorosa* and *Wall* we should carefully distinguish ‘David Hare the playwright,’ who went to Israel and Palestine and later wrote the text of both monologues, gave interviews and lectures, from the autobiographical character he created and played. As Susan Bennett warns us, in this kind of solo-autobiographical performance the audiences easily forget that “this is just the kind of self as fictive structure that consumers of autobiography have long been warned against, [and that] the live presence of the performer’s body works to disavow such a caution” (35). Hare struggles very much to create the impression that the performance is purely his authentic subjective reaction to a real life experience. In the words of the theatre critic David Spencer: “Hare has stripped everything that could stand between the viewer and the issue except the truth […], as he experienced it, and as he sees it […] which is truth enough” (1). The ‘trick’ Hare plays on the audience is more sophisticated than in a conventional play or docudrama. For every performer of a monologue, it is crucial from the very beginning to establish a close relationship with their communication partner — the audience. In the first couple of minutes of the performance, Hare endeavours to engage the audience by admitting his own insecurity and limitations. He even apologises for being on stage instead of regular actors: “Partly, of course, I just want to see what it’s like. That’s what I’m doing here. If you’re wondering” (*Via Dolorosa* 3). Moreover, he places himself in
the same position as the London and New York audiences, who might easily identify with him. Despite being almost daily in the news, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is difficult for a Westerner to understand, and *Via Dolorosa* is thus “a story of a Westerner trying to understand two societies where belief is at the centre of the way of life. It is about the wrenching effects on a person apparently without faith meeting a whole lot of people who have only faith” (*Acting Up* 7). With *Via Dolorosa*, Hare can be criticised for ‘playing it safe.’ The fact that “the only objections — literally in a year of playing it — the only objections that [he] had were occasionally from supporters of the settlers who felt [he] was unfair to them” (Boon 156) might be understood not only as his achievement, but also as a failure to be really challenging.

When I asked David Hare after a discussion at the National Theatre in London how he would distinguish the character he played in *Via Dolorosa* from the one in *Wall*, he told me that when he was acting *Via Dolorosa*, he was in his early fifties and still able to remember the text, but being in his sixties now, he was worried that he would not be able to, so he decided to read it — thus implying there is no difference. Ironically, in his last play *The Power of Yes* (2009), which is not a monologue, he shatters all the assumptions we could have made about Hare’s approach to theatrical autobiography. The Author is not performed by Hare, but by another actor, and all the artistic challenges he dealt with especially in *Via Dolorosa* suddenly do not seem to bother him at all. The reason, as Hare explained, was again very practical and simple — he did not dare to appear on stage together with professional actors from the Royal National Theatre. However, since we should “never trust the author, but trust the text,” I would suggest that in *Wall* Hare’s weakening ability to learn texts by heart may actually be an advantage. The stage reading might also be understood as a very effective means of
bringing the narrative even closer to the audience by breaking the fourth wall and creating an even more authentic effect. In *Via Dolorosa* Hare rejected enactment by other actors and acted all the characters himself; in *Wall* he actually refused to act. He said that he sees himself mainly as a reporter: “Channelling my own work, that’s what I want to do” (WNYC Radio interview).

In May 2009 Hare read *Wall* on BBC radio, renaming the monologue *Wall: An Essay* and provoking many reactions, most of them approving. The most interesting commentary, however, did not challenge Hare’s views on this particular subject, consented that he is perfectly entitled to say whatever he wishes, but pointed to BBC’s uneven distribution of airtime on Radio 4. Hare’s talk was classified as a ‘personal view’ programme, and according to the BBC’s Editorial Guidelines, there should be ‘an opportunity to respond’ after ‘personal view’ programmes on contentious topics (Donovan i). Two hours after Hare’s half-hour reading there was an only seven-minute discussion on Radio 4’s “The World Tonight” with the moderate Israeli historian Professor Benny Morris about some of the issues raised by Hare. Donovan rightly wonders whether “it is an equivalent of an uninterrupted, unchallenged half-hour” and suggests that there should be more ‘personal views’ “but embracing a wider range of opinions and facts than the BBC usually permits” (i). In this case, Hare’s celebrity status definitely played a crucial role in the BBC’s policy and points to the possible problems of such reading by Britain’s national bard, whose authority prevents some people from being critical.

‘What does art add to the situation in the Middle East’ then? In an ideal case, as the promoters of radical theatre wish, “there is the possibility that the immediate and local effects of particular performances might — individually and collectively — contribute to changes of wider social and political realities” (Kershaw i). In reality,
Via Dolorosa and Wall probably did not change much, yet some critics even predicted that "[t]here will come a time when we won't need to bother with the news. We'll just tune in — or turn up to a theatre — to listen to David Hare's thoughts on Iraq or the state of the Labour Government and go away suitably informed and chastened" (Mountford 1). Michael Billington is equally optimistic and praises Hare as "British drama's leading correspondent" (i), admiring his eloquence and his mix of description and personal opinion impossible now on television. Billington suggests that "[i]n a fascinating reversal of values we increasingly look to the theatre, once seen as a source of escape, for this kind of informed commentary on the state of the world" (i). Similarly to the media, however, we should be very attentive to the inevitable fictionalisation of the material Hare uses.
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Primary Literature

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Performing Evaluation in the Stand-Up Theatre of Claire Dowie

Claire Dowie has coined the term 'stand-up theatre' to describe her particular form of narrative drama in plays for the solo performer such as Adult Child/Dead Child (1987), Drag Act (1993), Leaking from Every Orifice (1993), and H To He (I’m Turning Into A Man) (2004). Her other stage works include All Over Lovely (1997), Easy Access (1998), and Designs for Living (2001). She has also written for BBC radio and television drama including The Year of the Monkey and Came Out, It Rained, Went Back In Again. As well as three collections of her plays, Methuen has also published Dowie’s first novel, Creating Chaos. Her What Shall We Do With Mother? — The Musical opened in June 2010 at the Finborough Theatre, London. This essay compares and contrasts the performance of evaluation in her piece for a single actor Why is John Lennon Wearing a Skirt? (1996) and her two-hander Death and Dancing (1992) to demonstrate how and why the physical presence of the performer can be considered as a fundamental component of narrative in performance. Moreover, the deployment by Dowie of the performer’s vocabulary of gesture ensures that the
ideological force of the work is carried in large part through this performance of physical evaluation.

In Why is John Lennon Wearing a Skirt? the narrator-figure recounts the journey of a young woman into adulthood, or, as Dowie puts it in the sequel, Leaking from Every Orifice, “[b]asically, how crap it is to be a woman … what it was really about was a tomboy growing into a woman and still being a tomboy because everything she feels is totally at odds with everything she’s supposed to be as a woman” (135). While Dowie’s writing and its performance might be read and received as autobiography (cf. Griffin), the identification of the narrator-figure with Dowie is not the concern of this essay. Instead, the focus is on the formal aspects of the narratives in and as performance, working from a practice-focused workshop process of research. Within the monologue, the narrator-figure recounts how she has been confronted with the limitations of gender-role stereotyping that are expressed most visibly in the dominant dress codes for women. These are presented visually in the opening of Part One of the performance in the skirt of her school uniform and then through a series of costumes between which she changes throughout the performance, including a pretty dress and high heels, jeans and a shirt, a skirt and court shoes, a khaki shirt and Russian-style cap, as well as her bra and knickers. Equally, however, the narrator-figure also confronts the limitations of feminist ideology and practice as she experienced it. Her response to both patriarchy and feminism is to assert “No, I’m a boy, you know” (60).

Death and Dancing (1992) is presented by two narrator-figures, a male and a female each called Max. It is the story of the relationship between the two Max characters from when they met at university, a relationship which is both sexual and complicated. The male Max is gay, camp and promiscuous. As he says, “I came out from the word go … Well, the moment the plane touched English soil I was out. But I
wasn’t just out, I was screaming” (69). The female Max looks androgynous and is bisexual. Their relationship is regarded as unusual and they find themselves ostracised even from the dominant lesbian and gay groups in the university. Without the certainty of patriarchal gender roles or confidence in the behavioural codes of their queer peers, they somehow have to negotiate their relationship together. The female Max says, “You know full well you weren’t supposed to be labelled or gift-wrapped or boxed. You weren’t even supposed to be labelled a man, look at you, just as you know I wasn’t supposed to be labelled a woman” (107). As in Why is John Lennon Wearing a Skirt?, clothing becomes one visual expression of their sense of themselves as individuals and as a couple. They experiment with their roles, swapping clothes to cross-dress in Part One. The playfulness that underpins this experimentation, however, is not without risk, since social dress codes are in danger of setting the power structures of their personal relationship, becoming more than “just a costume” (100). In Part Two, the mask of conformity for which the male Max has settled and which has caused him to leave the female Max behind is marked by his donning a suit.

This discussion of the use of costume signals the emphasis I am placing here on the ways in which the physical presence of the performers is vital in dramatic performances of narrative as a particular kind of face-to-face communication. In this focus, I am following Sample, for example, who argues that

[...]the body, then, through kinesis, vocalization, and facial expression, presents physiognomic aspects the perception of which, however subconscious, helps constitute the felt context of a communicative situation. It is by existing in such a felt context that words come to life in a particular situation, so that we understand how propositional contents fit into the situation at hand. (119)
The actor in playing the role of narrator presents and represents the story through her body and it is through the apprehension of how words become flesh that the spectator engages with the narrative. In understanding dramatic narrative, our concern should then be equally with what is materially present (the body of the teller) as with what is symbolically represented (the characters and events), or with only one of the signifying systems of performance, the verbal rendition of a story. Cassell and McNeill emphasise that “[n]arrative language is not a two-dimensional affair with only intersecting syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes: it has a full, rounded 3D structure, one dimension of which is imagistic” (109). We must be careful to distinguish embodied performances from written texts or audio-recordings of the spoken word. Except perhaps in the case of experiments such as those by Beckett, the voice speaking live has to be acknowledged as the product of a body which is present and apprehended by another body. The body is always a site of significance and signification even (or perhaps especially) when the body is static and/or silent, as I have noted elsewhere (cf. “Speaking Violence”).

Of course, we can be directed by Hamlet’s advice to “suit the action to the word” (III, ii), in which it might appear that the body should take on the function of illustrating the verbal rendition of the story. Cassell, McNeill and McCullough provide a basic typology of how gesture might be considered as a way of illustrating the verbal representation, where three particular forms of gesture might be considered to fulfil this function: iconics, metaphors and deictic gestures. Iconic gestures “may specify the manner in which an action is carried out” (4). So in Why is John Lennon Wearing a Skirt? when the narrator recounts her experience of attending her first dance, she describes verbally and physically how the boys prepare themselves for the girls: “So I sat there and watched the boys prepare; (Slouches around trying to find a ‘cool’ position to pose in, finally settles on the
thumbs through the belt loops look.) guzzling Coca Cola — ‘ta’ and smoking cigarettes pretending to be adults — ‘ta’. (Tries to smoke and drink with thumbs still in belt loops.)” (40). Metaphorics are similarly representational, where, as Cassell and McNeill explain, “the pictorial content of a metaphoric gesture [...] corresponds to an abstract idea” (115). Again in John Lennon, the narrator reports her first job with “a very classy firm” (46). Here, the performer extends her index finger horizontally and brushes it upwards against the underside of her nose, indicating how she understands ‘classy’ as snobbish and exclusive. Deictic gestures “locate characters in space, and make apparent the spatial relationships between them, even if this information is not conveyed verbally” (Cassell, McNeill and McCullough, 4). In Death and Dancing, Max and Max recount how they were frequently mistaken for two gay guys: “For instance, we were in this one restaurant and we just couldn’t get any service: ‘Excuse me?’” (75). Here, the performers have to locate spatially within the narrated scene where the waiter is by directing their focus at an agreed place in the actual space. Importantly, the qualifying phrase in the definition of deictic gestures — ‘even if this information is not conveyed verbally’ — points to the ways in which the body’s communicative function is not just secondary to the verbal representation in even these forms of gesture.

I want to extend the discussion of the ways in which the body is constitutive of the experience of dramatic narrative through a number of propositions. The first of these is that telling is in itself a form of physical doing. Here, I regard the body not as a transparent technology of representation but as a materially present site within which what is present stands for that which is absent without being obliterated or masked (cf. Wing). It is important, too, to remember that the words of the narrative are produced by the work of a body as it performs. The speaker invests herself physically in the act of telling
and that investment is operational for the spectator in understanding not just what is being represented verbally, but what the relationship of the speaker is to what is being represented, and in turn what relationship she wants to establish with the spectator. Cassell, McNeill and McCullough identify a fourth category of gesture which further underlines the importance of the body in this respect: the beat. They argue that “[b]eat gestures may signal that information in the accompanying speech does not advance the plot of the story, but rather is an evaluative comment […]. These gestures index the speech as a comment” (4). Elsewhere, Cassell and McNeill gloss this by explaining that “[t]he semiotic value of a beat lies in the fact that it indexes the word or phrase it accompanies as being significant not purely for its semantic content but also for its discourse-pragmatic content” (118). In John Lennon, the performance climaxes with a diatribe against the social conditioning of women that defines them as mothers-to-be in training from early childhood, ending with the narrator’s discovery that she is pregnant: “And I went to the doctor and he found a lump in my stomach, a growth. Well, he called it a baby, but I called it a growth, because I couldn’t accept that word, because if I accepted that word I’d have to accept everything I’ve fought against and everything I’ve laughed at” (63). The sense of ‘baby’ as something from which the narrator is alienated might be accompanied by a gesture with the index and middle fingers of both hands extended and flicked up and down together as if surrounding it with quotation marks. The beat gesture then directs the attention of the spectator away from the unfolding of the narrative to a meta-level of performance. It connects, too, with the ways in which the body ‘tells’: for example when someone is lying, or doubtful and so on. It has its analogue in the ‘tell’ in poker, which is any kind of physical reaction or behavior from which the other players may infer something about the hand of cards you are holding. Beat gestures,
then, may reveal the speaker's commitment to what they are saying or the propositional force with which they want their words to be received. Equally, they may be read as an indicator of uncertainty, lying or evasion.

These generalisable comments about the centrality of the body in narrative performance are particularly crucial to these examples from Dowie's work where the body is not treated as just a neutral or transparent medium through which the act of narration is undertaken. Instead, due to the focus on gender, sexual and personal identity, the performer's body is simultaneously representational and the site within which the concerns and issues of the narrative are made manifest. This is particularly focused on how we might understand these performances as examples of camp. As Sontag's “Notes on Camp” has it,

[as a taste in persons, Camp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated. The androgyne is certainly one of the great images of Camp sensibility. [...] Allied to the Camp taste for the androgynous is something that seems quite different but isn't: a relish for the exaggeration of sexual characteristics and personality mannerisms [...]. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater. (279-80)

Dowie's self-characterisation in both John Lennon and Death and Dancing is marked by the playful criss-crossing of gender and sexual identities. Her own androgynous appearance further emphasises the ways in which she can play different roles in both performances, and to the extent that we read the performance as autobiographical, in life.

In order to demonstrate in detail the ways in which the body can be considered as constitutive of the performance of narrative, I want to develop further the exploration of how bodies perform the function
of evaluation, for which the discussion of beat gestures serves as a preliminary. Labov and Waletzky were the first to provide what has been the classic structuralist analysis of narrative, identifying six common elements of narrative structures: abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution and coda. According to Riessman, “[w]ith these structures, a teller constructs a story from a primary experience and interprets the significance of events in clauses and embedded evaluation” (18). Of evaluation, she says, “[n]arrators say in evaluation clauses (the soul of the narrative) how they want to be understood and what the point is” (20). Such a structuralist approach locates evaluation within specific units or clauses. This may be useful when dealing with textual renditions of spoken stories (a particular research practice within some disciplines which engage with narrative) but is of less value when examining precisely how evaluation might be performed within any specific situation of utterance. In developing beyond a structuralist approach, then, I want to invoke Cortazzi’s formulation that “[e]valuation is the process by which the narrator assigns values and meaning and directs the audience to how the events described should be interpreted” (46). Focusing on evaluation as a process, provides an opportunity to see it not as a separate form of words or structural unit, but as a process of performance.

Labov and Waletzky divide evaluation into two broad categories: internal and external. Here I will deal only with the external, which Labov (1972) further divided into five types: simple external evaluation; embedded evaluation made by the speaker to herself at the time of the event; embedded evaluation made by the speaker to another person at the time of the event; embedded evaluation made by another person at the time of the event; and, evaluative action.

Each of these apparently verbal structures has a bodily expression, too. Simple external evaluation is when the speaker stops the
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narrative in order to explain to the listener the exceptional nature of the events, or to explain what the point is. In *John Lennon*, the narrative figure explains, “So I was quite happy with the top half of me, quite liked the top half of me. (*Takes off blazer, discards it on floor.*) Unfortunately the bottom half I hated. (*Holds edge of skirt in disgust*)” (35–36). Here the stage directions give a clear indication of just exactly what the narrator’s attitude is to her skirt. The second kind of embedded evaluation is made by the speaker to herself at the time of the event. In *Death and Dancing*, the two Max characters play out a scene in which the female Max performs a girl coming out to her mother.

SHE. Mum, I’m a lesbian.
HE. No you’re not, you’re a gemini.
SHE. Mother, I’m trying to come out, it’s difficult.
HE. Okay. What lesbian things have you done?
SHE. Well, none, not yet.
HE. What lesbian places have you gone to?
SHE. None, not yet.
HE. What lesbians have you slept with?
SHE. None, not yet
HE. Well, then, you’re not a lesbian, are you?
SHE. No, not yet! (8t)

The repeated response ‘None, not yet’ has to be played with increased awkwardness until it transforms into a resolution by the final refrain. It is the tone and pitch of the voice and the shifts in bodily tension and gesture that provide the commentary that transforms the sense of the words in that situation.

At the same time, the male Max, playing mum, performs his questions with a patronising tone and a range of appropriate gestures, such as patting her on the head, which reveals a third form of evaluation: that made by the speaker to another person at the time of the event. This can be seen, too, in *John Lennon*, where the narrator-
figure recounts, “And my mum says, ‘It’s about time you grew up because you won’t get a job in jeans, not one that’s interesting anyway.’ And I say, ‘I don’t care, I’d rather be a road sweeper than have to wear a dress!’” (46).

The fourth structural form of evaluation is where there is embedded evaluation made by another person at the time of the event. In Death and Dancing, Max and Max discuss their respective sex lives:

HE. Sandy? You’re having a relationship with Sandy?
SHE. Well I was. Not any more, God, that really annoys me, sooner or later everybody has to go and say that.
HE. Say what?
SHE. They say, ‘Why can’t you be a bit more caring, why can’t you be more womanly? When are you going to start using your womb?’
HE. Ugh! (72)

His “Ugh!,” accompanied by a gesture of sticking his fingers down his throat, as if to make himself sick, demonstrates his revulsion at the idea of her becoming womanly.

The final form of evaluation is identified as evaluative action, a category where the description of something done at the time of the incident being described, indicates how the incident is to be understood. In this example from John Lennon, the there-and-then of the past takes over the current here-and-now of the narration, so that the past sense that dancing represented a form of joyful free expression is created before the audience as it is acted out:

This is me. Dressing how I want to dress and thinking what I want to think. And I did it and it was fun. I still had friends, I was still popular, still went out, went dancing, and if there was a boy I danced with a boy, and if there was a girl I danced with a girl. If there was nobody I danced by myself. (44–45)

As these examples demonstrate, the body can function then as an analogue for or as a complement to the verbal units which Labov and
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Waletzky identify in these evaluative functions. Yet this is not an exhaustive account of the role of the body in evaluation. Here, I draw on an essay by Richard Gwyn in which he argues that

[t]he specific narrative feature of 'evaluation', as described by Labov and Waletzky (1967/97), is not a discrete and secondary structure, but rather is embedded in the continuous acts of description that constitute a story, as well as in the second-order evaluations provided by reported speech [...] (a) evaluation is a continuous and constantly shifting process within the narrative encounter [...]. Narratives are not the static discourses of literary theory and structuralist analysis, but dialogically evolving episodes of interaction, in which evaluations are frequently co-constructed between speaker and listener. (313)

Gwyn points us to the sense of evaluation as an ongoing feature of face-to-face storytelling and to the ways in which the listener must be attentive to how evaluation is performed to understand the narrative. Of course, such attention is underpinned by a more general competence in reading the body of both speaker and listeners. As Goffman suggests,

Everyone knows that when individuals in the presence of others respond to events, their glances, looks and postural shifts carry all kinds of implication and meaning. When in these settings words are spoken, then tone of voice, manner of uptake, restarts and the variously positioned pauses similarly qualify. As does manner of listening. (2)

This is important in the performance of dramatic narratives where there are two figures represented simultaneously by separate performers. The spectator then understands whatever is said in the light of how it is heard by the onstage auditor. For most of Death and Dancing, the two narrative-figures are there simultaneously and each evaluates both his/her own and the other's versions of the events they
describe. The auditor, then, carries out a powerful evaluative function, as can be seen in *Death and Dancing*:

HE. So I'm standing there, minding my own business, then I see him – big beautiful man, big ole beefy man, the sort who could crack walnuts with his butt ...

SHE. What an interesting hobby. (85)

This function is also present even when the auditor is silent. The female Max is onstage while the male Max describes her: “She stole two cassettes and a packet of cigarettes out of my glove compartment, and I never even saw her do it! (*Pause.*) After that I started seeking her out more and more” (73). Her response to this conditions how the spectator understands the description, for example, the degree of seriousness with which one is meant to understand it.

In *Why is John Lennon Wearing a Skirt?*, while there is only a single teller in the here-and-now, there are, nonetheless, a number of features that create a distance between the narrator in the present and the figures within the narrative, a distance in which evaluation is prompted. These might create both a speaking and a listening perspective, giving rise to the disintegration of the teller's body (cf. "Characterization in Storytelling Performance"). This refers to the phenomenon whereby the teller's subjectivity is simultaneously divided and multiplied within the act of narration. Such splitting is achieved technically by two principle devices. The first is through the process of *metaxis*. This is defined by Augusto Boal as “the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different, autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image” (43). Thus, even as a single narrator tells us about a past event, she is present both in the here-and-now of the telling and in the there-and-then of the story. The telling self in choosing how the past self is represented, gives that representation a particular heft,
simultaneously asserting the persistence of its identity and the distance between the present performing self and past performed self.

Secondly, the narrator figure can split the body to represent simultaneously two or more figures from the past event, carrying out what might be termed as an act of ventriloquism. Goldblatt suggests that the key to ventriloquism is, “a rapid-fire interplay displaying the ventriloquist’s talent for switching between significantly different personalities” (40). Such switching might be between the telling and narrated self, or, as in this example from *John Lennon*, between the telling self, the narrated self and the third figure in the narrative, the boss.

And I like this job and I like these people and I think I might stick it this time. Until I go into the stock-room for more paper and the boss comes up behind me, puts his arms round me and squeezes my tits ... just for a lark, a bit of fun ... and I think, 'I don't know what to do, what have you got to do?' I mean, don't I look ugly? Do I look as though I'm asking for it? (50)

In performance, the actor might allow one hand to move to her breast, representing the boss’s hand. By glancing over her shoulder, a deictic gesture further implies his presence, redirecting the eyes and head from the performance of narration and to an action from the narrative. Returning to look at the audience, she signals that she has returned to the here-and-now, albeit momentarily, since her facial expression, mixing shock and disgust, is generated in relation to her reaction in the past. Her alienation from what is happening in that there-and-then is registered in the reflective thinking which is quoted, before she returns to the present moment of telling. The body then shifts its temporal and spatial referentiality between the three figures being represented both simultaneously and in a rapidly alternating sequence of momentary characterisations (cf. Double). While she makes these shifts, space opens up for the narrator figure to share her
sense of what is being told. It is characteristic of performance that in
the playing of evaluation, the narrator-figure might create internal
drama in the narration, since the speaking may bestow on it doubts,
uncertainties, no-go areas, negotiations, contradictions, and half-
starts, which condition the speaker's relationship to what she is
saying.

Additionally, even as the single teller speaks, I suggest that she
may well be already engaged in a process of simultaneous evaluation,
which involves a sophisticated negotiation between her commitment
to what she is telling and the effect that she wants such telling to have
on her addressees. The point is best illustrated by an example from
*Why is John Lennon Wearing a Skirt?*:

> And at eleven, at twelve, it's big school. I go to big school and learn
> needlework and cookery […] and once a week in cookery I'm stuck,
because I can't seem to connect this activity, I can't find anything in it,
I'm beginning to wonder what's the point, it's so boring, till the
cookery teacher bounds in and says 'How to make pastry to be proud
of' and then it hits me, I realise I'm learning to cook for my future
husband, that's it, that's all, there's nothing else, that's my life, learning
to feed my future family. (55)

In the representation of the cookery teacher, there is a complex
process of evaluation at work. Verbally, the choice of 'bounds in'
suggests a degree of energy and commitment, contrasted with the
sense of lethargy associated with 'it's so boring.' The contrast is
inverted, however, by the attribution of specific qualities to the
teacher, vocally and physically. Speaking in exaggerated Received
Pronunciation, the narrator-figure signals the teacher as old-
fashioned and out-of-date. She can be characterised physically as, for
example, buck-toothed and spectacle-wearing, just by shifting her lips
and a hand gesture referring to where her glasses might be slipping off
her nose. Switching out of this momentary characterisation and
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stepping to one side, the narrator-figure can still refer to the teacher deictically, literally pointing out the dislocation between the representation she has created and where she is now standing. Further, the narrator-figure enacts her own evaluation of the proposition she is rejecting in the next phrase, by how she performs it. This is not a melancholy acceptance of the inevitability and necessity of learning these domestic skills; rather it is an energetic call to arms, an appeal to the audience to witness how ludicrously limited such a prospect is. She matches her words with exaggerated gestures, arms spread wide, the gesture turning the statement into a rhetorical question. She ends with a contrasting metaphoric gesture, the hands coming to shape a small box on ‘feeding my future family.’

From this, we can see that performing story is an evaluative process, demonstrating not just the speaker’s degree of commitment to what is being said, a way of marshalling a propositional force, but inviting the listener to respond in a particular way. In this way, it is possible to see that performance is both a means of giving weight to what is being said and “hailing the addressee” (Althusser 118). The spectator, then, insofar as she accepts the invitation to attend to the performance, is constituted as someone who accepts and agrees with the perspective of the teller. For Dowie’s work, this means that the spectator, whether gay, lesbian or straight, accepts the world-view of the narrator-figure, and in so doing legitimates the story that she tells, a fundamentally political strategy.

In this essay, I have argued for the importance of the physical presence of the teller in the performance of the story. This implicitly suggests a high degree of medium dependence in dramatic narrative, where the understanding of the medium has to take account of performing story live as a corporeal encounter. Here, evaluation relies on the distance between the teller and the tale. In the case of (apparently) autobiographical performance, it also marks the gap
between the self represented in the story and the self telling the story. This is characteristic of a process of representation that is concerned both with the construction of the self as a narrative figure, and the self as a telling subject. In performing narration, it is not just the tale, then, but the telling.
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Works Cited

**Primary Literature**


**Secondary Literature**


JANELLE REINELT

The Epistemology of First-Person Narrative

This happened on December 30, 2003. That may seem
A while ago but it won’t when it happens to you.
And it will happen to you. The details will be different,
But it will happen to you
That’s what I’m here to tell you.

Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

I am going to assume from the beginning that my readers are not hostile to narrative in contemporary drama, understood to entail an aspect of story, although worked into and imbricated in a variety of other rhetorical, spatial, aural and poetic dramaturgical strategies. This assumption requires a certain number of qualifications because in recent years the charge that narrative is obsolete has marked a good deal of academic discourse, especially about ‘postdramatic’
However, a number of theatre studies colleagues are still interested in narrative strategies, and in particular in the recent emphasis in English language theatre on non-fictional narratives, such as frequently occur in documentary, verbatim, and ethnographic drama. We seem to be cognizant of and interested in the kinds of knowledge production possible in these performances, and in the role that facts or, more broadly, evidence plays in such work. I am going to approach these preoccupations through the epistemology of first-person address including solo performances, verbatim theatre, memoirs, and other self-referential performances. The key feature under examination is the autobiographical self-representation that is involved in such drama, the deliberate artistic self-fashioning (in other words, the effort to use a performing art form for autobiographical purposes).

In a recent essay, “The Promise of Documentary” (Reinelt 6–23), I have tried to address some similar questions about what we think is on offer in fact-based performances, and what we hope to get out of them: interrogating the unspoken contract between the ’I’ and the ’you’ of author and auditor or spectator. I start with three assumptions, modified here to address autobiographical performance specifically:

1) The value of the narrative is predicated on a realist epistemology, but the experience of narrative is dependent on phenomenological engagement.

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1 Hans-Thies Lehmann himself, in fact, insists the “principle of narration is an essential trait of postdramatic theatre” (109). He has in mind the self-presentational aspects of narration as a counter to the world of media. Emphasizing the communication of personal experience as against the “arbitrary exhibitions of biographical ‘realities’ in the confessional shows of television,” Lehmann retains the efficacy of narration for the postdramatic theater (109).
2) The 'truth' is not in the narrative but in the relationship between the narrative, its mediators (artists, authors) and its audiences.

3) The performance experience is connected to reality but is not transparent, and is in fact constitutive of the reality it seeks (cf. Reinelt 7).

Before I unpack these three assumptions, let me be more explicit about the kind of material I am addressing and why I think it is important. My US colleague and friend Marvin Carlson, employing his customary encyclopedic analysis, wrote an essay in 1996 on “Performing the Self” in which he identified the first autobiographical theatre performances in 1276, when Adam de la Halle appeared as himself in a French comedy he had authored. Moving through prologues and curtain speeches in 18th-century and 19th-century popular entertainment, Carlson devotes the bulk of his essay, however, to the rise of autobiographical performance art in the 1970s and the transition he thinks took place by the late 1980s. The emphasis moved away from making public the voices of silenced or suppressed identities, particularly in feminist performance artists such as Linda Montano and Carolee Schneemann. Following this explicitly formulated political project in which the authenticity of the voice was rarely questioned, a second moment of autobiographical drama emerged that questioned the mimetic and representational strategies of self-reflexive performance. Carlson concludes that autobiographical performance had become much more self-conscious, “much more aware of its own constructedness, and much more willing to make this awareness itself part of the presentation” (604). His preferred examples were Karen Finley, Deb Margolin, Tim Miller, and Spalding Gray, whose Monster in a Box (1991) reflected “precisely about the process of gathering and arranging the material for one of his [self-referential] works” (603). Carlson’s historiography of this shift, his observation of how the autobiographical form had developed
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and changed by the mid-1990s when he wrote the essay, forms one account from that decade.

Deidre Heddon’s recent important volume on our topic, *Autobiography and Performance* (2008), offers an alternative account of this history — one that contests a clear dividing line between these types of pieces. While validating the immense political value of autobiographical work about the lives of women, racial and ethnic minorities, and especially gay, lesbian, and transgendered artists, she wants to insist that both the identitarian aspects of these representations and their destabilization and interrogation as constructs has been an integral part of much of their work all along. Here Heddon moves easily from Carolee Schneemann, Linda Montano, and early Spalding Gray to Bobby Baker, Tim Miller or the lesbian company Fingerlicks, reaching into the late 1990s and early oughts. Heddon is at pains to point out that although strong identity markers certainly appear in this work, one of autobiographical performances’ “formal strengths” is that it “brings to the fore the ‘self’ as a performed role, rather than an essentialized or naturalised identity[…]. It is a property much capitalized on by many performers as a means to reveal not only the multiplicity of the performing subject, but also the multiplicity of discourses that work to forge subjects” (39). Heddon is a much younger scholar than Carlson, and part of her difference of perspective is generational. While it is certainly true that living through the early manifestations of identity politics produced a cultural environment that was often less sceptical about realist epistemology, the value of experience and its voiced articulation, much of the key work of the time was also, as Heddon elucidates in her study, more nuanced and complex than is remembered in retrospect. Carlson’s view, on the other hand, is both useful and accurate in the sense that at a certain moment, assumptions changed, aspects of self-referential scepticism became
foregrounded, certain essentialist positions became untenable, and this sea-change affected the explicit nature of performances about the self. A way to articulate this change in terms of poststructural and postmodern theory would simply be to say that after a certain point, the subject became the key problematic term in both performance and life.

Against the diachrony of these historical accounts, I offer a more synchronic approach. We need to understand both the changing ethos of different historical moments of performance, and also what abiding features of performance itself survive the changes. Two attitudes toward autobiographical work often heard today involve either rejecting performances for allegedly out-dated identity politics, or else claim that there is no ‘real’ person being represented at all, but rather only an absence that is discursively constructed/imagined into an ‘autobiography.’ Everybody knows it is all made fiction or at least unknowable. Both of these positions seem wrong-headed to me, and miss the subtle pleasures of the autobiographical process in performance.

Looking at the dramaturgical relationship between narrative, documentary, and autobiography, we find discrete but overlapping regimes. Narrative interprets documents and renders them as evidence, while it also expresses a life project or ‘story,’ selecting and highlighting or shaping the raw and private experience of autobiography. The three are intertwined in such a way that there is a space of overlap in any autobiographical performance — to write or speak about oneself is to deploy both narrative and documents in an act of historiography.

The moment of enunciation in such performances marks the present, but the content of the performance looks back inevitably to a time before or outside of the performance. Such temporality necessarily regulates narrative because it marks out an event, the
performance event. As Susan Stewart has written in On Longing, her study of how objects come to animate certain versions of the world,

[w]ithout narrative, without the organization of experience, the event cannot come to be. This organization is an organization of temporality and an establishing of the causality implicit in temporality, but narrative closure is offered outside the temporality of our everyday lives. It is not caught up within that temporality, but rather is performed with self-consciousness, with a manipulation of point of view within its own story time, the context of its performance [...]. Although narrative offers transcendence, it lacks authenticity, for its experience is other. (22)

Stewart is speaking about writing, primarily, but employing the language of performance, and in fact, she describes the literal situation of performing stories about a self that in the moment of the telling belongs to the past. This ordering and bordering function of narrative is self-evident in the performance event, especially for those who come to the established theatre and attend a solo performance for a circumscribed conventional time, lasting for example an hour, or 90 minutes.

Equally, turning to the documents, the archive of the self is made up of orts and fragments of existence, memories, photographs, letters, other archival objects, souvenirs, and also embodied traces of past experiences, marking the body’s itinerary. In a work of autobiographical performance I saw in London in 2010, US-based lesbian performer Peggy Shaw, co-founder of Split Britches, together with the UK’s Clod Ensemble made the topography of the body the central focus of Shaw’s poetic solo work, Must the Inside Story:

When my skin cracks open/You will find my meat. /My carnivore body. You will see the anthills and mole tunnels underground and food being carried from place to place by millions of workers. You will see a magical landscape, like New York City in the seventies – finding graffiti and layers of bone and blood and sex shops and garbage ... Evidence
that someone lives in here. Really lives here and leaves traces. (Shaw and Willson n.pag.)

Shaw’s poetic evocation of her life, accompanied by Paul Clark’s original score as performed by the Clod Ensemble trio, was originally created for training medical students and healthcare professionals, but was well reviewed in Edinburgh and transferred to the Soho Theatre, London. During the show, the screen behind Shaw projects cells, corpuscles, skeleton, bones, and other mysterious slides of seeming body-matter, while Shaw inventories what has happened to her own body and that of other friends, creatures and topographies over time. Documents include not only the slides, but her material body and its marks, her clothes/costume, the popular music she references (“Ain’t No Sunshine When She’s Gone”), and many other micro-tissues of her personal existence. This ‘evidence,’ these ‘documents’ are the materials used in creating the performance — some are more transparent than others; their truth value is always questionable though never foreclosed.

As film theorist Philip Rosen writes, documents are “the indexical traces of the presence of a real past” (65). In the overlapping relationships between narrative, documents, and performer/narrator, the oscillating truth is put in spin. What does the spectator want? A glimpse, perhaps, of that truth. What does it require to appear? A secular form of faith.

Returning then, to the first of my assumptions, ‘The value of the narrative is predicated on a realist epistemology, but the experience of narrative is dependent on phenomenological engagement,’ it should now be clear that the performance event is underwritten by a promise to get at reality, through the narrative as well as the documents. However, the success of the endeavour will depend on the phenomenological engagement of the spectator, and in particular, his or her willingness to take the leap of faith over the chasm of
undecidability or perhaps, even, to overlook the inevitable failure of achievement. The phenomenological engagement has to do with the experience of the performance for the spectator and the degree to which there is an individual uptake of relationality between the spectators’ personal and cultural knowledge and the narrator’s existential position.

This intersubjective relation leads then to the second assumption: ‘The “truth” is not in the narrative but in the relationship between the narrative, its mediators (artists, authors) and its audiences.’ Self-definition is dialogical, a self emerges only in relation to others in a dialogical process of constituting and consolidating within the operative cultural and socio-political codes of the historical moment. Audiences can and sometimes do withhold their affirmation of, identification with, or recognition of the autobiographical performer’s version of their history; for their part, performers occasionally deliberately deceive their audiences.

In an extremely lucid Masters’ Dissertation on autobiographical performance, my Warwick student Lotte Allan found a way to explain this implicit contract between performer and audience member:

In order to accept the contract of a strategic re-presentation, the audience member has to take a risk that what they are watching may not be authentic, yet still takes a leap of faith that it may be, much like suspending their disbelief. Whilst a leap of faith is necessary, the pieces are self-reflexive about the status of the performing self and its delivery, so the “leaper” is kept aware of the stakes and the gamble. Therefore, in this context the intersubjective relation is the performance: it is the meeting of two subjects-in-process, linked by a fiction which may in fact be “true” and is related to a lived “real” in the present as well as the past. (30)

This account provides a much more adequate and sophisticated way of grasping the construction of reality than simply to say that
autobiography is by nature unreliable. That is really not quite it: it is more accurate to say that the suspension within an ongoing oscillation of subjectivity is the condition not only of every ‘I’ but every other space of enunciation as well, particularly the second person position ‘you,’ and that autobiographical performances produce knowledge of this state of affairs in reality by virtue of the structure of their own ‘eventness.’

My third and last assumption should now be more comprehensible because this understanding of the structure of autobiographical performance allows me to venture an answer to the question about the form’s claim to access reality: ‘The performance experience is connected to reality but is not transparent, and is in fact constitutive of the reality it seeks.’ Just as Susan Stewart noted that narrative is always outside the experience it seeks to describe because of its temporality, autobiographical performance is outside of the past being narrated, but is congruent with the performance event in the present, within which the oscillation of subjectivity takes place and the reality of performance is negotiated between the narrator and the audience.

Within this description of how autobiographical performances work, the pleasures of this kind of performance provide a plentitude in the face of loss. They counteract nostalgia by giving back something else in place of the absent past. The negotiated reality of the performance events takes the place of the forever deferred original material. If it is satisfying, it is because reality has been negotiated; therefore, something mutual or at least agential has occurred, which is why autobiographical performance has sometimes been such a vortex for community and/or political efficacy. In Susan Stewart’s study of longing, she describes this pleasure as nostalgia, and considers it a “social disease” (23). But I propose the contrary, that this pleasure can offer an antidote to nostalgia. Nostalgia is a condition
born of longing for the impossible authenticity of lost lived experience. The substitution of mediated experience through narrative can provide pattern and insight but at the cost of the utopian place of origin. Stewart’s argument is that the substitution only produces more impossible desire, but alternatively, I think the co-production of reality within the performance event can offer an alternative mode of understanding — not perfect knowledge of an inviolable past but a coming to terms with an oscillating present, self-conscious of its situation and context, addressing the postmodern, postdramatic predicament. The performance event can also be a site of struggle for insisting on certain versions of self and history, for refusing to believe others. Thus, a final harmoniousness is not always the desired outcome; mutuality sometimes appears through dissonance.

In the remainder of this essay, I discuss two public figures, authors who use autobiographical material to fashion performances of self. They are both writers who have embedded their personal itineraries within social observation and political critique. They are “public subjects,” in David Marshall’s sense of “a representation of individuality and personality that operates in the public sphere,” his fundamental definition of celebrity (70). ‘Celebrated’ means praised, honored for achievement. It is a commonplace that today’s ‘celebrity culture’ is something else entirely where public attention alone constitutes celebrity and Andy Warhol’s witticism about 15 minutes of fame has been overwritten by someone like Susan Boyle’s extraordinary rise and fall in public consciousness.² That is not the sort of celebrity I am talking about.

² Susan Boyle is the Scottish singer who became an overnight sensation after appearing on a British reality television show (Britain’s Got Talent) in 2009.
Joan Didion and David Hare are public intellectuals who have for several decades been well-known in the US and UK respectively for trenchant descriptions and critiques of their life and times. Both have written fiction; both have published books of essays — Hare’s are most often lectures, although occasional articles and newspaper commentary comprise his œuvre as well. Didion is best known and admired as an essayist whose special gift is to weave self-reflexive examination into social commentary. She starts with the personal tale and ends up capturing the socio-political milieu surrounding the event, or she starts with what appears to be investigative journalism and ends up in deep subjective spaces of self-implication and irony.

I have been reading Didion’s work for about 30 years, and although she is 12 years older than me, I consider her the chronicler of ‘my generation;’ like me, she is a native Californian from the Central Valley. Over the years, her writing has documented the changing social reality that is California, from her essay about Haight Ashbury in 1967 (“Slouching Toward Bethlehem”), to an essay mixing childhood memory with an account of water flow and its control in the ‘golden state’ circa 1977 (“Holy Water”), or more recently, her book of essays Where I Was From (2003). She has written a number of novels as well and covered election campaigns for elite magazines. She had not written any plays until 2007 when she adapted her celebrated memoir about the death of John Gregory Dunne, her screenwriter husband of 40 years, into a play — subsequently directed by David Hare. Vanessa Redgrave played Didion.

David Hare is exactly my age, and he, too, sometimes seems a chronicler of my generation although a more distant one, if only because it is the UK he most trenchantly observes, my home for a mere five years. He is, unlike Didion, mostly a writer of dramatic fictions, but lately he has been doing a lot of work with fact-based theater, from The Permanent Way (2003), to Stuff Happens (2005),
and most recently, *The Power of Yes* (2009). In addition, he has appeared on stage himself in three autobiographical works: *Via Dolorosa* (1998), *Wall* and *Berlin* (2009). In a revealing article about *Via Dolorosa*, Chris Megson and Dan Rebellato analyze Hare's career-long streak of anti-theatricalism, leading to his faith in the lecture and self-performance as a form of lecture. At the beginning of the article, they write:

> Our hypothesis is that Hare's long-standing commitment to the pure, transparent and direct communication of subject matter in performance has led to his increasing discomfiture with the mediating discourses of theatre and, consequently, to his reification of the lecture format as the preferred mode of public address both on and off the stage. (236)

While Hare seems compelled to come ever nearer to his audiences so that, finally, they hear him speak in his own voice in direct communication, Didion is a reticent person who has never relished direct contact in real time between herself and her audiences. Known for her mastery of irony and introspection, she was often photographed wearing dark glasses when younger. She “avoids unbuttoned outpourings of emotion, and there is a controlled reticence about even her most personal revelations” (Donadio). *The Year of Magical Thinking* is arguably her most personal writing, but perhaps it only seems to so be because it was dramatized, and Vanessa Redgrave played her.

A key aspect of autobiographical writing is the persuasion of the reader to accept the authority of the narrator. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in *Reading Autobiography*, point out that for “people who are public figures and celebrities, [...] the name itself — well known or notorious — is a kind of guarantee. It assures the reader of the

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3 See the essay by Hana Pavelková in this volume.
authority of the writer to tell his or her story, and promises that the public will find the story a credible disclosure” (27–28). While both Hare and Didion have that kind of credibility by virtue of their celebrity, this does not mean there is no dissonance between themselves and their auditors. Megson and Rebellato characterize Hare’s lecturing as a combination of “studied exposition and eviscerating polemic” (239). Describing his reception in terms that might in fact also apply to Didion, they write: “For some, his work is coolly analytical, dispassionately laying out the structure of our social life; for others, his work is full of violent accusations, political bias and deliberate provocation” (238–39). Didion, recognizing the ambivalence in her own work, has commented in the essay “Why I Write”: “In many ways writing is the act of saying I, of imposing oneself upon other people, of saying listen to me, see it my way, change your mind. It’s an aggressive, even a hostile act.”

On the first page of his text for Berlin (2009), a commentary on the changes in the city since the wall came down, David Hare remarks that in the 1970s he was booed on stage at the curtain call of one of his plays. Several pages further on he returns to this comment and embellishes it thus:

I meant to say, by the way, about the booing – I rather liked it. I didn’t mind it at all. Of course I would prefer to have been cheered – I’m not an idiot – but given that they didn’t like what I’d written – no, let’s be honest, they thought that what I’d written was not good – that being the shared assumption of what sounded like the whole audience, then booing wasn’t bad. You could get used to it. In fact, I did get used to it. I came back the following year and was booed for a different play. Eventually, I got booed all over Germany. I’d say to my agent, “I’m going to Hamburg tomorrow to be booed.” (8)

Whether you believe him or not, whether you find this witty and charming or self-indulgent and talking rot is, I think, a matter of
personal judgment. But it illustrates what I mean by suggesting ‘The “truth” is not in the narrative but in the relationship between the narrative, its mediators and its audiences.’ I found Hare’s discussion of Berlin rather offensive and full of cultural generalization about the Germans, the French, the British, but then I tend to read his photograph, too, that appears on the cover of the play, as a smirk. Others may see an open and gentle, well, ... gentleman.

In closing, I want to redirect readers to a different kind of observation about these writers, focusing on the triangulation of the three figures. Turning back to The Year of Magical Thinking, and the collaboration of Hare and Didion with Vanessa Redgrave, we can see that the surrogation of Redgrave for Didion was a brilliant move on behalf of the oscillating subject of autobiography. Redgrave, like Didion and Hare, has been an outspoken political figure and a lightening-rod for controversy particularly because of her commitment to the Palestinian cause. However, they chose Redgrave, according to Hare, because of her superlative ability to express emotions, and Didion also confirmed “she has an emotional intensity that we all thought was essential to conveying this particular piece” (Montagne).

The original memoir, described in the New York Times as “an indelible portrait of loss and grief [...] a haunting portrait of a four-decade-long marriage” (Kakutani), arguably needed someone like Redgrave to reinterpret Didion’s direct address to the audience — in order that it might get through, might invite the kind of co-production of reality that Didion and Hare would wish. Redgrave is nothing at all like Didion: tall, large-boned, while Didion is very slight. Redgrave is a technology for Didion: an appropriate embodiment for a task best carried out by someone with the same highly developed skills of style and presentation on stage that Didion displays on the page. Ben Brantley wrote in the New York Times,
“Vanessa Redgrave is Vanessa Redgrave, and she has her own means of plumbing depths. Watch, for example, the attention she gives to a bracelet on her arm, and how she develops it. It will break your heart.”

This commentary on her acting technique runs through the review; at one point Brantley suggests acting students should buy close-up seats to “observe the presence and craft that allows one woman to hold an audience’s attention for 90 uninterrupted minutes.” But I think this also indicates the distance appropriate to the piece. It breaks your heart and you observe the craft. Didion and Hare, through their interpreter, evoke the mood but also draw your attention to its construction, in this case, to the construction of the stage essay itself. Redgrave steps in for both Didion and Hare, and in filling Didion’s shoes, as Joseph Roach taught us in Cities of the Dead, both preserves and changes the performance of grief at issue. This is how surrogation works — the virtuoso performance that replaces the author and fills the space of the role, but always with a difference. Roach writes: “They [performances] raise the possibility of the replacement of the authors of the representations by those whom they imagined into existence as their definitive opposites” (6).

There is, of course, a great irony operating here. After Joan Didion’s husband died and she had written the memoir, her daughter Quintana, seriously ill at the time of the first event, also died. The play version of The Year of Magical Thinking was rewritten to include this second enormous loss. It was produced in New York and London in 2007 and 2008. And then in March 2009, Vanessa Redgrave’s daughter, the actress Natasha Richardson, died suddenly as a result of head injury in a skiing accident. A special UNICEF benefit performance of the play was postponed in light of events, but later performed in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where both John and Quintana are buried. Joan Didion and David Hare were present.
I was not present, except perhaps in my deep imagination (although I was present at performances in NYC and London). What is the point of this tale of mine? That taking the leap of faith and experiencing the oscillation of the subject of autobiography produces a reality I am pleased to affirm and to inhabit. That a certain truth is produced in the crucible between the narration, the narrator, and the auditor. It may not look anything like the inaccessible original, and that is, after all, all right. Perhaps it is more than all right, maybe it is a gift.
The Epistemology of First-Person Narrative

Works Cited

Primary Literature
Shaw, Peggy and Suzy Willson. Must: the Inside Story. ©Peggy Shaw and The Clod Ensemble, 2008. (Text of the show, sold at performances)

Secondary Literature


II. THE AMBIGUOUS FUNCTIONS OF NARRATIVE IN DRAMA

WOLFGANG FUNK

Re-Imagining England– Myths of Identity and Community in Jez Butterworth’s Jerusalem

I. The Truthfulness of Representation and the Representation of Truthfulness

It seems that stories matter again, not only in drama but in literature in general. In a special edition of the New York Times Magazine of December 1999, which probed into what the new millennium might bring, Jack Rosenthal asserted “storytelling” as one of the “millennial themes” for the 21st-century (i) and Wendy Steiner in an essay in the New York Times Book Review claims that issues of love and traditional pre-modern storytelling have replaced “metafictional fireworks” (19) as literature’s main concern nowadays. Past, apparently, are the days of self-reference and the work of art endlessly circling around its state...
as a work of art, when Alain Robbe-Grillet famously declared that “narration in the actual sense of the word has become impossible” (34). If we are prepared to follow Patrick O’Neill’s opinion that “realist texts focus on the story, modernist texts focus on the relationship between story and discourse, postmodernist texts treat the discourse as the story” (7), it would seem that realism, this long shunned category, is staging a great comeback. But is it really? Is the rise of storytelling in contemporary fiction and drama really marking the end of postmodern experimentation with form and a return to a prelapsarian world where real stories about honest people — told in a straightforward, no-nonsense, realist fashion — once again take centre stage?

Before analysing one specific case of how and to what end contemporary drama uses storytelling, let me say a few quick words on the validity of the term ‘realism’ in a dramatic context. I am talking here about realism with a decidedly lower case ‘r,’ since I want to use the term as an epistemological rather than a historical category to denote any medial representation, which is (or at least pretends to be) as close to observable reality as possible. Drama, in this regard, is both infinitely superior and inferior to prose fiction. Both are fictional in so far as they are simulations of real situations. In prose these situations are mediated indirectly by means of a narrative authority which always inevitably inserts itself between experience and representation. Drama, on the other hand, can directly and immediately present experience on stage, with the simulation occurring on the level of the speech situation which is artificially constructed. Experience in realist fiction, one could say, is always filtered through the narrative perspective and therefore once removed from real experience, while dramatic realism is entirely born of pretension and reliant on the spectator’s willingness to suspend disbelief, on the precondition of which it has the power to display real experience (cf. Fricke 451).
So when we are asked to assess the renaissance of storytelling in today's theatre, we should not lose sight of the bigger picture of literary realism and the relationship of narrative authority, truthfulness of representation and the mediation of experience. In this sense, my paper might actually be a relapse into pre-modern times as I try to make a case for Brian Richardson's statement that “[p]rior to the eighteenth century, the majority of the most interesting narrative experiments were conducted on the stage” (299). In order to substantiate this claim, I will look at one the most successful plays in recent years — Jez Butterworth's Jerusalem, which premiered at the Royal Court on 10 July 2009, before transferring to the West End's Apollo Theatre in January 2010. I will analyse the play, which Mark Lawson in the Guardian has commended as “unarguably one of the best dramas of the 21st century so far” (2 Dec 2009), not only as an example of how stories told by the play’s protagonist fuel the imagination of the audience. In addition I will also try to read this tendency in the wider context of what I would describe as a return to sincerity in literature. This move is partly brought about by the transformed relations between the production and reception of art in general, which I will argue result from the medial innovations of what is now commonly called Web 2.0. The play could indeed be much more than just “a rich, closely observed portrait of English eccentricity that is packed with affectionate humour,” as Philip Fisher's review on The British Theatre Guide-website states; it might even show us a way out of the post-dramatic identity crisis contemporary theatre has landed itself in after almost two decades of in-yer-face-action.

II. Telling Stories and Appropriating Myths — A Narrative Struggle for England
Even before *Jerusalem* begins, the audience is confronted with an image of the struggle to be played out before them, as the curtain is emblazoned with "*the faded Cross of St George*" (5), a symbol of the threadbare glory of once (supposedly) proud traditions, which are personified in the play’s protagonist. At first glance, Johnny — nickname ‘Rooster’— Byron is an unlikely figure of narrative authority and if *Jerusalem* were a novel, he would be a classic case of a most unreliable narrator. His name already situates him awkwardly in-between the roles of mythical (Byronic) hero and self-important braggard and the play draws much of its fascination from the fact that both Johnny’s friends and the audience are to the very end not able to tell which of his Janus faces is the real thing. Habitually drunk, compulsively abusive and vulgar, he resides in a trailer in the woods near the fictional village of Flintock somewhere in the English heartland of old Wessex between Bristol, Oxford, Winchester and Swindon. He is quite clearly a person of the past and the first scene sets up what seems to be the principal conflict of the play — that between tradition and change, between what I would call ‘the lay of the land’ and the decrees of contemporary society. Representative of the latter are Fawcett and Parsons, two officers for Kennet and Avon Council who are not to be envied for their job of notifying Mr. Byron about the imminent removal of his “Unauthorized Encampment” (8), which is to give way to a new housing development. The clearing in the wood on which Rooster Byron lives becomes the battleground

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1 The prologue also quite literally sets the tone for the confrontation between long-established notions of Englishness and their absorption by and into contemporary discourses: Phaedra, who as last year’s May Queen represents the rule of tradition, appears in front of the curtain singing Blake’s “Jerusalem,” this quintessential hymn to ‘England’s pleasant pastures.’ The apparent ideal is cruelly cut short, however, by the onset of thumping basses and drums, which chase her away.
between old and new, between the enchanted wood full of the “lost gods of England” (18), as the Professor in the play puts it and the new estate, threatening to destroy the forest and sacrifice its mythical and mythological significance on the altar of property development, uniformity and economic growth.

Rooster Byron, however, is not going to take this lying down. When he first appears from his trailer “Wiry, Weathered; drinker’s mug. Bare chest. Helmet. Goggles. Loudhailer” (9), he basically raises two fingers to authority telling them that “Rooster Byron ain’t going nowhere. Happy St George’s Day. Now kiss my beggar arse, you Puritans!” (9). In his spirited defence against the council, he summons various markers of traditional Englishness, fashioning himself not only as the spiritus loci of this particular spot of South Wiltshire but of all England. This self-fashioning as the stalwart of Ye Olde Albion is further accentuated by the setting, as the stage directions inform us that his mobile home flies the old banner of Wessex and is adorned with the railway sign ‘Waterloo,’ symbols of successful endeavours to keep Albion without the reach of foreign influence. His association with and indeed rootedness in tradition is further emphasised in a later encounter with the character Wesley, whom he advises to “tell Sue’s brother Jim to tell all his South Wiltshire bandits and all them fuckers on the New Estate that this wood is called Rooster’s Wood. I’ve been here since before all you bent busybody bastards were born. I’m heavy stone, me. You try and pick me up, I’ll break your spine” (45). And despite the seeming hollowness of his intimidations, there seems to be more to Rooster Byron than meets the eye: His spirited if rather uncouth declaration that “comes a time you’d swap it all for a solid golden piss on English soil” is accompanied by (so the stage directions inform us) “A hundred distant voices” (10) singing the traditional Padstow morning song “With a merry ring, adieu the
merry spring,” suggesting that the voices of the past seem indeed to have united behind Rooster Byron.

The showdown between tradition and progress, between folklore and profit, is at this point delayed or to be more precise deferred to another battlefield, as the big topic of the day in Flintock is the Flintock Fair. Disguised as a celebration of village and national identity, this is in actual fact no more than a corporate attempt at reappropriating markers of said identities in the name of commerce and saleability. Butterworth reveals the hollowness of this arrangement in a dialogue between Johnny and his sidekick Ginger, which I want to quote at some length:

GINGER: It’s all go in Flintock. Trestle tables. Hot-dog vans...Bunting. Bumper cars. Whirler-swirler. Floats are all lined up in Garner’s Field. There’s a Lord of the Ring float, kids done up as hobbits, orcs...whatnot...fuckin’ what’s-his-name. Randolph.

JOHNNY: Gandalf.

GINGER: That’s the one. There’s a George and the Dragon. Men in Black II. Crown and Goose have gone X Factor. Same as last year. I say, make a bloody effort. Although old Roger Pyle done up as Sharon Osbourne is genuinely unsettling.

JOHNNY: Where’s my money then?

GINGER: Tough. I’d say fifty-fifty between the birds from the gym as St Trinian’s. Stockings. Suzzies. Whole shooting match. Bloody lush...And the lads from the rugby club all turned out as golliwogs. Steel drums. Frizzy hair. Bit offensive but it’s all for charity. (19f.)

Ginger himself provides an insightful interpretation of this clash of cultures that is the fair: He enters the stage singing along with the final stanza of the Padstow morning song, which he seamlessly follows up with a rap on the Fair:

It’s the fair, it’s the Flintock Fair.
It’s the motherfucking Flintock Fair.
It’s the fair, it’s the Flintock Fair.
It’s shit. But you love it. (11)

As the pinnacle of this sorry display stands Wesley, the landlord of the local pub, and member of the ‘Flintock Men.’ He is dressed up for the occasion as ‘Barley Sword Bearer’ and describes his task at the fair as follows: The brewery, he says,

have this big cake with loads of bottles of brandy, Tia Maria, advocaat, whatever they can’t shift, all that in it. I cut the cake and distribute it among the womenfolk. It’s bollocks, really. Basically, it connotes fertility and the hunt. [...] It’s the brewery’s idea. They’ve got right behind the fair this year. Point-of-sale material. T-shirts. Flintock men. Special ale. (35)

Ginger contrasts this free-wheeling consumerism with memories of former glory: “When I was a boy there was this big fucking farmer, right, and you paid ten pence to take a run-up and hoof him in the bollocks. If you brung him to his knees, you won a pound” (32). The lines of battle are set now and what is at stake, it would seem, is the interpretative authority over the use of the markers of (collective) identity. In one corner, we have the worshippers of Mammon, represented by a) the local council, eager to transform the native countryside into property, and b) the organisers and participants of the Fair, who make an event of tradition — an event which has at its heart nothing but superficial pleasure-seeking and corporate interest. In the opposing corner, we have Rooster Byron, heavy as stone, rooted to the spot and making a stand for the mystery and irreducibility of the real against the simulation of corporate enterprise. In this enterprise, he is supported by a rather motley bunch of airheads and loiterers, who in themselves — by dint of the apparent failure of their existence and their fatalistic acceptance of and even indulgence in it — could be said to undermine a quintessentially English myth. Apart from Ginger, there is the Professor, who stumbles through the forest
looking for his dog (although he may have lost more than just her) and disseminating samples of traditional lore like: "It is an Englishman’s duty at the first scent of May to make the turf his floor, his roof the arcing firmament. And his clothes the leaves and branches of the glade" (51). On entering the stage for the first time, the Professor — like Johnny and Ginger — provides his own variation on the theme of the exploitation of traditions, when he sings Henry Farley’s song “Money’s Worth” (1621), which enumerates the sights and sounds of a 17th-century fair. Gathered also on the clearing are Lee and Davey, who between them cover the spectrum from radical autochthony (Davey: “I leave Wiltshire, my ears pop” 24), to emigration (Lee is off to Australia the next morning on a quest to find his real self), and the local girls Pea and Tanya.

The glue that binds this awkward lot to Rooster Byron is (apart from the abundance of all sorts of drugs at his parties) their desire for stories, stories which might justify or explain their station in life. In the mythical environs of Rooster’s Wood, the private myths that all of them spin to make sense of their existence seem to attain a higher level of likelihood. Ginger, for example, acts as the successful DJ he imagines himself to be rather than the unemployed plasterer he really is (16); Lee is given a grand farewell as a “son of this vale, born of this

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2 In order to accommodate the song to the topic of the day, the Professor ends the song with a line of his own “All this upon St George’s Day!” (15). While this seems adequate enough, the original ending of the song would lend itself even more suitably to commenting on the abuse of tradition in the name of commerce, as they read:

There goes the bounty of our age:
But unto any pious motion
There’s little coin and less devotion. (Carrington 13)
soil [...] tomorrow sets sail on a voyage to the far side of the world,” and the Professor relates the glorious story of St George (83f), albeit only to himself. Fleeing to the woods means an escape from the reality of everyday life, to a place of primeval language and traditions but also of self-determination and dream, where both ancient and contemporary myths ring true more easily than in the mundane world of the Flintock Fair and the New Estate. When the Professor proposes a toast “To Titania. To Woden’s Wild Hunt. To the blossom and the May-come, St George, and all the lost gods of England!” (18), he in fact gives voice to this nostalgia for an antediluvian paradise steeped in myth and folklore. In this regard, when Rooster smashes up his TV set with a Cricket bat (21), this can be read as a powerful image of the struggle of English culture (cricket) against the stupefying and levelling influence of the global entertainment industry.

In keeping with this archaic economy of desire and ontology, Rooster Byron rules as an absolute monarch over all he surveys. Ginger rather comically introduces the theme of royalty when he reminisces how Johnny had “come barrelling out [of the local pub] in your birthday suit waving your crown jewels around” (13 emphasis added). Yet, Johnny’s self-stylisation as King of the Forest is not all in jest. His speech to the “minions of his country” (50) is a call to arms against the usurpers of folklore, the archaic language a desperate attempt to wrest the signifiers of national heritage from the interpretative authority of commerce and entertainment:

*Make merry. For tonight, like a flaming flock of snakes, we will storm Flintock Village and burn every house, shop and farm. We will behead the Mayor, Imprison the Rotary Club, Pillage the pubs! Rob the tombola! And whip into a whirlwind a roughhead army of unwashed, unstable, unhinged, friendless, penniless, baffled berserkers what haunt that Godforsaken town, and together, snout by jowl, we will rise up and ride on Salisbury, Marlborough, Devizes, Calne, until the whole plain of Wiltshire dances to the tune of our misrule.* (52)
The misrule he invokes is not merely anarchic, though, as Rooster seems to have a clear idea of how to restore the traditional signifiers of national identity to significance, and that is by personalising and actively engaging with them (rather than passively consuming them): “In a thousand years, Englanders will awake this day and bow their heads and wonder at the genius, guts and guile of the Flintock Rebellion. Davey Dean will be on a ten-pence coin. Lee Piper will be on a plinth in Trafalgar Square. Tanya Crawley and Pea Gibbons will have West End musicals written for them” (52).

In a way, of course, this utopian design — like all the stories bandied about in Rooster’s Wood — does not amount to more than the deluded fantasies of a madman, the hallucinations of omnipotence in the dispossessed with no more relevance than Johnny’s stories about partying with Girls Aloud (12), or his portrait being commissioned for the National Portrait Gallery (18). These are tales, it would seem, “told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (Macbeth V. 5). And there are even several rational explanations for Rooster’s idiosyncratic take on reality. His hyperactive imagination is apparently fuelled by too much drink and too many spliffs and seriously impaired by his near-fatal crash (he used to be a daredevil motorcycle artist) at the Flintock Fair in 1981. And yet, all is not as it seems. His stories, it turns out, are perhaps much more than just gibberish. They can be read as the last stand for the reality of myth and indeed a path for an endangered variety of

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3 This recalls Antony Gormley’s project One and Other, which in the summer of 2009 turned the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square into a stage on which members of the public could turn themselves into works of art. This project serves as a poignant example of a new aesthetics in the arts in general, based on and indeed consisting in the active involvement of the consumer. See the conclusion to this essay for a more detailed account.
English self-representation (which for want of a better word could indeed be called ‘culture’), aiming at penetrating the stultifying displays of simulated tradition that capitalism and the event culture of today have reduced it to. With this in mind, I will now look at the two most outrageous stories Rooster relates.

III. The Birth of Truthfulness from the Spirit of Exaggeration

Act 2 of Jerusalem opens with Johnny’s exuberant claim that “my mother was a virgin when she bore me” (48). What follows is a story of how his mother was inseminated via a bullet which had lodged in her womb after being fired through the testicles of Johnny’s wayward and philandering father, which led to Johnny being born with “a bullet clenched between his teeth” (48). He obviously fashions himself in the role of another famous son of virgin birth, whose stories of immaculate conception and resurrection from death are strikingly similar to and — taken at face value — at least as outlandish as Byron’s, and his very first exchange with his mother can be taken as a veritable mission statement: “This one — me — he sits up,” so he claims, “wipes the dew from his eyes and calls, ‘Mother, what is this dark place?’ And she replies, ‘Tis England, my boy. England’” (49). A concern with the question of territorial and national identity seems to be his primum movens from the word go. Rather expectedly, this tale

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4 When Ginger recounts to Davey the events of Johnny’s failed motorcycle stunt of the Flintock Fair of 1981, some of his words are taken directly from the Resurrection of Christ, as related by John 20, 1–10: “St. John’s [the ambulance, but obviously a broad hint towards the Bible,] put a blanket over him. Paperwork, everything. All the mums are crying, how they should build a statue to him in the town square, when suddenly everyone turns round and he’s gone. He’s vanished. There’s just a blanket with nothing under it” (32). Unlike Jesus, however, the first thing Johnny does after his resurrection, is to go straight to the pub.
provokes disbelief among his followers and the audience, which he effectively dispels by producing what he claims to be the bullet in question. Capitalising on the surprise this elicits, he then addresses his faithful with a speech asserting that “this day we draw a line in the chalk, and push back hard against the bastard pitiless busybody council, and drive them from this place for ever” (50). As with the gospel, the stories secure their effect not through their confirmed veracity but through their power to suspend disbelief. Johnny very effectively fashions himself (and is in part fashioned by the others) as the messiah of the good old times, when stories were born from tradition, sometimes indeed signifying nothing, but were at least not yet cannibalised by forces of greed and corruption.

Johnny’s attempt to present his struggle in the guise of a Christian crusade of the truly faithful against the heathens of corporate business eventually fails. He is abandoned by his friends, who piss on him when he is asleep (82) and capture the scene on their mobile phones, an act symbolic not only of the selfish nature of their involvement with Johnny but also of their implication in the world of corporate entertainment. His family, in the shape of his ex-wife Dawn, who has opted for the security of a settled life, and his son Marky have also left him. Ultimately left to his own devices, he falls back on the power of myth. One of the tales he told before concerns a giant, whom Johnny claims to have met when he, the giant, was in the process of building Stonehenge. This giant gave him a golden drum with the accompanying advice: “If you ever get in any bother, or you need a hand, just bang this drum and us, the giants, we’ll hear it and we’ll come” (58). This drum, like the bullet of the nativity story, Johnny produces on stage to great dramatic effect (61). Both of these symbols can be seen as a tangible connection, a shortcut almost, to the realm of myth — a trace of the real, in Derridean terms, as they pierce the shroud of referentiality, the simulation and dissimulation of meaning.
(constituted by the hyper-real spectacle of the fair), which threatens to suffocate myth’s power of signifying in a world bereft of any transcendent consciousness. It is congruous then that the drum provides the soundtrack for the ultimate stand of the old world. In the final scene of the play, Byron returns to his role as the personified spirit of place, when he asserts (himself) that “I seen lots of ghosts. I seen women burn love letters. Men dig holes in the dead of night. I seen a young girl walk down here in the cold dawn, take her clothes off, wrap her arms round a broad beech tree and give birth to a baby boy. I seen first kisses. Last kisses. I seen all the world pass by and go” (102). At the same time he acknowledges that “I’m Johnny Byron. I’m nobody’s friend” (106). He sets fire to his trailer, thereby ultimately fulfilling its symbolic status both as a Christian (‘Ashes to Ashes’) and heathen (‘Back to Nature’) residue, curses the local council and sits down to bang the drum and invoke the spirits of England (including Jack-of-Green, Galligantus and Brutus of Albion), culminating in the incantatory battle cry: “Come you drunken spirits. Come, you battalions. You fields of ghosts who walk these green plains still. Come, you giants!” (109). With his drumming getting ever louder and more penetrating and eventually reverberating all through the theatre, signalling the advent of the army of giants, the curtain comes down and the audience are left wondering if there might not indeed be a huge host of mythical notions, waiting, as it were, in the off of the symbolic order (like the voices singing the Padstow morning song), ready to do battle against the false world of corporate capital and entertainment culture, which have assumed the authority over storytelling in our times.

It would be an unfair simplification, however, to read Jerusalem only as a nostalgic invocation of England’s past and a threnody for the loss of transcendence. Not only is Rooster Byron a highly problematic figure; the mythological arsenal from which he assembles his version
of what constitutes England is ultimately quite as arbitrary and strategic, and thereby inauthentic, as that from which the organisers of the fair take their cues.5 There might still be a fundamental difference, albeit one that defies proper representation in the traditional framework of signification. Myth and folklore in their traditional sense have, or so it would seem, lost once and for all their power of generating valid categories for collective identification. They are utilised and abused by the forces of capitalism to either figure as an empty vehicle for commercial enterprise or as an equally insignificant, as in not relevant in everyday life, hoard of quotations (as with the Professor) or arcane knowledge. The latter is symbolised by Johnny Byron being able to answer all Trivial Pursuit questions (some of them without even hearing the question) except the really significant one, which in this case is: “Who wrote the words to the popular hymn 'Jerusalem'?” (78). The question, however, of what will arise from the ruins of these shattered categories (which are in some

5 Similar questions about the authenticity of national identification in an age of simulation and the difficulty of representing a genuinely English identity (as opposed to Welsh or Scottish) are addressed in Julian Barnes's novel England England (1998), in which a theme-park (called 'England England' and set on the Isle of Wight) reconstitutes in outward form and function the signifiers of traditional Englishness (from Big Ben to 'warm beer' and from the Royal Family to 'emotional frigidity,' cf. the now famous list of 50 Quintessences of Englishness, 83–85) as part of an postmodern enterprise motivated purely by commercial interest. The attempt to rebuild the old England (rechristened 'Anglia') along the lines of a pre-modern, pre-capitalist agenda based on local customs and personal interaction is itself eventually no more than a simulation of community life, with the participants merely impersonating roles in their own theme-park; for a more thorough analysis of the simulation of national identity in England England, cf. Bentley (2007), Daniels (1993), Head (2006), Mergenthal (2003) and Nünning (2001).
sense coextensive with what we have come to call 'postmodernism'), is still very open. Both Jerusalem and Julian Barnes’s novel England England seem to imply that out there somewhere just beyond the pale of representation there remains a residue or trace of a more transcendental form of reference/reverence, based on belief, truthfulness and uncertainty rather than knowledge, truth and positivism. This “other thinking of knowledge” (Derrida 34) is necessarily always already beyond the scope of collective representation and can only come into its own in the imagination of the individual. Coincidentally, both Jerusalem and England England attempt to symbolise this promise of transcendence and authenticity in the figure of the May Queen. In Barnes she represents the possible beginning of a new tradition in Anglia, which — though born from simulation — is definitely more authentic in spirit than the capitalist venture across the Solvent. In Jerusalem, the significance of the May Queen is much more complex. On an abstract level, she represents the ultimate symbol of innocent mythology, an iconicity emphasised by her name Phaedra, Greek for ‘bright, shining.’ When she sings “Jerusalem” at the start of the play, she incorporates and incants a message from a mythical time when — in Blake’s words — ‘the Countenance Divine’ did ‘shine forth upon our clouded hills.’ It is therefore only consequent that Johnny Byron hides her in his trailer to protect her from being commercially abused (by the makers of the Fair) and physically abused (by her stepfather). She is, however, also a real girl, aged 15 whose stay with Byron alone in his mobile home carries with it a powerful whiff of impropriety. The fact that Phaedra eventually runs away to return her title at the fair and that Johnny is beaten up savagely by her stepfather is maybe not more than just another hint at the potential dangers of confusing reality and metaphor, the signifier and the signified. It is also, however, a telling achievement of Butterworth’s play that we cannot fully endorse
Phaedra’s leaving Johnny’s enchanted forest to return to the real world, where she will probably fulﬁl her mythological namesake’s tragic fortune.

IV. In-Yer-Brain Theatre — An Aesthetics of Transcendence and Mutuality

So what exactly are the spirits that are invoked by the renaissance of storytelling on stage? The answers provided in Jerusalem are ambiguous. The tall tales told by Johnny Byron conjure up notions of a pre-industrial, indeed pre-modern age of mythical autochthony. They are permeated by traces of a lost but longed-for realm of the real (in a Lacanian sense), to mend the hyper-symbolic gashes which capitalism and event culture have slashed into the fabric of contemporary group identiﬁcation.\(^6\) They can be seen as romantic, even nostalgic in nature, a whistling, as it were, in the dark of post-industrial exploitation and post-representational arbitrariness. While the interpretative implications of this on the level of what is represented on stage are deliberately left open, I would argue that Butterworth’s aesthetic approach might incidentally help to redeﬁne the role of the theatre by reconstituting the parameters of showing and telling on stage, or in other words, by redeﬁning dramatic realism.

\(^6\) The scope of this essay prevents a more thorough reading of Jerusalem along Marxist lines. In this vein, Mark Rylance, in an interview with Andrew Marr, puts forward the view that the contemporary interconnection between government and corporate money was the major topic of the play (cf. Crooks).
for the 21st-century.\textsuperscript{7} We look back on nearly two decades of post-dramatic, In-Yer-Face Theatre, which have produced, I would argue, a hyper-realist aesthetics of presence based on the structural power of the author, who remains the interpretative authority of the action displayed and who (with a slight nod to Aleks Sierz) shocks and awes the audience into confronting the events played out before them. Both Butterworth and Martin McDonagh introduce a level of abstraction into their plays by relegating significant plot elements to the realm of mediated (as opposed to ‘in-yer-face’) experience, thereby once removing them from the actuality of events on stage. This shift of plot advancement onto a meta-level comes along with an increased involvement of the audience in the interpretative process of what actually happens on stage. The decision about how real Byron’s tales are is eventually delegated to the audience, and it is this renunciation of dramatic authority on the side of the author which, to my mind, could point the way towards a new aesthetics in theatre. Through the displacement of action from stage to the imagination of the characters, this aesthetics paradoxically manages to include the

\textsuperscript{7} Cf. my article on Martin McDonagh’s The Pillowman (Funk 199–207) for the analysis of a play which similarly uses the narrative authority of the protagonists, the brothers Katurian, to question the representational capacity of drama, while at the same time interpellating the audience’s cooperation in resolving (or maybe just accepting) the meta-dramatic aporiae of mediated experience. Cf. also Kurdi (2006) and H. Worthen and W.B. Worthen (2006).
imagination of the audience into the signifying process itself. This approach, which might or might not be called ‘in-yer-brain’ theatre, could eventually even overcome drama’s postmodern unease about plot by transforming the role of the recipient into that of a ‘prosumer’ of plot (for the origin of this term, cf. Toffler 277). This could in turn be read as a necessary readjustment to the rise of reflexive and integrative media formats in the so-called Web 2.0 but might also hint at a much deeper, and indeed time-honoured, function of the theatre, namely that of exaggerating individual experience to arrive at transcendent collective perceptions.

Returning finally to the question of realism, it seems obvious that any realist agenda worth its salt must in all forms of literature reflect the post-representational state of the arts. In prose fiction, there have been attempts to enhance the truthfulness (as opposed to the truth) of representation by way of laying open the process of literary creation (as in recent meta-fictional texts by Bret Easton Ellis, Dave Eggers or David Foster Wallace). While some of these attempts may indeed result in what Adam Kelly (2010) calls a ‘New Sincerity’ in fiction, any claim to a realistic representation must inevitably fail as the intervention of a narrative authority (however fragmented, humble or self-deprecating this may be) automatically imposes an insurmountable barrier between reality and its representation.

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8 Insofar as the involvement of the audience’s imagination or background knowledge (as with the various songs and poems quoted in Jerusalem) is on a fictitious and implicit level, this development could be seen as the aesthetic, not to say philosophical, complement to the use of ‘real’ stories in documentary theatre (as presented in this volume by Bignell/Paget/Sutherland/Taylor, Weidle and Rubik) or the direct and explicit involvement of audiences as in recent productions by Rimini Protokoll (Sicherheitskonferenz 2009), Coney (A Small Town Anywhere 2009) or Neil LaBute (Reasons to be Pretty 2009).
Dramatic performances, as already demonstrated in the introduction to this essay, do not suffer from this structural impediment and can immediately address the audience and integrate them into the process of making sense. Realism is no longer created on stage with a view to collective expectations of reality; it is assembled rather in-between stage and audience in a reciprocal process, where the text provides stories the truthfulness and 'realism' of which has to be authenticated by the individual members of the audience.
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A Form of Ethics: The Disrupted and Misappropriated Story in the Monodramas of Mark Ravenhill

“This paper will explore the politics of disrupted and misappropriated narratives in Mark Ravenhill’s monodramas Product and The Experiment. These texts, in which a single speaker tells the audience a story, were of initial interest to me because in the original productions of both (The Experiment at Southwark Playhouse in October 2009 and Product at the Traverse in August 2005) the role of the speaker was performed by Ravenhill himself. Watching Ravenhill perform in both pieces, I had the distinct sense of him performing himself, the writer, engaged in the process of constructing a story for us, and highlighting for us the shortcomings of this process of dramatic narration. I found myself reading both performances as moments in which the writer, Ravenhill, was commenting on the process of narration itself.”
The subject matter of both of these monodramas concerns harmful acts. In *The Experiment*, we are told the story of a man who finds himself involved in some experiments on children, while in *Product* we are told the story of a suicide bomber. This paper will argue that both these monodramas can be read as questioning the commonly held assumption that the dramatic narrative has value to society because it is a medium through which we can come to understand both other people and the reasons for any harmful actions they commit. It will position the dramatic narrative as a structure which society utilises to judge the acceptability or unacceptability of people's actions and examine the idea that the narration of a harmful act makes it more acceptable to us. It analyses the ways in which the process of narration in the Western dramatic narrative, rather than enabling us to see the world through the eyes of Others, reconfigures the actions of Others within a viewpoint that is entirely our own.

I. Narrative and the Acceptability of Actions

Lyotard states that the narrative process can be seen as one of the ways in which a society determines legitimacy of certain actions. Narratives “define what has a right to be said and done in the culture in question” (Lyotard 23). Lyotard positions narrative as a form of knowledge. Knowledge, he argues, is not purely a set of denotative statements of what may be considered true or false. Knowledge also includes the notion of competence, of ‘knowing how’ — for example ‘knowing how to live.’ As such, the concept of knowledge is not purely denotative, but is also prescriptive and evaluative. Narrative is a form of knowledge, not only because it contains denotative statements of what is and what is not, but more importantly because it defines a set of criteria of competence. Narrative can be seen as transmitting the knowledge of ‘how to live.’ The hero of a narrative’s actions represents
A Form of Ethics

...
elections in the mid 1970s. Edgar states that “[t]he reason for making the fascists recognisable, and treating them seriously as human beings, was precisely in order to say to the anti-fascist movement, ‘You’ve got to understand these people. You’ve got to understand how it works — and this is how it works’” (Wu 123). Edgar is arguing that if we can understand the socio-psychological factors that draw a person towards fascism, then we can understand how to combat fascism more effectively. In broader terms, if we can see the world from a character’s point of view, it can help us to understand the factors that have caused the character to perform a specific unacceptable action or set of actions. By following a character through a chain of causation which ultimately leads them to commit an ‘evil’ act, we can see how under a similar set of circumstances we, too, might choose the same path and commit the same act: a sense of “there but for the grace of God go I” (Edgar, “In Defence of Evil”).

Edgar proposes another way in which the dramatic narrative has social value. It enables us to see the world through the eyes of the Other. By enabling us to do this, dramatic narrative, he suggests, may be a useful tool in the resolution of conflict: “Drama trains human beings in the unique skill of looking at themselves as if through other eyes. No surprise, then, that it is such a vital tool in working out how we can live together.” The dramatist is thus able “to invite the audience to see the world he creates from competing perspectives” (Edgar, “Making Drama Out of Crisis”). The actions of Others which we would find unacceptable at first glance, become more acceptable when they are narrated. The dramatic narrative universalises the Other, so that we can discover our equal status as human beings. Again the socio-psychological causes for the actions of Others are revealed to us and we see we, too, might commit similar actions, if we lived under similar circumstances. Therefore we are able to resolve our conflicts with Others, as we are trained to see the world from
their viewpoint, as well as our own.

In the field of social psychology, the relationship between narrative and the acceptability of the actions it narrates is presented as highly problematic. In their exploration of this relationship, Arthur G. Miller, Anne K. Gordon and Amy M. Buddie note the large number of books offering accounts of real incidents of harmdoing that begin with a preface in which the writer of the account expresses a concern that to narrate these harmful actions is to somehow make the actions of those involved more acceptable to us. For example, at the beginning of his account of how a battalion of German reserve policemen were transformed into mass murderers during the second world war, the historian Christopher Browning offers the following disclaimer for the possible effects of the narratisation of their actions:

The policemen in the battalion who carried out the massacres and deportations, like the much smaller number who refused or evaded, were human beings. I must recognise that in the same situation, I could have either been a killer or an evader – both were human – if I want to understand and explain the behaviour of both as best I can. This recognition does indeed mean an attempt to empathize. What I do not accept, however, are the old clichés that to explain is to excuse, to understand is to forgive. Explaining is not excusing; understanding is not forgiving. (Browning xviii)

Miller et al. conducted a series of experiments in which they aimed at determining if Browning’s concern, the idea that to explain is to condone, had any actual validity. In one experiment, the participants were asked to read one of a selection of descriptions of a harmful act, for example rape or domestic violence. The participants were then asked to respond to a series of judgment items, such as how forgivable or understandable the harmful act was. Half the participants responded after writing a narrative explanation of the situation and half responded immediately. The participants who had written the
narrative explanation first were significantly more likely to see the harmful act as justified or caused by the external situation. They were less likely to label the perpetrator as evil. They were more forgiving and more lenient on the issue of punishment. Miller et al. concluded from these experiments that the act of narration, either as a producer or receiver of the narrative, led to a more condoning attitude.

The study suggests that the act of narration tends to focus the subject on the socio-psychological conditions under which the perpetrator committed the harmful act. This creates a strong impression “(a) that the perpetrators are, to an important degree, not personally responsible for their actions and (b) that the reader (of the explanation), were he or she in the same situation, might be highly susceptible to the same actions as the perpetrators” (Miller, Gordon, and Buddie 266). The more complex and extended the act of narration, the more likely they found it was that a condoning attitude would be produced in the writer or the reader. When the act was presented without an accompanying narration, the tendency of the subject was to focus on a dispositional causal perspective, “attributing harmdoing to the perpetrator’s personal character” (Miller, Gordon, and Buddie 266). Miller et al. point out that both types of casual perspective are highly problematic. One does not offer a better viewpoint on a harmful act than the other. The dispositional perspective distances the subject from acknowledging their own proclivity towards negative social behaviours, while the socio-psychological perspective is unacceptable as it could be seen as offering a way of condoning any action, no matter how harmful. The dramatic narrative can be seen as problematic as it offers a highly socio-psychological causal perspective. When a harmful act is framed within this perspective the attitude produced is more likely to be condoning, even if the playwright’s intention is otherwise.
II. The Experiment

Ravenhill’s recent monodrama *The Experiment* can be read as an attempt to legitimate a harmful action through narrative. The monologue tells the story of someone or some people involved with scientific experiments on a child or some children, which are being conducted in the hope of finding a cure for an incurable disease. At the beginning of the piece the speaker pleads “Please god: help me to remember” (*The Experiment* 2), indicating that what follows is an attempt to put into narrative a set of crucially important events surrounding a harmful action in which the speaker was involved. The narrative that the speaker produces for us, however, is extremely disrupted, past the point of comprehension. The speaker is unable to deliver a dramatic narrative which meets the audience’s expectation of being told a coherent story.

Dramatic narrative is traditionally divided into two elements, plot and story. In simple terms, story is thought of as a chronological sequence of events, while plot is the selection and organisation of these events within a dramatic text: “Whilst story consists in the purely chronologically arranged succession of events and occurrences, the plot already contains important structural elements, such as causal and other kinds of meaningful relationships” (Pfister 197). Aristotle instructs playwrights that they “should not compose a tragedy out of a body of material which would serve for an epic” (30). When writing a play playwrights are traditionally seen as starting with an original or known story, and then constructing the plot of their play by selecting events from the original story and organising them into dramatic form. The playwright assumes that the audience will be able to infer the original story from the plot: “story provides the foundation underlying […] every dramatic text” (Pfister 196). The spectators are expected to use their existing knowledge of dramatic
narrative to reconstruct the story for themselves. Similarly, as Brian Richardson states, our expectation as a member of the audience is that “a self-consistent, unitary story will always be able to be inferred from the events presented, regardless of the sequence of their presentation” (59).

The audience’s role, however, in generating the story from the plot is more active than is sometimes assumed. Keir Elam points out that the audience do not receive the dramatic narrative complete, but rather they play a vital role in its construction, particularly in the construction of story.

The spectator is called upon not only to employ a specific dramatic competence (supplementing his theatrical competence and involving knowledge of the generic and structural principles of the drama) but also to work hard and continuously at piecing together into a coherent structure the partial and scattered bits of dramatic information that he receives from different sources. The effective construction of the dramatic world and its events is the result of the spectator’s ability to impose order upon a dramatic content whose expression is in fact discontinuous and incomplete. (88–89).

The story is not something that exists as a consistent given beneath the dramatic text, rather it is an individualised construct within the mind of the spectator. Each member of the audience uses the incomplete information that they are given in the plot to build a story to which the plot refers. Obviously, all the stories constructed from one plot will not be identical, as each spectator brings their own experience to bear on this process. The story is an individual hypothesis created to explain how the elements of the plot relate to each other. Story is not a non-textual given, but rather “the structure of invariable relations shared by everyone of its existing or hypothetical versions” (Pfister 197).
Jonathan Culler explains the process by which story is constructed from plot with reference to the assumption of Oedipus’s guilt in Sophocles’s *Oedipus Rex*. He argues that Oedipus’s guilt is a narrative construction as opposed to a definite fact. The witness to the murder of Laius reports that a band of robbers committed it, and Oedipus sends for the witness to confirm his testimony. As Oedipus recognises:

If he says the same,
Still calls them robbers, I'm in the clear.
One man is not a group of men.
Plural is plural, not singular.
But if he describes a single traveller
Walking alone, then quite obviously
All the evidence will point to me. (Sophocles 36)

But before the witness has a chance to recount his testimony, Oedipus decides that he is guilty of the murder based on other facts — the revelation that he is Laius and Jocasta’s son, and the Oracle’s prophecy. Oedipus takes the plot elements he is given and constructs the most logical story to connect them: “His conclusion is based [...] on the force of meaning, the interweaving of prophecies and the demands of narrative coherence” (Culler 174). This story convinces him of his own guilt, but his guilt is not a proven fact. It is a narrative construction. The chance that Oedipus might be innocent is never actually dispelled. The witness of Laius’s murder never confirms if it was a single man or a group of men who killed the king. Like Oedipus, the spectators watching a play bridge incidents whose connection is not clear, fill in gaps in the action and work to build a coherent story from the scraps of information they are fed in the plot. To summarise, story is “a paraphrase of a pseudo-narrative kind, made, for example, by a spectator or a critic in recounting the ‘story’ of the drama” (Elam 108).
The Experiment presents us with a series of plot elements which both suggest the possibility of a coherent story while making it impossible to form a coherent story from them. The plot elements feel as if they should be connected because they belong to the same dramatic world. The objects described within the narrative act as concrete referents. The presence of a “bed,” a “house,” (The Experiment 2) a “garden,” and a “fence” (3) indicate a naturalistic frame to this story. We are in a world that we recognise. The everyday nature of the objects indicates a familiar space. Often the text offers us only the broadest description of these objects, using simple adjectives. The house in which the characters lived is “big” and “old”. The child’s room is “lovely” (2). The lack of specificity allows the audience a wide scope to imagine the objects as they choose. The object becomes a template onto which the audience can project images from their own experience. The house, for instance, could be a cottage in a Welsh village, a terrace in South London, a Barrett house on a suburban estate. At the same time, the lack of specificity allows the audiences to make connections between the sections of the text. The house which is repeatedly mentioned, could be conceived of as being a single house, or the story could refer to many different houses. It is both one house and every house. The spectator is able to connect these mundane unspecific everyday objects into a concrete individualised image of the world in which the action is taking place.

Whilst the text allows us to make connections between the objects mentioned in it, at the same time it constantly contradicts itself. The sentences of the text themselves contain contradictory compound phrases. The neighbour’s response to the experiments is “sarcastic mocking teasing furious understanding.” The weather is “hot rain” (The Experiment 5). The time span is “two three six months years” (4). Where an object is described in specific terms, its description is frequently protean. The image of the house alters every time it is
referred to. Its size expands and contracts continually. At first the house is “modest,” then it is a “great big manor” house, next it is “cramped” (2), then “big” (4) again and so on. It becomes difficult to maintain a constant picture of the house and thus of the social status of the speaker. The exact socio-economic conditions under which the speaker is making his decisions are unclear, so it becomes difficult to explain the speaker’s actions in terms of their situational causality. This sense of contradiction is also present in the description of the speaker’s actions. At times we are presented with three possible actions in response to one event, as if several possible choices of action exist at the same point in time. For example, when asked about whether he will agree to the experiments, the speaker states that I:

- Was totally opposed
- I understood immediately
- I was dumbstruck, didn’t know what to do (The Experiment 3)

All three actions exist as possibilities in the audience’s mind, but there is no indication of which action represents the narrator’s actual response. It is impossible to determine the narrator’s actual actions in response to the situation he found himself in. Thus it is very difficult to judge the speaker in socio-psychological terms. We know neither the exact circumstances of the situation he found himself in, nor the exact way in which he responded to it.

In *The Experiment*, Ravenhill disrupts the dramatic narrative by making it difficult for the spectators to successfully apply their usual strategies for constructing the story of the play from its plot. In order to create any single coherent version of the story, the spectators are forced to make a tiny selection from a large set of possible events. There is a failure of narrative processes, both in the audience’s reading of the monologue and in the narrator’s own attempts to narrate his experience. This disruption of the dramatic narrative means that the
speaker is denied the possibility of explaining the experiments on the children in socio-psychological terms, and the audience too is denied the possibility of understanding them in this way. This failure to explain the experiments in terms of socio-psychological causation suggests that this harmful act lies beyond the bounds of acceptability. There is an implication that the events the narrator refers to lie outside Lyotard’s criteria of competence, which define what it is right to do within our culture.

III. Product

In Product, Ravenhill’s speaker is a film producer called James. James is speaking to an actress Olivia, whom he is trying to persuade to sign up to play the lead role in his latest film. In order to do this, he pitches the film to her, describing its dramatic narrative in detail. The film tells the story of a suicide bomber, a Western woman called Amy. Amy lives an affluent, if empty life, until one day she meets a tall dusky stranger on a flight with a prayer mat and a knife. She finds herself drawn to his Otherness and they start a torrid affair. In order to win his love, Amy joins Mohammed’s terrorist cell. She betrays him, but then attempts to rescue him from prison in order to win him back. When he is killed during the rescue attempt, she vows revenge on the society that took him from her. As James tells her this story, Olivia sits with her back to the audience, responding silently to the dramatic narrative of the film along with us.

In Product, the narrative of the harmful act is misappropriated rather than disrupted. Ravenhill provides us with an ill-fitting situational causality for the harmful act he describes. This mismatch between the act and the situation exposes the political perspective of the seemingly neutral socio-psychological dramatic narrative. In an interview for the Guardian around the time of the play’s première,
Ravenhill suggested that what differentiates Western structures of thinking from other ways of thinking was their narrative structure. He defines the difference between the IRA and al-Qaeda in terms of a presence and absence of a recognisable narrative:

An al-Qaeda bomb, or planes going into a tower, doesn't have a story, unlike an IRA bomb. That had a story, in that the IRA would say, "This is going to happen", then there would be a bomb, and afterwards there would be a claim saying "Yeah we did it, and we want troops out of Ireland". That's your beginning, middle and end. But with al-Qaeda, there's nothing like that, they just do it. I think that's one of the things that unsettles us, because we want a story. So my character tries to give suicide bombing a story. (Sawyer)

The implication here is that the actions of a suicide bomber lack a narrative and hence, we find these actions difficult to accept. They cannot be explained satisfactorily from a recognisable socio-psychological perspective. I would suggest, however, that *Product* can be read as offering a slightly more nuanced view of the link between Western culture and narrative than Ravenhill advances in this interview. It is not that the actions of the suicide bomber lack a narrative, it is rather that they do not conform to the socio-psychological narrative of Western drama. The two narratives, that of the suicide bomber and the Western socio-psychological dramatic narrative, do not define the same criteria of competence. They suggest different models of ‘how to live.’

Through his act of narration in *Product*, James, the executive, adds a Western socio-psychological narrative to the figure of the suicide bomber. As he describes the film, he makes us aware of this process by repeatedly flagging up the dramatic structures that he is employing in the construction of this narrative — the “narrative hook,” “empathy” (*Product* 156), “inner conflict” (163). The common assumption would be that this act of narration enables us to see the
world through the eyes of a suicide bomber. It helps us to identify with the Other and understand his/her actions. The narrative of the suicide bomber which is described in Product, however, is misappropriated. It does not help us understand anything. The suicide bomber whose story is told in the film is not Mohammed, the devout Muslim man whom Amy meets on the plane, but rather Amy herself. Amy’s journey to becoming a suicide bomber is told as an incongruous mixture of romantic comedy and action movie, or as Ravenhill pitches it “Bridget Jones goes Jihad” (Sawyer). The narrative behind the figure of the suicide bomber is shifted from the narrative of Islamic Fundamentalism to the narrative of the action-romance.

James’s attempt to narrate the suicide bomber’s story through a Western socio-psychological dramatic narrative, highlights the extent to which this form of narrative is driven by a discourse of personal gratification. Amy is driven not by faith in a cause larger than herself but by personal desire — her desire for Mohammed, her “aching” (Product 158) sexuality. This Western narrative of desire is flagged up to the audience through James’s frequent references to desirable consumer goods. This textual product placement makes the film described seem like an advert for luxury products. James name checks “Gucci” (155), “Versace” (156) and “Jimmy Choos” (157) within the first few minutes of the play, and that is only the tip of the iceberg.

The dramatic narrative of the film seems to commodify everything in its path, including the narrative of other cultures. Towards the end of the film, James describes a montage of images which tell the story of how Amy trains to rescue her lover. This montage includes: “The Tibetan monastery where you learn to breathe and kick and chop. The mountain state where your Kalashnikov is slung across your breast ready to fire as the targets go flying into the sky” (Product 174). The dramatic narrative of the film eats up and absorbs the traditions and practices of other cultures and uses them for its own purpose. It
appropriates the narratives of other cultures and reassembles them in a Western form. This can clearly be read from the cultural misunderstandings that the images in the montage contain. The Tibetan monastery is configured as a place where violence is learnt, instead of peace. In the picture of Amy as a member of the mujahedeen, the mention of her exposed breast adds a sexual perspective which is out of step with Fundamentalist Islam. The Western dramatic narrative Ravenhill presents us with absorbs, appropriates and commodifies everything in its path.

Ravenhill’s narratisation of the figure of the suicide bomber in Product points to the idea that when we try to legitimate the actions of Others through narrative, we can only do this from within our own cultural context. Rather than understanding the perspective of Others, the socio-psychological dramatic narrative of modern drama recreates Others in the image of ourselves. It explains their actions on our own terms. The socio-psychological dramatic narrative does not help us to see through the eyes of Others, it only helps us to see the actions of Others through our own. We do not understand these actions within their actual context, we rather appropriate them and legitimate them by fitting them to our own criteria of competence, as defined within our own socio-psychological narrative. Mohammed, the authentic suicide bomber, remains as unknowable to the audience as he does to Amy, “a tall, dusky fellow” (Product 155) with a prayer mat and a knife. Ravenhill does not tell us his story. He remains Other. His actions cannot be condoned through the process of narration, and hence remain inexplicable and unacceptable.

Like the images in the montage, the story of the suicide bomber in Product is absorbed into a Western dramatic narrative and commodified. It becomes, in the form of a Hollywood film, yet another product for the Western consumer market. In Product, however, this attempt to acquire the narrative of the suicide bomber
fails hilariously. The situational causality which impels Amy to commit the harmful act of suicide bombing is comically inadequate. The attempt to explain the actions of the bomber through a socio-psychological narrative, albeit the obviously ridiculous one of action-romance, moves the audience not to understanding but to laughter. It fails to be convincing. Interestingly, the narrative’s onstage audience, the actress Olivia, does not share the laughter of the audience seated in the auditorium. She remains unimpressed and her abrupt exit at the end of James’s pitch suggests outrage as opposed to amusement. As a member of the audience, her silent response made me question the nature of my own amusement. It seems to me that this attempt to misappropriate narrative, and so explain the actions of Others on our own terms in order to make them acceptable to us, is a much more serious issue than the audience’s laughter at the story James tells would suggest.
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Secondary Literature

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Ravenhill's Pool of Narrative Products: Theatre in the Conflict Area of Pretension and Presumption

I.

In my paper I want to discuss the shift from the focus on action to the focus on narrative as a new mediator of plot via Mark Ravenhill's story-telling plays *Product* from 2005 and *Pool (no water)* from 2006. The emphasis on showing is replaced by an emphasis on telling, thus rejecting or subverting conventional dramatic techniques. What are the possibilities of theatre within such a conceptualisation?

I want to start with a quote from Ravenhill's *Shopping & Fucking*, probably one of the most frequently quoted passages of the play:

ROBBIE. I think ... I think we all need stories, we make up stories so that we can get by. And I think a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hand of the Gods of Fate. The Journey to Enlightenments. The March of Socialism. But they all died or the world grew up or grew senile or forgot them, so now we're all
making up our own stories. Little stories. It comes out in different ways. But we've each got one. (*Plays i 337*)

Despite postmodernism’s questioning of master narratives, there remains the idea that “everything significant about the disappearance of master narratives has itself to be couched in narrative form” (Frederic Jameson qtd. in Henke 10). The conviction remains that humans are “story-telling animals” (Jonathan Swift qtd. in Nünning 1) and that “narrative plays a central, structuring role in the formation and maintenance of our sense of identity” (Eakin 123), which is passionately supported in Ravenhill’s plays. Narratives are not merely a literary form or a medium of expression, but a phenomenological and cognitive mode of self-knowledge and world-knowledge (Nünning 2). This process of ordering through narrative, the translation of complex experience into coherent memory is best described with the scaling ‘event — plot/story — discourse’ as suggested by Jonathan Culler:

Plot or story is the material that is presented, ordered from a certain point of view by discourse (different versions of “the same story”). But a plot itself is already a shaping of events. A plot can make a wedding the happy ending of the story or the beginning of a story — or can make it a turn in the middle. What readers actually encounter, though, is the discourse of a text: the plot is something readers infer from the text, and the idea of elementary events out of which this plot was formed is also an inference or construction of the reader. If we talk about events that have been shaped into a plot, it is to highlight the meaningfulness and organization of the plot. The basic distinction of the theory of narrative, then, is between plot and presentation, story and discourse.

(Culler 117)

A text thus remains one among many, yet all place their experience on the work bench and carve out their personal fetish called epistemology, causally determined by the different perspectives. As Robbie in *Shopping & Fucking* says, they make us get by and the fact

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Nils Wilkinson
that we make them up, produce them, does not undermine their radiance: you live your whole life in them. Ravenhill himself cannot help but see the irony when even scientists such as Richard Dawkins are almost worshipped. Referring to a statement by Russell T. Davis, executive producer of Doctor Who, who engaged Dawkins for one episode, Ravenhill writes,

Falling at his feet? Worshipping? It all seems oddly reminiscent of the triumphal entry of Jesus into Jerusalem in the days before his Passion; a strange resonance for the scientist who has declared himself the champion of secularism in a world where, he claims, the delusions of faith are gaining an increasing stranglehold. ("God Is Behind Some of Our Greatest Art")

II.

Ravenhill’s play Product focuses on such narrative- or myth-making by which we are meant to cope with the events of 9/11, and on a more abstract level, asks how the ideals or fetishes of freedom, democracy or civilisation are represented within shaped plots. Product is also useful in describing the effect of the shift from showing to telling. The play turns spectators into behind-the-scene witnesses seeing the process of meaning-making, and discusses both theatre and movies as bearers and circulators of “social energy” (Stephen Greenblatt qtd. in Baumbach and Nünning 36). The authority of the movie industry here dictates and navigates the inference of meaning with regard to the event ‘terrorist attack on the World Trade Center.’

Product is about a director telling an actress about a Hollywood movie in which she is scheduled to play the female lead, Amy, a ‘modern career woman’ (as probably scripted by male writers — there are several images of her ‘emptiness’ and aching sexuality finally ‘filled’ with Mohammed’s “groin of fire” (Plays 2 170), with a penchant for Gucci handbags, Versace suits, Jimmy Choos and yoga. on a plane
she meets an Al Qaeda member called Mohammed, “a tall, dusky fellow” (155) wearing an oriental robe, with a knife and a prayer mat, and falls in love with him. She houses several members of the terrorist cell in her converted abattoir, “a massively cool loft-style apartment” (158) and does not betray them due to her love for Mohammed. After meeting Osama Bin Laden himself, she herself stoops to suicide bombing Disneyland Europe, but eventually decides to contact the police to thwart the plan — we learn that she has lost a beloved in “the Towers” (157). Mohammed feels betrayed and wants to commit suicide by pouring petrol over himself and burning himself, saying “I am the weakness. I am the flaw. I was the lust that drove me to woman. I have betrayed jihad” (169). A regretful Amy decides to join him in death by embracing the burning Mohammed, but they fall through the window into a pool below. The police have arrived and take Mohammed with them. Amy’s life now seems void of meaning with Mohammed gone. “There’s the constant drive drive drive to outsource customer relations to expanding economies. […] You hang about the coach station and pull up your skirt for teenagers in toilets and alleyways — looking for a smell that will drown the scent of Mohammed” (173). She sees him in a news report on an American offshore prison in Cuba and sees guards “[applying] the electrodes to his testicles, you see the dignity in his face as the other guards laugh and jeer, you see the spit on his face, then his body dancing as the electrodes burn at the testes you have held so often in the night” (173). She decides to rescue Mohammed and with the help of a montage we imagine her transformation into a hero through lengthy training in a boxing club, swimming in an icy lake, in a Tibetan monastery where she learns “to breathe and kick and chop” (174), and finally in a “mountain state where your Kalashnikov is slung across your breast ready to fire as the targets go flying in the sky” (174). She rescues the prisoners: “I’m coming to fucking find you,’ you scream, blasting at
the guards who come running toward you. Your bullets tear into them and hurtle them against the walls and the blood begins to run in rivers down the corridors of Uncle Sam’s detention centre” (175). But Mohammed is killed: “The lone guard — you take her out, but not before her bullet ricochets around the walls and — slow, slow, slow motion drills its way into Mohammed’s head. He crumples — slow — and — slow — the blood stutters from his mouth and ears” (177). The movie ends with Amy kneeling on Mohammed’s prayer mat: “Allah? I will revenge, Allah” (178).

The question of who speaks with what kind of authority is answered by the play itself: the producer, who among others, pulls the strings of the story. “[This] script, this story, I — I have been touched, I have been moved by this. When I — I have lain on the floor in my office and wept when I read this script, you see?” (161). In his description of the planned movie we get to know all the techniques with which the producer wants to shape the plot. The readers or the future cinema visitors infer the plot ‘Western society vs. islamistic terrorism’ from the narrative of a tacky, cliché-ridden romance that turns into a Rambo action movie. Here, the telling analyses the showing: we do have the reference to traditional theatre in which theatre’s “emphasis on showing rather than telling […] allows] us to experience mimesis” (Baumbach and Nünning 26) by observing and identifying with characters and their interaction on stage, or in a movie, which represents a more abstract message and expresses a particular sense of coherence of the world. The film producer is looking for scripts like that. Most scripts however are the “effluent of the soul. Nobody understands the basic, the truth, the wound” (161).

Amy’s ex-boyfriend Troy represents such a monolithic truth — his falling out of the tower stands for the fall of Troy (160), America’s world power.
Product focuses on how that is achieved — namely by placing representational signs of culture within the mise-en-scene. The contexture of signs that shape the plot helps us to look at social semantics expressed in narratives and their variations which revolve around a ‘final point of reference’ (freedom, democracy, civilisation) giving these structures an intelligible coherence. An example is the Gucci handbag, a sign of wealth and of belonging to a particular social stratum that we are told to achieve through hard work. Yet, similarly to Robbie’s comment in Shopping & Fucking, there is the ambivalence of postmodern society and its absence of master narratives:

You sit in your fabulous loft-style apartment that evening and you watch that image played as it rolls through the news and you listen to the experts and the politicians and the lawyers and the celebrities trying to give it their story. (173) [...] and you see it’s all screens and show and display and symbols and acting make-believe emptiness. (177)

This is opposed to Mohammed’s belief that

[There] is Destiny, there is Allah’s will, there is the Cause. And all of these are bigger than people. I pity you, my love, in your small world of people. No purpose ... How do you live with this? My sadness is with you. (169)

Product wants us to look at social semantics, i.e. the totality of cognitive or communicative rules of meaning-processing in a society that is trying to create structures within which to get by — a logic that necessarily establishes privileged signifiers or partial fixations regulating the flux of meaning (Laclau and Mouffe 112). These codes are expanded through coercive powers that dictate not only a particular performance of social habitus, but also how to read cultural signs within discursive formations, i.e. understand the sign system ‘knife — prayer mat — dusky fellow’ as ‘terrorist — Islam — enemy —
dangerous.’ These codes are nowadays also circulated within market commodities, in products.

In this respect postmodern theatre asks: how do we embody the narratives that have been established before our birth and tell us how to read; and how do the following generations react, embody, perpetuate, affirm, displace, subvert what the preceding ones have made of them? It can be seen as a mythopoeic ‘narrative – embodiment – narrative – embodiment’ chain or circle. Product foregrounds how people choose to embody that narrative, and thus questions the mediating function of representation — the focus is on the process.

In Product, the actual actress Olivia is present all the time and listens to the producer. The medium actress is there on stage and represents the planned embodiment of the narrative laid out by the producer. He fetishises her: “You are hero. Before you, we are nothing. Before you, we — oh saviour, oh saviour, oh saviour” (174). The spectators as witnesses of this conversation, however, know that this movie’s truth “is anything but true, the director has to produce this, he has to make one realise: this truth has been produced. It has not been concealed,” as Elfriede Jelinek would word it (“Leere” my translation). The producers and writers are the designers, the outfitters (“Leere”) and the actress Olivia is meant to represent “that false unity reflected in the faces of actors: the unity of life, [...] filled as they are [...] with poetry. [...] There is this room, and skillful people embody fates of two-legged creatures tightened in a harness” (“Sinn egal” my translation). The actors’ bodies are computed, calculated on stage (“In einem leeren Haus”).

III.
In a further twist, theatrical texts that do not prescribe any characters or spatial organisation foreground and enforce what Product demonstrates. This is where Pool (no water) comes in.

While Product is about a story that is going to be shaped in the future, Pool (no water) deals with a reflection of past events. The play is about a group of friends, former art students, who once organised their own exhibitions and staged various performance artworks together as “the Group.” Only one of them, however, was able to notch up success for herself, which eventually brought her to America, probably L.A. or somewhere in California, close to Hollywood. Apart from her villa, her pool plays an important representational role, since it stands for her success and at the same time for the failure of her friends who remained in London: “[cramped] little exhibitions in lofts in the bohemian quarter” (Plays 2 295). She buys their art, which is seemingly understood as a gesture of pity in the eyes of her friends. Envy looms large over the whole story and a sudden accident during a wild reunion party in her villa, when the successful friend jumps into an empty pool and falls into a long coma, inspires her friends: they document the healing process with photos, they arrange her body according to aesthetic needs: “And that night on the laptop we survey our work and we — ah — we are not disgusted with ourselves as we expect we should. We are already thinking interviews — exhibition — catalogue — sale” (307). When she finally awakes, she finds out about their work, finds it brilliant, and eventually takes over. Her friends are yet again second to her.

I can’t do this any fucking longer you know? Give me a break. Let me succeed. She would claim the images and we would be back in the bohemian quarter doing – oh – very good work with the underprivileged. But be honest – I’ve done my dues – I want to be privileged. (315)
During a drug-induced party they decide to destroy the image files and burn the already developed photos. When their friend enters the room and she discovers what they have done, her hatred comes out:

‘You are small people. You have always been small people. Ever since the day. There are small people and there are big people. And I am a big person and you are not. [...]’

‘Oh I’ve held this in all these years but no more. I have talent. I have vision. I am blessed.

‘None of you can touch me.

‘You thought I didn’t see your jealousy and hatred all these years? Of course I saw it.’ (322)

What is striking about the play is of course the absence of *dramatis personae* and stage directions. It is mere text, interrupted frequently by new paragraphs that indicate someone else speaking, but the overall tone suggests an uninterrupted speech flow. The play’s narrative allows post-dramatic creativity in staging in so far that nothing indicates how it should be staged. In the printed version it says, “[the] original production had four speakers — A, B, C, D. Other productions don’t have to follow this” (294). This allows great scope for any production: the number of characters (their gender, their ethnicity, etc.), the spatial organisation, the setting, the costumes — all is open to various impositions by either one or more directors who impose a particular structure that presents itself on a stage as a somewhat final product, or an enactment, not a completion. A text such as *Pool (no water)* is more open to displacement with regard to how narratives (in this case envy, friendship, the pressure to succeed, approval, failure) should be embodied on stage, thus allowing various dramatic versions of the ‘original’ text. In this case it should be regarded more as a ‘background text.’ With the shift from showing to

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1 Thank you to my colleague Seth Hulse for this differentiation.
telling, the pretension to negotiate and uniquely form what is offered on the text's surface becomes pretentious, a pretension among many theatrical pretensions and presumptions — instead of originality, we are looking at self-reflexive, temporary manifestations.

Characters become a group expression, a choir and an embodiment of cultural narratives rather than fixed 'round' individual characters, thus also subverting popular ideas of individuality, because with the abandonment of characters, individuality is abandoned: "Every one of them could be someone else, and could be represented by some third party who is identical with a fourth, without anyone noticing it" (Jelinek "I want to be shallow"). It is not about the uniqueness of character: "I don't take what people are or do as my subject, but what is the same about their actions, the structure of their actions, that is, according to which the characters act," the characters' talk remains a "shadowy talk that has always already been uttered by someone else, every figure has to hand itself to what has already been handed down" ("Die Leere öffnen").

From a systems theory point of view, theatre's function and cultural meaning, then, is not to try to represent itself as realistic within a hierarchy of truths but rather to engage in revealing the process of meaning-making within a heterarchy of truths. This term is used by cybernetician and neurophysiologist Warren McCulloch and later adapted in systems theory, which states that in a functionally differentiated society all positions of power are equally important and mutually dependent:

[The word] heterarchy stems from the Greek words heteros (the other, neighbor) and archein (to rule). Thus heterarchy means the rule of the other. It is no longer the holy one who rules from on high. There is no longer any point in talking about absolute values. Everyone is involved in ruling. Ruling becomes circular. (Foerster 86)
What this means to master narratives or society’s moral anchors or ‘final points of reference’ is that their various embodiments in political representation become subject to ongoing critical revision.

This is also reflected in *Pool (no water)* in which the character or characters try to refer to some ideal which was established before them and into which they were born. They now invoke it in order to justify what has happened — they are ‘the Group,’ not the individual. Yet any perspective calls for a qualification of that perspective which only spurs the speech flow. The narrative lends agency, but accusations within the social realm appear biased, forced, uninformed, scapegoating: “We’re the Group. And there’s balance. And you took away the balance. One of us goes up, then one of us goes down. It’s a natural law. Don’t you understand the most basic natural law? Well of course you do — you understood it and ignored it — on purpose — and killed Sally” (298) — a former ‘Group’ member who after long suffering died of cancer and was nursed by her friends. They understand Sally’s death to be the sacrifice which enabled their other friend’s success. When the successful one attends Sally’s funeral, one voice is trying to formulate what it does to him or her:

But I felt did you feel, listen I felt, this is wrong I know this is wrong but I felt, maybe it’s only — did anyone else feel — and it is only a feeling, but a feeling is a feeling and I think that should be honoured, you know? If you know what I’m saying? Okay, okay, I’m going to say it, I’m going to tell you, I’m going to tell you what I what I felt, standing in the crematorium and suddenly she’s there with her Manager or whoever the, she’s there and I want to scream at her: Cunt. (297)

The pool accident is then voiced in terms of poetic justice: “This is right. This feels — there is right in that” (303). Who speaks here with what kind of authority, and where do these feelings come from? Can
they be reduced to the speaker? Using a metaphor by Jelinek, theatrical texts become a throwing device which the director uses to throw characters on stage. They are made to utter the text, and with each production different throwing techniques are used. And since Jelinek’s writing, but also Ravenhill’s in *Pool (no water)*, is not about working with difference among people, it is the director’s job to create that difference, the nuances. There might be an individual, but he or she is merely an intersection or an “axiomatic” starting point of what is fundamentally a “dialogical process” (cf. Bhatia and Ram 299). Ravenhill’s engagement with the actors during a production and his alterations of the script show a more reciprocal approach to the shaping of a play.

In this respect, the outcome is much more contingent. *Pool (no water)* might work well as a scenic reading or a multimedia performance (both and more has been done), but none of the two is necessarily the ‘better,’ more adequate staging since so much focus lies on the narrative and each approach could highlight different aspects of the play. In *The Observer*, Susannah Clapp called the 2006 production by Ravenhill and Frantic Assembly “play (no drama)” and found it rather over-produced. The material, then, might remain more powerful because it does not need the performance; one can simply read it as prose fiction. There need not be the “fierce demand that the practice of mise-en-scène should live up to the complexity and truth embedded in the great texts” (Lehmann 38). *Pool (no water)* is more about reinventing the text, not being true to the text. As Hans-Thies Lehmann puts it: “Staging creates yet another additional dimension of dissemination, dispersing and cancelling textual significance in a field of heterogeneous materials, structures and processes which in turn create new and largely unpredictable meanings” (37).
Coming back to the initial statement by Culler that we only have access to events via different discourses from which we infer meaning, what *Product* and *Pool (no water)* can demonstrate is that in a postmodern world the pretension to find a monolithic story with which to get by is rejected as presumptuous. Staging the process of meaning-making or using actors’ bodies, including their voices, as intersections of social discourses seems fitting for portraying and tackling the issue of the dialogical rather than autonomous self. As in *Pool (no water)*, this replaces theatre’s traditional ‘here and now’ with the dialogical ritual of shaping memory and the emphasis on its focalisation. The development of ‘the Group’s’ identity is fundamentally based on the absent, successful ‘she.’ So instead of watching an idealised individual perform his or her authentic self, we focus on the embeddedness of culture, listen to the internal and external narratives (Hermans 100) that speak the (social) actors, that define them, that explain and justify their deeds while the (social) actors’ pretension to political autonomy is infinitely deferred.
Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature
Tall Tales and Bedtime Stories: Self-Reflexive Narrativity in Modern Irish Drama

On the widest level, theater is a form of narration through imitation. To start with a cliché: drama is generally conceived as Character in Action. Almost by definition, then, verbal narratives recounted by characters inside a play are seen as undramatic because they interrupt the action. However, the Irish have always been great ones for stories; and so many of their plays resolve into narrative that it becomes possible to trace an arc through 20th-century and post-millennial Irish drama, demonstrating shifting attitudes to narrative. This focus leads to a range of characters who tell stories, or are professional writers, and to plays where narrativity has been incorporated in the dramatic structure itself. Of course the author-figure (as I have pointed out elsewhere1) is a favourite trope in contemporary British drama,

although in fact hardly any of these British authors, whether historical personages or autobiographical, are actually shown telling stories. By contrast, in Irish drama, reflecting a traditional emphasis on oral transmission, story-telling is always conceived as verbalized rather than written — and so becomes expressed in the on-stage dialogue. At the same time, the dramatized presentation of narratives generally has a critical edge, because story-telling and the mythology of Irish nationhood are so closely intertwined. So the element of narrativity automatically becomes problematized, which highlights the whole issue of narrative in critically illuminating ways.

A highly popular example underlines the degree to which Irish drama privileges verbal narration: Conor McPherson’s *The Weir* (produced at the Royal Court in 1997), where the whole action is composed of competing stories, and where the stories themselves have literary antecedents. The play is set in a country pub (as a pastiche of the standard Abbey Theatre setting), and four local drinkers all try to impress the single woman in the cast — Valerie, a newcomer to the district — by telling ghost tales taken from Irish folk legends. This culminates in Valerie’s response: the story of a dead child (in a clear echo of the poem “The Stolen Child” by Yeats [18–19]) calling agonizingly from another world, paralleling the loss of her own child. The stories are the plot; and as the reviews commented, McPherson’s play is “an artful testament to the power of storytelling” (Higgins).

What makes Irish drama so different from the norm? As Ruediger Ahrens has pointed out: “One of the most important themes of Irish drama in the twentieth century is its treatment of national and historical myths, which in consequence has led to an intensive preoccupation with the contrast between imagination and reality” (89). Ahrens uses this insight to explore the use of surrealism and the grotesque, but the same focus on imagination and reality — or fiction
and truth — leads equally to story-telling. Further, if part of the national mythology is the Irishman as a teller of tall tales, this can perhaps be explained as a response to political powerlessness. Colonized and under foreign rule for as long as a thousand years — a history marked by repeated (and defeated) rebellions, and by imperialist attempts to denigrate and destroy the Irish culture — it can be argued that telling stories has been the only type of self-assertion possible. For those prevented from acting, the only consolation is talk. And this indeed is the point made by Brian Friel in one of the key Irish plays from the last quarter of the 20th century, *Translations*, first performed in 1980.

Set in 1833, and specifically focusing on language, *Translations* details the erasure of Irish place names — and by extension the stories of past experience those names conjure up, as well as the Irish ownership of their countryside — by the map-makers of the 19th-century British army. All Friel’s young Fenian rebel achieves is the murder of the one British officer who has overcome national stereotypes, appreciates the romance of the Irish countryside and has even bonded with a native girl (in a wonderful scene where the two lovers learn to communicate without understanding a single word of each other’s language). This killing not only devastates the Irish community, but also results in the demolition of their village by the army in retaliation; and — as if that were not enough — at the end of the scene the characters begin to notice an odd smell: the potato blight, which (as we know with historical hindsight, though they do not) barely a decade later will depopulate the island through widespread famine and emigration. In counterpoint to the disaster of Irish history, Friel has set the fragile cultural institution of a Hedge School (so-called because in the 17th and 18th centuries all schools were banned, and the only education for the Irish took place illegally, hidden under the hedges). In *Translations* the Hedge School keeps
alive a cultural heritage that goes back to ancient Greece. As the teacher, Hugh, remembers the failed revolution:

The road to Sligo. A spring morning. 1798. Going into battle. Do you remember, James? Two young gallants with pikes across their shoulders and the *Aeneid* in their pockets. (*Translations* 67)

Now, 35 years later, Jimmy Jack (fluent in Greek and Latin), an out-of-tramp who has lost touch with reality, and believes himself married to the Goddess Athena, becomes the object lesson for Friel's point. Hugh is — perhaps slightly over-obviously — Friel's mouthpiece in the play; and as Hugh very specifically comments, speaking about the Irish language that is being obliterated by the British imperial rulers:

[It] is a rich language, [...] full of the mythologies of fantasy and hope and self-deception – a syntax opulent with tomorrows. It is our response to mud cabins and a diet of potatoes; our only method of replying to ... inevitabilities. (42)

This political depth to the speech of the Irish (ironically represented by the text as English) of course means that a whole people can become “imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer matches the landscape of ... fact” (like Jimmy) (43). But in Friel’s view, “it is not the literal past, the ‘facts’ of history, that shape us, but images of the past embodied in language,” so that “we must never cease renewing those images; because once we do, we fossilise” (*Translations* 66). And the final speeches of the play are a hymn to the power of mythmaking, in terms of the Aeneid:

HUGH: Urbs antiqua fuit – there was an ancient city whichm, ’tis said, Juno loved above all the lands. (68)

The translation of Gaelic place-names into English equivalents becomes a transformation of the landscape itself, while the suffering of Ireland is transmuted into tales from Ovid and Homer. Yet Friel is
also realistic in presenting the powers of language: Jimmy Jack, who becomes the quintessential mythic storyteller, is presented as not just ancient, but broken-down and delusive. His visions of an imaginatively rich and glorious existence have no relevance to the present. Even so, *Urbs antiqua fuit* — the description of Dido’s Carthage from the opening of Book 1 in the *Aeneid* — is also the city motto of modern-day Limerick. Significantly the city crest and the motto from Virgil were officially adopted in 1840, just seven years after the time of *Translations*: the connection is obvious. Ireland is indeed being presented as the inheritor of the Classical world. Stories really do come true.

With this sort of focus on story-telling as a value that preserves Irish pride and heritage (however delusively) against the repeated blows of history — so tellingly encapsulated by Friel — it is hardly surprising that Irish drama in particular includes story-tellers (in other words, narrators) and represents narrative as action. Indeed, a significant number of Irish plays deal specifically with narrativity. Indeed, the theme of story-telling — and the critique of the story-teller as well as his stories — goes back to the very beginnings of Irish Theater.

In fact narrativity is foregrounded in the earliest real classic to emerge on the Abbey stage: Synge’s 1907 peasant comedy, *The Playboy of the Western World*. From his first entry, Synge’s protagonist Christy Mahon starts fictionalizing his past in a way that casts him in a heroic light. On the run from having killed his father (as he believes) by hitting him over the head with a spade, he discovers to his surprise that instead of the conventional moral censure he expects, the villagers — and particularly the innkeeper’s daughter, Pegeen — see this as something daring and admirably bold. Responding, Christy begins to embellish the story until a sordid family squabble in a field becomes a titanic battle with evil. And he even starts to live up to his
self-created image, winning both the races on the sands at the local fair, and the hand of the pretty Pegeen.

Then his father appears, with a bandage on his head, but otherwise undamaged — proving the falsity of Christy’s tale —, and seeing the loss of respect his father’s presence produces, Christy picks up a spade and hits his father over the head again, to make his story true. But instead of regaining popular admiration, actually seeing the deed makes the villagers aware of the “great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed” (The Playboy of the Western World 74). Horrified, and fearful of being seen as accomplices, the villagers seize Christy, tie him up with ropes to give him over to the authorities; and when he struggles, they burn him with a poker (wielded, most woundingly, by Pegeen, who only hours before had been his lover).

In Irish lore, the British colonial government is sometimes represented as a domineering and evil father-figure; and in this light Christy can be seen as a would-be revolutionary, while the villagers’ reactions casts them as dangerous fantasists, and the whole nationalist movement they symbolize as mutually reinforcing myth. To make the point even clearer, Synge provides a parodistic ending, where the father — once again — rises from the dead, and then excoriates the villagers for their cowardice and willingness to believe in stories. With the son leading the way from “the fools [that] is here,” (77) the pair go off to act out their story across the west of Ireland, leaving Pegeen to lament that “I’ve lost the only playboy of the Western World” (77). Not surprisingly, the staging of The Playboy of The Western World caused riots at the Abbey Theatre — and while the proclaimed cause was the perceived insult to Irish womanhood, because peasant girls were shown on stage in their cotton undergarments, it is hard to imagine that the public anger was not in fact fuelled by Synge’s attack on the mythology of nationalism as a
destructive fantasy (although it may be too subtle to be explicitly recognized).

85 years later, Synge’s subtextual critique of the Irish revolutionaries was picked up by Thomas Murphy in *The Patriot Game* (1991). Here the mythology of the 1916 Uprising — the failed revolution that led, precisely because of the execution of its leaders, to the Irish Free State — is staged in modern-day Dublin by amateur actors, playing out their own identification with iconic historical figures.

The play stages the events of the Uprising in a highly artificial format, with the Narrator (a young girl, whose boyfriend has taken on the part of Pádraig Pearse) continually interrupting the action, filling in historical or political context, or commenting cynically on the characters of the revolutionary leaders, and frequently undercutting the actors’ presentation. As a result, we are always aware of the performance as such, which objectifies the action as a narrated story. So, in one scene, Pearse’s mother is given a poem of Pearse’s to speak, glorifying the coming sacrifice of himself and his brother; and the stage directions point out that

*The poem was written by Pearse for his mother; the sentiments contained in it, therefore, are his – male – and not necessarily the sentiments of a mother. The actor playing MOTHER is free in interpretation to question the sentiments [...]*

*(The Patriot Game 115).*

The focus of the play is on the Narrator, who — as the teller of what she categorizes as “The Disgraceful Story of 1916” (147) — believes she controls the material of the performance, and as a ‘modern’ girl rejects the (to her anachronistic) nationalistic upbringing:

*NARRATOR: I hate the English. No. I am honest and in control. I hate nationalism. It doesn’t exist. I love life. Heigh-ho! And I’m not getting involved. (129)*
Yet, even though she declares, “So, yer risin’ was a failure: I knew all along and I was right not to play” (147), as the actors chant the names of the people executed by British firing squad, the blood-sacrifice of Connolly, Pearse and the other leaders of the Uprising transforms her into a Nationalist, screaming “UP THE REPUBLIC!” (149). This reversal echoes the way, historically, the Irish population had been mobilized by outrage over the executions. However, it is also a condemnation of the way revolutionary propaganda continues to infect people even four or five generations later.

Murphy, of course, is playing with the convention of the objective, rational and uninvolved narrator, in order to weight his narrator’s abdication of control and submersion in national mythology, which overcomes even the artifice of stage performance. However, over the last decade contemporary Irish drama has challenged the status of story-telling in even more extreme ways.

One telling example is Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* (2003), which explores the connection between story-telling and acting-out, in a quasi-totalitarian setting. In this quasi-bedtime story, a writer of horrific folk-tales about the extreme abuse of children is forced to take on the role of one of his own characters in order to kill his single auditor: the brother for whom the stories were composed, who has himself acted out the stories by actually killing children in exactly the same way as the stories describe. This frame lends itself to a fundamental questioning of narrativity. It encapsulates the issue of narrated versus acted stories, as well as exploring the concept of authorial responsibility, and the ethical basis of storytelling. In addition, it foregrounds the relationship between fiction and reality. The central author-figure in this play, Katurian, asserts that “[t]he only duty of a storyteller is to tell a story” (*The Pillowman* 8). Yet this statement is challenged and disproved by all the events depicted, or recounted. This is the case with the story one of the interrogators tells
that specifically rejects this authorial neutrality, or in Katurian’s own insistence on the irrelevance of content in respect to form, where the endings represent an ironically dark twist that inverts expectations. And this literary technique is externalized in the play itself, where in the ending the spirit of the writer is shown to survive the death of the body, even if the stories on which his reputation rests are (possibly) burnt. The play itself also has meta-narratological aspects: Katurian Katurian (the full name of the protagonist) has a Kafkaesque echo in its doubleness; and Katurian indeed explicitly refers to Kafka. With the overlap between author, auditor and characters, as well as the literary references and its overt meta-narrative aspects, The Pillowman is an almost too obviously didactic commentary on Irish story-telling; and the horror-story elements (which help to disguise this through their almost vomit-inducing grotesqueness) are themselves a graphic statement about the destructive influence of political myth-making. Indeed the play itself can be seen as a reflection on, and even as an explicit rejection of McDonagh’s own earlier work, with its extreme and graphic violence: particularly his ‘Leenane Trilogy,’ which represents a dysfunctional modern Ireland in which torture, murders and even parricide are commonplace — and which plays on the stereotypes of Synge’s isolated Irish peasantry.

This deconstruction of narrative as a negative and deeply suspect aspect of the Irish psyche is taken up by the most radical of the young Irish playwrights, Enda Walsh, whose characters typically shut themselves out from the world through story-telling. So, the three sisters in Walsh’s The New Electric Ballroom (2005) are women “branded, marked and scarred by talk” and “stamped by story,” which makes them “boxed by words” in their isolated house (35). And its companion piece, The Walworth Farce (2006), takes story-telling to a new low.
The New Electric Ballroom is set in a remote Irish fishing village which (like McDonagh’s ‘Leenane Trilogy’) might be the village in The Playboy of the Western World almost exactly a century later. Here there are three sisters, obsessively reenacting a shared mythology of a past personal disaster, which has caused them to retreat into their hermetic existence, and one intruder: a fishmonger who may be able to take the youngest of the sisters away. In a contrasting parallel, The Walworth Farce deals with a family of three men, locked into a shabby and half-demolished council flat in darkest London, and one intruder: a shop girl who has a tenderness for the only son who is ever allowed out of the flat. But where the two older sisters in The New Electric Ballroom are suffering from teenage sexual rejection—a relatively innocuous event, for all that it has trapped them in an endless replay of the perceived insult—, the stories of the family past that are played out in The Walworth Farce revolve around violent accidents and multiple murders. And where in The New Electric Ballroom it is the youngest sister who stage-manages the older sisters’ story-telling—handing them lipstick, prompting their lines—and who therefore has a certain independence (she also has a job outside the home that her elder sisters never leave)—, in The Walworth Farce it is the abusive patriarch who directs his increasingly unwilling grown-up sons. He forces them to act out a family story which has come to substitute reality, and critiques their performance. In addition, where the two older sisters of The New Electric Ballroom switch equally between their present and younger selves, in The Walworth Farce it is only the father (Denis, nicknamed ‘Dinny’—a painter and handy-man) who plays himself, past and present, whereas his two sons take on multiple roles: one, Blake, dressed in skirt and blouse, acts the parts of his aunt Vera, his mother Maureen, Jack, his father’s employer back in Cork, and the latter’s wife Eileen, while the other, Sean, acts his uncle
Paddy, and Eileen’s brother Peter. Both also act the parts of their six- and seven-year-old selves on the day of their grandmother’s funeral.

Quite apart from this confusing complexity — which frequently leads to the sons delivering lines (as one of their characters) to themselves (as another of their characters) —, the acted narration of the story is itself discredited: first by the directive that when in role, the characters’ “performance style resembles The Three Stooges” (The Walworth Farce 7) (indeed, as the Druid Theatre stages this play, the movement is exaggeratedly stylized, jerky and rapid); and secondly by the fantastical, simply unbelievable story they act out.

In fact this story (the ‘Farce’ of the title) is so complicated, so fragmented and so rapidly presented that it becomes almost impossible for an audience to follow. So in Toronto the critics took the play as simply an exhibition of physical theater (cf. Crew). But underneath this deliberate emphasis on surface performance is a chilling development in the way Irish storytelling is represented, which, as it were, takes up (just two years later) where McDonagh’s The Pillowman leaves off.

The supposed originary trauma is the death of the family matriarch (Dinny’s mother) — killed apparently by a dead horse flying over a hedge and crushing her while she was picking gooseberries by the roadside: a horse killed and sent flying into the air by Peter’s and Eileen’s father in an out-of-control speedboat that hit a sea-lion and was catapulted up from the sea into the field where it slammed into the horse. From its fake details (there are no sea-lions off the southern Irish coast; gooseberries do not grow wild in Irish hedgerows) to its fantastical climax (however fast the speedboat, the laws of energy make it impossible for a horse to be propelled through the air), the story is indeed farcical in being obviously and deliberately false. This arcane chain of events is revealed to have been the result of a plot by Jack and his brother-in-law Peter, to kill Peter’s and Eileen’s father for
his money. (They poured whiskey down his throat until he was dead drunk, then tied him to the speedboat and blocked the accelerator.) And the cash — nowhere to be found in the house — turns up in his coffin, which is a clear echo of another famous farce: Joe Orton's *Loot* from 1965.

We are told that all the characters are gathered in Jack and Eileen's opulent house in Cork — a stark contrast to the sleazy, cramped and half-demolished council flat on Walworth Road where Dinny, Blake and Sean spend their lives going every single day through this extremely ritualized story (ritualized actions being yet another definition of farce), with the coffin of Dinny's mother (stashed supposedly in the dining room) and the coffin of Eileen and Peter's father (standing on the kitchen table). Both are represented by one coffin-shaped cardboard box in the council-flat recreation of the events presented. The rationale for this unlikely gathering in the acted-out story is that Dinny, while engaged in his renovation job, overhears Eileen's description of her father's death, is overwhelmed by the connection with his mother's death, and determines that the wakes for both departed parents should be held together. However, when Dinny's brother Paddy and Paddy's wife Vera arrive from London, Dinny presents the house as his own home, claiming he has become a wealthy brain surgeon (justifying this incredible switch in professions by an outrageously comic story). This pretence is presented as part of a scam to steal Paddy's share of their mother's meagre inheritance, parallelng Jack and Peter's plot to steal Peter's and Eileen's father's wealth.

Then, at the double wake the conventions of 'bedroom farce' come into play: we learn that Paddy's wife Vera is Peter's lover, while Eileen tries to seduce Dinny. As a result Jack (jealous but also wanting all the money) puts poison into the sauce for a chicken Dinny's wife Maureen is cooking, hoping to kill Peter and Eileen, while Peter gives Jack a
poisoned beer. As a result, Peter, Eileen, Jack and also Paddy and Vera (who insists on eating despite the bright blue colour of the sauce) are all poisoned, in a parody of the multiple deaths at the end of Jacobean tragedies.

That, at least, is the story Dinny, Blake and Sean have repeatedly acted out, ever since the sons were sent away by their mother, as young boys, to join their father in London. And of course it turns out to be just a story: a tall tale to cover up an even more horrific truth. That reality only comes out because, on this particular day, the ritual breaks down. Sean, sent out to the local supermarket every day to buy the ready-cooked chicken, sliced bread and pack of beer required for the story — the only food the three ever get to eat —, picks up the wrong shopping bag and returns with a big sausage and crackers. And half-way through the play the checkout girl unexpectedly arrives, having followed Sean to give him the right groceries. Not only female, but racially ‘Other’ (being a black girl) as well as forming an on-stage audience for the acted-out ritual, she is even more a disruption to the story.

So Dinny forces her to join in the acting, as his wife Maureen, even whitening her face with moisturizer; and when it becomes clear that Sean wants to leave the flat with her, threatens to kill her — a threat backed up by Blake, waving a kitchen knife, although at the same time Blake suggests that he will make it possible for her to get out together with Sean. The story has already unravelled, with Sean finally describing what he witnessed as a five-year-old: a violent quarrel between his father and uncle over their mother’s inheritance, which ended with Dinny, kitchen knife in hand and covered in blood, and the bodies of Paddy and Vera on the floor. We realize that this Walworth Road flat is Paddy and Vera’s home, to which their murderer Dinny has fled, isolating himself in paranoiac fear.
Sean, ready to leave the flat — and the story — and go away with the girl, gets locked in the wardrobe; and to make Sean’s escape possible, his brother Blake first stabs their father to death, then gets the girl to scream and unlatch the wardrobe, while he stands, knife raised, so that Sean, rushing out, immediately stabs Blake with his own kitchen knife. The girl flees in horror, leaving the door open. But instead of going after her — and liberating himself from isolation as much as from the ritual, which was his brother’s intention in activating his own murder –, Sean locks the door again and plays through the main play-acting events of the opening sequence in a speeded-up tempo that lasts just two minutes. He then puts on the girl’s overcoat, plasters his face with his father’s brown shoe-polish, and, as the stage directions describe, “we watch him calmly lose himself in a new story. Blackout” (The Walworth Farce 85).

Of course the make-up is intended to trigger connections: whiteface, blackface and transvestite (Blake with his wigs and skirts for all the female characters) — all these are not just racial or gender symbols, but also theatrical, indeed specifically related to Farce. And as Walsh has pointed out in an interview:

That the characters use theatrical methods to tell their stories is no stranger than having an audience in the theatre in the first place ... Theater as a form of expression is just bizarre, everything shouldn’t work. It’s all fake, the lights, sets, people pretending to be something that they aren’t. So it’s a complete house of cards and yet it sort of works. It only works on the basis of the audience wanting it to work.” (Orel)

However, even this theatricality is undercut in The Walworth Farce, by being taken over the top into farce — as with Dinny’s wig, which is not only intended to be patently fake hair, but is incongruously attached to his head by a strip of Velcro glued to his scalp.
Story-telling is (just as in *The Pillowman*) a type of deliberate lying, or creative fiction. But it has a real effect, both on the teller and on those who take part, whether imaginatively or — as in *The Walworth Farce* — physically. Stories transfigure events into something the participants can cope with. They form rituals by which people live their lives. They are protective (at one point Dinny asserts: “We’re making a routine that keeps our family safe” (*The Walworth Farce* 69) but equally confining: they literally trap their participants. Even more centrally, the stories people tell define who they are. As Dinny asks rhetorically, “For what are we [...] if we’re not our stories?” (82). And, unlike Walsh’s other plays, all of which are set in Ireland, here the transposition to London as well as the normative behaviour of the black girl, indicate the Irishness of mythologizing one’s present situation and one’s own actions in stories.

Narrativity then, in Irish drama, stands for a national character and the myth of nationhood, represented (as Friel and Murphy indicate) in revolution. Necessary, but also corrupting, from Synge to Walsh, the stories the Irish tell of themselves are seen as shaping the character of the Irish people, in increasingly violent ways. It is significant that in no fewer than three of the plays discussed here, parricide is a common theme — *The Playboy of the Western World, The Pillowman* and *The Walworth Farce* —, as it is in other Irish drama, too. But after independence, instead of symbolically representing a heroic uprising against the colonial overlord, father-killing becomes a symptom of a deeply dysfunctional society. And it should be noted that in the latter two plays parricide is accompanied by fratricide, exacerbated in Walsh’s farce with brother killing brother in each generation. In this light, the story-teller — or closer to home, the dramatist himself, as McDonagh implies — is at least partly responsible for this state of affairs. But, in all these plays, the investment in narratives means that there is no possibility of change.
The Playboy and his father will go on telling their story throughout Ireland; the *Pillowman* story-teller survives even death, albeit as a ghost; while the surviving figure in *The Walworth Farce* returns to story-telling, even after the deaths of the other controlling figures. As Walsh points out, talking about *The New Electric Ballroom*, the younger girl “says to her sisters, ‘things can never change here, can they?’” (Orel). Indeed, all these plays suggest that, in the Irish context at least, drama — as a form of narration — is itself a central and integral part of the problem, not the solution.
Works Cited

Primary Literature


Secondary Literature


Deirdre Osborne

How Do We Get the Whole Story?
Contra-dictions and Counter-narratives
in debbie tucker green’s Dramatic-Poetics.

Adriana Cavarero’s crucial distinction between the self as ‘narratable’ and as ‘narrated’ has a special resonance for people who write from marginality (2000). Compared to their white contemporaries, Black British dramatists do not experience as analogous a degree of authentic agency and opportunities for artistic self-fashioning across a range of contexts, be these creative, academic or polemical. In the context of British theatre, the processes which contribute to both playmaking and critical knowledge creation often function as indexes to other meta- and micro-socio-cultural concerns which generate “discourses of interference” (Bal 10), mediating or even contorting the drama’s aesthetics from inception to reception.

debbie tucker green is a leading contemporary Black British woman playwright, one whose oeuvre plants her as an
uncompromising presence in British theatre in a number of ways that reshape public and critical perceptions. This paper will consider two of her plays, \textit{born bad} (2003) and \textit{random} (2008) through registering: (i) the relationship between diasporic and socio-cultural inheritances and aesthetic and theatrical heritages, (ii) the advocacy of a lexicon and inter-referential analytical methodology by which to engage with tucker green's genre-crossing dramatic-poetics, (iii) the criteria for aesthetic judgement employed by important sites of critical reception — theatre reviewing coteries, the academy — in encountering her work, and (iv) the degree to which such processes, in tandem with archiving and publishing, still detrimentally affect the longevity and canonical recognition of a black dramatist's work. Each of these factors form narrative layers around tucker green's work, some enlarging possible interpretations and others diminishing the potential for these. In turn, her plays reinforce the capabilities of drama as counter-stance and counterbalance to prevailing social norms that devalue and oppress certain groups and to prevailing aesthetic traditions which denote inclusion or exclusion within the British dramatic and literary compass — and its markers of artistic merit.

In addressing the narratology of art exhibitions and the interplay between theatricality and poetics in shaping presentation conditions, Mieke Bal notes, "the thoughts art articulates in its own way become framed and addressed by discourses surrounding the exhibition and interfering with it" (10). This concept of 'discourses of interference' is applicable to how Black British playwriting is still viewed in contemporary Britain. Firstly, interferences in the creative development of black dramatists produce restrictive expectations of subject-matter, authorial quality and reception. Nearly thirty years ago writers Caryl Phillips and Farrukh Dhondy identified the obstacles placed in the way of black dramatists by white cultural reception —
which persist today. While rehearsing his play *Strange Fruit* (1982), Phillips described these narrow creative constraints:

The problem is that when you write a play about black people, white people can assume that this is a finite model of the black community and that is what the black community is about. There is a whole range of material about the white community [...] and it is clear that white society is complex and full of contradictions. The difficulty is that we need more stuff written about black people by black people so that an equally valid picture emerges. (qtd. in Bridglal 6)

He points to the intense scrutiny a black artist faces from what seems to be a devouring white mainstream. This scrutiny is at odds with artistic refinement.

The trouble is that as soon as any black person does anything a white person takes out a little torch [...] and shines it on the black person. [...] The idea should not be to become a figurehead or to become well known but to become good at what you do. Writing is a craft and it takes a long time to become good at it (qtd. in Bridglal 5).

Dhondy’s coinage “behalfist” echoes Phillips’s assessment (11). He denounces the perceptual strait jacket imposed by dominant (white) perspectives, which confuse imaginative subjectivity (subject-matter) with expected social subjectivity (subjection).

Even if the playwright strains away from representation and tries to put a character as individual and universal as Hamlet on stage, the criticism that follows inevitably begins to look for the same alienated youth of newspaper reportage or sociological study in him. If he is too close to this reportage, this notional person, the playwright is criticised for “stereotyping”. If he is so far removed as to be unrecognisable as the boy next door, the playwright is castigated for wasting everybody’s time. (11)

It is worth highlighting the continuity from these claims to the impediments Kobena Mercer articulates a decade later. In the first
case, the failure to instantly measure up to a required and acceptable artistic standard (based upon Western aesthetic principles) is in-built when marginality moves to cultural centrality, for, as Mercer writes, “[i]f there is likely to be only the one opportunity to make your voice heard, is it not the case that there will be an intolerable imperative to try and say everything there is to be said, all in one mouthful?” (234).

Thus, as the chosen one, the danger of the artist overwriting and overstating is pronounced — something to be found in particular in some of Britain’s current prominent black male playwrights (but not in the minimalist, radical writing of tucker green). The example of Britain’s most prolific black playwright Roy Williams is prophesied in Phillips’s observation, “A lot of artists aren’t given a chance to evolve [...] you can’t produce a novel or a film overnight. You need a period of gestation which is usually quite long” (qtd. in Bridglal 6). As influential (white) broadsheet reviewers have begun to point out, hastiness, leading to a lack of depth, characterises some of Williams’s latest writing as it did his earliest,\(^1\) insinuating that his prolific production may not be best serving his artistry.\(^2\) This raises a further dilemma of acquiescing to commissioning opportunities. According to Phillips, “some black artists come under a tremendous amount of pressure from white people to do things [...] The danger is that white people will cut you off if you don’t do what they want you to do” (qtd. in Bridglal 6). This comment still finds currency — for despite his established position, Williams himself remains fearful that each play


\(^2\) Examples of this can be found in the range of responses from influential broadsheet critics towards Angel House (2008), which show a balancing act between acknowledging Williams’s important presence in British theatre, his previous successes and yet critically identifying the shortcomings of his current work based upon his prolific production. See Michael Billington, Benedict Nightingale, Charles Spencer and Rhoda Koenig (Theatre Record 28.3 (2008) 134).
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will be his last. His dissatisfaction at not being given enough time to finish his final approved version of *Days of Significance* is evident:

> [In]-between Stratford and the Tricycle, I did rework the play. When we had to get the play in to be published we were still working on it. So even the second published version is not the finished version […]. Maybe on reflection I should have perhaps said actually 'no I want to wait because this is the definitive one, we’re still working on.’ (qtd. in Osborne 2010)

Clearly Williams did not feel he could assert the gestation time Phillips cites as necessary. The demand from mainstream programmers for quick results (to fulfil new writing and funding imperatives, to attract new audiences from younger generations, to meet cultural diversity targets) can forestall the germination and evolution of the writer’s work — whose retention of future opportunities is contingent upon creating plays that get staged.

The second factor, (as Julien and Mercer outlined in relation to black filmmakers in Britain) recalls Stuart Hall’s concept of the ‘burden of representation.’ This is a consequence of the one-through-at-a-time dynamic, “if only one voice is given the ‘right to speak’ that voice will be heard, by the majority culture as ‘speaking for’ the many who are excluded or marginalized from access to the means of representation” (Julien and Mercer 198). This (on behalf of) perception narrows the representational scope of black artists and is seen in a tendency for black dramatists’ work to be viewed critically as an inevitable reflection of certain social problems, problems perceived as primarily associated with the black community. Yet, as there is “no single ‘Black Experience,’” writes pre-eminent American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, there is also “no one way to write or think or feel or dream or interpret or be interpreted” (21). Likewise, there is no single-perspective, trans-historic, black community in Britain but a complex matrix of knowledge and experiences of people who (ideally), self-
identify as members of that community in ways and for reasons meaningful to them. Some negative experiences might be shared (such as racism in a white-dominated society) and some not (such as domestic violence and dysfunctionality). As has been well noted, up until the 1980s, the term ‘black’ in Britain housed a diverse range of ethnicities, nationalities and accompanying cultural identities. This paper assumes the writers’ automatic constituency within British culture (as indigenous Britons) rather than making some kind of case for their inclusion. Indigenous Black British playwrights are just as much inheritors of Britain’s aesthetic cultural legacies as their white peers, while also frequently offering the unique perspective of African diasporic influences shaped within and by a British context.

It is not only writers who have had developmental opportunities curtailed by the merging of black person equals social comment. Rosamund Caines described how “[d]irectors seem to be under the impression that all black faces must be making a significant social comment to justify their appearance in a play, they are never to be seen as members of conventional British Society” (Caines). Journalist Jim Hiley noted that opportunities for black actors remained so under-realised due to theatre critics’ attitudes. “Fleet Street commentators find black actors easiest to appreciate in socio-dramas, while the alternative press patronises black plays by raving over them all. Both are inhibiting to experiment” (Hiley). Lorna Laidlaw, one of the first black actresses in the Birmingham-based company Women and Theatre, recalled the restrictive expectations she faced.

You can’t help but be aware of your colour when you perform. In a production I did with another company, I played the part of a young girl of seventeen who started a relationship with a young boy which culminated in teenage pregnancy. The discussion that followed after the performance highlighted the audience view of ‘Oh well, Black
people always do that, they always have babies really young.’ (qtd. in Aston 132)

While the paper does not claim that these examples from the 1980s and 1990s evince a detailed and substantial study, they do offer a snapshot of the nexus of enduring influences which have placed black artists and the representations and receptions of black experience in a disadvantaged position in British theatre, a legacy which confronts contemporary dramatists. In the new millennium, this is no better illustrated than by the number of plays produced in London featuring a young black male character dying of wounds, centre-stage. Such an image unswervingly supports the media-driven (over-determined) link between the young black male body and public violence and most specifically, gang affiliation, drug offences and knife crime. Daily media reports of young black men as gang members and victims of gang-related fatal stabbings or shootings have intensified popular awareness of a social problem. Lynette Goddard’s essay about tucker green’s play random cites some of this extensive media coverage of murdered London teenagers (2007–8) as the dominant, comparative source material. Goddard argues that substantially more press coverage is accorded to murdered white teenage boys, while black boys are more often the victims, and that tucker green’s play provides “provocative alternatives to the predominant media images and

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3 For examples (2003–10) of young men dying from or subjected to wounding: Fallout by Roy Williams (Royal Court Theatre) which opens with a young African student being murdered off-stage; Kwame Kwei-Armah’s Elmina’s Kitchen (Royal National Theatre); Frontline by Che Walker (The Globe Theatre); Gone Too Far by Bola Ajabe (Royal Court Theatre); the film of Roy Williams’s Fallout (aired on Channel 4 as part of the Disarming Britain season on gun and knife crime); debbie tucker green’s random, which records the teenager’s murder off-stage (Royal Court Theatre); Williams’s Category B (Tricycle Theatre) and Mojisola Adebayo’s Desert Boy (The Albany).
reports about young black masculinity” (304). Similarly Marissia Fraggou’s promise to “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” (76). is reliant upon press sources and her assumption that Tucker Green’s material is dialogically responsive to these, rather than fundamentally shaped by writing a play for the theatre.

Some scrutiny of the comparative methodology is needed. Tests for reliability of sources would highlight how press reports are sited within particular and problematic representational arenas. Reportage might aim for the truth but it frequently relays statistical information according to prevailing social codes or self-censorship, without noting the back-story and long-term factors from which the contemporary situation has evolved. Moreover, the British press demographic has little ethnic diversity amongst the very journalists who generate its reports. For instance, Hannah Pool confirmed that after fourteen years as a staff reporter, she is still one of only a handful of non-white journalists amongst the 800-plus at the left-of-centre Guardian broadsheet newspaper (2009). Press reports do not correspondingly acknowledge that to be associated with this kind of tragedy is neither the foremost experience nor expectation of black families in Britain. Its thematic recurrence on the stage however, has led Patricia Cumper, the Artistic Director of Britain’s premier black-led theatre company Talawa, to decry this reductivist, theatrical pathologising of young black men, which she implicitly connects to mainstream theatre’s relentless New Writing production line.

I feel that gang violence is only a symptom of a much deeper malaise. Young black people are growing up in a society where they are frequently stereotyped and alienated. They respond in many creative and dynamic ways — but we don’t hear much about that.
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What makes it into the newspapers and on to the stage is dysfunction, criminality and violence (Cumper 2009). Repeated commissioning and staging of a narrow range of representations by white-led theatre venues constricts both the experiential and the aesthetic ambitions of potential playwrights. It reinforces a self-affirming overlap between media narratives and dramatised versions. These in turn shape the criteria by which audiences and readers encounter representations of black people’s experiences. The intertwining of young black men and violence is longstanding in British socio-cultural and political representations, and it has become what theatre programmers and artistic directors (overwhelmingly white males) tend to look for in plays either by black dramatists or about black people’s lives. As Cumper notes, their search for new drama results in “work considered ‘urban and gritty’ (and usually working-class)” and they “believe that it represents the black experience. It does not” (2009). In her own soliciting of new writing Cumper demands equivalent access points for Black British writers (as for their white counterparts) in terms of genre and topoi, “[r]omances, comedies, musicals, examination of class and history — the synergies created when immigrants arrive: these topics interest me. Another play that assumes black men are violent, profligate and oversexed […] does not” (2009).

The view that staging certain subjects propagates a misleading sense of social reality is discussed by David Edgar, who warns that “works of the imagination — however threatening — are being judged as if they were descriptions of the real.” He uses drama about paedophilia as his case in point, “a striking example of how the idea that to describe something is to promote it” (Edgar 30). Clearly plays which stereotypically conflate young black males and violence could not be interpreted as promoting this, rather the opposite. However, it is not a taboo topic (unlike paedophilia) but typical of how black
people’s lives are frequently dramatised. The British theatre establishment’s myopic approach thus coincides with the media’s to relay certain discourses of interference (in this instance, the perpetual connection of young black men with violence), which, played back to their audiences (of all subjectivities), reinforces and naturalises these representations as a kind of self-perpetuating social truth.

In three significant areas, Tucker Green avoids the representational perils Cumper and others describe via her experimentation with: (i) language, form and genre, crucially the page performativity of her text as a distinct entity from its performance as a play, and (ii) her subverting of public (pre)conceptions about black people on the British stage; through her casting specifications, and (iii) her refusal to engage with critical frameworks by withholding personal biographical information and avoiding interviews. These factors set out the terms of engagement with her drama, lifting it out of the repressive embrace of social over-identification and its convenient generic facilitator, social-realism. As Tucker Green’s agent unfailingly responds to any requests for information, ‘Debbie feels the work should speak for itself.’

**Language, Form and Genre**

*Born Bad* (2003) and *Random* (2008) demonstrate how Tucker Green’s unique dramatic-poetics, is governed by her use of linguistic strategies, namely parataxis (writing without connecting language), polysemy (a word’s capacity to carry two or more distinct meanings), anaphorae (same word begins each new line), epanalepsis (an initial word or verse line reappears at the end or is woven through a passage), and anadiplosis (word/phrase appears at the end of one clause/sentence/stanza and the start of next to link two units). Alongside her experiential destabilisations and insistence upon non-
capitalisation and sparse punctuation, such techniques place her at the heart of dissonant and frame-breaking traditions of women’s experimental writing. Experimentation of this sort can aid in creating an emancipatory aesthetic. As Isobel Armstrong notes, “It is harder to make critique from within a discourse than through the drama of difference in linguistic experiment” (Armstrong 42). Tucker green’s linguistic experimentation has evolved into a complex and inimitable dramatic signature — one which undoes the restrictive carapace of social realism or the well-made play, the form which has unilaterally characterised commissioned drama by black Britons over the past decade.

Whether experienced as live performance or read on the page (aloud or to oneself), Tucker Green’s writing fulfils Marianne DeKoven’s observation that the essential manoeuvre of postmodernist experimental writing is to enforce the upending of expectations as listeners and readers are required to apprehend “the world through a lens that would subvert, at their linguistic-perceptual root, habits of consciousness comfortable with the predominant cultural givens” (13). Tucker Green’s dramatic-poetics creates an arresting polyvocality that discomforts these ‘predominant cultural givens.’ The vocality is physically realised (voiced) as performance on the stage and, in its published version where typography alerts the reader to further performable aspects embedded in the writing which cannot be captured on stage. To read Tucker Green’s play texts is to be aware that normal (or normalising) reading is being obstructed. Likewise, its auditory and physicalised life when performed in the theatre, also obstructs the automatic attribution of a number of conventional receptive frameworks.

With its interplay of formal and practical grammar, Tucker Green’s writing invites analysis via Noam Chomsky’s theories of generative grammar and linguistic competence, which as Allen and Van Buren
describe, “gives a human speaker the unique ability to create new sentences which he has never used before, and to understand new sentences which he has never heard before” (152). Her texts provoke new relationships with competence: performatively through active silences and overlapping dialogue (which must be recognised by the staging apparatus of actor, director, technical team), and linguistically in testing how far audiences are conversant with vernacular and its resonances with Jamaican patois, estuary English, dub poetry and jazz lyrics.

As Walter J. Ong notes, “The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word” (74). Tucker Green’s playtexts encompass this multi-dimensionality of a simultaneous oral, aural, visual, and grapholectic interplay. As Robbie McCauley has observed from an African American standpoint, “Black playwriting is in the tradition of black poets — many of whom are also performance artists and playwrights” (584). Tucker Green does not create a drama-poetry hybrid but a radical enunciatory language that places spoken-word poetic strategies at the heart of drama and theatre. Reading Tucker Green’s work (with an underlying awareness of Standard linguistic structures) can function reductively, and yet reading it actually produces an increased awareness of the potential of her plays’ linguistic repertoires and possible meanings despite their minimal vocabulary. The page life offers a range of options by which to appreciate the text’s complexity, something which, ironically, is reduced by the selection process required for acting the play on stage, its live third dimension and intended endpoint.

Chomsky’s three degrees of grammaticalness — conventional (transparent, graspable, orderly), semi-grammatical (multiples of lexical meaning, figurative, evocative, strange) and ungrammatical (unreadable, word as word and nothing more) — are relevant to
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encounters with tucker green’s semantic gymnastics, especially the transition between second and third degree grammaticalness. As applied to Gertrude Stein’s experimental writing DeKoven explains,

The second degree of grammaticalness not only undermines or fragments coherent meaning, it also subordinates meaning altogether to the linguistic surface [...] we notice the strangeness or freshness of the verbal combinations themselves – the words "stand out" as words – before we register consciously their determined, unresolved articulations of lexical meanings [...] these deviant utterances retain meaning in some significant accessible form. (11)

The surface of the word as it looks, or as it is spoken (and heard) in tucker green’s writing enables that momentary defamiliarisation of the semi-grammatical where “the words ‘stand out’ as words” (DeKoven 11) which is then clarified back into first degree by the performer’s arsenal of meaning-making strategies, by which they act and shape the play’s delivery.

It should be remembered that critical writing aligns black poets in Britain pejoratively, to oral traditions primarily. Kwame Dawes rightly argues in relation to poetry that there should be no ethno-cultural ring fencing: “The poem is the thing. Its value can be tested on the page and in performance [...]. A poet ought to be able to choose her own ‘performance space’” (284). The aesthetics of tucker green’s printed text covers both bases. Its theatrical performance disappears while the printed text remains for perpetuity, but this is not an unequivocal or univocal medium. Her lower case usage and sparse punctuation suggest a simultaneous pull between linguistic rules and their disruption, an implicit a priori critique or dissatisfaction with what Standard grammar offers — yet it ultimately endows her writing with “the liberating effects of constraints” to redeploy Rosemary Waldrop’s description of her own technique (197).
In writing *born bad*, tucker green says she generated her dialogue chronologically rather than consciously creating a narrative. She describes it as “an ad hoc way of developing the play where it was not immediately apparent what had happened and who is actually in the family” (tucker green 2005). The characters’ names: Dad, Mum, Dawta, Sister 1, Sister 2 and Brother, form the “blood related black family” (*born bad* 1). ‘Blood related’ becomes a disturbing specification in a play that turns out to be about incest. The uses of ‘Sister,’ numbered 1 and 2, and ‘Brother’ creates a sibling group in relation to each other which consolidates Dawta’s axial isolation (as the one chosen by Mum for Dad to abuse). She is the only child whose identity is derived from and verified by her parents’ relationship to her. A Fury-like figure, Dawta, names Zeus-like patriarch Dad as her incestuous abuser and propels the play’s accountability narrative to ensure all family members acquire the whole story. The mosaic methodology tucker green employed in creating her text is transposed to the theme of naming Dad as perpetrator and piecing together each of the other family members’ perspectives. Is the impetus to remember fuelled by revenge or justice? tucker green weaves the problematic motivation into her characters’ inconstant recollections. In Scene 3, Sister 1’s affirmation that Mum chose Dawta for Dad to abuse — “She chose/I remember” — becomes, “I recall...sorta...something...’alf arsed remember like that, y’know?” (8 ). The elliptical vagueness is reinforced by the question mark, which undercuts certainty. Lines later, an epanaleptic passage demonstrates distinctive features of tucker green’s linguistically transformative, second-degree grammaticalness as Sister 1 redeems Dawta to confirm Mum as catalyst:

SISTER 1.: It wasn’t by misfortune. It weren’t.
   It weren’t all your misfortune
   You weren’t borned misfortunate.
More misfortunate. 
Unfortunate. 
Unfortunately. 
Born bad. No. 
Nature nurture. None a that not knowin. 
Wondering long over which one. 
No. 
She knew. 
She chose. (8–9)

The shifting definitions of the base word ‘fortune,’ as it gains and sheds prefixes and suffixes, requires a verbalised dexterity, lyricised by the actor's tone and articulating emphasis in performance, and the reader's mental awareness of the endless possibilities of language associations. The reassuring alliterative sibilance of ‘Nature nurture’ as a rhythm is negated by the impact of ‘None a that not knowin,’ the final assonance underscoring the intentionality and the shared knowledge of what the situation should be, compared to what it is. Together with the double negatives, this linguistic strategy pluralises ambiguity just as it pares down the very vehicle for its conveyance, the syntax and vocabulary. Mum's wondering 'long over' could mean a finished state, or does it refer to lingering over which child she would pick for Dad to abuse? This presents a chilling juxtaposition between sacrifice of her child or judicious selection to appease Dad that an actor must choose between, while a reader can appreciate both possibilities. Similarly, a reader will see the difference between 'No' as a negative and its homophone 'know' (as present tense of 'knew') on the page, while an audience member might hear 'No' as 'know,' in the sense that it is followed directly by 'She knew.'

This passage exemplifies how born bad is awash with moral difficulties. A judgemental quagmire disallows either exoneration or culpability to ultimately triumph, and this encircles the character Mum. While Mum's womb retrospectively might have been the only
safe place for her children, who were then born into the Law of the Father, a context of sexual abuse, Mum’s womb is not Kristeva’s chora. In choosing the child Dad would abuse, Mum’s womb is an activator, a conduit to Dad’s Law which violates natural law, especially if Dad was abusing Dawta before her siblings were born. Mum even blames her child: “So if I did mek a choice./You made it easy.’ Blackout” (34). The stage direction compounds a brutal finality denying Dawta any chance to respond to such cognitive distortion, denying the audience the satisfaction of witnessing a response. Tucker green illuminates the complexity (of what turns out to be a false sense) of choice through a lens focused upon sexual abuse and the extremes to which an individual will resort to avoid the consequences of his/her actions. In the final scene Dad bluntly tells Mum: “You made the wrong choice” (50). It is undetermined as to whether Mum chose the wrong child, thereby precipitating his sexual abuse of their son as well (which emerges in the play) and consequently invalidating her choice and its rationalisation or whether she chose the wrong husband if she could not ultimately accept him as an incestuous abuser: Whatever the outcome, Mum’s life is nullified. She is left facing oblivion for having remained intentionally oblivious to her collusion.

In contrast, the character Dawta functions to force out repressed voices, remorselessly aiming for a verification of facts, discrediting testimony, rendering it inadmissible and extracting never-before-heard confessions in her intractable mission of disclosure and accountability. But it is not a straightforward enterprise. The vicissitudes of inter-sibling rivalries surface even in the face of so unpalatable a context. Sister 1’s envy and resentment about not being the centre of Mum’s attention (despite what this entails) exudes self-preserving relief: “God was who I’d give thanks to every night in gratitude, God was who I thanked for guiding her in getting her choice right” (11). Sister 1, the main witness of Dawta’s nightly empty
bed, contrasts with Sister 2’s adamant refusal to corroborate this, when she accuses Sister 1 of lying and thus undermines previous clarity and certainty. Sister 2’s mission is avoidance and obstruction, characterised linguistically by epizeuxis and the syllabically accumulative syntax working in tandem with differing capitalisation.

SISTER 2.: Don’t
don’t
don’t. Yeh.
Don’t ask-
don’t ask me
don’t ask me nuthin
(13)

Sister 2’s narcissistic justification for not believing Dad’s incest, is that Dad did not approach her, “Not a touch, not a glance Not a raas. Never once” (18). Empathic possibility becomes contorted into incredulous resentment: “That little gurl yu had something over bouncing baby me?” (19). When Brother reveals he, too, was abused, the competitive achievement element gathers a perverse intensity as Dawta’s status of being the special one is destabilised.

BROTHER: All the things you wouldn’t do I guess I got. All your little –
DAWTA: there was nothing I wouldn’t do.
Brother. (21)

The mutual revelations here underpin a sibling rivalry caught within distortion and damage. As she reinstates herself, Dawta’s interjection continues Brother’s sentence — they both know the terms of engagement with Dad — while her final “Brother.” encompasses both the grim absurdity of this competitiveness and the distance of their discussion from any projected healthy familial relationships.

In random another snapshot of Tucker Green’s dramatic-poetics is illustrated by her economy of vocabulary, sparse punctuation and
unconventional capitalisation (or lack of it), which develop a threshold where the reader is held on the edge of perceiving meaning due to the positioning of words on the page. Writing about Rae Armantrout’s poetry, Ron Silliman has commented that (in ways which hold true for exploring tucker green’s poetic effects) Armantrout’s textual divisions serve to identify “a place within meaning — a suspension — that seems not to be capable of articulation in any other way,” one where “[c]onnotation seems about to break into denotation and yet ... To accomplish this requires a certain degree of holding meaning back” (Silliman 40). In the final section of the play, tucker green’s elegiac paring down of language reveals an unconscious affinity with Gaston Bachelard’s poeticising of the house as a psychologised space and illustrates Silliman’s thesis. Sister’s eulogising of her brother’s traces (their potency in the household mourning his eternal absence) is conjured in her sensory journey through its rooms.

Close back his
drawer
close back his
doors –
keep his stink in. [to seal in his traces as his room becomes a time capsule]
Step down the – too quiet stairs
[the caesura/hyphen acts as a self-interrupting reminder, to tiptoe in the context of grieving]
past the stank Dad still sittin in
[the noun stink becomes a hybrid of noun and verb, stank the past tense usage, Dad is clasped in the past]
from the kitchen. (50)

Each family member is separated from the other: Dad in the kitchen, Mum in the Front Room. The vibrant interwoven familial ordinariness of the play’s beginning is replaced by numbed domestic isolation at
the ending. The Sister/actor marks the gradual winding down enhanced by alliterative sibilance, to the finish.

Pass the socked Supporting Officer
struggling –
in the best room
with our...
[the ellipsis invokes that which lies beyond verbal articulation as she must painfully recalibrate the family members here, for she is the realist, the pragmatist of the piece]
my
destroyed Mum. (50)

The utterance of 'Mum' is an almost too painful matrixial intimacy (so unlike born bad), evoking both the cycle of life that connects the mother's body in giving birth to life, with the brother's last cry, maybe for his mother in his dying moments. It undoes the supercilious media demand for a black mother's stoicism when Mum asserts she has "nuthin nice to say./ Nu'un polite [...] nu'un forgivin" (random 42). tucker green's Mum debunks the media's endorsement of Doreen Lawrence's example as a template of the bereaved black mother and introduces (albeit fictively) more than one option for a black mother's grief.
Audiences and Casting

In born bad, the sense of imprisonment within the purgatorial stage area enhances the thematic incarceration of the family emotionally shackled to one another by a terrible secret. The stage directions state, "Once onstage, the characters never leave" (born bad 2), so that once onstage even outside the playing area, the actors are still perceived in reference to their characters. Audience complicity as voyeuristic witnesses to the secret's enforced disclosure adds another concentric circle; all are powerless onlookers to the staged action. This is not Forum Theatre. There is no intervention. Thus, what is palpably underscored is the layering of the awareness of, collusion with, yet inaction towards, abuse within a family. The epiphany in random occurs notably in the Front Room, a uniquely aestheticised domestic and social space for Britain's black community, one which may or may not resonate with audiences' cultural competencies, as the majority of Britain's demographic population is white, so too is the majority of the mainstream theatre-going public. tucker green underscores the calamity in a host of ways. The ominous metonym of 'Dark boots,' (indicating the police, there to break the news of the brother's murder outside his school) is a multi-evocation that draws into its compass the Orwellian archetype of a merciless crushing metaphor: the jackboot, the oppressive marching unison of the male military complex, the Doctor Martins of racist skinhead gangs. The house-proud mother's ledger of her decency is her Front Room and the jarring masculine presence of 'Dark boots' violates the woman's fashioned space. Her authority in this space is increasingly disabled by the harbinger quality of "Dark boots an heavy shoes" (random 26).

> on my clean carpet
> in my good room –
> in my front room –
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my visitor room –
my room fe best –
fe formal –
not even fe family (26)

The anaphorae “in” and possessive “my” work in tandem with the end-stopping hyphen to transmit the mother’s growing distress. The police defy the customs of the Front Room and usurp the mother’s hospitality prerogative (by offering her tea), which confirms they are white officers and unfamiliar with the socially expected and accepted protocols of the space.

An artistic representational context might be the closest some white people come to engaging with black people, confirming that investigation is needed into the kind of work that is being rewarded with cultural centrality. While no comprehensive surveys of audiences (their demographic compass, their range of responses) have been conducted in relation to tucker green’s work, the theatre critic — as audience member — does provide a range of recorded perspectives (his/her theatre reviews), which can be analysed. DeKoven has noted “the reader experiences the text while the critic takes possession of it” (8). For theatre critics, the application of this possessive authority often faces an elusive and slippery project when encountering tucker green’s plays. A feature of white male-dominated theatre critics’ reviews of black writers’ work unfailingly confirms that white audiences are the critics’ norm. Time and time again, reviews mention a perceived audience ethnic-composition when plays by black writers are reviewed, which is not the case for reviews of white writers’ plays.4 Perceptions are accompanied by conjectural comments about age and

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4 Billington notes “a predominantly young black audience” (Theatre Record 28.6 (2008) 284), Taylor “largely comprised of young black people” (284) and Edge “the young black audience” (285).
behaviour of the audiences amongst whom the critic finds himself (the male form is used intentionally here as critics predominantly are). The recorded observations frequently highlight the reviewer’s receptive limitations. As tucker green’s wordage and its usage hover over the void, daringly inviting audience member and reader to imagine beyond restrictive structures that articulate experience, this can prove alienating to those people who will not venture past them. In many instances, the theatre critic finds himself at sea, floundering in encounters with the culturally and experientially unfamiliar. His life line takes the form of a reinstating of conventions and a repositioning of himself as a cultural arbiter or even custodian. tucker green’s genre-refusenik style oversteps acceptable boundaries for theatre’s critical custodians. If it is not her works’ poeticity that is so alarming, it is that an interloper is excluding them from full participation, unless it is under her textual terms. She writes beyond the epistemological framework of playwright and critic’s white maleness. Reviewer Michael Billington habitually laments that tucker green’s plays are poems not drama, “more like an acted poem than a play” (2006). random displays “a pungent poetic voice and an eye for detail. But fine writing is not the same as drama” (Theatre Record 28.6 (2008) 284–85). Her plays’ mini-philippics confront Billington’s notion of drama as a “marriage between language and action” (2006) since in tucker green’s plays speech is the action of the drama, embodying the dynamism of Ong’s “event, a movement in time” (74) and as often as not, Chomsky’s third-degree grammaticalness, of word as word. Although disparaging in his observations, Billington is on the right track, tucker green’s plays are like a poem. Dialogue groupings on the page evoke stanzaic clusters, as words and phrases are repeated in shifting contexts. Of course drama-poetry inter-referentiality proves unproblematic when applied to (white men such as) Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. As Keith
Peacock writes, “[l]ike Beckett, Pinter’s whole career in the theatre [...] has been characterised by a poet’s search for economy and clarity of expression in words, movement and visual imagery” (161).

Much cross-fertilisation obviously occurs stylistically, generically and formally in tucker green’s work. Beth Wright notes how performance poetry “provides an ideal conduit to engage with Black performativity owing to its orality, its capacity to equivocate between the aesthetic and social functions of performance and its popularity within Black communities” (272). Communality is as fundamental to the art form of performance poetry and spoken-word poetry as it is to staging play texts. Novelist Dreda Say Mitchell affirmed that as a black British woman she immediately recognised the rhythms and interactions, sayings and rules of the family rituals captured in random from its opening lines which are specifically related to black family dynamics. The poetic rendering did not present an obstacle to this. (BBC 2008) In contrast, Quentin Letts’s review lamented, “[t]he 50-minute poem is hard for a middle-class white ear to follow” (Theatre Record 28.6 (2008) 284), his white middle-class ear perhaps!

Casting has been a longstanding barometer of the degree to which black performers have been excluded from mainstream theatre roles. Much is made of Caryl Churchill’s casting specifications in Cloud Nine (1979) of both gender dissolution and where a white actor plays the role of a black character. It must be noted that the only combination lacking in her fluid dramatis personae is a black actor playing a white role. Perhaps this indicates that at the time Churchill wrote the play, black actors were simply not on her casting radar. The ethnic singularity is noteworthy especially as Clive’s normative whiteness is not specified. Furthermore, ‘Joshua, his black servant played by a white’ in Act I is not present in the updated Act II, suggesting a place for black people in the Imperial project but not in “London in the present” (Churchill 2). tucker green asserts her theatrical reality as a
black-centred one. Her casting specifications combine a socio-cultural and theatrical resistance to legacies of marginality and discounting. For *born bad* she specifies, “A blood-related black family;” in *random* stipulates, “One Black actress plays all characters” across sexes and generations. This authorial directive liberates casting expectations from both colour-blind and societal casting and prevents white-colonising casting where productions use white casts for her work. Her plays remain activist in revising conditions for black actors and promoting on-going opportunities for work.

The demands of the monodrama *random* offer a black actress an opportunity to show her expertise like no other Black British play. In its Royal Court première season the cavernous main house stage was stripped of its illusion-making apparatus (no props, set, lighting special effects, or other actors), which accentuated actor Nadine Marshall’s vulnerability and aloneness, while contemporaneously asserting the highly artificial dimension of the extraordinary and complex self-intra-inter-actions needed to play all parts. This single actor is split into a transitioning prism of a family’s activities. The play’s narrative binding is reliant upon the daughter’s first-person focalisation. Mike Chasar’s noting of billboard prosody’s “structural dialectic” when two systems “do not exist side by side but on top of, within, and even at odds with each other [...] a sort of palimpsest in which each system is continuously erased and rewritten by the other” (39), resonates with how the performance of *random* operates through the illusion of multiple conversations and interactions between characters, activated by the actor’s virtuosity of performance. When the actor brings to life one character’s voice, another is lost in a continual system of replacement. No overlapping dialogue is physically possible and yet the deft marking of one character from another gives the emotional sense of more than one person. Second, third or fourth ways of hearing and viewing are actuated constantly
and yet, the physical conduit is one body and one voice, an ever-present reminder of the performance’s contrivance. The artifice of a conversation between many selves by one self (implausible, or certifiable, even dangerous in real life) chafes against the pseudo-seductive believability, the beguiling approximation to truthfulness or bearing witness that a solo performer (as the only option for an audience) compellingly endows.

**Critical Packaging**

tucker green’s resistance to a detailed personal public profile and the packaging this entails, serves to circumvent conjectural biographical, racial or social positioning being used to compromise encounters with her writing. However, her self-imposed absence from any dialogue about her plays bypasses the greater problem of black writers in general who experience limited opportunities to maintain authentic agency and credibility in a white-dominated field. Joan Anim-Addo and Les Back have highlighted “the persistent pattern of white interpreters ‘speaking for’ and about, and seldom in dialogue with Black people” (12). The preserving of white-led cultural production in Britain — at the expense of logging the presence of black people’s contributions — still clearly continues in the new millennium and, in turn, creates the distortions which have characterised traditional British literary and theatre historiographies. The composition of critical drama genealogies is a case in point. Examining Pinter’s influence upon contemporary playwriting, Steve Waters asks: “So who then are Pinter’s legitimate children?” (300). His roll call denies the existence of any black offspring, either women or men. This continuation of the canon of artistic paternity replicates the familiar exclusions from the national and theatrical story and second-class citizenry for both women and black people. tucker green’s dramatic-
Deirdre Osborne

poetics clearly evoke Pinter's legacy. The dramatic pause, poetic lyricism and spare vocabulary are as integral to her writing as are legacies of women's experimentation in dramatic utterance and choreopoetics traceable from Gertrude Stein to Ntozake Shange. Her acknowledged influences — Caryl Churchill’s overlapping dialogic technique, the dub poetry of Louise Bennett, the lyrics of Jill Scott — are as discernible as Suzan-Lori Parks’s dynamic silences, or aspects of the theatrical jazz aesthetic that “disrupts the traditional conventions of Western theatre” (Jones and Olomo 599). The comparative critical work which positions black playwrights among their predecessors and peers is overdue — bearing in mind any comparisons should take into account the variegated experiential and aesthetic influences which fall outside traditions of British theatre criticism.

Anthologies (vital to longevity) also distort a truly representative cultural offering. The Methuen Drama Book of 21st Century British Plays (2010) includes two dramas by black Britons Kwame Kwei-Armah and Bola Agbaje (the only woman) but the selection is derived from Methuen-published playwrights only. Both plays Elmina’s Kitchen (2003) and Gone Too Far (2008), feature the murder and near-murder of young black male characters, factors which enhance the violence, disaffectedness and the incomplete or failing family expectations that have stereotyped black people in Britain. Likewise Ruth Little’s edited The Methuen Drama Book of Royal Court Plays 2000–2010 includes one woman writer only and further limits its criteria for selection not only to Methuen-published writers, but also to those whose plays were produced at the Royal Court Theatre. Little showcases Roy Williams’s Fallout (2003), which is centred on a murdered young black man on a council estate. A dramatist of the impact and importance of debbie tucker green, one of the most radical and experimental of contemporary British playwrights (but
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who is published by Nick Hern Books not Methuen) is omitted — despite being a commissioned Royal Court writer.

The expectation that black drama is still a novel presence or an especially catered-for component of mainstream theatre fare is indicated by perceptions about the audiences who attend it (the audience in its widest sense of attendees at a live performance) critics, general public, or ‘specialist public’ such as those derived from Outreach initiatives. The Royal Court’s revival of random opened its Theatre Local season at the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, Unit 215–16. Theatre Local or Pop-Up theatre is problematic, redolent perhaps of a budget airline or package holiday represented as being a luxury holiday abroad. Prices of tickets notwithstanding (they are resoundingly advertised as ‘cheap’ at £8), it should be queried whether Theatre Local really does or will open up the institution of British theatre to a wider range of audience members than before. Or, more accurately perhaps, it merely attaches a gimmick to it and with that an illusion of access (as package holidays do to a jet-setting lifestyle) rather than sustained opportunities for full participation within the elite circumference. Theatre Local might re-site plays from mainstream venues to the heart of a community. However, to date the underpinning examples staged have been by Black British playwrights (Oxford Street by Levi-David Addai and tucker green’s random), thus replaying a community or grassroots slant, a devaluing connection which has long impeded mainstream inclusion for Black British dramatists and practitioners.

Noticeably this revival is further diminished since the main stage of the Royal Court (2008) for “after it leaves here it will still draw audiences as it plays studio theatres around England,” notes Dominic Maxwell in his review (2010). As tickets are primarily obtained through the Royal Court Box Office (and its attendant routes of programme dissemination), who is drawn to see random in this
location? Are they regular theatre-goers or does it engage new audiences? Will Pop Up theatre mean a permeated presence of drama in the consciousness of people unaccustomed to attending theatre complexes, or is it equitable with the transience of a marketing ploy, the bedrock remaining intact?

While the concentrated cultural visibility of indigenous black writers is arguably a recent phenomenon, the framing of their drama to fit within a certain cultural lens is not only curtailing the possibilities of adventurous, inventive writing but in the case of Tucker Green, failing to recognise and laud what is truly revising conceptions of current drama.
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“D’You Really Give My Scribbling That Much Thought?” Narrative Games in the Plays of Martin Crimp

Playwright Martin Crimp’s work has been accurately characterized as possessing a “pared-down and steely verbal style” and offering “a totally convincing vision of social and moral collapse,” all of which is delivered with “wit, intelligence and theatrical control” (Rebellato 182–3). As the quotation in this chapter’s title — which comes from Crimp’s 2009 translation of Ferdinand Bruckner’s Pains of Youth (27) — makes clear, he is also a most self-reflexive playwright, always conscious of his own writing, and of his own ability to use narrative as a means to make meaning. He is also aware of his ability to unsettle his audience, to provoke them, and to sometimes startle them into asking questions they might not have known that they wanted to ask. The experience of watching Crimp’s plays on stage is one where the familiar leads you by the hand and then lets you go, or twists you down an unexpected path, or gives you an odd handshake. Often, something very curious is happening, but what exactly is it? To
answer this question, you have to go back to the text. Crimp’s work demands close reading, in a way that is simply not true of most contemporary British playwrights. His works are not only play texts, but also literary texts. To appreciate his narrative games, you have to follow his various textual leads. Yes, you really have to give his scribbling some thought.

I. Narrative and Fiction

To begin, it is worth remembering some of the things that narratives do. The main point is that stories are, like the fictions that they are part of, very powerful tools of meaning-making. Stories do a lot of hard work. As narratives, they give us pleasure by giving shape to reality: playwrights are, of course, well aware of this. A recent example is a moment of typical self-reflection in David Greig and Gordon McIntyre’s *Midsummer* (2008), where one of the characters says that: “The more you tell a story the more it becomes a story. All the rough edges get worn away” (47). In the theatre, stories help us enjoy ourselves by leading us through the labyrinth of meaning, contradiction and conflict that is drama. They give us pleasure. Narratives play to our natural desire to know what comes next, to find out what is hidden, and to our need to expose the truth in its banality as well as its revelatory power. Very often, stories are both fictional and real: as one character in Philip Ridley’s *Moonfleece* (2010) says, “He used to mix fantasy up with real stuff. [...] The stories. He used to put real places and people in them” (46). So narratives teach us about the world: they make visible the motives of fictional characters, perhaps compensating for our inability to truly know people in real life. Perhaps they make us feel that life is more manageable than it really is. They act as a compensation for hard-to-bear reality. In doing so, they also police us. They remind us of moral codes, of the
boundaries of desire and of the consequences of wrong-doing. They
sometimes even show the good being rewarded (it is fiction, after all).
They provide equipment for living, and help make sense of the world.
Narratives ‘R’ us.

And fictional narratives have some real advantages over reality. If
real life is messy, fictional stories are usually clear (even when
ambiguous). Real life does not usually follow a pattern; fiction does.
Real life is often meaningless; fiction abounds in meanings. Fiction
appeals to us because it can do things that real life cannot. For
example, in the fictional world of the stage, conflicts that are very
hard to resolve in the reality beyond the theatre building can be
brought to a neat resolution. Deep contradictions can be overcome.
Justice can be seen to be done. Love can overcome all odds. Fiction
can be so moving precisely because it is unlike real life. In the world of
fiction, anything is possible: time can be made to unfold in reverse.
Two locations can be experienced at the same time. Fiction enables us
to time-travel and to jump across oceans; it allows us to see who we
really are by showing us people who are both like us and not like us. It
also permits us to transgress and break taboos with fewer risks. As
playwright David Edgar says, “Drama is a zone in which we can
experiment with our dreams and our dreads, our ambitions and our
impulses — murderous as well as virtuous — in conditions of safety”
(How Plays Work 202). Fiction is where the real world and the
imaginary world both talk to the wider world. So narrative fiction,
concludes Beckett scholar H. Porter Abbott, offers “the truth of
meaning rather than fact” (153). In the imaginary world of the stage,
we might be able to accept truths that we are reluctant to
acknowledge before the house lights go down. Sometimes, narratives
can change us. However temporary, that is their power.

Theatre is a particularly powerful cultural location for such
narratives. If, as Abbott points out, it is a truism that “bringing a
collection of events into narrative coherence can be described as a way of normalizing those events" (44), then theatre is a good place to perform this process. In British theatre especially the stage conventions of naturalism and the realistic portrayal of what audiences recognize as objective reality create a feeling that theatre is just normal reality, albeit in an edited and entertaining format. After all, the actors are real people pretending to be, well, real people. The scenery attempts to show us a real location; writing, directing and acting styles emphasize naturalism and realism. Such conventions tend to tame the waywardness of theatre texts. In Jonathan Culler’s formulation, "'Naturalization' emphasizes the fact that the strange and deviant is brought within a discursive order and thus made to seem natural" (Structuralist Poetics 137). But there are limits to this process: conventions must always be made to appear conventional. A good example is given by director Mike Bradwell, who as a young actor performed in Mike Leigh’s Bleak Moments (1970). This play was created through improvisations, one of which involved Bradwell walking around central London in the character of Norman, a shy hipster, and then reporting back. During this process, by chance, he bumped into John Lennon and Yoko Ono, who of course ignored him, but the point is that when he reported back in character, detailing the encounter, the director accused him of inventing the story: “Mike [Leigh] was furious. He thought that I had made the whole thing up for effect” (70). Reality was stranger than fiction; so strange, in fact, that it could not be used within the constraints of this improvised play. Bumping into John Lennon was too errant to be natural. It defied normalization.

If, in the words of the title of this chapter, Crimp plays narrative games, what is the kind of story that he plays games with? Of course, he has a lot of different narratives to choose from. He is spoilt for choice. Various forms of story have been developed, over centuries of
cultural history, into traditions of storytelling, from the classical unities with their elaborate backstory narratives and climaxes of fateful catharsis, through the messy structures of Shakespeare’s plays to the well-made models of the 19th-century theatre, a type of theatrical storytelling that Graham Saunders argues has recently experienced something of a revival: “During the early 1990s the well-made play enjoyed a brief flourishing and momentary return (literally) to centre stage” (227). In Alan Bennett’s The History Boys, there’s a running joke in which Rudge, the dimmest pupil, defines history as “just one fucking thing after another” (85, 106) — it sounds almost like a comment on epic theatre. A similar sentiment can also apply to life. As novelist Martin Amis recently said, “Life is just one damned thing after another” (2010). Of course, stories differ from life in that in most of them causality is vital: most stories are just one fucking thing causing another.

II. Story and Genre

Does any of this help in considering the games that Crimp plays with stories? When working on a translation, he sometimes takes a radical approach to the originals. In his version of The Misanthrope (1996), the action follows Molière’s, and the verse mimics the verve of the original, but the setting is completely contemporary (for the 2009 West End revival, he rewrote some passages to comment on contemporary politics: for example, the lines about a political leader — “He cleverly/adopts a flat bland mask of pity/and never mentions once his shit-rich banking cronies in the City” (8) — clearly refer to Conservative David Cameron). Likewise, in Cruel and Tender (2004), Crimp’s reworking of Sophocles’s The Trachiniae, Herakles has become a present-day General fighting a War on Terror, but the basic overall structure of the play remains similar to the original (see Sierz,
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The Theatre of Martin Crimp 63–7). But in the plays where he has dreamed up his own story, Crimp is playing a different kind of game. He is experimenting with a particular aspect of theatrical expectations: he is mucking about with genre. As David Edgar points out, genre can be simply defined as “a recognizable kind of story” (How Plays Work 64). For playwrights, and their audiences, genre is “a set of expectations of storyline, character, locale and outcome. Any discussion of genre exposes theatre’s dirty little secret, which is that audiences know the ending of most plays (or certainly the sort of ending) before they begin” (How Plays Work 65). And, one could add, audiences know not only the ending of a play’s story, but also much about the way in which it will be arrived at. In a countryhouse murder mystery, say Agatha Christie’s The Mousetrap (1952), we know that there will be an investigation, the interrogation of suspects, and a final surprise revelation; in an absurdist play, say Harold Pinter’s The Birthday Party (1958), we have the sense that nothing will inevitably make sense (although this awareness was denied to this play’s first reviewers and audiences); in a play within a play, such as Tom Stoppard’s Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (1966), we know well, the title gives it away (or does it not?, they do not quite die on stage); in family reunion dramas of the 1960s, we know that deep-seated conflicts will emerge and be bitterly articulated while being finally left unresolved; in a piece of dirty realism, say a contemporary council-estate drama, we just know that the characters will end up even more depressed at the end than they were at the beginning. In television, our ability to correctly spot the genre — police procedural; drama series; soap opera; sitcom; flatshare comedy; costume drama — is now more or less instant, as anyone who has ever zapped their way through a hundred and more cable network channels knows. One could even say that we have now evolved a survival mechanism to
cope with boredom: our ability to recognize genre helps us maximize our spare time. Our cultural lives depend on it.

At the same time genre conventions can also result in narratives that keep us guessing. So, beginning with *Dealing with Clair* (1988), the game that Martin Crimp plays involves messing about with the audience’s genre expectations. So, for example, *Dealing with Clair* playfully alludes to the shape of a murder mystery. This is suggested, so innocently that a live audience might miss it, by Clair in the opening scene when she tells her Mum on the phone that she would like to “make a [financial] killing,” an expression that leads her to the teasing idea that she just wants to “disappear,” “That’s right. Vanish” (6). But, after this, the play is more comedy of manners than murder mystery. For although the character of James becomes increasingly sinister in the first act, it is not until Act Two Scene Two that he appears to be getting closer to Clair — and she immediately vanishes in the following scene. This is rapidly followed by a scene in which James is talking to her mother on the phone: by now, the audience can guess that he has abducted and killed Clair. Unsettlingly, the audience is now watching a murder story. But when and how exactly has Clair been murdered? And is James ever caught? By the end of the play, the social comedy remains clear, but the murder mystery has been set up, yet never delivered. What has happened is a game with genre expectations. A similar method was adopted by Simon Stephens in his *One Minute* (2003):

*If One Minute* was a detective story, though, it was a detective story with its centre removed, with its heart taken out. Many of the scenes that one imagines when considering a dramatised police missing persons search were taken away. There was never a body revealed

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1 That is, the plays that he wrote after discovering David Mamet, who inspired him to write compelling naturalistic dialogue (Sierz, 2006, 91).
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onstage. No suspect was identified. No one was arrested or interrogated. There was no confession. No one was ever charged or sentenced. The case remained open. (xi)

The same is clearly true of Dealing with Clair.

But if Dealing with Clair could be seen, in terms of narrative and genre, as a murder mystery with its heart taken out, then this also raises questions about the emotional ethics of this game with narrative: Dealing with Clair is a heartless play and this narrative game is a very cerebral affair. If the lust to know what happens next is essential to audience satisfaction, then Crimp’s denial of that satisfaction is surely a deliberate act of cruelty. Similar games are played in his Play with Repeats (1989), in which he takes the sci-fi notion of a second-chance-at-life fantasy, then deliberately ends it on a pessimistic, cruel note. The second chance results in death. The redemptive potential of this genre has been hinted at, and then denied. Likewise, in the second half of Getting Attention (1991) the witness testimonies of the onlooker characters suggest once again that a child-abuse story has turned into the genre of a police procedural. But yet again audience expectations are mocked. No police appear, no body is revealed and we already know whodunit. Cruelly, we have seen this abuse story through the eyes of the victimizers, with no child ever appearing on stage to solicit our sympathy. The word ‘game’ suggests playfulness, but Crimp often plays tricks which are cruel rather than innocent.

These are relatively easy narrative games. Things get a bit more complicated with some of Crimp’s other plays. In The Treatment (1993), he goes further than suggesting genre shifts by showing not only how the life story of his central character, Anne, is created, recreated and falsified by two film-makers, Andrew and Jennifer, but also how it is invented and modified by Anne herself. Likewise, when a writer, Clifford is employed to turn her life story into a film script,
Crimp develops one of his characteristic themes: criticism of the commodification not only of people, but of cultural representation. As Vicky Angelaki says, describing the themes of food and hunger in the play, “Clifford, as a writer, consumes Anne’s life by functioning as the auteur of her story, which is to be presented in a commercial way so as to be ingested by an audience” (“Taking a Bite” 260). In this rapidly shifting scenario of ever-changing narratives about a person’s life, Anne’s real experience is constantly being overridden by those with more social power than she has, and the play’s ending, in which she is casually murdered, underlines her powerlessness, and the mystery of exactly what her life was all about. If any audience member was tempted to sympathize or identify with her character during the course of the play, her fate is a cruel joke. The treatment she gets in The Treatment is not very nice.

By contrast, Crimp’s The Country (2000) not only plays no games with genres, it is also a study of middle-class adultery which, while perhaps not pure and simple, is nevertheless quite straightforward. That is, until you start digging into the disturbing detail of the piece. The plot progresses very elegantly through the stories that the characters tell each other, until the final scene when the discovery of Rebecca’s watch is typically ambiguous. Suddenly, some audience members might think that the play is a thriller, another murder mystery. In fact, Crimp refutes this: “Some people think the play’s a thriller, and that Richard has killed Rebecca. I’d like to point out that this is not the case” (qtd. in Sierz, The Theatre of Martin Crimp 106). The discovery of Rebecca’s watch is disturbing but does not mean the play is a murder story: it is not. What has happened, according to Crimp, is that the watch, as an object, has acquired a “life” of its own: each object “has its own little story” (qtd. in Sierz, The Theatre of Martin Crimp 106). The capacity of inanimate objects for having their own small narratives is a good example of Crimp’s ability to create
very subtle disturbances to audience, or reader expectations. In this context, *The City* (2008) is like a wild card, the opposite of subtle. Once again, Crimp is writing what appears to be a relatively straightforward story of family troubles. Chris and Clair are a suburban couple who, when they try and communicate, tell stories which seem to implode, and are always left incomplete. Until you get to scene five, when it emerges that the story we are watching onstage is just the fictional imaginings of one of the characters. The subverted narratives and increasingly bizarre events are, to a certain extent, explained when, in the last scene, Chris reads Clair’s diary, which gives an account of how she “invented characters” (62): what we have been watching is Clair’s attempts, to use a very Crimpian word, to be a writer. To describe the inner space of her imagination, she uses the metaphor of the city: “a city inside of me,” “an inexhaustible source of characters and stories for my writing” (61). But her characters do not come alive: “They lived a little — but only the way a sick bird tortured by a cat lives in a shoebox” (62). As this cruel metaphor shows, the writer is a vampire, sucking the vitality out of life. And the city is a super-metaphor which, in the words of John Stokes, “is both inner and outer, where we live and how we live, continually terrifying us with thoughts of its demise even as it makes our lives intolerable” (17).

This kind of game comes perilously close not only to the traditions of absurdism, but also to the juvenile kind of imaginary narrative which inevitably ends on the phrase: “Then he woke up and found that it was all a dream!” Clearly, there is a metatheatrical joke involving the author’s self-reflexive instincts going on here. But there are even more extreme aspects to Martin Crimp’s games with theatrical genre, form and narrative.

*III. Known and Unknown*
At this point, I can do no better than refer to the methodology of that famous philosopher and politician, Donald Rumsfeld, former Secretary of Defense in the Bush administration. Rumsfeld once proclaimed that:

The message is: there are known 'knowns'. There are things that we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know. (qtd. in Amis, *The Second Plane* 52)

The “unknown unknowns,” in the words of Martin Amis in *The Second Plane*, are “conceptual breakthroughs — shifts in the paradigm” (53). How would this paradigm shift apply to Martin Crimp’s most experimental plays, namely *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) and *Fewer Emergencies* (2005)? In these plays, Crimp plays wicked games with theatrical form. *Attempts on Her Life*, for example, seems to fit not only into the idea of a radical break with genre and narrative expectations, but also into Rumsfeld’s category of ‘unknown unknowns.’ The audiences for the first production simply could not imagine what the play would be about, or what its challenge was. Their experience was one of initial bafflement turning into, for the most part, an understanding that this was a new style of play that eschewed traditional narrative. The play is a series of fragments in search of a story, but its radicality can be best appreciated by remembering Jonathan Culler’s idea that:

If narrative is defined as the representation of a series of events, then the analyst must be able to identify these events, and they come to function as a nondiscursive, nontextual given, something which exists prior to and independently of narrative presentation and which the narrative then reports. (Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* 190)
In *Attempts on Her Life*, it is precisely these ‘events’ that prove so fugitive. In the scenario called “Tragedy of Love and Ideology,” for example, several people (who might be script writers, media types or just students playing a game) evoke a story about a love affair involving a couple. In their minds, they must have an idea of the ‘events’ behind the story but, instead of existing “prior to and independently of narrative presentation” and then being reported by the narrative (Culler, *The Pursuit of Signs* 190) these ‘events’ are actually being invented in front of the eyes and ears of the audience. They are also seen as being invented by the onstage characters themselves. Because they are being thus invented, they are radically unstable, and keep changing. Here the game with narrative attacks the very roots of narrative stability, the idea that there is an actual story (even if it is concealed behind modernistic experiments in form) which comprises ‘events’ which happen in one order with a beginning, middle and end.

In *Attempts on Her Life*, Crimp challenges exactly this assumption, showing time and time again that Anne is not one person but many, and that our idea of her identity is not only unstable but is actually being constructed on stage. Heiner Zimmermann puts it well when he reminds us that what is being satirized is the male gaze, and Anne’s creation by different men who each have their own agenda. (“Martin Crimp, *Attempts on Her Life*”) The result is that, as Clara Escoda Agusti remarks, “The process of interpretation is always mediated by a series of cultural myths and expectations which render her increasingly opaque and obscure” (150). The more we know about the Annes in the play, the less is clear about them. Moreover, it is not only these Annes who are indeterminate; likewise, the whole presentation of the play (in form and content) plays fast and loose with postmodern ideas. As in *The Treatment*, one of the other subjects being criticized here is contemporary culture: in Mary Luckhurst’s
words, “Crimp flirts skillfully with received postmodern clichés, which suggest that art is apolitical, morally relative, and made meaningful only through its self-referentiality — a trope that seems to be reinforced through the majority of the voices in the play and their obsession with the process of constructing narrative” (47). Other striking examples of the instability not only of the ‘events’ of the play’s narrative, but also of the world it conjures up are, of course, the scenarios which are composed only of songs, and “The New Anny,” where Anne is a make of car — surely a good example of an ‘unknown unknown.’

What kind of a story does this play tell about its author? Playwright Simon Stephens offers a way into an answer when he tells a story about attending a workshop given by a Russian director, who asked some questions about narrative: “What does this story say about the world. And what does it say about me?” (qtd. in Devine 263). But while it is clear what much of the play is saying about the world, what does it say about Crimp? Well, Katie Mitchell — who has directed the play twice — made a list of the motifs in the play and asked its author which of them occurred most often. He guessed that it was probably terrorism, pornography or violence. So he was surprised when she pointed out that the most common motif was that of children, and threats to children (Sierz, The Theatre of Martin Crimp 198). What this shows is that a writer can subconsciously write a play about parental anxiety, and not be aware of it. What Crimp was aware of was the game he was playing. As playwright David Edgar sums up:

Crimp’s purpose is not only to question whether we can truly know another human being, but whether we can regard other people as existing at all independent of the models we construct of them. And he does this not by a bald statement, but by playing an elaborate and
sophisticated game with the audience’s expectations of how scenes connect within narrative. (*State of Play* 31)}
IV. Challenge and Collapse

The idea of subverting the ‘events’ of narrative and of creating ‘unknown unknowns’ is exemplified even more radically in Fewer Emergencies, Crimp’s paradigm-shifting trilogy of short plays. If, as David Edgar says, “[p]lay structures fall into two categories: those using linear time and those which disrupt it” (How Plays Work 99), the disruption of linear time does not necessarily mean telling the story backwards, or in fragments. Fewer Emergencies does neither, but it does employ a radical form to tell three familiar stories — an unhappy marriage, a school massacre and a street riot. In each case, a small group of un-named speakers narrate the stories, all of which collapse under the weight of their own emotional content. For example, the school massacre story (“Face to the Wall”) veers off into a surreal direction when its narrator, who appears to be an actor performing a scripted version of the story, finds he cannot remember the words because of the horror of the subject matter. As he struggles with his memory, and tries to hold off an ever-helpful prompter, the story gradually morphs into another, that of an incidental figure: the psycho-killer’s postman (33–36). As if infected by the homicidal subject matter of the main narrative, this simple story of a postman who finds it hard to wake up in the morning is equally violent, and Crimp ends up by telling it in the form of a twelve-bar blues song. It is not only surreal, but is suffused with a postmodern sense of resisting narrative closure. Linear time evaporates. Fewer Emergencies is a series of collapsing narratives and the complexity of the piece highlights the fact that all stories are artificial constructs and also suggests that the contemporary world is too complex to grasp (see Sierz, The Theatre of Martin Crimp 67–69; and Sierz, “Form Follows Function”). Such experiments in form are radical. As Sarah Kane once said, “[a]ll good art is subversive, either in form or content. And the
best art is subversive in form and content” (qtd. in Stephenson and Langridge, 130).

In each of the playlets that comprise Fewer Emergencies, Crimp’s storytelling strategy is the same. In ‘Whole Blue Sky,’ the first of the trilogy, Crimp tells the story of an unhappy marriage by using three unknown narrators, one female and two male. He hints that something is wrong in the relationship of the two parents because 1 says “she knows what it means when his eyes slide away” and the others agree that there’s something wrong with “the things he gets up to” (10). But the specific ‘events’ that this narrative, which we watch being constructed on stage, refers to are left vague. They are not simply ambiguous — we have no idea at all of what they could be. They are ‘unknown unknowns.’ At the end of the playlet, the couple’s son, Bobby, appears and the story takes a sudden turn into something similarly unexpected and unknown: the territory inside the little boy’s head. He complains of hearing a ‘voice’ in his head. Then, when his mother tells him not to hum the song his parents hum, their “private song” (20), he asks why. Her reply at first is: “Says Mummy.” Then she thinks of a better idea of policing her son: “Not says Mummy, sweetheart, not says Mummy: says the voice” (20). If you think about this example of parental manipulation, it is both grimly hilarious and thoroughly cruel.

Likewise, the last of the trilogy, “Fewer Emergencies,” tells the story of a street riot in a rich neighbourhood, where the have-nots threaten the haves. Once again, narrative coherence is undermined when the tale, which begins with a couple of parents out boating, veers into surreal territory with the focus shifting from them to their son, also called Bobby. The list of Bobby’s possessions that is then narrated starts off with the typical, “candles, boxes of matches,” but rapidly becomes breathtakingly extraordinary: “Barrels of oil,” “the island of Manhattan,” “a wardrobe full of uranium,” and “souvenir life-
sized Parthenons” (45). Grotesque, delightful and amazing, the story then turns nasty as Bobby is hit in the leg by a rioter’s stray bullet and decides to drag himself up the stairs to get a key to unlock the front door and make friends with the poor people outside. Here, the ‘events’ of the narrative are less thoroughly subverted than in the previous two playlets, but the wildly imaginary nature of Bobby’s possessions is both an example of ‘unknown unknowns,’ as well as being a critique of the social inequality of consumer capitalism.

Fewer Emergencies is recognizably postmodern in its form and attitude towards narrative. As each of the three stories veers off in a bizarre direction, Crimp resists narrative closure. Not only are the stories told in fractured conversations; they never materialize as complete, with a beginning, a middle and an end (even in the most complete one, “Fewer Emergencies,” we never find out what happens to Bobby in the end). Instead, each collapses during the process of its own telling. You could relate this to postmodern discourse, and in particular to Jean-François Lyotard’s “incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv), which traditionally have a recognizably dramatic structure. Crimp studiously avoids telling a coherent story; indeed, the grand narratives of social order are satirically subverted. Take just one example: “And what’s more they’ve identified the gene — no — correction — they’ve identified the sequence — that’s right — of genes that make people leave burnt mattresses outside their homes and strangled [sic] their babies” (44). Crimp’s spurious correction about the gene sequence emphasizes his mockery of one narrative by which Western society explains social deviance. At the same time, the speech like so many in these plays has the unsettling characteristic of being, in Adam J. Ledger’s words, “not that of dramatic, psychologically motivated characters” (130). Crimp subverts character as well as narrative (see Sierz, “The Darkest Place” 304).
Significantly, while these playlets satirize society’s grand narratives, the oppositional grand narratives of leftist theatre, whether Brechtian or social realist, are completely absent. At first, Crimp’s world here seems Lyotardian in the sense that it concerns itself with “undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, ‘\textit{fracta},’ catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes” (Lyotard 60). But if grand narratives are consistently mocked, the petites histoires which postmodernist theory suggests have taken their place are entirely absent. Like \textit{Attempts on Her Life}, \textit{Fewer Emergencies} foregrounds the verbal struggle to create a story but also shows how even the smallest stories collapse: the play’s radicalism lies precisely in the fact that, while never departing from a normal conversational mode, it enacts a crisis of representation. The form of the playlets deliberately requires us to question what is being represented to us, and by whom. This radicalism is even more clearly apparent when \textit{Fewer Emergencies} is compared with Mark Ravenhill’s \textit{Product}, produced in the same year, 2005. In Ravenhill’s play, the monologue does manage to tell a whole story, however exaggerated. In Crimp’s play, by contrast, the stories stubbornly resist their own telling. In Nick Kaye’s words, “The event of narration, the move toward containment, is frustrated and so made apparent” (139). Vicky Angelaki sums up that: “in this text Crimp removes elements that have been taken for granted in the theatre, as he deducts something from character development, establishment of a locale, or even linearity of plot” (“\textit{Subtractive Forms}” 31). In short, he creates ‘unknown unknowns’ by playing games with storytelling.
V. Conclusion

Some of the narrative ploys used by Crimp suggest that perhaps our methodology for studying playwrights and their work is a bit old-fashioned. For example, the common use of the distinction between story as independent ‘events’ and plot as an artificial ordering of them is epistemologically compromised in his most paradigm-shifting work. Not only is the plot fractured and self-imploding, but the story is fugitive and completely illogical. I would also suggest that looking at the background and influences of a playwright might not prepare us for work that is so radically leftfield, and that perhaps we lack an adequate critical vocabulary with which to assess work which pushes at the limits of the understandable. My use of Donald Rumsfeld as an intellectual guide is a kind of metaphoric gesture to underline our need for different ways of generating insights into genre and narrative when they are pushed to the limits. Even the insights of postmodernism — questioning narrative conventions and genre, challenging the authority of a single story, and disrupting narratives — seem inadequate when dealing with plays such as *Attempts on Her Life* or *Fewer Emergencies*. Somehow, these plays resist our ability to analyze them.

At his best Crimp teases the audience with his narrative games; at worst, he deliberately, even cruelly, frustrates their expectations. His method can be summed up in director Dominic Dromgoole’s words: “Incidents occur and are then reflected in different mirrors, refracted through different lenses” (62). His work challenges audiences and splits them into two camps: fans and detractors. For fans, there is the joy of getting the meaning of the work, a self-congratulatory attitude that mixes a pleasure in witnessing artistic innovation with a heightened sense of exposure to social threat. For detractors, Crimp’s
narrative games are pretentious and ethically suspect, an injection of an unwelcome foreign sensibility into the veins of British theatre. Either way, his plays are sites in which the old division between high and low culture is reinvented and reinscribed. His radical content — for example, a critical attitude to global capitalism and a sympathy with women's experience — is arguably compromised by the traditional modernistic elitism of his choice of form. Quite simply, Crimp does not do populism.

In this, he is surely not alone. If looking at his influences and career (which is a traditional way of explaining the work or a playwright) never really yields the explanatory key to the effects he creates, perhaps it is more illuminating to situate his work in a matrix of culture where similar games have been, and continue to be, played. For example, Gerhard Richter's portraits have been summed up as "intentionally 'banal.'" They

assert nothing definite, draw attention to no particular facet or feature, and avoid making a specific point. This avoidance tactic deflects the universal human instinct to seek meaning in the appearance of people and things [...]. [The] portraits convey a universal human predicament: the desire to understand the world and a corresponding inability to know anything with any certainty (Gerhard Richter Portraits n.p.)

1 cf. Nathalie Sarraute's The Golden Fruits (1963), a novel whose language seems to have an uncannily Crimpian rhythm.

2 Reality has a way of ambushing artists. One portrait, called Horst mit Hund (1965), is a painting of Richter's father, based on a family photo taken at the wedding of the artist's sister in 1959. It shows an unflattering image of a man. But the joke is on the artist. After Horst's death, Richter discovered that he was not his father at all. Appearance and reality were even more different than the artist imagined — surely a case of an 'unknown unknown'? Deceptive appearances are also evident in Helga Matura mit Verlobtem (1966), which seems to show a mother and her son. In fact, it is a based on a photograph of Helga Matura, a
it sounds like a description of Martin Crimp’s theatrical project. Another example, this time from the world of music, is John Cage, who often used methods of randomness to bring about indeterminacy in his music. Likewise, in Carlos Ruiz Zafón’s *The Shadow of the Wind* (2002) there is a line that seems to apply to Crimp’s process of self-discovery in *Attempts on Her Life*: “a story is a letter the author writes to himself, to tell himself things that he would be unable to discover otherwise” (459). But the best recent examples come from the world of film, especially European film. José Luis Guerín’s *In the City of Sylvia* (2007), an account of male obsession and voyeurism, shows a man in search of woman, whom he glimpses and follows through the streets of Strasbourg. Into this love story genre comes a woman who is only an image, similar to the absent Anne in *Attempts on Her Life*. In the end, the man accosts the woman who tells him that her name is not Sylvia, and rebuffs him. Michael Haneke’s *Caché* (2005) sets up the genre expectations of a thriller, but the mystery of the surveillance at the heart of the story has absolutely no solution. Lastly, David Lynch’s *Inland Empire* (2006): about halfway through there is a scene where a grim guy pops up (with some kind of metallic bolt — or a lightbulb — between his teeth), and introduces himself: “I’m your neighbour — Mr Crimp.” And just in case you do not believe it, he repeats the name. In the context of such work, giving Crimp’s scribbling some thought yields new views of the familiar territory of the postwar European culture of uncertainty and its deliberate attacks on traditional forms of meaning-making through narrative.
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Dennis Kelly is one of the most exciting, innovative and talented British playwrights to emerge in the 2000s. Born in 1970, he has made a name for himself by writing work which is characterised by both a provocative in-yer-face sensibility and an interest in examining contemporary issues by means of experiments in style. His plays include Debris (Theatre 503, 2003), Osama the Hero (Hampstead, 2005), After the End (Bush/Paines Plough, 2005), Love and Money (Young Vic/Royal Exchange, 2006), Taking Care of Baby (Hampstead/Birmingham Rep, 2007), Orphans (Birmingham Rep/Traverse, 2009), and The Gods Weep (RSC, 2010), as well as work for young people. His plays have been performed in many countries and translated into twenty languages. He has also adapted Kleist’s The Prince of Homburg for the Donmar Warehouse, and is working on a musical version of Roald Dahl’s Matilda for the RSC. The following
interview discusses the different ways in which Kelly has used narrative forms in his main plays.
ALEKS SIERZ: Let’s start in the beginning. Why did you decide to become a playwright?

DENNIS KELLY: I don’t know if I decided to become a playwright. I left school very young; a friend of mine was in a drama group. I went to that drama group and started doing bits of acting. I loved it because it was an outlet, a creative outlet. I was doing shit jobs at that time, so any creative outlet was good.

ALEKS SIERZ: Did you also like showing off?

DENNIS KELLY: I did in a very shy way. You know, I was a shy show-off, which is the worst kind of show-off. If you are going to be a show-off, you should just fucking do it. Then when I was in my mid-twenties I ended up writing a play just because I thought there weren’t plays about people like me, you know what I mean? I was wrong because it was the 1990s — there were lots of plays about people like me. I just wasn’t seeing them. So I wrote a play and I put it on with a friend of mine. It certainly wasn’t a great play but it made me think that I wanted to do this a bit more.

I decided to go to university, partly because I was writing. It was Goldsmiths, London. They really didn’t like writers. You had to fight to do anything that had a text. What was good about that was that it made me think about theatre in a completely different way. It pushed me in a different direction. So when I came out of Goldsmiths I wasn’t interested in writing a traditional British play, a social realist sort of play. I was more interested in playwrights that were more playful and creative, such as Anthony Neilson, Sarah Kane, and Caryl Churchill.
Interview

But I have always worried that there was this little acting itch in me that I hadn’t really scratched. Rather than being a writer, I was a failed actor. Then, about two years ago, I asked a friend of mine, Matthew Dunster, who directed Love and Money, to write something. And he agreed on the condition that I acted it. I did that and it was terrifying. It was the worst thing I have ever done in my entire life — and I’ve done a bungee jump. I’d forget lines, it was awful. Fortunately, the character was a schizophrenic so everyone thought it was brilliant.

ALEKS SIERZ: Your debut in April 2003 was Debris. It is a series of alternating monologues about two teenagers, Michelle and Michael.

DENNIS KELLY: Yes. It’s a strange play because it starts off with a crucifixion. “Crucicide” is the name of the first act. Michael describes how his father builds a crucifix and crucifies himself. He builds this very elaborate construction with nail guns that will crucify him and all sorts of really bizarre things. It’s his son’s sixteenth birthday, and he’s coming home from school, and when he gets in, he finds his father dying on a cross. And his father says, “My son, my son, why have you forsaken me?” Then, it jumps to another monologue, Michael’s sister’s, which is a description of how her mother died in childbirth by choking on a chicken bone.

ALEKS SIERZ: And then the child has to give birth to herself.

DENNIS KELLY: No, that’s in the next monologue. The thing is that story gets told three times, but each time it’s completely different, more grotesque, but also closer to the truth, strangely closer to what really happened. The play is about these children and their relationship to their father. The girl is trying to figure out how her
mother died but she does it by telling these very elaborate lies that are actually quite positive. The first story is very positive.

ALEKS SIERZ: But gross?

DENNIS KELLY: Gross, yes. I mean, in one story, the mother dies. She dies of boredom three months before the girl is born. So the girl has to gestate herself and uses bits of crisp packet to patch up the womb and bits of liver and things like that. When she gives birth to herself, she has to breastfeed on this rotting corpse. It's quite dark. So she turns into a plant. It's an odd play. For example, someone nicks the kids while the father is drunk in a pub and then tries to sell them to this slightly wonderful paedophile. It's not a linear play. I suppose I structured it like that because I don't think I knew what I was doing. But what is useful about starting the play with a crucifixion is that you then have a story to tell. I did this in a more conscious way in Love and Money where I wrote a monologue at the beginning.

Love and Money begins with an email correspondence between a man and a woman. You gradually find out that the man has sort of murdered his wife, assisted her suicide. It comes as quite a shock because it became apparent to me that he loves his wife when I was writing it, even though he had done this thing. The job of the rest of the play was to explain that that man loved his wife and that circumstances had brought him to this. So the play then has to jump around in time and space to show that. Something similar happens with Debris, which is, that, when you have that very strong opening image, it's very easy to think how the father is a complete bastard. And for a lot of the play he is. But actually, I think the play is really about understanding him and understanding the pain that that family goes through to get to that place.
ALEKS SIERZ: In *Love and Money*, did you start that play with that opening idea of an email exchange between two people who have met at a sales conference?

DENNIS KELLY: She is a Frenchwoman and the guy, David, is English. After the conference, they keep in touch by email. He gradually reveals this story about his wife committing suicide because of debt. I wanted to write about money. I wrote it for The Young Vic and I said to them that I wanted to write about money. I expected that they would say, “That’s a boring subject.” But actually they said, “Go on.” So I started with this opening monologue, although technically it’s an email conversation. I often don’t know where a play is going when I start it. I know what I want to write about but it’s quite nice to find out who the characters are by listening to them talk. They’ve probably spent a wonderful weekend together. Now she’s in France, he’s a bit embarrassed, makes some stupid mistakes, he’s very British. But she wants him to reveal more and he eventually does reveal too much.

ALEKS SIERZ: When you started did you have in mind the idea that you’d finish the play with a scene about David and his wife, Jess’s, early bliss?

DENNIS KELLY: No idea at all. When we first looked at it we thought we might rearrange it a bit as well. I know the director [Matthew Dunster] was quite keen not to start with the emails first. I think he just thought that it was a very strong scene and should be played later on. He had other ideas too. Originally, the play was six scenes and Matthew said, “You need a seventh.” He was right. It needed a scene where the two people actually met. The funny thing about working on plays is that sometimes you’re right, sometimes you’re wrong. And it’s very hard to know which in advance.
ALEKS SIERZ: So with Love and Money, then, the next scene is something totally leftfield, isn’t it? It’s the parents of Jess.

DENNIS KELLY: They are visiting her grave. And they start complaining about this Greek woman whose grave has a very large gravestone, very ornate. Overshadowing their daughter’s. It’s funny because the play was in ‘Theatertreffen’ two weeks ago, and the Greek stuff got a huge laugh. It felt very topical. The parents end up destroying this huge Greek monument because it’s the only thing that they can do to protect their daughter’s memory.

ALEKS SIERZ: Suddenly, in scene five, you have two characters that have never appeared in the play at all. And they are talking about what?

DENNIS KELLY: There is a girl and there is this guy, Debbie and Duncan, who is a bit like a showbiz agent, a disgusting one. He is saying, “You know, you’re great. We could do some big things. Here’s my card. Give me a call.” He is completely drunk. At one stage, he pulls out a picture, gives it to her and says, “It’s a man sucking a cock.” So he’s involved in things like porn. The thing is that there was a very simple rule for the story when I was writing it, a very simple rule for the play, which was that in each scene there is a piece of information that progresses the story of what happened to Jess and David. And in scene five you learn that the man in the picture is David, who has actually sucked cocks to get money. He’s got so desperate about debt that he’ll do porn.

ALEKS SIERZ: But it’s an indirect way of telling the story.
DENNIS KELLY: It’s very indirect. Well, I mean, the theme of the play was more belief than anything else. You can have these little playful scenes that are really about belief. But actually the narrative is being served because of these little pieces of information that come in.

ALEKS SIERZ: Let’s talk about directors and their input. How did Matthew consider scene five, which has almost nothing to do with the rest of the play?

DENNIS KELLY: I wanted the play to change every time you came to it. So the first thing is an email monologue, the second thing is a duologue between two parents. The next one is a realistic scene, then there is this slightly weird abstract scene, and then you go back into a realistic scene, which is the Duncan and Debbie scene. I wanted the play to shift each time you came to a new scene not that you don’t know where you are, but hopefully so that you just feel that there is something different about the play. But no, I think Matthew liked it.

ALEKS SIERZ: When you’ve seen that play produced, for example, in Germany, have they messed around with the structure even more?

DENNIS KELLY: Oh yes. In ‘Theatertreffen,’ in Stephan Kimmig’s production, they did the Duncan and Debbie scene as the third scene. They moved it forward. They also took the abstract scene and cut everything out except for the monologues. Strangely, they made it much more British. I could understand the reason why he did that because he had all of the actors on stage at the same time. And none of the actors was playing two characters. So there were a lot of things he had to strip out. When I saw it in Hamburg, I thought, “Oh, I don’t know if I like that.” And then I saw it again in Berlin, in ‘Theatertreffen,’ and I thought it was brilliant. So there’s an initial
shock when you think, “That’s not what I did.” But actually, in some ways, it was incredibly faithful to the play. Since the credit crunch and the financial crash, the things that he took out are probably less necessary to the play.

ALEKS SIERZ: Okay. Let’s go back to Osama the Hero. How did that one come about? Was that a commission?

DENNIS KELLY: No, it was a Wild Lunch. There’s a company in England called Paines Plough, and they organise Wild Lunch events, which are usually readings. Actually, [Sarah Kane’s] Crave came from the Wild Lunch. They have a philosophy that they wouldn’t bring writers in and do lots of farting around with them. But every year they would do a small season of brand new writers who would do these lunchtime readings. They asked me to do one. You have to write it in a weekend, which was Sarah Kane’s idea, I believe. When she was at Paines Plough, she said that unless she was locked in a room for a weekend she couldn’t write a play. So they do what they call a lock-in where you have to sit down and write the play. I wrote the first two acts of Osama the Hero.

ALEKS SIERZ: What’s the story of the play?

DENNIS KELLY: The three acts are quite different. The middle one is sort of realism. The first is these different scenes that intersperse each other. You understand that you are on a council estate where there are these different lives going on. There’s a boy, Gary, who is a little bit different from many other kids in class. He’s just a little bit odd.

ALEKS SIERZ: He’s not stupid, is he?
DENNIS KELLY: He’s not stupid, no. He’s actually quite smart. I think, in five years time, he’d be just like anyone else. He’s just being a quirky teenager. His teacher says, “You’ve got to do a presentation on a hero.” Gary looks around and thinks, “David Beckham? No, that’s not right. Nelson Mandela? That’s too obvious.” And then he suddenly thinks, “Osama Bin Laden. He’s a hero.” So he does this presentation on why Osama is a hero, and the class hates him. But at the same time there are these spates of attacks on the estate, where bins have been blown up. But it’s not him. He’s got nothing to do with it. It culminates in this very large explosion where two people get very badly hurt. The estate just gets furious and takes it out on him. At the time it was written, in 2004, it was before the London bombings. We were odd in England at that time. You felt that logic had taken a holiday, and certainly in the media. No one was talking about the possible reasons for terrorism. It was almost religious in that way. We were very much like America at that time. That seemed to me to be so wrong. How can you deal with it unless you talk about the reasons? It was strange because now it seems actually quite tame and easy to say. But at that time, on the press night, there were police standing outside the theatre for some unknown reason.

ALEKS SIERZ: Must have had something to do with the title.

DENNIS KELLY: And there are four other characters. There’s Mark and Mandy. Mark is a man in his fifties and Mandy is an about fifteen- or sixteen-year-old girl. They do this thing where they pretend that they are like Posh and Becks. They pretend they are celebrities. They talk to the audience like this as if it’s an evening with Mark and Mandy.

ALEKS SIERZ: As if they were talking to a camera.
DENNIS KELLY: Yes. They talk about their imaginary little son, a little boy called Armistice. But actually, they are in a garage on this estate. Occasionally, it’s obvious that he wants to touch her. It’s a slightly creepy relationship. I don’t think it’s paedophilic but it’s obviously very inappropriate and creepy.

There are also two others: Francis and Louise. Francis is in a state of fury because of these bombings on the estate and because of Mark and Mandy. He’s very angry at this fifty-year-old man, who is messing around with this girl. But what happens is that when the final explosion happens — it’s actually Francis who is doing the bombings, by the way — they all get together and unite to take it out on Gary. They kidnap him and end up brutally torturing him, which is quite a horrible scene.

ALEKS SIERZ: You’ve got this unrealistic opening scene where all the characters are on stage. Gary’s talking to the audience. Francis and Louise are talking to each other. Mark and Mandy are talking to the camera. That sets it all up. Then you’ve got the second scene where Gary is already being kidnapped.

DENNIS KELLY: He’s tied to a chair with gaffer tape on his mouth. It culminates in him getting his teeth smashed in with a hammer. But the idea behind that was that, at the time, I remember seeing things like an American soldier — he was in Iraq — saying, “I have a picture of the Twin Towers on my locker and every time I ask myself, ‘Why are we here?’ I look at that.” It was like a holiday from logic because anyone who had the briefest knowledge of the situation could say that there is no connection between Saddam Hussein and Bin Laden. But weirdly, our media didn’t seem to be saying that. I couldn’t understand why they weren’t screaming at people, “There’s no fucking connection.” I wanted to make a scene where the same thing
happened, where they ran on their emotions. If they stopped to think about it they would know that this person had nothing to do with it.

ALEKS SIERZ: It’s one of those grotesque interrogation scenes where they are telling the victim that if he confesses they will let him go.

DENNIS KELLY: That’s right. But he can’t confess because he’s not done it. They are very clumsy, they really don’t know what they are doing. I mean, it’s comic in some moments, in a kind of a grim way. Again, they are led by emotion rather than logic.

ALEKS SIERZ: Then, how does it end, the third part?

DENNIS KELLY: Well, the play is a little bit strange. It really should probably end with Gary getting his face smashed in because that really is the end of the story. But I felt that what I was more interested in was what comes after, which is, having done these things, how do we live? And at the time, it was against the backdrop of the war in Iraq. I felt that if an Iraqi looked at me and looked at Tony Blair he would see no difference. I am part of my country’s society and I can’t claim anything else. So I thought, “How do we as a nation move forward?” In the last act it turns to what happens afterwards because that seems to be the most interesting part, not the violence, but how people carry on.

ALEKS SIERZ: And how did each individual character carry on?

DENNIS KELLY: None of them can really carry on. Louise, the sister, who is the engine behind the events, seems to be going completely insane in this room, surrounded by newspapers and television. She is convinced that something is in there that she needs to understand.
Her brother, who buckled out in the violence itself, witnesses a man attacked in the streets. He goes to help him and has this quite profound experience where he’s holding this guy’s hand in the ambulance. He doesn’t feel that he’s worthy of this because of what he’s done. Mark, the older guy, gets back with his wife and everything seems perfect, and he’s cooking Salmon Teriyaki.

ALEKS SIERZ: In fact, the subtext is...

DENNIS KELLY: ...that something’s definitely wrong and it’s never going to be right. Mandy, the young girl, is the one that has the least to do with it. She just has this monologue at the end where she finds herself in a park, and is just trying to get away from all of society. Oh, her conclusion might be a bit kind of corny. She used to think that there were grown-ups in the world. But there aren’t any grown-ups. It’s just us.

ALEKS SIERZ: After the End. Mark and Louise: Louise again and Mark again.

DENNIS KELLY: Yes, I’m not very good with names.

ALEKS SIERZ: Talk us through the play.

DENNIS KELLY: I suppose, at the same time, I was still quite obsessed with the War on Terror. I’ve got over that now. After the End is set in a nuclear shelter. I discovered that there were lots of these ex-Cold War personal nuclear shelters in England, in people’s gardens from the 80s and the 70s. The scene opens. There is this girl who is in a party dress and this guy who says, “There’s been an attack outside.” You gradually realise that he has dragged her in there. There’s been this nuclear
explosion. They've got enough food to last for a couple of weeks. As the play goes on, they start off by trying to get on but you realise there's a tension between them. They used to be friends at work. But she pulled away because he was getting a bit weird. It was actually her leaving do the night before. They wind each other up and he's quite controlling. He wants her to play Dungeons and Dragons. It's a very strange thing because this game actually becomes a matter of life and death. He ends up trying to starve her into it because he believes that it's right for them to keep occupied and not go crazy. But there's also a slight sexual undercurrent. The tension rises. And then she hears some guys banging on the shelter and it suddenly occurs to her that there might not have been an attack after all. That's when it gets really nasty. It does turn out that he's really kidnapped her. It is very brutal.

ALEKS SIERZ: Was it technically difficult because you've trapped your two characters? My idea is that you write yourself into a corner and then you fight to write yourself out again. Was that difficult?

DENNIS KELLY: You know, the thing about writing is that you should write at a hundred per cent all the time. I think one of the difficult things about writing is that we have a tendency to save things for a rainy day. We think, "I'll save that idea for later because I'm scared that I won't have any other ideas," or "I won't write myself into a corner because I don't trust myself to get out of it." You've got to write at full speed really, really hard. I think it was [National Theatre literary manager] Jack Bradley that said to me that good writers write themselves really difficult problems and then get out of them. And that's actually really interesting to watch on stage. If you write with a safety net then you're not going to get there. In After the End the
situation is quite dramatic. You’ve got two people stuck together so it’s going to be interesting to see what happens.

ALEKS SIERZ: But you give it a traditional form, don’t you? Because the play is divided into sections labelled beginning, middle and end.

DENNIS KELLY: And then the last section is “after the end.” Even though there are three sections, to me the play is divided into two parts, which is first of all beginning, middle and end. And then the last part is after the end because, after the shelter, she comes to visit him in prison. It’s the part of the play that people either love or hate. Some people just don’t understand why she’s there. Other people love it. She comes back to visit him and what people find difficult is that she is quite understanding.

ALEKS SIERZ: She feels guilty, doesn’t she?

DENNIS KELLY: She does feel guilty to some extent. He ends up raping her. She ends up threatening to cut his cock off and all sorts of quite nasty things. Sometimes I’ve seen the play and people think it has something to do with the Stockholm syndrome where you fall in love with your capturer. But I think it has nothing to do with that. I think she comes there for her own humanity. Without getting too intellectual about it, I thought that she represents postmodern liberalism and he represents, not modernity, but a literal way of thinking, which seemed to be coming back at that time. It’s my way or the highway. You believe in Islam, you believe in God, you believe in our society, you don’t believe in theirs. The fuzzy liberal ‘all-things-are-good-really’ sort of people, like me, we seem to be on the retreat. I have a very optimistic view and I think that will eventually win through because history moves forwards, not backwards.
ALEKS SIERZ: How about *The Gods Weep* for the RSC? How did that all come about?

DENNIS KELLY: Well, it wasn’t a commission. It was something I was working on and then took to the RSC. They seemed to like it, so they put it on. Yes, it was always a big play. I wanted to write a very long play. I had in mind a character, Colm, an older man, who had been very powerful, a corporate businessman. He was getting to the end of his life thinking “What was all that for? What was the point?” even though he’s got money and everything else. As I was writing it, I thought, “This is *King Lear.*”

ALEKS SIERZ: Because he gives away his empire to executives, who then fight each other.

DENNIS KELLY: It wasn’t really *King Lear*. It was more [Akira] Kurosawa’s *Ran*, which is a version of *King Lear*. It’s a strange play. It really is three plays. What I wanted was a story that went through three very, very different plays. The first play is set in a recognisable corporate world. The second play is on a battlefield. But it is the same people with the same situations killing each other. The third play is this strange two-hander where there’s just the two of them left and they are trying to survive. So it’s Colm and Barbara, who is his Cordelia. But she’s not his daughter. She is actually the daughter of a rival he has destroyed.

In the last scene they are just trying to survive. She hates him at that stage. He ends up at her door and she looks after him. She doesn’t know who he is, but then she discovers who he is and, of course, hates him. She doesn’t want him there but he won’t go away. All the war is gone. They are just trying to survive on this hillside
together with absolutely nothing. Gradually, they grow together a bit. They agree not to talk about the past.

ALEKS SIERZ: What was the original length of the play?

DENNIS KELLY: Well, about four hours. When we did it in London we probably made a mistake by making it three hours. You know, we started with something that was epic. A four-hour play is epic; a three-hour play is long. When you know you’re going to be in somewhere for four hours there’s a bargain the audience makes with you. And they know it, whereas that doesn't happen with an averagely long play. I think it’s a messy, ugly, sprawling bumblefuck of a play. But it’s got a lot of heart. That’s the important thing for me. Plays like After the End or Orphans are very clean plays. They are very tight. It’s not that I couldn’t write a clean play, it’s that I wanted to write a play that wasn’t clean and clear. I wanted to write something that had its own logic. It didn’t matter to me if that logic wasn’t going to be understood by us all the time. I wanted it to be sprawling at certain moments.

ALEKS SIERZ: Okay, how did you go about cutting it?

DENNIS KELLY: We cut it a lot in rehearsal and in previews we cut about half an hour off it. A lot of it was slash and burn. Looking back, I think, we made mistakes. I made mistakes in cutting. There were two whole scenes in that middle act that we cut that stopped it making sense. They were logical scenes. They were scenes with logic in them.

Audience Questions

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LI B TAYLOR: How have you worked together with directors?

DENNIS KELLY: The interesting thing in England is that our directors are dramaturges as well. I like working with directors. Some of them are good, some of them are bad. A director like Roxana Silbert, who I’ve worked with twice, is brilliant. She’s very tough, but she also listens. We worked together on Orphans. There was one particular point where we couldn’t agree and we really tussled. Actually, it was really healthy. I’ll change things but I won’t make a change I don’t believe in. But at the same time it’s a collaborative medium and it can be quite energising. During rehearsals, I would probably like to be in for the first couple of days when you might sit around the table and read it. I like to say everything I’ve got to say about the play and then fuck off. I like to go away and then maybe pop back in for every so often and be in a bit more at the end.

ECKART VOIGTS-VIRCHOW: A question about Love and Money. Where did you get the inspiration for the reverse structure?

DENNIS KELLY: It’s not exactly a reverse structure strangely. It doesn’t go backwards. It just jumps around a bit. The danger of going backwards — unless you have a reason — is you just think, “What are we doing that for? What’s this backwards thing for?” You are just doing it for the hell of it. But with Love and Money, I’d written the first monologue and once I’d understood that this man had done this terrible thing, I felt that the rest of the play should prove that he’d loved her. And so to do that I needed to jump back in time and go to different places. It came out like that really.
DEREK PAGET: Why did you write the fictional play *Taking Care of Baby* in the form of a Verbatim Theatre piece, and what do you think you achieved by doing this?

DENNIS KELLY: Well, *Taking Care of Baby* is a strange play. In England, we had a lot of documentary theatre at that time. Documentary theatre is obviously theatre that is constructed from interviews. I wanted to write one but I wanted to make it all up. And so I wrote a verbatim play. I mean, I maintained that it is a verbatim play. It’s just that the characters don’t exist and I made it all up. But I wanted to write about truth. I’d done a piece for Paines Plough, called *Dennis is a Liar*, which was basically me. It was an improvised stand-up routine that I was performing. It was absolutely terrifying. I was lying all the time and I’d go back and say, “That was a lie by the way. I’m sorry about that.” So I’d start off by going, “Hi, my name is Dennis. I’m an alcoholic.” And you get a little laugh, you know. Then I’d sort of go, “Sorry, I’m not an alcoholic. I’m just nervous.” I carry on and I talk about why you would lie. Later on, I go, “Actually I am an alcoholic,” and I just go back and keep lying. Some of it was about lies in the media because it was at a time when there was a general election and it seemed like there were a lot of lies going on. I think why I was doing it was because I’d felt that truth had to some extent become compromised in our public life. It didn’t matter that things weren’t true. If the media could prove something was true it became true. Once I’d done that, I wanted to explore it a little further. I thought the best way to write about truth would be to lie, I guess. So I wrote a verbatim play that wasn’t true.

In England, there was the case of about six women who were imprisoned for murdering their children, although actually they were cot deaths, from natural causes. One of the women was Sally Clark. So I used that actually. But when I started the play, I began to do
research but I stopped immediately because I felt that if I wanted to lie I should lie completely. But also, I felt I had no right to do research: these were real people and these were real lives. I had no right to suggest that any of them were guilty or innocent.

I've had a couple of strange experiences with the play. One was that two months before it was due to go on I had a meeting with this TV company. They were asking what I was doing. And I said, “Well, I do this play called Taking Care of Baby,” and explained what it was about. They said, “That’s great.” And they said, “That’s great because we’d like to do a programme on Sally Clark but the husband won’t let us. So maybe we could talk about that.” I thought, “You fucking cunts.” Do you know what I mean? This man has lost his children and then he’s lost his wife. If he doesn’t want you to do it then leave him alone. But in the play, there is actually a section where the husband comes on and reads these letters out that he has written to me, the playwright, because the playwright is in the play. These letters are quite strange because he starts off by saying, “I don’t wanna be involved.” Then he comes on with another letter saying, “Dear Mr Kelly, I think I made it clear that what you’re doing is wrong.” And by the last letter, he’s very angry, and he is saying, “Dear Mr Kelly, I now know that I can do nothing about what you are doing. But let me make it clear how I feel. You are a sickening piece of shit. You are a little turd. I hope you catch cancer.” It’s really strong. The strange thing was that if the audience knew it wasn’t real they found it very funny. But if they didn’t, if they thought it was real, it was like ice in the audience. It was a strange experience, it was weird.

I think the critics generally did understand that it wasn’t real although one of them did review it as the famous case of Donna McAuliffe. My intention wasn’t to lie to people. I wanted people to believe that it’s verbatim going on and then half way through realise that it wasn’t. But what happened was a lot of them went away
thinking it was all real, which is maybe a failing of the play. But I think you’ve just got to take those risks. I remember the second night and we didn’t know at that stage what people would think. Then a woman came up to me in the foyer — she was really nice, a really ordinary middle-aged woman — and she’d really been moved by the play. The central performance was fantastic. I could tell she was really moved by it. She asked me to sign the script. I was talking to her and I began to realise she thought it was all real. So I said, “At which stage did you get that it wasn’t real?” And she was kind of smiling when she was talking to me. I could see this smile was still there but something changed behind her eyes and I felt terrible. I said to her, “Look, I’m sorry, we are not trying to fool you. It’s not a trick. It’s not a game and I hope you don’t feel that we have tried to fool you.” And she was amazing: she said, “I think I like it more now.” But she had to think about it. But what was incredible was that generally the response from the audience even when they’d realised we’d lied to them. It just made me understand that a theatre audience will go to incredible places with you. They really are very, very versatile.

**Merle Tönnies:** Have you got any new exciting projects coming up?

**Dennis Kelly:** I’ve got a couple of plays that I am supposed to be writing. I’ve also got *The Prince of Homburg*, which is a kind of a new version of that. And I’ve got *Matilda*, a musical, which seemed like an interesting thing to do. Just because I’ve never done it. When I wrote *Debris*, it was my first play and when I came to write another play and I thought, “Is that how I write?” I had a choice then to say, “That’s my voice and I’m going to carry on like that.” Or, “I can change.” Caryl Churchill is one of my favourite writers and she changes every time she writes a play. I used that as inspiration. I thought I wouldn’t do the same thing either. When they asked would I be interested in
doing a musical of *Matilda* I thought I haven’t really done one of those. I don’t really like musicals. And they said, “You’re perfect then.”

**Wolfgang Lippke:** Dennis, you said that when starting a new play, you are not really sure how it will end. I talked to Howard Brenton some years ago, and he said similar things about *Magnificence*. Could you talk more about that?

**Dennis Kelly:** I don’t necessarily always do that. With *After the End* I had the idea for it in the morning when I woke up and by the time I got out of bed I knew exactly what was going to happen. I knew where I was going to go with it. Then I did a play called *Orphans*. I just had the opening image in my mind, which is that two people are having dinner and a man comes in covered in blood. And to me, that seemed like an interesting first image. The job of the rest of the play is to find out who those people are. Pinter used to do that as well. Pinter used to say that he would have character A and B. Character A would ask B a question. So what’s interesting about it is that it means you are not preparing yourself for anything. You can surprise yourself.

With *Orphans* I was too busy so I couldn’t write it for year, so I just left it alone. When you come to it, then you suddenly panic because you are then under commission. You are thinking, “Shit. Maybe this is just rubbish.” Writing is about taking many false turns. You go down a certain road and you might continue down that road. I’ve just started writing a play at the moment and I’ve had a couple of false starts where I’ve carried on, but I just thought, “That’s not working.” You know, every time you get there you despair and you think, “I can’t write.” It’s all awful because you’re just writing rubbish.

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**Wolfgang Lippke:** Do you have any basic idea of your characters beforehand?
DENNIS KELLY: I don’t have ideas about characters. Once the characters start to talk then I can respond to their voice. I just know the area that I might like to think about. One of the things I like to do is to ask myself what I want to write about. And then I have to ignore the answer and find out what I really want to write about. With *Orphans*, I knew the opening scene and then I thought, “Oh, maybe it’s about this,” and that changed during the course of the play.

STUART MARLOW: Television commissioning editors have told me that on the one hand there is passion and on the other end of the scale the mechanism of plotting. Would you say that this is a realistic way of assessing a writer’s skills?

DENNIS KELLY: I’d say no. I think the whole scale should probably be thrown in a bin. There’s a lot of stuff that happens with TV writing. I mean, I’ve written for TV and I started writing for film. But the problem with a formula is it’s abstract and it doesn’t take account of what’s in your heart. A lot of these kinds of formulas are very dangerous. Actually, what the best writing does is it takes in both sides of the scale. The best writing is passionate. You can do intricate plots and you can also say very large things about the world and you can also have a great ear for dialogue. Too often we, as writers, say, “I’m good at dialogue. I’m going to stick with this,” or “I’m good with plots. I’m going to stick with that.” But the best writing embraces all of that. Writing should be a journey to find out the things you don’t know, rather than the things you do. I think really good people in TV respond to that and look for all of those things.
Notes on Contributors

JONATHAN BIGNELL is Professor of film, theatre and television and Head of the School of Arts and Communication Design at the University of Reading. He specialises in television history and the methodologies of television and film analysis. Jonathan Bignell was part of the ‘Acting with Facts’ research group together with Derek Paget, Heather Sutherland and Lib Taylor.

WOLFGANG FUNK is a research assistant and Ph.D. candidate at Leibniz University, Hanover. His Ph.D. thesis has the working title Discourses of Authenticity in Contemporary Metafiction. Further research interests include utopian writing and contemporary British drama. He has published various articles on contemporary British and American drama and fiction and is co-editor of two books on authenticity in literature and culture (both to be published in 2011).

SARAH GROCHALA pursues a Ph.D. at Queen Mary, University of London where she has also taught seminars and workshops on the theory and practice of theatre performance. Her research focus is on contemporary British theatre, and the ways in which playwrights challenge conventional notions of dramatic structure. Sarah Grochala is also a dramatist herself. Her play S-27 won an Amnesty International competition and was produced in the UK and Australia.

CHRISTOPHER INNES holds the Canada Research Chair in Performance at York University, Toronto. He has published widely on modern drama and is general editor and co-editor of various prestigious
publications such as the Cambridge ‘Directors in Perspectives’ series. Christopher Innes is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada as well as the Royal Society for the Arts (UK).

Dennis Kelly is a contemporary playwright whose main works premiered on the British stage after 2000. His provocative and highly political work includes Debris (2003), Osama the Hero (2005), Love and Money (2006), Taking Care of Baby (2007), Orphans (2009) and The Gods Weep (2010). Dennis Kelly is also one of the writers of the BBC sitcom Pulling.

Tom Maguire is Senior Lecturer in Theatre Studies at the University of Ulster. His areas of research and teaching include contemporary British and Irish drama, applied theatre as well as theatre practice and storytelling. He has acted as a reader for various publishing houses and reviewed books on theatre for prestigious academic journals. Tom Maguire is on the board of directors for Northern Ireland’s Big Telly Theatre Company.

Deirdre Osborne teaches drama and theatre arts at Goldsmiths, University of London. Her current research is focused on contemporary Black British writers of drama, poetry and prose. She is also interested in late Victorian literature and representations of women in various cultural periods. Deirdre Osborne produced Lorca’s The House of Bernarda Alba with inmates of Holloway Prison as part of the Inside Job Theatre in Prisons Project in 2001.

Derek Paget is Reader in theatre and television at the University of Reading. He specialises in fact-based drama across all media and was principal investigator for the ‘Acting with Facts’ project which also included researchers Jonathan Bignell, Heather Sutherland and Lib
Taylor. Before starting his academic career, Derek Paget worked for commercial as well as alternative theatres.

HANA PAVELKOVÁ is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures of Charles University, Prague. Her dissertation project is entitled Monodramas in Contemporary Anglophone Theatre. Her M.A. thesis, Dramatizing the Medium: Samuel Beckett’s Works for Radio, Theatre, Film and Television, was awarded a Mathesius Prize for best English thesis of the academic year 2005–06. Hana Pavelková has co-edited and co-translated into Czech The Anthology of Contemporary Political Anglophone Drama (2010). She is also co-editor of and contributor to The Politics of Irish Writing (2010).

JANELLE REINELT is Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at Warwick University and specialises in contemporary British theatre. Her works include Crucibles of Change: Social Change and Performance (2000), and Gender in Cultural Performances (2005) and she is an ex-editor of Theatre Journal. Summer 2011 will see the publication of her co-authored new book The Political Theatre of David Edgar: Negotiation and Retrieval. In 2010 Janelle Reinelt received the Distinguished Scholar Award for lifetime achievement from the American Society for Theatre Research.

MARGARETE RUBIK holds a Chair for English literature at the University of Vienna where she is currently also head of the English Department. Her research interests include contemporary English drama, Restoration and 18th-century women dramatists and Gender Studies. Until 2010 she was Vice President of the Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English (CDE).
ALEKS SIERZ is a renowned British theatre critic and freelance reviewer, who famously coined the phrase ‘In-Yer-Face Theatre.’ His publications include In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today (2001), The Theatre of Martin Crimp (2006) and most recently Rewriting the Nation: British Theatre Today (2011). Sierz is also co-editor of the website theatreVOICE which features audio-material about British theatre, including interviews with actors and directors. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts and holds a Visiting Professorship at Rose Bruford College, London.

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ROLAND WEIDLE holds the chair for literature of Shakespeare’s time and the early modern period at the Ruhr-University of Bochum. His research interests include theories of drama and theatre, Renaissance drama and theories of tragedy. Roland Weidle has also worked in television and produced the theatre play Ladies’ Night at the Imperial Theatre, Hamburg.

NILS WILKINSON graduated from Siegen University in 2009 and is now a research assistant and Ph.D. candidate in the university’s English Department. The topic of his thesis is The Gene as Collective Symbol in Modern Art Discourse on Human Nature. His further research interests include gender and queer studies as well as the nature/culture debate.
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