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Extending the Code:
New Forms of Dramatic and Theatrical Expression
Contemporary Drama in English

Extending the Code: New Forms of Dramatic and Theatrical Expression

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

Edited for the society by Hans-Ulrich Mohr and Kerstin Mächler
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Hans-Ulrich Mohr
Introduction: The Code of Contemporary Drama and Theatre and its Functions

1. Definitions

At first glance, the title of this volume and the conference it documents might suggest that it is a report on certain contemporary trends in drama and theatre. The reference to the _code_, however, is not metaphorical but intentional. It emphasises the concern with the newly developed _vocabulary_ of expression, its functions, and an evaluation of it.

‘Drama’ and ‘Theatre’ are, as is frequently forgotten, not interchangeable terms and neither are their codes. Of course, they are closely related. Dramas are written documents about something that has to be realised in the more comprehensive medium of the theatre. Put on stage, the drama opens up to its cultural contexts by exceeding the boundaries of written language with the repertoire of signs (the code) of the theatre. Thus, written language becomes spoken language but it is also embedded into other means of communication. Linguistic signs are completed by paralinguistic signs (such as pitch, pauses etc.), other sounds, noises and music. Although this shows many parallels to everyday life, the medium of the stage allows stronger modifications and stylisations. The same applies to visual signs such as miming, gestures, proxemic means, make-up, hairstyles, costumes, spatial conceptions, decorations, stage properties, lighting and derivatives of these.

Realising the dramatic text on the stage has been described as opening it up to the cultural context. This, however, has certain limitations. All the signs on stage are, in the first respect, referential within the sphere of the stage. And so the line between stage and audience never disappears, as long as the play remains a play.
The signs used on stage have been taken from our lifeworlds and they refer back to them, however only in an indirect, secondary sense, thematising it selectively and commenting upon it. Written as well as performed plays are models of social interaction. They record, imitate and interpret observed interaction in their mediaspecific ways. Usually they reduce experience to relevant lines, to patterns and — due to a critical stance — they frequently show an interest in emphasising inherent contradictions. Human interaction — the sphere where society realises itself — constitutes an extensive and open field: People change permanently and there are continuously new configurations between them. On the other hand, single persons need the support of the community and a common fund of reliability in humane terms. This shows that the communicative process that goes on between drama/performance and the audience is dedicated to the task of keeping society alive: On the one hand, it has to retain reliable forms of communication, on the other, it has to prevent these forms from becoming lifeless and intransigent to necessary changes.

In this sense, the dramatic and theatrical code(s), as conventions and as changing repertoires, are the expression of a process of thematisation and of reflexion on the process of civilisation.

A good example of a change of the theatrical code is what happened in 1777 in connection with the production of Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal* at the *Royal Theatre Drury Lane* in London. The need to represent something new on stage helped to introduce the ‘picture-frame stage’ (Lynch 166-207, Mullin). And that type of stage led to the common type of stage we all know, even to today’s omnipresent TV screen. How did this happen? The implicit problem was to represent something new on stage, metaphorically speaking: to bring another actor on the stage, viz. nature as landscape and as space for history (cf. Mohr). Up to that time there were only around four standardized types of scenic backgrounds (e.g. two indoors, street, open fields). The new type of stage is a reinterpretation of the stage-opening in terms of the picture frame in landscape painting as it was practised at the time. From that time, the picture-frame stage represented, analogous to landscape paintings, the inclusion of ‘nature as space for landscape and history’ when reflecting on human interaction *qua* drama. This implied, for example, that the successful hero (a model of a middle-class individual) has behaved in accordance with the surrounding forces of
nature and history. One of the consequences of this notion in the first half of the nineteenth century was replacing the existing theatres by more spacious buildings with extended stages in order to introduce the new ‘techniques’ and codes.

The crisis that came with the decline of the model of nature towards the end of the nineteenth century led to a reconsideration of the human mind and its faculties, with the result of a focus on human perception, its range, deceptions, perspectivism and the psychology conditioning it influenced by Freud’s first publications in the 1890s. This ‘inward’ turn is behind the emergence of the so-called ‘Little Theatres’ around 1900. They signal the downfall of the larger-than-life middle-class individual and of the belief in its dominant role in a ‘Natural History’.

What, then, are today’s preconditions for the repertoire of theatrical (and dramatic) expression?

In our (‘post-modern’) epoch it is common knowledge that what we call reality has been created and continues to be created through a social process of collective construction: By means of its faculties of perception, differentiation and inventive implementation humankind has managed, in the course of its history, to surround itself with the sphere we take for ‘reality.’ Woven into this sphere are many traces of this process of construction, based on group-dynamics, asymmetries of knowledge, historical constellations of power, beliefs, errors, chance, etc. In one way or the other, this reality is problematical for everyone. It begins with the simple circumstance that one has to put up with decisions made by the collectivity of the ‘others’ in the past or the present ages. Questioning that condition today goes by the term ‘deconstruction.’ This signifies an activity with the aim of analysing the given ‘reality’ in order to avoid, or even revoke, certain of its deficits or disadvantages, including those that have come to be established under the aegis of matter-of-factness and reasonability. In this sense, the present distribution of the world between the sexes, the role of the human body, the elimination of emotions from our lives are issues. In addition, the difference between the Western civilisation and other ethnic lifestyles has come under intense scrutiny. If it has not been blurred by globalisation, it is, in any case, no longer a difference of higher and lower substance and values. Generally, the ubiquity of the media has changed the quality of life and the perception of everything we are surrounded with. Baudrillard
is probably the most outspoken critic in demonstrating that we now live in a world of high artificiality and simulacra.¹

For the drama and the theatre this poses the problem not only how to thematise such complex as well as incoherent experience but also how to represent it at all. For instance, how can one act as an actor or make an actor act on stage if one can no longer trust in the consistency of a character? Or, how can you tell a coherent plot, if nothing like it exists? And how can you show a ‘reality’ that is hidden behind or is part of artificial constructs? How can you describe certain coherences of human or non-human agents and actions (and have them performed by actors) if those coherences are fragmentated, obscure and evasive?

The two contemporary plays presented in the evening program of the conference, Neil LaBute’s *the shape of things* (2000)² and Christopher Durang’s *Betty’s Summer Vacation* (1999)³ proved to be well aware of these implications.

LaBute’s play deals with a sophisticated topic. The borderline between art and life, or between social construction and reality. It shows a female art student engaged in an experiment to style a flabby male student into a socially and aesthetically engaging person without him suspecting it. Ultimately, this intentional variation on the Pygmalion-theme is revealed and discussed between the couple. However, the thin line between the concepts of art and life, between love and emotional exploitation, between authenticity and manipulation is elusive. The binary oppositions, so typical of our Western everyday ways of thinking are in fact inseparable, none goes without the other.⁴ LaBute seems to have recycled traditional material. Even ‘worse,’ he expresses these ideas with the material of a TV soap like *Friends* or *Melrose Place*. High and low art coalesce. The ubiquity of the media is also thematised. Even the most intimate moments are recorded by a video camera: Nevertheless, it is unable to record more than the surfaces.

¹ On Baudrillard, simulation and hyperreality see Annette Pankratz’s contribution in this volume.
² LaBute’s play was performed at the Schlosstheater Dresden.
³ Durang’s play was staged at the Domherrenhof in Meissen by a group of students from the Dresden University of Technology under the direction of Laura Park.
⁴ Cf. the quotation by Jonathan Culler at the beginning of Adele Shank’s essay.
The characters are dissolved: There is not much of a continuity, nothing like *Bildung*.

As regards the formal side of the play, there are no acts, just a series of ‘takes’: brief configurations of ‘persons’ and ‘situations.’ And, of course, the plot’s teleology is doubtful or, rather, multivalent: is it a story of love or of exploitation or about a feminist backlash, the birth of authenticity or a case of manipulation?

*Durang*’s play confronts a world constituted by the electronic and pictorial media (especially TV) and based on a sex and violence sensationalism. The play fuses several plots of ‘trivial’ genres in the media. The life-world thus constituted appears to be unreal and fragmentary, due to the absence of ‘self-reliant’ individuals and consistent narratives. Durang addresses the problem of representation by confronting the unreal and incoherent narratives of today’s media-ridden world with each other. In this way he exposes their surrogate quality as well as the deficits they cover up.

The surreal world of media sensationalism makes an additional appearance in the shape of hidden (Hydra-like)\(^5\) ghosts that have invaded the ‘house’ these persons share in their media-(mis)directed search for authenticity and emotional fulfilment. Altogether, the play looks like an allegory, not in the traditional sense, but an open, polyvalent allegory that constitutes itself after the deconstruction of the media clichés.

2. The Essays

2.1 Strands and Tendencies of Development

The first contribution to our volume, “Beyond Illusion: American Alternative Theatre” by Theodore Shank (San Diego, USA), the authority on American Alternative Theatre, is based on his opening keynote lecture. He discerns two dominant lines of extending the code, at present. One is the outcome of a deconstructivist attitude and it materializes particularly in the functionalisation of complete, i.e. polyvalent nakedness. Presentation of the body other than the reigning discourses reveals its instrumentalisa-

\(^5\) At least in the Dresden/Meissen production where these ‘ghosts’ acted together as one almost impersonal phenomenon.
tion by society. It allows to accept it in its multifacetedness and to think of alternative, more humane ways of socializing it. The other main strand of development is deconstructivist as well as postcolonial, viz. ethnic theatre. As a common denominator, Ted Shank identifies a decidedly anti-illusionalist, experimental approach to human experience.

The second contribution — also a former keynote lecture — is entitled “To Recommend a Cure: Beyond Social Realism and In-Yer-Face Theatre.” The author Aleks Sierz (London, GB) is not only an eminent critic and insider of the London theatrical scene but also the inventor of the term ‘In-Yer-Face-Theatre’ which has become the term to designate what happened on the London stages of the 1990s. His paper describes how he coined that term and what its advantages are. In defending it he offers a highly interesting record of the explosion of British drama and theatre around such figures as Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill. He characterises the relevant tendencies of these plays and he points out the lines beyond this provocative theatre that have emerged more recently. It is obvious that the In-Yer-Face Period and its radical deconstructivistic allegorising of the basic human condition is over. It seems to have stimulated a desire for large-scale work on the main stage. As the name ‘The Monsterists’ of an informal group of youngish writers indicates, the repertoire of the contemporary theatrical means will be more or less the same. However, conceiving allegorical equivalents to life in our present-day world on a larger scale will necessitate some extensions of the code.

Annette Pankratz’s (Passau, GER) essay “Signifying Nothing and Everything: The Extension of the Code and Hyperreal Simulations” points to the challenge to the code by the social context of simulation. The task drama and theatre face is to supersede the hyperreal and present truths. Nevertheless, they are only able to simulate that they are not really simulating — or, to show their awareness of simulating simulation. As to the code, this means fairly sophisticated ways of presenting the non-representable.

Piet Defraeye (Edmonton, Alberta, CN) with his essay “In-Yer-Face Theatre? Reflections on Provocation and Provoked Audiences in Contemporary Theatre” pursues the invisible and sometimes extremely thin line between the stage and the audience. He surveys how, during the last decades, it has been problematised by shocks and provocations in order to extend the theatrical and dramatic possibilities. Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Patrick
Marber (all GB) and Tracy Letts, Karen Finley and groups such as The Living Theater (USA) have shown specific variants, above all to control the audience in a way that can be seen as parallel to the sensationalism of our postmodern societies. Defraeye also raises the question whether at a certain point provocation turns into theatrical self-referentiality.

In her lecture “Body and Machine. Extending the Codes in Theatre of Laurie Anderson and Robert Wilson” Silvija Jestrovic (Toronto, CN) investigates how the performance artists Robert Wilson and Laurie Anderson mechanized the human body or how they humanized objects. The categories she establishes are ‘symbiosis between body and machine,’ ‘substitution of the body by machine’ and ‘doubling of body and objects.’

2.2 Individual Experiments

What the essays in this section have in common is their intense concern with individual plays. For us this provides answers to question the previous section has touched only briefly or more sweepingly. For instance, how the problem of representation has been solved by certain dramatists or to what spheres they apply their deconstructive tools.

Clare Wallace, an Irish woman teaching at Prague (CZ) University, entitles her text “Dramas of Radical Alterity: Sarah Kane and Codes of Trauma for a Postmodern Age.” She argues that Sarah Kane’s plays were doubly encoded, typical of postmodern art. In this way, Kane presents an experience of reality that is trans-real and traumatic on the one hand, and highly ironic in its treatment of lifeworlds on the other.

Mateusz Borowski (Krakow, PL) has made a particularly interesting observation about contemporary extensions of the dramatic/theatrical code. In his lecture “Gendered Bodies — Historical Bodies. The Development of the Brechtian Convention in Caryl Churchill’s Cloud Nine and Mark Ravenhill’s Mother Clap’s Molly House” he demonstrates a new functionalization of the Brechtian Alienation Effect. Those two plays from 1978 and 2001 re-used it for the purpose of deconstructing historical and gender-specific roles.

“The Celtic Tiger Is Trapped and Speaks With a Twisted Tongue”: Language, Space and the Question of Identity in the Plays of Enda Walsh” is the title of Mark Schreiber’s (Bremen, GER) contribution. It concentrates on Walsh’s experiments with theatrical space. Here, the space of the stage
appears to be in permanent conflict with the imaginative spaces of the text and in this way the sphere of stage action is continuously re-configurated. It is Walsh’s intention to find an expressive equivalent to the floating identity of contemporary Ireland.

“Published and Perished’: The Blurring of Boundaries in Margaret Edson’s *Wit*” is the title of the paper by Marion Hebach (Mannheim, GER). Edson’s Pulitzer Prize winning play (1999) uses a plethora of dramatic and theatrical means. In this way it suspends genre contours, creates multi-perspectivity and dissolves a realist ontology. It performs a — very post-modern — re-negotiation of identity and reality.

The contribution by Kathleen Starck (Bremen, GER) “Battlefield ‘Body’: Gregory Burke’s *Gagarin Way* and Anthony Neilson’s *Stitching*” registers in both plays a new thematisation of the human body following the breakdown of communication by language. In consequence of this breakdown the ‘characters’ try to find new orientations derived from the body, only to learn that without being socially inscribed the body is ambiguous or even non-significant.

### 2.3 Ethnic Interchanges

The following texts might also be rubricated under ‘effects of postcolonialism.’ It is highly interesting what kinds of reactions between Western culture and those emerging ethnicities can be observed. Emancipation from Western mentalities, sometimes has to take the road of attacking postcolonial structures (see Raji below). Of course, there is also the striking back of the former Empire by invading Western mentalities, which sometimes is not beyond using old clichés (Innes; Schlote). And there is the discovery that the emancipative tradition of Western drama and theatre can be utilised for ethnic purposes (Riemenschneider).

Christopher Innes (Toronto, CN) and Christiane Schlote (Berlin, GER) both write about the influence of Indian (South-Asian) ideas and concepts on the English theatre of today.

“Cross-Cultural Connections — Indian Signs in English Conventions” (Innes) analyses *Indian Ink* and *Bombay Dreams*, two plays in which West End Musical and Bollywood converge but also parody and criticize each other.
Introduction

“How Many Things Make a Home, and How Many Can We Carry?”: Staged Migrations and Globalized Aesthetics in Tara Arts’ Journey to the West (Schlote) looks at the trilogy Journey to the West performed by the London Asian Theatre Company Tara Arts. From there she proceeds to a characterisation of what is called ‘Binglish Theatre,’ a style created by Tara Arts.

Dieter Riemenschneider (Auckland, NZ) discusses the play Woman Far Walking written by the Maori Witi Ihimaera who previously had restricted himself to narratives. Riemenschneider traces the way Maori traditions are represented in the shape of the Western dramatic/theatrical code. Ihimaera shows new connections between mental and theatrical actions, thus developing a Maori theatre and extending the Western dramatic/theatrical code.

Wumi Raji’s (Iloran, Nigeria) article is about “Transformed Identities: Cultural Transgression and Postcolonial Transformation in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s and Ngugi wa Mirii’s I Will Marry When I Want.” He shows that Ngugi took up traditional subjects and plots and that he changed them in certain ways in order to mobilize the public against contradictions and obstacles in the process of postcolonial emancipation.

2.4 Workshops

On the second afternoon there were also two workshops in dramatic writing. The one held by Adele Edling Shank (San Diego, USA) carried the title “Creating Drama for the New Theatre.” The paper printed here is a slightly extended version of her instruction material. Setting out from a deconstructivist and anti-realist position she turns against the traditional notion of integrated characters, of motivation and causality. Especially by means of pictures of informal paintings and exotic postcards she suggests actions and scenes that overcome the limitations of psychological realism.

Parasuram Ramamoorthi (Madurai, India), who had impressed on the first night by reading from his plays, called his workshop “Third Eye Opens....” By putting on blindfolds the participants should concentrate on tactile and acoustical signals as well as the sense of smell. Relying on those perceptions only, they should develop extensive, more imaginative ideas of the other and thus try to engage interactively.

Due to serious illness he was not able to hand in his paper. For those who are interested in his work we give the titles of two of his dramas: Hey
Parashuram (1999) and Vanaprastham (2002), both published by Velvi Books in Madurai, India.

3. Summing Up

What kind of changes of the dramatic/theatrical code do those papers report?

First of all, deconstructivist activities were found in every play. Consequently, there were suspensions and dissolutions of concepts and objects but also extensions and delimitations of traditional forms and norms. One of the strongest elements of expression was the use of the body when liberated from the traditional definitions and attributions. Considerable innovation of a thematic kind was expressed by reference to other ethnic and cultural traditions, in the sense of postcolonial emancipation from Western concepts as well as in the sense of articulating ethnic material through Western dramatic means.

Regarding the stage as such, new configurations and connections of (wo)man, body and machine were discussed. Provocation and shock questioned the borderline between stage and audience and tended to intensify the impact on the spectator. In the fictional sphere of the stage new ‘realities’ have appeared through orientation at the experience of trauma (Kane), by confronting the socially undefined body (Burke, Neilson), by genderifying Brecht’s alienation effect (Churchill, Ravenhill) and by suspending spatial points of reference or certainties (Walsh, Edson).

Taking such observations together, one could say that contemporary drama and theatre register a world pervaded by an immense dynamic of change on many levels. Nothing stays as it is, and nothing is what it seems. But what is the constitution of reality? It is a vast potential with which we are able to interact creatively. This applies to whatever tasks we may face. What used to be factual reality has been dissolved into a hovering state of alternatives which is sometimes almost as hard to bear as the narrowness of a one-dimensional world. We feel at rest and satisfied whenever we can creatively reduce this undecided state. However, only for a certain time, eliminating those alternatives for good would be worse. We feel most real when we realize ourselves creatively. This seems difficult in view of the complexity and heterogeneity of our lifeworlds. But this is what the code,
developed by the contemporary deconstructivist theatre and drama, is supposed to warrant. Its function is the development and furthering of the creative competence of its audiences under these socio-historical conditions.

It is to be hoped that the observations presented in the papers of our conference will stimulate further interest in the matters addressed. Thank you to all contributors.

Works Cited


I.

Strands and Tendencies of Development
Beyond Illusion: American Alternative Theatre

Long-term Characteristics

There are two characteristics of American Alternative Theatre that have endured from the 1960s to the present. First, the productions are experimental. Second, the performances tend to break through illusion; spectators are made to focus on the performance itself, on performers and the circumstances of performance, instead of, or in addition to, a fictional illusion of people living in a separate time and place.

The term “experimental” has been used in a number of ways, so I should explain what I mean by the term. Basically, I mean the same thing that the American Webster dictionary means when it gives the first meaning as “of or based on experience rather than on theory or authority” (Webster’s). By experimental theatre I mean theatre that is based on experience and not on conventions or imitation of existing forms. In other words, an experimental artist, in my view, is one who attempts to create forms to express his or her experience of living in the world at a certain time and place. This is quite different from making works according to conventions that were developed to express emotive experience of another place and a time in the past. Such conventions, of course, originated in the past as expressive new techniques and concepts. They were so expressive of the time that they were repeated. With repetition, these techniques and concepts became conventions which some artists simply accepted as the correct way to make theatre even after the conventions had ceased to be expressive of the artists’ contemporary world. Throughout history new forms have often been seen as confrontational or offensive by audiences that are more comfortable with the familiar conventions they have come to accept. This is true of many of the works of the contemporary alternative theatre.
Since 1969 I have been interested in theatre groups that create new forms to express the emotive ideas of the time. And I am especially interested in productions that are created from inceptive idea to performance by the same artists rather than by separate artists serving the functions of playwright, director, designer, etc. Such groups were plentiful in the late 1960s and '70s — not only in the United States, but also in Western Europe. In the United States these artists were usually part of a counter culture comprised mostly of young people who rejected the values of their middle-class parents and the government. These young people rallied around a number of political and social causes, but above all else they rejected the US involvement in the Vietnam War. This counter culture of the late 1960s and '70s no longer exists. But the alternative experimental theatre continues.

Circumstances That Shaped the American Alternative Theatre of Today

Today most of the alternative theatre artists are part of the cultural mainstream. They survive within the dominant economic structure of the country. They solicit money from many sources — even from the government that the counter culture had rejected. Now they are eager to receive grants from the National Endowment for the Arts (the NEA) which is the only Federal government agency that awards money to theatres.

The typical structure of the alternative theatres of the late 1960s and the '70s was a collective, and their works were created collaboratively by groups that were socially and politically engaged. By contrast, the companies of the 1980s tended to be politically disengaged reflecting the me-first society of the Reagan era. A different structure emerged — a structure reflecting a focus on the individual artist instead of the group. These new companies were structured as artistic hierarchies rather than as democratic collectives and usually were formed around a single dominant director who performed most of the creative functions previously performed by the group. Their work, however, continued to be created in one process rather than being created independently by playwright, director, designer, and performers.
In the 1980s there was also an increase in the number of solo performers. There were several reasons for this. Along with the emphasis on individual self-reliance, the conservative government and its supporters believed that the arts, like corporations, should be financially self-reliant. If audiences liked the product, they would and should pay for it. Public money for the arts decreased and it was cheaper for theatres to produce or present solo works. Solo work also became more plentiful because some performers, like Karen Finley, came from a visual arts tradition of creating works of art by oneself alone.

Several of these solo performers found themselves in confrontation with the political establishment. Some members of the US Congress, who believed that government should not support art, attempted to eliminate the budget of the National Endowment for the Arts.

In 1990 the NEA chose eighteen performing artists to receive grants. But the National Council on the Arts, the oversight organization for the NEA, voted against funding four of the artists and the NEA conceded. These four — Karen Finley, Tim Miller, Holly Hughes, and John Fleck — became known as the “NEA Four.” The performances of all four solo artists involved sexual politics. They were sympathetic to the gay movement, they talked about AIDS, homophobia, and sex. They talked about the abuse of women in a male-dominated culture, and nudity was often a part of their performances.

Some members of Congress considered their work to be obscene. Some also considered it an outrage that tax money was awarded performers who had what they called “deviant” sexual orientations. Hughes is an acknowledged lesbian and Fleck and Miller are gay. Finley, although a heterosexual feminist, was not spared. Her politics was like the others, and she was considered obscene because her language was irreverent, scatological, and sexual. And in her performances she was sometimes naked, and often smeared with food of some sort.

The four artists sued the NEA. They claimed that denial of the grants infringed their free speech and therefore was against the constitution. Eventually the case reached the Supreme Court and by an 8–1 decision the Court determined that the policy of the NEA did not violate artists’ free-speech rights, and that the NEA could consider “decency” in deciding who should receive public money. The House of Representatives was still not happy
and voted to abolish the NEA. The organization was saved in a compromise with the Senate after a similar attempt to eliminate the Endowment was defeated there.

The NEA decided that the safest course was to stop giving grants to individual artists, thus guarding against a repeat of the problems caused by the NEA Four.

There were further repercussions. Congress slashed away at the NEA budget and by 1998 had reduced it by 44 percent. To put their budget in an international context, the NEA pointed out that governments of Canada and France spent 32 dollars per capita on the arts and Germany spent 27 dollars. By contrast the USA was spending only 38 cents. (Financial support for the arts decreased still further in 2003 as the economies of many states deteriorated. For example, the budget of the California Arts Council was cut from eighteen million dollars to one million dollars leaving the organization with only enough money to maintain a small staff and with no funds for grants to the arts.)

To make matters worse, many private grant-giving foundations shifted their giving to other “safer” areas. Arts organizations have been drained financially and emotionally by having to defend their programs and artists from audits, public attack, and harassment by city officials and police. There is no telling to what extent this constant pressure has resulted in self-censorship by artists and unspoken, perhaps unconscious, censorship by NEA panels in the belief that they are helping to preserve the NEA. The NEA now follows a politically safer course by awarding most of its money to large, established, more conservative organizations.

Karen Finley, one of the NEA Four, decried the impact of this conservatism on the spirit of the country at large. “We’ve lost sight of what made America so innovative — we were daring, original and not afraid of offending the old guard. We have lost our inventiveness for the sake of appearance” (“Art of Offending”).
Nakedness in the Alternative Theatre. Examples

In the 1960s the *Living Theatre* had shocked their spectators by removing their clothes during performance (Photo 1). Nakedness was unusual on the stage and the shock broke through the usual aesthetic frame. It diminished the distance between art and life and presented the self, one’s body, one’s experience — emotive, cognitive, and perceptual. Nakedness, by breaking down the barriers of aesthetic distance, created a more direct relationship with the audience allowing for a direct political impact. This technique of nakedness has continued into the present. Performers present themselves naked but without the gloss of eroticism. Some expose their body mutilations, alterations, and tattoos. Many of the resulting highly personal works are of necessity performed by the creators themselves.

*Photo 1*

*Karen Finley’s* solo performances offer a raw critique of society in the USA. Her works deal with homophobia, the desecration of women, the sexuality of men and women, and hidden desires. She is also concerned with commercialism which sets standards of appearance and behaviour for women based on the desires of men. She expresses the emotionality of these sub-
jects in poetic images and language and by smearing food on her body as an expression of female degradation. Her aim is political, but she insists that it is not negative. She says she tries to fix things by stirring people to be responsible for what they do in their personal relationships. And she tries to interweave this into the whole of society’s corruption. She thinks people find this very disturbing (cf. Finley “The Other Life” and “A Constant State” 153).

At twenty-one, while she was home for Christmas vacation, her father went into their garage and shot himself. In an interview several years later she said the event “put an effect on me that reality is stronger than art. And it makes me interested in real time. When I’m performing, real time is stronger for me than theatre pretend-time... In some ways, it actually freed me” (“A Constant State” 157–58). She always strives to make what happens in performance actual rather than illusory.

Even though in her performances she speaks of some events that she has fantasized or observed, she does not pretend to be another person or character. She insists that the performance present her actual feeling self rather than an illusion. Some of her techniques such as nakedness without eroticism, lack of rehearsal which increases the risk, and breaking into the monologue to comment on what is actually happening in the theatre, result from her striving for an actual presence.

She talks about events she has seen, experienced, or fantasized, and often they involve abuse. She believes “we’re really scared of our own sexuality which is no longer a sexuality of love but a sexuality of violence” (“A Constant State” 153). Speaking in the first person in The Constant State of Desire, she says:

And the first memory, memory I have, I have of my father, is he putting me into the refrigerator... Then he opens up the vegetable bin and takes out the carrots, the celery, the zucchini, and cucumbers. Then he starts working on my little hole.

Starts working my little hole. “Showing me what it’s like to be a mama,” he says. “Showing me what it’s like to be a woman. To be loved. That’s a daddy’s job,” he tells me. (“The Constant State” 148)

Although the experience seems to be autobiographical, it may be a fantasy. She has said that she was not sexually abused as a child.

While her language, images, and politics had been found offensive by some, it was not until her performances of We Keep Our Victims Ready,
which premiered in 1989, that the campaign against her and the NEA took shape. Syndicated conservative columnists derided her as a “nude, chocolate-smeared young woman” whose outrageous style was endangering the entire NEA. In the production Finley stripped to her underwear and put gelatine in her brassiere. Then, after discarding the brassiere, she smeared her body with chocolate frosting and sprinkled herself with glitter.

Few artists are as courageous as Karen Finley. She makes herself vulnerable by revealing herself — her body without the cover of eroticism as well as fantasies and experiences that other people would keep secret. And she expresses openly her fears, angers, and desires in a language that is uncensored. She has also defied the right wing elements in the United States — religious, governmental, judicial — at the risk of financial penalty. Some venues more timid than she is, will no longer engage her.

While most of the so-called “outrageous” performers deal with the darker side of sex and its abuses, Annie Sprinkle seems to think sex is taken too seriously. It is fun, a source of entertainment, satisfying. While in no way does she imply that these darker aspects do not exist, they simply are not the focus of her work. Instead, her performances seem to spoof sex and those who are obsessive about it. So there is a serious message behind the fun.

At her performance of *Post-Post Porn Modernist* colourful condoms are handed out with the programs. The performance consists of Annie Sprinkle, in various stages of nakedness, telling the audience about her life and experiences and presenting some demonstrations. She tells of having been born Ellen Steinberg and then becoming Annie Sprinkle. Ellen was unattractive and very shy, but Annie was sexy and very popular with the boys. The transition in her life, she says, came when she began selling soiled panties by mail. She did not think many people would be interested, but business was so brisk she could not keep up — she figured she had to wear a pair for two or three days. So she got her friends to wear some for her.

For over twenty years I’ve been passionately researching and exploring the subject of sex. This has led me into all sorts of interesting adventures. For example, I made over 200 porno movies…. I also worked as a nude model for all of the major sex magazines… [and] I worked as a prostitute, off and on, for many, many years…. *(Post-Post Porn script)*
While *Post-Post Porn Modernist* is a solo performance, spectators can participate. In the last section before intermission she offers to let spectators see her cervix. “You may be wondering,” she says, “why I’m going to show you my cervix… Reason number one: a cervix is such a beautiful thing and most people go through their whole lives and never get to see one” (*Post-Post Porn* performance). She sits on a chair at the front of the stage with legs spread. She inserts a speculum and invites spectators to line up to have a look at her cervix. Her assistant holds a flashlight so the viewers can see better. At the performance I attended, approximately a hundred people,
men and women, lined up and filed past. Some had still or video cameras to capture the cervix on film (Photo 2). During intermission Sprinkle raised money for her new movie by charging interested spectators five dollars for an unusual photograph of themselves with her (Photo 3).

There is an element of subtle ridicule of those who line up to view the cervix or have their photos taken but it is not vicious. And the performance is not erotic or pornographic. It is fun rather than titillating. Her wit and irony demystify sex; it is the opposite of pornography which mystifies sex by way of being erotic.

Annie Sprinkle says she has successfully made the transition from the sex industry to being an artist:

The difference between the art world and the porn world is that now I can really tell the truth without prostituting myself. It’s being able to express what I really feel instead of worrying about what “they” want... The only place that is open enough for someone like me is the art world. (Post-Post Porn performance)

Some forms of body mutilation have been traditional in American culture — for example, ear piercing, facelifts, and circumcision. While other forms of modification have been rare, by the early 1990s tattoos and body piercing had become fashionable in the mainstream culture. Body piercing studios sprung up in most large cities and they were kept busy piercing navels, noses, tongues, lips, eyebrows, nipples, genitals, and other parts of clients’ bodies. For a few artists, body modification and mutilation came to be used in theatrical performances. The motivation for performers engaging in such alterations is usually more than mere decoration or entertainment or sensationalism. For them it is a form of self expression. Some are practitioners in the so-called “primitive movement.” For some it is an ecstatic experience. For others the pain may provide the kind of atonement that comes from flagellation. Some, for whatever psychological or aesthetic or political reason, feel the need to explore their bodies in this manner.

In 1994, while Congress was considering the NEA budget for the following year, the religious right found another kicking boy to parade before law makers and the public in an attempt to eliminate the Endowment. The new weapon was Ron Athey whose performances draw upon his turbulent life. Trained in childhood as a Pentecostal minister, he became a heroin addict, is HIV positive, is a member of the “modern primitive movement,”
and has a fascination for pain, tattooing, scarification, body piercing, and blood letting. The brouhaha resulted from a performance of *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* presented under the sponsorship of the respected Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. It has been estimated that the portion of the Walker’s NEA grant that was used for Athey’s fee was less than 150 dollars. Nevertheless, that was enough to cause an uproar and again put the NEA in jeopardy.

In the opening scene Athey, dressed as a nineteenth-century holy woman, stands at a pulpit. Beside him is a naked woman who, like St. Sebastian, has a dozen or so “arrows” (actually barbecue skewers) inserted through the flesh of her sides, arms, and legs (Photo 4). Athey, reading from a text, tells of being taken as a child to the Mojave Desert to see a woman with stigmata and being disappointed that it did not occur — the blood did not come.

It was a section of the performance called “The Human Printing Press,” which caught the attention of the religious right and the US Congress. In it Athey, using a knife, carves an African scarification pattern into the back of an African American drag queen. He blots the bloody pattern with paper towels and then attaches the paper towels to a clothes line rigged on pulleys. The “printed” paper towels are then pulled out above the aisles over the audience (*4 Scenes* performance).
In subsequent scenes the performers engage in other sado-masochistic activities. Athey says, “I think there’s something inherently spiritual in what I do that makes it a ritual. It’s like a public sacrifice, I think. It is really parallel to doing penance” (“Spanner” 66).

Shortly after the Minneapolis performance, complaints were made to the Health Department about the “Human Printing Press” scene. A report went out over the Associated Press wire and the performance received national attention. The Christian Action Network issued a “declaration of war” against the NEA. In the imagination, the idea of homosexual blood (most reports said it was “AIDS-infected blood”) passing over the heads of spectators was a volatile image. Athey believes it played upon people’s “disease phobia” as well as their “body phobia” which he sees as the root of homophobia. Again, some members of Congress wanted to eliminate the NEA altogether. When a budget was finally passed, the NEA funds were cut nearly five percent.

Nakedness and Performance

Nakedness and body mutilation are only two of the most obvious means used by theatre artists to disrupt theatrical illusion and put focus on actuality, on the performer, the present moment, the here and now. This is one of the most pervasive characteristics of alternative theatre. In exploring the unique possibilities of live theatre, several means have been employed to take advantage of the fact that performers and spectators share the same time and space. By contrast, the conventional theatre usually separates the performers and the audience by lighting, proscenium arches, and especially by creating an impenetrable illusion of a time and a place different from that of the spectators. In addition, the conventional theatre, rather than putting the focus on the performers, creates an illusion of people — that is, characters — living in a separate world from those in the audience. In the alternative theatre the artists let actuality be the entire performance or share focus simultaneously with whatever transparent illusion may be presented. The principal means used by the conventional theatre to keep the focus on the fictional illusion has been a linear plot creating suspense. For the most part, in the alternative theatre, it is the performance (not the illusion) that is of greatest importance. It is this characteristic
more than any other that makes a performance by one of these companies such a different experience than a conventional theatre performance or movie or television drama. The performances are uniquely alive. Perhaps this is what has made the alternative theatre of enduring interest.

It is very important that those theatre artists who hope to bring about social change speak directly to their audience without obscuring their objective in a fictional illusion. After all they are concerned with creating a community of like-minded people, so rather than putting the audience in a semi-trance where they vicariously live the lives of people in another time and place, it is important for these artists to make the spectators focus on the here and now.

Ethnic Alternative Theatre: Examples

In the late 1960s and the ‘70s there were many alternative theatres advocating social change. They were driven especially by the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement. By contrast, in the 1980s the principal energy of the alternative theatres came to be more focused on individual expression and subjective artistic visions. In the 1990s the pendulum swung back somewhat toward a greater concern for social issues, and there was a resurgence of small companies and solo performers dedicated to changing society or at least pleading their cause. Marginalized groups including African Americans, Latinos, Chicanos, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Jews, gays, lesbians, and the homeless increasingly used theatre to present their concerns and create communities. For the first time some of these groups began to make use of inexpensive electronic communications — e-mail, websites, and list servers — to extend their constituencies and develop communities at geographical distances.

The border shared by Mexico and the USA has motivated the work of several theatre companies. In the 1960s and ’70s the productions of El Teatro Campesino were in support of the farm workers who migrated, legally and illegally, from Mexico to the USA in order to work in the fields (Photo 5). At first these workers were welcomed by their employers as cheap labour so long as they did not unionise. But antagonisms arose. The children of these workers attended state schools and universities, they used other social services, and they competed for jobs
wanted by the white population. Some politicians seized the opportunity to play upon the anxieties of the white population resulting in various anti-immigrant measures.

*Guillermo Gómez-Peña* responds to this more threatening view of immigrants and of Mexico itself. “The anti-immigrant political rhetoric,” he says, “portrays Mexicans as invaders. Mexico is seen as filled with corrupt politicians, drug dealers, terrorists” (Gómez-Peña interview). Gómez-Peña was born in Mexico, he came to the United States in his early twenties, and has continued to travel back and forth between Mexico and the USA.

His earliest works in the United States were solo performance installations. In one of these he sat on a toilet in a public restroom. For twenty-four hours he read an epic poem from a toilet paper roll describing his journey to the United States. Whoever happened to come in experienced the work.

During the quadricentennial of Columbus’s so-called “discovery of America,” Gómez-Peña and a woman collaborator exhibited themselves in
a cage as “undiscovered AmerIndians.” (Photo 6) These cultural hybrids were hand-fed and taken to the restroom on leashes by fake museum staff. Signs describing their costumes and physical characteristics were displayed next to the cage. At the Whitney Museum in New York Gómez-Peña offered an additional attraction: “for $5.00, a spectator could ‘see the genitals of the male specimen’” (Gómez-Peña, New World 97).

The Mexterminator is his most expansive work. In it he uses cultural hybrids and ethnographic dioramas similar to those seen in a natural history museum (Photo 7). This interactive installation plays upon the fear of the Mexican immigrant. It is set in the future after the Mexterminator has led an invading army and has re-conquered the United States in a Second US/Mexico War. The former USA is now loosely controlled by a multiracial junta, and is governed by a Chicano prime minister. Spanglish, a mix-
ture of Spanish and English, is the official language. This exhibition, we are told, is an example of the new “official hybrid culture.” A large warehouse space has been arranged for The Mexterminator to resemble a natural history museum with tableaux of bizarre living ethnographic specimens placed on platforms in front of diorama-like backgrounds.

The specimens, ethno-cyborgs, are identified by placards. There is Gómez-Peña himself as The Mexterminator (Photo 8). His habitat, we are told, is the American Borderlands. He is an indestructible, illegal border crosser, and he may abduct innocent Anglo children. Sometimes he wears a headdress of feathers, sometimes a cowboy hat. Other specimens include elements of several cultures: ancient Aztec, inner city urban Latino, gay, US Caucasian middle class, Mexican revolutionary, and transsexual. And there are science-fiction-like cyborgs that combine humans with technology.

These and other specimens are in continuous motion accompanied by hybrid rock-Mexican-disco music. The premise of the work, according to Gómez-Peña, is “to adopt a fictional center, and push the dominant Anglo culture to the margins, treating it as exotic and unfamiliar” (press materials).

Spectators are free to wander from exhibit to exhibit and are encouraged to interact with the specimens. They can feed the specimens, touch them, smell them, and attempt to engage them in a conversation. Occasionally spectators are invited to take the place of specimens on their platforms and enact their own fantasies.
The Mexterminator is part of a long-term project which Gómez-Peña says is “to make relentlessly experimental yet accessible art; to work in politically and emotionally charged sites, and for diverse audiences; and to collaborate across racial, gender, and age boundaries as a gesture of citizen-diplomacy” (press materials).

The cross-cultural interaction involves bringing together spectators of various ethnicities; and, as we spectators observe the freaks on display, we seem by contrast to have much more in common with each other despite our differences.

Gómez-Peña uses his website as an important source of information on what people are thinking with respect to Mexicans and others. Those logging in can express their views and confess their racist behaviour anonymously as they respond to Gómez-Peña’s provocative questions:

Where do Mexicans belong? In Mexico or everywhere?
What do you think of the fact that Mexican immigration is increasing dramatically and irreversibly? (home page)

The views of respondents, abstracted and shaped by the artists, are incorporated into the bizarre ethno-cyborgs on display. It is through these specimens that Gómez-Peña expresses his view of the country. He says:

America is living with an incredible paradox. It’s the most multicultural society on earth — that is it’s utopian strength — but it’s also riddled with fear of otherness and change. I want to make that visible through the creation of these Ethno-cyborgs. Hopefully people will see their own inner savages — which are in all of us — and deal with them. We’re saying, Hey we’re not that different. (press materials)

Like Gómez-Peña, the Chinese American director Ping Chong is also concerned with the immigrant as outsider. He grew up in New York’s Chinatown speaking Chinese as his first language, and this feeling of estrangement permeates all of his work. Even in his most abstract works the characters seem to be strangers in their environments. He has said that his frequent use of languages other than English helps to put the English speaker in the position of the outsider. He says, “I want the audience to understand the other side of the fence, what it feels like not to comprehend.” (qtd. in Kolkebeck no pag.)
In his series of productions under the collective title, *Undesirable Elements*, which is also called *Secret History*, he puts on stage people who consider themselves outsiders. They are immigrants in the communities where the works are being performed. In each locale six to eight local residents, none of them performers, are selected to be the participants. They are of different ethnicities, each is bilingual and each is bi-cultural. For example, in *Secret History/New York* the six were from Uganda, Tonga, Japan, the Philippines, and Lebanon. Chong says his intention is to explore “the effects of history, culture and ethnicity on the lives of individuals who vary in many ways but share the common experience of having been born in one culture and are now part of another” (company brochure).

In performance, the participants sit in a semicircle and speak into microphones. Behind them are projected maps of their countries of origin. First the participants introduce themselves in their native language. The text that follows is made up of their own material that Chong has edited, woven together, and arranged chronologically. They take turns singing songs, reciting poems, and demonstrating dances from their culture. They tell stories and anecdotes of their ancestors, their immigration to the USA, their experience as outsiders, and of discovering, rejecting, and embracing the culture of their ancestors. These language sections are interspersed with formal elements such as unison gestures, walking, and clapping.

At the same time that Chong is creating performances of *Undesirable Elements* in various parts of the United States, he is also making more elaborate productions. These works, created with skilled performers, make use of scenery, film, slide projections, music, and language. Typically, the scripts are collectively developed during the course of rehearsals, and Chong functions as director and designer. For *Deshima* he collaborated with a writer as he set out to explore East-West relations.

The Mickery Workshop in Holland had commissioned Chong to make a work commemorating the centennial of Vincent van Gogh’s death and *Deshima* was the result. A few years earlier, a Japanese insurance company had bought van Gogh’s painting, *Sunflowers*, for approximately 40 million dollars and shipped it to Japan. This treatment of the painting as a mere commodity led Chong to view van Gogh as an outcast controlled by foreign economic forces, and he saw a parallel with a 1641 event when the Japanese ordered Dutch traders and missionaries to be quarantined on
Deshima, an island off the coast of Nagasaki. The production was described as a “meditation on the effects of politics, trade, religion, art, and racism on the formation of the modern world” (Chong, “Stages” 10). As in his other works, music and sound, dance-like movement, and projections create a unique world contrasting Western and Asian cultures. Although incorporating historical material and figures, the structure of Deshima is non-linear and multi-layered allowing for ironic contrasts. For example, in one scene van Gogh is a poor street person selling postcards of his paintings; he walks through the cornfield of his painting Crows in the Cornfield, where there is a group of Japanese schoolgirls. (Photo 9)

All of Ping Chong’s work tends toward a cinematic structure. His images are influenced by his Asian experience, and he uses a variety of means including projections, sound, music, dance and dance-like gestures, fluid expressive lighting, and whatever other means help to create his unique worlds.

Like Ping Chong, the Wooster Group in New York uses sophisticated technology and complex techniques for combining live action with live and pre-recorded video. But their productions are actually and metaphorically related to the psyches of director Elizabeth LeCompte and the company.
LeCompte uses modern classical texts as springboards to the company’s distinctive disjunctive productions. But the performances do not permit the spectators to become passively absorbed in a fictional world. The techniques used demand that spectators focus actively on the present moment of the live performance. This active mental participation allows memories of the classical text sources to collide and resonate with what one sees on stage.

In *Brace Up!* (Photo 10) LeCompte drew upon Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*, but she emphasizes that the production is not an interpretation or an adaptation of Chekhov. The three sisters of Chekhov’s play and performer Kate Valk as narrator are on stage throughout while the men are relegated to tables at the back of the stage and come forward only for certain scenes. Most often they are seen on video monitors.

Kate Valk as narrator introduces actors, sets up props, signals lights, sound, and video, and makes “corrections.” Peyton Smith as Olga is often seen on a TV monitor. Irina, the youngest sister, is played in a wheelchair by Beatrice Roth who is in her seventies. Anfisa, the old nurse, is seen only in black and white video. The narrator explains to the audience that she is played by a 95-year-old performer who cannot be here.

As in other Wooster Group productions, sound dislocation and disruption are two of the techniques working against a cohesive narrative.
Performers on video monitors carry on dialogues with live performers, and performers off-stage speak over microphones for characters on video. There are so-called “mistakes” and “adjustments” during the performance. At one point, Willem Dafoe as Andrei sobs at great length until the narrator taps him on the shoulder and he suddenly stops, drops character, and calmly leaves the stage.

LeCompte is interested in presenting actual events on stage rather than fictional ones which could result in a compelling narrative and psychological acting. One of the techniques for accomplishing this and keeping the audience focused on the actual present is task performance. In rehearsal, she says,

I try to deal mostly with tasks. I say to the actors, “you have information to present to the audience, and you are responsible for a clear imparting of this information.” That’s giving them a mental task, so they can get through the persona thing without coloring it emotionally. (LeCompte 147)

The productions of the Wooster Group present no overt point-of-view; nonetheless they embody a point-of-view directly expressive of our culture which is made up of fragmented and contradictory ideas, events, and images that exist side by side, layer upon layer. That fact is often intentionally overlooked by artists who make use of conventional structures created to express how it felt to live in a simpler world that no longer exists. The Wooster Group and other experimental artists express how it feels to live in their world in the present, and that requires the creation of new forms. As experimental theatre artists the Wooster Group feels on the edge, determined not to conform. Such a position is risky because financial support is frequently from foundations whose boards and administrators have conventional artistic interests or wish to avoid controversy by supporting work that is generally acceptable. Nonetheless, as in the past, the Wooster Group and other experimental companies are stimulated and energized by their precarious positions.
The Experimental Artist

Art is capable of expressing a certain kind of knowledge that can only be conveyed through art. If artists are sensitive to their world and how it feels to be alive now and if they create forms to express that feeling, they are able to communicate that knowledge to others. This is what it means to be an experimental artist. To experience our times, to know feelingly who and where we are, and to communicate this knowledge, frequently by extending the existing dramatical and theatrical code. It is one of the ways of crossing borders and giving strangers an emotive understanding of our world.

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‘To Recommend a Cure’: Beyond Social Realism and In-Yer-Face Theatre

“Revolt is understandably unpopular. As soon as it is defined it has provoked the measures for its containment. The prudent man will avoid the definition which in effect is his death sentence.”

Alex Trocchi

1. Introduction

In January 1956, the critic and myth-maker Kenneth Tynan wrote in the Observer newspaper: “Brecht once drew an analogy which I think worth quoting. Some surgeons, he said, are content to supply merely a diagnosis: others feel it their duty to recommend a cure” (qtd. in Shellard 147). He was talking about how theatre can teach lessons, how it can stage “propaganda plays.” But if theatre-makers are metaphorical surgeons, doctors and healers, how does it happen that today’s theatre historians have become anatomists, grave diggers and obituarists? The historian of contemporary drama is excited by seeing a living play, runs home and writes about it. Then, typically, they revisit the patient at a later date. But, inevitably, when the historian’s book eventually comes out, the patient is usually dead, often long buried, sometimes even forgotten. Historians of the contemporary have to struggle to avoid becoming necrologists.

So, for example, I finished my book on in-yer-face theatre in January 2000. It was published in March 2001, and, by the time it came out, the phenomenon that it was describing had already begun to slide back into the past. In fact, in this perhaps imprudent book, I argue that the year 1999 (when Sarah Kane committed suicide) could be used as a convenient end date for 1990s experiential theatre. And indeed, the passing years seem to
support this suggestion. From writing a passionate diagnosis of a living experience — in-yer-face theatre — I ended up with an extended obituary. And one which has occasionally led to some serious misunderstandings.

A few months after Tynan wrote his piece, British theatre experienced the first of its post-war new waves when John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* opened at the Royal Court. Not only did the Royal Court project of developing new writers challenge the accepted codes of existing theatre — from verse drama to what Tynan called the Loamshire play — but it also established its own codes. From the working-class settings to the austere designs, British theatre became a home for social realist drama. The standard code — being the sum total of all means used to convey meaning on the British stage — is still based on these conventions of social realism. As John McGrath put it:

> The now dominant strain in British middle-class theatre can be traced back to Ibsen by way of Shaw and Rattigan, and so on. The tradition is one of two or three long acts of concentrated spoken drama, usually with no more than five or six main characters. The actors communicate the plot by total immersion in the character they are playing, and move around on a set or sets made to look as much like the real thing as possible. (56)

The recent success of award-winning plays such as Peter Gill’s *The York Realist* (Royal Court, 2001) and Nicholas Wright’s *Vincent in Brixton* (National, 2002) show that this code remains strong in mainstream theatre. Even when Royal Court plays were about working-class life, argued McGrath, they spoke “the language of a small metropolitan cultural group with developing but essentially bourgeois values,” a code governed by “the tastes of a white, well-fed, sensitive but sophisticated literary critic” (18; see also 7–17, 54–59). So the mix of sensibility, writing style, plot devices and directing and acting styles — plus other factors such as newspaper interest and the cordial relations between theatre and other forms of drama such as film, television and radio — are elements of this code. So how did the great upsurge of new writing in the 1990s affect this theatre code?
2. New Writing

The story of British new drama over the past ten years is the story of the revival of new writing. In Britain, the new European drama took the form of an explosion of new plays in which the writer — rather than director, dramaturge or designer — is the centre of the theatrical experience. Basically, the term ‘new writing’ emphasises the British tradition of making the word more important than the gesture. In this sense, the code remained unchanged during the 1990s. But what exactly does the label new writing mean? After all, every writer, including Shakespeare, Harold Pinter and Caryl Churchill, was once a new writer. By new writing what is usually meant is:

1) Plays by young writers. Sarah Kane, for example, was 23 when her 1995 debut, *Blasted*, was first put on. So new writing implies first plays written by people who are usually in their twenties. But age is much less important than the fact that they are making their debut. For example, the London New Play Festival in November 1999 featured writers who were aged 40 or over — but they were all first-time writers. New writing is the drama of debuts.

2) Plays about contemporary issues. Mark Ravenhill’s 1996 debut, *Shopping and Fucking*, for example, is about consumerism and individualism, about drug addiction and the value of money, about alienated sex and abuse. These may be the problems of all modern societies, but Ravenhill not only examines their contemporary forms — from telephone sex to dealing in Ecstasy — but he also adopts a contemporary attitude by refusing to preach or to be a Brechtian activist. New writing is the drama of the contemporary.

3) Plays written in an up-to-date style. Jez Butterworth, for example, set his 1995 debut *Mojo* in 1950s Soho, but the language his characters use is 1990s baroque. If you compare the plays of the past ten years, they are much more direct, funky and to the point than those of previous decades, which in comparison look verbose, windy and long-winded. New writing is the drama of present-day speech.
4) Plays produced by subsidised new writing theatres. For example, theatres such as the Royal Court, the National Studio, the Traverse, the Bush, the Hampstead or the Soho Theatre produce new work without having to depend on commercial success. New writing is a post-war phenomenon: since Look Back in Anger, there have been successive new waves of state-subsidised writers, each of which modified the code of drama. Many modern classics, such as John Arden’s Sergeant Musgrave’s Dance, which was first put on at the Royal Court in 1959, were originally commercial flops.

However, it must be admitted that there are problems with the idea of new writing. In a way, the phrase is a classic bit of marketing: the “new” (as in New Labour) implies good, virtuous and up-to-date; the “writing” tends to exclude other aspects of theatre-making. Like other examples of contemporary spindoctoring, the label inevitably collides with reality. The main problem can be summed up by the question: When does a new writer become an old hand? We can agree that Mark Ravenhill (seven plays; mid-30s) is a new writer, but when does he become an old boy? New plays by Tom Stoppard or David Hare are rarely seen as new writing, so when will the young Turks of the 1990s be seen as establishment writers?

It is clear that individual plays — especially those which already make up the canon of 1990s drama — have extended the dramatic code. For example, Sarah Kane’s Blasted extended the code by its innovative form, especially the double meaning of its central rupture point and its sharp infusion of Beckettian elements into a naturalistic play. Mark Ravenhill’s Shopping and Fucking extended the code by adding elements of playfulness and fantasy that used to be rather rare in serious social realist drama. Both tested their original studio audiences with depictions of explicit sex and violence, thus pushing out the envelope of what is socially taboo and what is theatrically tolerable. Now, Blasted and Shopping and Fucking are already anthologised as typical 1990s plays (see Whybrow) and the headline of the Daily Mail review of the first production of Blasted is a legend: for example, a recent round up of must-see shows in Time Out (3–10 September 2003, 21), the London listing magazine, gleefully recommends the West End transfer of Jerry Springer: the Opera with the words: “Now’s your chance to see this disgusting piece of filth in the West End,” surely an echo of the Daily
Mail’s notorious condemnation of Blasted as “This Disgusting Feast of Filth” (Tinker).

3. New Wave of the 1990s

Any breakthrough in theatre sensibility is prophetic in the sense that the images shown on stage can explore, in a much faster and more concentrated form than material reality, a wide range of possibilities in any given code. Typically, such images show a new world that can only gradually become visible in reality, and for this reason they may be prophetic or even subversive; or, they show a world which is invisible to a typical audience, and thus they might come across as disturbing or dangerous.

During the 1990s, British theatre experienced an explosion of creativity and an enormous growth in the production of new writing, much of which was characterised by a new sensibility and new theatrical images. Of course, not everyone accepts this. Vera Gottlieb, for example, says, “Some critics view the plays of Kane, Ravenhill and Butterworth as examples of a renaissance in British theatre. I do not see a renaissance” (211). Since she justifies this offhand dismissal by pointing out that new writers are influenced by older playwrights such as Beckett, Pinter and Bond, and by film and television, her argument is unconvincing and intellectually sloppy. Her claim that new writing is a triumph of style over content only reveals the shallowness of her reading of the text and her unwillingness to examine the plays in production. A similar wilful blindness is evident when Mary Luckhurst says that, “I am not of the view that Kane was a great writer nor that her plays represented a defining moment” (72; see also 73). Bizarrely, she then goes on to state what an excellent writer Kane was in terms of theatrical vision, and in terms of her stagecraft. Luckhurst can only fault Kane’s dialogue and her right-wing politics — since she produces not a shred of evidence to support this, it seems frankly irresponsible to calumniate a dead writer with such thoughtless criticism. Kane’s work is certainly not above criticism (see Sierz 2003), but this kind of dismissive rejection fails to confront the success of new British drama in theatres all over the world. Unless you believe that thousands of dramaturges, artistic directors and theatre audiences are deluded or have no taste, it seems odd to dismiss in-yer-face theatre out-of-hand. But, of course, dismissal is much easier than serious engagement.
It is important to reiterate a couple of points about the upsurge in creativity in the 1990s. The first point is that there is a materialistic basis for what happened. Objectively speaking, there was a large rise in the amount of new plays that were staged. Arts Council statistics show that, at the end of the 1980s, new plays formed less than 10% of staged work in subsidised theatres; by 1994-96 the figure was 20%. Production had doubled. Even more important has been box office success. In the late 1980s, new writing regularly attracted audiences of less than 50%; by 1994, this figure was 53%, and by 1997 it was 57%, which means that new plays were outperforming adaptations, post-war revivals, translations, classics and even Shakespeare (Edgar, “The Canon” 31).

Also, there was a critical mass of new writers. It is relatively easy to make a list of 50 new writers that emerged in the 1990s — if we collaborated, we could come up with perhaps 100 names of new writers. When I am at home, and can look at my play texts, I can easily give you the names of more than 150 new playwrights. It has also been calculated that between 500 and 700 writers of stage plays, radio plays and television drama make a living from writing in Britain. These are really remarkable figures: Britain today has many more writers than Periclean Athens, than Shakespeare’s England or even than the first post-war new wave which began in 1956. If this is not a renaissance, then what is?

Among the serious misunderstandings of in-yer-face theatre, a leading delusion is the fashionable dismissal that it was “all just a marketing ploy” — as if the emergence of dozens of new working writers was a fantasy thought up by press officers. In fact, the play that more than any other publicised the new wave of the 1990s, Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*, was not marketed at all by the Royal Court. They did absolutely nothing to promote it — no newspaper interviews, no posters, nothing. Along with this fact, it is also worth remembering that there was absolutely nothing predetermined about the new wave of 1990s drama — the play readers at the Royal Court were completely split about *Blasted*: half of those at the script meeting which considered it, did not want to stage it. If they had won the argument, history would have been different. By the same token, when director Max Stafford-Clark got the first draft of Mark Ravenhill’s *Shopping and Fucking*, he was completely unimpressed. If Ravenhill had not hassled him with more and more new drafts, proving that he was committed to the
play, Stafford-Clark would not have put it on. And, once again, history would have been different.

Anyway, if it is blatantly obvious that British new writing underwent a significant revival during the 1990s, it is still worth pointing out that there was not just more theatre, but theatre of a different kind. In terms of style and sensibility, I believe that British drama in the past ten years has been distinctive and distinctly different from the drama of previous decades.

4. The Name Game

If this is true, the main question is: How do we characterise it? And by this I mean, what do we call the phenomenon and how do we theorise it? Basically, I believe that the choice of name you use is a political one. There is nothing objective about it — playwrights do not arrive with neat little labels on their lapels. It is a subjective decision, and a polemical one. And one that I am always being asked to defend. There are several labels attached to the new writing of the 1990s. I would like to list these and say why I would reject them, before arguing in favour of my own choice, which is ‘in-yer-face theatre.’

1) Neo-Jacobeanism. If you choose neo-Jacobeanism you are, in political terms, implicitly arguing that what matters in contemporary theatre is its links with tradition, and indeed in the work of Sarah Kane, to use the most obvious example, there are many links with Shakespeare and Renaissance theatre. If your political intention is to emphasise this link with the past, the term neo-Jacobeanism seems fine, but if you want to emphasise the sense of rupture between 1990s theatre and the past, it obviously is not.

2) New Brutalism. If, on the other hand, you choose to call this phenomenon New Brutalism, you are emphasising one aspect of contemporary theatre — its brutality and violence. Since the work of Sarah Kane is as much about tenderness and love, this label conveys entirely the wrong impression. Kane and Ravenhill are really not brutes — and they are not interested in brutality as such. Also, a further drawback with the name New Brutalism is that it implicitly compares theatre
with architecture — the National Theatre is a New Brutalist building — and I really think it is a terrible mistake to name a new theatrical sensibility after an institution which has been built in one of the most unpopular styles of modern architecture — and which has one of the worst records for promoting new writing in the mid-1990s. It also raises more problems than it solves: If the 1990s saw the emergence of New Brutalists, who were the Old Brutalists? So, for these reasons, I believe that the name New Brutalism is a theoretical dead-end — it really does not help our understanding of new writing in the 1990s.

3) Blood and Sperm Generation. Like New Brutalism, the trouble with this label is that it is merely descriptive — and narrowly so. The good thing about this label is that it focuses on the shocking elements of the new theatrical sensibility, and it does, after all, acknowledge that there was a generational aspect to the new drama. However, once again I would reject it because it merely describes the content of a play and not its theatrical form. By this I mean that it describes only the more superficial aspects of the new plays of the 1990s.

4) Theatre of Urban Ennui. I will not waste too much time here about this, which I think is truly dreadful. Not only does it sound like a description of 19th-century French symbolism, it also completely misses the point: The typical characters of 1990s plays do not sit around being bored; in general, they try and get on with their lives.

5) Cool Drama. I suppose this arises from the historical co-incidence that the explosion of creativity in London theatre happened at the same time as the increase in other British cultural forms such as films, clubs and restaurants, which led to the much-hyped phenomenon called Cool Britannia. As a label, it is also a good marketing device — if new theatre really is cool, young people should be encouraged to come and see it. But although the new drama of the 1990s certainly was hip, most of its writers were certainly not cool (in the sense of being ironically detached and uncaring) and the theatrical form it took was anything but cool, in the sense of lukewarm. It was hot.
In a sense, all of these labels are unsatisfactory precisely because they do not do justice to the many ways in which the most cutting-edge new writing in the 1990s extended the code of British theatre.

5. In-Yer-Face Theatre

When I told Sarah Kane that I wanted to call her work “in-yer-face,” she replied — with a characteristic shrug of the shoulders which meant: that’s your problem not mine — “At least it’s fucking better than New Brutalism” (Sierz, “Raising Kane” 9). Since choosing a label for the new phenomenon is such a political and polemical choice, perhaps I need to restate why I believe that “in-yer-face theatre” is still the best way of theorising what has happened.

Unlike names such as New Brutalism, in-yer-face theatre describes not just the content of a play but the relationship between the writer and the public, or (more accurately) the relationship between the stage and the audience. Because of this, it strongly suggests many more issues than a mere description of content. Those issues include theoretical ideas about experiential theatre (which seems to me a crucial concept in understanding the force of 1990s drama); the idea of writing kick-ass dramas for small theatre spaces; the question of what is taboo; the notion of what is a theatrical provocation — it not only focuses on the sensibility, especially its confrontational aspects, of the writing but also on the way it finds an apt theatrical expression. In-yer-face theatre describes not only a play’s content, but also the way in which this content is realised in practical terms in the theatre.

For example, this name strongly suggests what is particular about the experience of going to a studio theatre and seeing an intense piece of drama — the feeling that your personal space is threatened. It gives a sense of that violation of intimacy that some forms of extreme drama produce in the audience. In other words, it is a tool with which to understand the relationship between play and audience. It also describes the way in which 1990s British drama both extended the code of what was acceptable on stage and tried to find new ways of communicating this to new audiences. A label such as New Brutalism does not suggest either.
The idea of in-yer-face theatre is also a political one.

1) This name emphasises the sense of rupture, a radical break, with the past — it stresses what was new and innovative about the dramatic voices which were heard for the first time in the 1990s. It focuses on the way young writers rewrote the code and reminds us that, at its best, the role of in-yer-face theatre was to use shock to awaken the moral responses of the audience — its aim was no less than to help change society.

2) This name not only suggests a confrontational approach, it also implies the existence of an avant-garde: Although cultural critics have announced the death of the avant-garde on more than one occasion in the past 50 years, in theatre its re-emergence took a classical form: innovation, scandal and then retrenchment. The theatrical code was questioned, reformed and then rapidly became a new orthodoxy.

3) This name is absolutely full of resonance of the Zeitgeist of the 1990s. It was often used about other cultural forms and thus it links theatre to the wider culture of that decade (the term refers to other 1990s phenomena, from shock jocks to Young British Artists). Other commentators have also noted this: for example, “This was the nineties — the ‘lottery age’ — the ‘in-yer-face’ age” (Napier-Bell 390). In-yer-face drama brought the theatrical code into synchronicity with society’s wider cultural codes.

Finally, the name has also been recognised by many theatre practitioners. For example, in Act Two of April de Angelis’s A Laughing Matter (Out of Joint/National, 2002) scene three has the title (which in the first production was read out on stage): “In-Yer-Face Theatre.”

6. Politics and Problems

Of course, none of this is problem-free. According to traditional models of culture, the shock of the new is usually seen as a radical project — and, of course, the implicit politics of much in-yer-face theatre is an unstable mixture of traditional leftwing beliefs (ideology) and fresh innovations in
form and style (aesthetics). In a sense, every cultural code contains within it tensions that both power its development and threaten to shorten its life. If you bring politics into the equation, the temptation to stress the point of rupture means that elements of continuity tend to get undervalued. But is continuity necessarily conservative? It is tempting to say yes, but I think that would be an oversimplification. At its very best, a play such as Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* is not only an example of innovative drama that breaks with the past, it is a play that rewrites the past (in other words, Kane is rewriting both *King Lear* and *Saved*).

So although I think that using the name ‘in-yer-face theatre’ is a good way of celebrating what happened in British new writing in the 1990s, it may be worth clarifying exactly what ‘in-yer-face theatre’ really is — and what it most certainly is not.

1) I am not saying that every new play in the 1990s was in-yer-face (for example, Diane Samuels’ *Kindertransport* or Jonathan Harvey’s *Beautiful Thing* were not).
2) Nor am I saying that all writers were either in-yer-face or not in-yer-face.
3) Nor, finally, am I saying that there were no good plays that had a different aesthetic agenda.

What I am saying is:
1) The most talked about and most innovative new writing of the 1990s had a distinctive in-yer-face sensibility, and that when you discuss them what they share is just as important as what they don’t.

2) In-yer-face theatre is a sensibility, not a movement nor a school. You cannot join this club or party because they do not exist. Many young writers, while having their own distinctive voices, also shared some or all of the elements of that sensibility. So movement is not the right word; if you need metaphors to understand what was happening, the idea of a network or an arena are much more correct.

3) The in-yer-face sensibility is about extreme emotions not necessarily explicit acts of sex and violence. A play such as David Harrower’s lyrical *Knives in Hens* is written in a 1990s manner, but actually has very little explicit sex or violence in it.
4) Finally, the in-yer-face sensibility is expressed through a specific theatrical form, which is experiential theatre, and which privileges energy, engagement and shock over languor, distance or debate. In fact, part of the explanation for the intensity of much in-yer-face drama lies in the fact that young writers, having been confined to studio theatres turned weakness into strength by developing a form of theatre best suited to these spaces.

In the end, it does not matter whether a play is in-yer-face or not. What matters is whether a play is good or not. The definition “in-yer-face” is only useful as a tool which helps illuminate the relationship between a play and its spectators. What did the audience think and feel? How did the play contribute to the wider culture? Did it uphold conventional morality, support complacency and encourage despair — or did it challenge conventional ideas, provoke its viewers and oppose mainstream politics? Crucially, what does the play say — and is what it says right or wrong?

Sensibility is a good word to describe a writer’s mix of ideas and emotions. The mix can be contradictory, as in the co-existence of cynicism and sentimentality in some new work. But always analysis will seek the exact ingredients of the mixture. In Mark Ravenhill’s plays, for example, the ironic tone is mixed with feelings of anger and ideas about leftwing politics. The sensibility is that of the 1990s because of Ravenhill’s refusal to preach, to tell his audience what to think. So although it is clear that he believes in humanistic values, he never lectures you with long political speeches. Clearly, this attitude reflects the shifts in global politics since the fall of the Berlin Wall. Equally, it is clear that the shock originally provoked by his plays can be perfectly described as having an in-yer-face impact.

Finally, in the spirit of self-criticism, I am happy to admit that the concept of ‘in-yer-face theatre’ does create some anomalies:

1) For example, by linking it to new writing in the 1990s, there is a tendency to concentrate on writers who emerged in the mid-1990s, which is unfair to writers — such as Martin Crimp or Bryony Lavery — who made their debuts in the 1980s. At its acutest, this calls in question the whole concept of studying aesthetic styles in neat decades.
2) There is a tendency to concentrate on English metropolitan writers, which is unfair on some Scottish writers — such as David Greig — or English writers based outside London (sorry Moira Buffini, Kate Dean, Paul Lucas and Sarah Woods). At its worst, a concept such as ‘in-yer-face theatre’ downgrades those writers who have worked in a variety of styles or whose work is only partly touched by this sensibility.

3) There is a tendency in in-yer-face theatre to exaggerate the importance of a laddish sensibility. Although I agree with David Edgar (“Provocative Acts” 27-28) that the crisis of masculinity is a central theme in much 1990s new writing, the laddish sensibility of plays such as Jez Butterworth’s *Mojo* does tend to push other more gentler sensibilities to the sidelines.

4) There is a voyeuristic tendency in the idea of in-yer-face — a form of cultural tourism. Phil Setren, who ran the London New Play Festival in the 1990s, once pointed out: “One good reason for seeing the back of in-yer-face plays is that they are creating voyeurism in the audience — the public is becoming more interested in how far you go, rather than in what you’ve got to say” (Sierz, “Plays” 59).

5) The idea of ‘in-yer-face theatre’ does emphasise the sensation and immediate emotional impact of the drama, and what you lose is the importance of subtext and the notion of plays that gradually creep up on you and work on your subconscious, what David Greig once called plays that are “not so much in-yer-face but under-yer-collar.”

Now, what are the future challenges facing new writing in Britain? And how can we image the theatrical code being extended further?

7. Future Challenges

I would like to finish by suggesting some ways in which I think British theatre is pushing out the envelope, or extending the code. The neatest way of doing this is to question four clichés about new writing, all of which show how a dramatic code is perceived by the theatre-going public, and all of which suggest specific challenges facing writers and theatre-makers.
Cliché 1: “New writing is just depressingly social realist” or “British theatre is just naturalistic”

So the first challenge is: writing with a different sensibility. If the days of the in-yer-face sensibility are indeed over, it is an interesting question to wonder what other sensibility is in the air at the moment. The bread and butter of new writing is the social realist play usually set on a council estate (often in “sarf” London) and usually with a cast of working-class characters — good recent examples include Simon Stephens’ Herons and Leo Butler’s Redundant (both at the Royal Court, one studio, one main stage, 2001). But there is also evidence in the past couple of years of an openness of new writers to other sensibilities, which could be called magic realism, surrealism or imaginative realism. Examples would be Zinnie Harris’s Further Than the Furthest Thing (Tron/National Theatre, 2000), Enda Walsh’s bed-bound (Dublin Festival, 2000), Jez Butterworth’s The Night Heron and Nick Grosso’s Kosher Harry (both Royal Court, 2002). The British success of a German writer such as Roland Schimmelpfennig (Push Up and Arabian Night) over the past couple of years or so shows that this may be a new current that is emerging. Certainly, when the Royal Court staged Lars Norén’s symbolist and anti-naturalistic 1995 drama, Blood, as a mainstage production in 2003, it was a signal that this cutting-edge theatre wanted to push forward the story of British theatrical sensibilities.

Cliché 2: “New writing values the word over the action” or “British theatre is full of actors who act only from the neck up”

The second challenge would be: writing in a fusion of styles. Some of the most innovative theatre in the past ten years has been a fusion of genres, in which writers mix new writing, dance, music and physical theatre movement. The market leaders have been groups such as Frantic Assembly (and some of the experiments of Suspect Culture). This kind of fusion theatre differs from dance, such as DV8, or physical theatre, such as Complicite, in that the new writing component is much stronger. So, for example, the Frantic Assembly show Tiny Dynamite (2001) had a cracking text by Abi Morgan; other examples include Helmet, written by Douglas Maxwell (2002) or Gary Owen’s Heavenly. At the moment, some of these experiments are rather basic. Helmet, for example, tells the story of a kid who is obsessed by computer games by using a multi-media staging that
shows a computer game. The challenge for writers is to find new ways of telling stories through the use of music, dance and movement which will be able to express feelings and ideas that standard scripts cannot.

Cliché 3: “New writing is not successful on main stages” or “British theatre prefers building to artists”

The third challenge would be: writing for larger stages. Most 1990s new drama was written for studio spaces which usually had audiences of about 100 people. Very few new plays in the past decade have been judged big enough to fill the National’s Cottesloe theatre (which seats 300–400), let alone the National’s Lyttelton (seats about 900) — as for the National’s Olivier (seats about 1,200), dream on! The only piece of new writing by a 1990s writer to be staged in Lyttelton in the past 10 years has been Mark Ravenhill’s *Mother Clap’s Molly House* — even Patrick Marber’s *Closer* started life in the smaller Cottesloe. In 2002, the experience of staging plays in the National’s temporary studio space, The Loft (seated 100) led to the creation of the Monsterists, an informal group of youngish writers — such as Richard Bean, Simon Bowen, Moira Buffini, David Eldridge, Tanika Gupta, Jonathan Lewis, Colin T eevan and Roy Williams — who issued a manifesto “to promote new writing of large-scale work in the British theatre.” Desiring to liberate new writing “from the ghetto of the studio black box to the main stage,” they also demanded “equal access to financial resources for plays being produced by a living writer” (Bean et al. no pag.), meaning equal to the resources lavished on dead writers. They also want the best directors and the best actors. In short, they want “equal access to the means of theatre production” (Bean et al. qtd. in Sierz, “State” 12). So the challenge for people such as Nick Hytner (new artistic director of the National) or Michael Boyd (new artistic director of the RSC) will be to find young writers to fill these main stages. And the challenge for young writers who have only had experience of writing for studio theatres will be to write bigger and bolder plays capable of filling larger spaces.

Cliché 4: “New writing is boring at the moment” or “British fringe theatre is no longer a radical alternative”

The final challenge would be: writing for subversive spaces. By this I mean to highlight one of the rather dismaying developments of the past
decade, which is the decline of fringe theatre. Now I know that the fringe, especially in London, has long ago ceased to be a political opposition or a cultural alternative, but despite this you could still find a really good show at an unsubsidised pub theatre in the mid-1990s. And writers were happy to put on their first plays in small pub venues — there was a real energy, a kind of garage band feel to the fringe scene in the mid-1990s. Sadly, all that is gone now, and the fringe is a poor relation to an increasingly commercialised and expensive theatre system. Increasingly fringe venues are under pressure from pub managements to increase bar sales and stage commercial plays rather than radical experiments. This is fair enough, I suppose — it is really not the job of pub landlords to be patrons of theatre or to run R&D workshops for the rest of British theatre. However, you do have to ask — where will the new energy be coming from? In some senses, I can see that writers outside the current new writing scene — those that do not do workshops and get attachments to established new writing theatres — may yet surprise us. As for the fringe, perhaps it is time for it to be reinvented. As Tom Morris, formerly of the Battersea Arts Centre and now Associate of the National Theatre, says, “Given the amount of property that is sitting empty, it is only a matter of time before artists start squatting, making theatre happen illegally and then moving on” (Stratton 144). It is an intriguing idea — and one which would challenge both the increasing commercialisation of theatre and perhaps even the conformity of much of its naturalistic aesthetic. So, perhaps a future extension of the code of British theatre will take place among the blooming of a thousand squatted theatres.

Whether any of these challenges will develop into a large-scale phenomenon is uncertain. At the moment, I am happier “to supply merely a diagnosis” and will leave it to others “to recommend a cure.”
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Secondary Literature

Signifying Nothing and Everything: The Extension of the Code and Hyperreal Simulations

Theatre produces a flood of divergent signs and a host of meanings. Sounds, sights and smells, moving bodies, immobile objects and immaterial words form the basis of the theatrical code, the “ensemble of signs or signals together with the internal rules governing their combination and the rules responsible for assigning semantic content to the units in question” (Elam 49; cf. Fischer-Lichte 64 –65). And they create “possible worlds” more or less related to the “real” world (Elam 99; Finter 158).

The extension of the theatrical code is closely linked to two fields. First, changes in the relations between theatrical and cultural codes. Second, changes in the dialectic between theatrical code and its message (Fischer-Lichte 63–64). Both kinds of changes are nowadays closely connected to one of the central cultural paradigms, the dominance of the hyperreal.

The ubiquitous flood of mediatized signs — photos, advertisements, movies, TV broadcasts, the internet — create images of “reality” which seem more authentic than unmediated reality, but which lack a referent. Reality is being replaced by a system of simulacra, by signs of reality:

It is no longer a question of imitation, nor duplication, nor even parody. It is a question of substituting the signs of the real for the real, that is to say of an operation of deterring every real process via its operational double, a programmatic, metastable, perfectly descriptive machine that offers all the signs of the real and short-circuits all its vicissitudes. Never again will the real have the chance to produce itself. (Baudrillard, *Simulacra*)
The oppositions between the original and its copies, between true and false, play and replay implode and give way to a stream of images which refer to other images, but never to reality itself (cf. Auslander, “Liveness” 203).

This new cultural code leads to two basic variants of extending the theatrical code: one is to include the media of the hyperreal, here above all the televisual as “intrinsic and determining element of our cultural formation” (Auslander, “Against Ontology” 50), into the code, i.e. to make use of videos, TV, the Internet; the other is to apply the pragmatics and semantics of the code of hyperreality by means of the new “old media” of the theatrical code, i.e. language, space and the performer’s body (Kolesch 167–68). Both methods — either showing or simulating the hyperreal — are connected to a critique of contemporary culture and to a search for truth and authenticity behind the simulations. And in both cases, the theatrical code with its inherent doubleness as representation and as live presence on stage (cf. Pavis 54–55; Lehmann 175) implicitly or explicitly figures as one of the few means to supersede the hyperreal.

1. Showing the Hyperreal

Contemporary plays such as Mark Ravenhill’s Faust (Faust Is Dead) (1997) and Handbag (1998), Patrick Marber’s Closer (1997) or Abi Morgan’s Tender (2001) accommodate modern mediatized images as signs and symptoms of the hyperreal. Mark Ravenhill’s Faust (Faust Is Dead), for example, fuses images of the mediatized and the dramatised to present the story of the Faustian/Mephistophelian French philosopher Alain on his futile search for meaning. Alain’s first appearance in the play is staged as video montage. The protagonist meets the TV celebrities David Letterman and Madonna and chats with them about his new book, “The Death of Man.” This scene encapsulates the “ontological precariousness” (Callens 167) of the manifold realities of the play. Alain, an “unabashed fictional crossbreed between Foucault and Baudrillard” (Callens 170) acts on the same plane as the “real” people, Letterman and Madonna, who exist as mere simulations on TV and who themselves recycle preformulated mediatized images.

Later, Alain forces the point and declares that “reality died. It ended. And we began to live this dream, this lie, this new simulated existence” (30). Although Alain’s lover Pete claims that reality does indeed exist, namely
in the dying of Donny and in his rotting corpse (30–31), the enactment of Donny’s death in the context of the play implicitly refutes his argument: the audience sees a video tape of his death, “footage of Donny’s dead body, covered in blood [...] possibly repeated on a loop” (30–31). Before that, Donny had only existed as images in cyberspace; after his death he becomes fodder for TV chat shows and pop songs: “He made every TV show, every talk show. Ricki and Oprah got the same show: ‘Death on the Net.’ And Stevie, he already has a song about it. Which he has performed unplugged and is now showing three times an hour on MTV” (sc. 17, 32).

Due to the mediatizations on stage, supposed signs of the “real” — a dying person, a musical performance — turn out to be simulations (cf. Callens 175; Auslander, “Liveness” 206–207). What Pete praises as stabilising frame (“I kind of prefer it on the TV. I prefer it with a frame around it, you know [...] when you actually see it, you know ... it’s a little scary” sc. 10, 16; cf. Sierz 135) erases all traces of authenticity and reality. The audience have to wade through the shifting realities of Faust (Faust Is Dead) which reflect the “shifting realities of the external world, the mind, the stage, TV or home video, and cyberspace” (Callens 167).

Media images often offer templates for the perception, communication and performance of reality. In Ravenhill’s Handbag, for example, the contemporary characters live their own soap operas and TV-serial dramas. Mediated feelings serve as models for pseudo-authenticity. The junkie Phil expresses his feelings with a little help from the Teletubbies: “Uh oh. Uh oh. Uh oh. Tastic. Tastic. Tastic. Hehehahahaaa” (sc. 11, 57). The other characters orientate themselves towards modern consumer culture. And again, videos, TV, and “The full gamut of modern life” (sc. 3, 11) dominate the theatrical code.

In Patrick Marber’s Closer the four characters search for truth, sexual and emotional fulfilment. In vain, as they live in a world of simulations as well. This becomes very obvious in the Internet scene (sc. 3). Dan and Larry have a virtual dialogue in cyberspace. Larry, the Net “virgin” (23) uses his real name during the exchange; Dan pretends to be “Anna” (23). The supposedly female character tries to seduce Larry with quite explicit descriptions about “her” sexual preferences and “her” physical build: “Dark hair. Dirty mouth. Epic Tits. [...] I want 2 suck U senseless. [...] Sit on my face Fuckboy” (24). Although these offers are merely based on Dan’s pro-
jections and on the conventions of erotic/pornographic fiction, Larry who thinks the virtual “Anna” is “real” reacts physically and unmistakably (“I got a huge” sc. 4, 31; Marber’s italics). A meeting between Larry and the “real” Anna explodes Dan’s virtual role-playing, although the initial feelings of Larry for Anna remain: the two marry.

But Closer goes further than proving that you should not trust people whom you meet on the Net. Just like the virtual “Anna” all the characters in Closer prove to be unstable constructs and projections, their world a web of simulations. Live or on the Internet: the truth is nowhere to be found. Everyone invents himself/herself and all the others. Perception and performance generate reality, or rather: simulations of the real. Anna produces a “reassuring [...] Big Fat Lie” (37) with her artistic photographs. Dan writes a novel about his lover Alice. What Anna thinks is an “accurate” portrait “[a]bout sex. About love” (sc. 2, 15) turns out to be a double fabrication. Dan, the “WRITER” and “LIAR” (sc. 10, 96) aestheticises Alice’s anecdotes about her life as stripper in New York. According to Alice, the “true” author of these anecdotes, the novel lacks “The truth” (sc. 5, 38) and Dan, the appropriator of her stories, “buries [her]” and makes her “invisible” (sc. 9, 91). Furthermore, Alice is not Alice. She took her name from a memorial in Postman Park erected for “Alice Ayres, daughter of a bricklayer’s labourer” (sc. 12, 115). The real Alice is buried indeed and the other Alice’s real name is “Jane Jones:” “Everything is a Version of Something Else” (sc. 7, 63).

Even the material side of things, the hard facts or physical reactions, get entangled in the web of simulations. Although Larry claims that he can look behind the verbal and symbolic constructions of reality and see the essence of things (“Ever seen a human heart? It looks like a fist wrapped in blood” sc. 10, 96), he falls prey to Dan’s Internet fantasies (sc. 4, 31). Alice’s scars are the source of diverse stories and explanations: the result of a car accident (sc. 5, 39), of an accident with a bike (sc. 11, 105) or a skin disease (sc. 10, 96-97). The material reality only becomes accessible through cultural inscriptions. These symbolic worlds seem to represent reality, but in the end prove to create merely hyperreal versions of it. Due to this, all the characters seeking real emotions, real love, real sensations, are constantly disappointed: “Everything’s a lie, nothing matters” (sc. 9, 91).
2. Simulating the Hyperreal

The conclusion that everything is a lie and nothing is real does not necessarily have to be tied to examples of the televisual and the virtual. A host of plays reverts to simulations of the hyperreal by means of the traditional repertoire of theatrical signs instead. This method is closely tied to transcodifications. The media of the hyperreal and their mainly visual signs are replaced by the mostly verbal: narratives of videos, photos, commercials. These narratives are complemented by experiments with the parameters of theatrical representation. Thus, the audience no longer sees characters lost in cyberspace, they get lost in the tangle of different realities themselves. Postdramatic plays like Abi Morgan’s *Splendour* (2000), Martin Crimp’s *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) or Sarah Kane’s *Crave* (1998) deconstruct the conventional ingredients of the code, “with its constituents of character, dialogue, action, story and conflict” (Zimmermann 106; cf. Lehmann).

*Splendour*, for instance, combines the transcodification of mediatized hyperreality with an opening up of the theatrical space. The play presents the visit of the Western photographer Kathryn at the villa of an Eastern potentate during a civil war, which ends with the victorious approach of the enemy forces. Instead of showing a linear plot, *Splendour* works with repetitions interspersed with flashbacks and verbalised thoughts. The theatrical space comprises both the characters’ past and present, their public performances and their private thoughts. Kathryn and Micheleine exist simultaneously in the moment of the visit, in their recollections of the visit and in the memories about events which implicitly shape the visit. Time and space as distinct and stable categories get out of joint. It is no longer possible to distinguish between the description of something happening in the “here and now” of the plot or of something that is just being represented in the “here and now” of the stage. The planes of reality overlap and influence each other leaving the audience in doubt about the reality status of what they see and hear.

The ontological instability of the events on stage ties in with references to the media, e.g., video tapes of *Bug’s Life* and *Toy Story* (55) or Jackie Collins’ *Lady Boss* (51). The central metaphor for this state of in-between is the photograph: it makes the past accessible, it documents, but it also manipulates “reality.” *Splendour* emphasises the ambivalences of the pho-
The “real” Micheleine proves to be “shorter than [Kathryn] expected and not as beautiful, certainly not as her photos have shown” (27), whereas the photo of Micheleine’s husband, the dictator Oolio, seems to allow a glimpse into the private sphere: “He is wearing a paper hat, he is flushed, the hat’s awry, like a comical drunkard or a man with one eye” (54).

The conventional differentiation between staged portrait vs. spontaneous snapshot, between purposeful lie vs. accidental truth no longer serves as pertinent criterion, though. Genevieve’s photos seem to point to very private truths: the friendship between her and Micheleine and the mourning for her husband:

Micheleine and him [Oolio] and my husband and me. On boating trips and birthdays and there is even one at my husband’s memorial. Micheleine sitting, head bent down at her husband’s side [...] The photo was commented upon, noted, that they both visibly cried. (58-59)

It transpires, however, that Oolio ordered the execution of Genevieve’s husband and that the friendship between Micheleine and Genevieve is very strained, if not non-existent.

Kathryn’s position emerges to be the most precarious. Her initial stance as objective observer, seeing “terrible things [...] through the eye of a lens” (45; cf. 63) and thereby detaching herself from them, is gradually deconstructed. In the end she appears as perpetrator. While the hostile troops get closer, which will probably mutilate and kill Micheleine, she asks Kathryn to take photos of her (cf. 88). The play ends with the following scenario: “The ricochet of noise grows louder, carrying the ripples of violence, of shelling as Kathryn hovers with the camera in her hand, as if holding a gun. Micheleine: Shoot ... Shoot ... Kathryn hesitates then slowly aims her camera” (93).

In the instable theatrical space, the action oscillates between a replay of the photo-shooting, an anticipation of Micheleine’s execution and a projection of Kathryn’s moral responsibility. The audience is confronted with a representation of both: they see the representation of both a hypothetically real action, its implicit causalities and its consequences.

The techniques of transcodification and of experimenting with the space on stage are taken even further in Martin Crimp’s Attempts on Her Life and Sarah Kane’s Crave. Both plays do away with character and plot,
which in turn enhances the effect of hyperreality. The central character of *Attempts on Her Life* never appears on stage. She is only talked about by others. These narratives lead to contradictory versions of “Anya,” “Anne,” “Annie” (21, 42), “Anny” (30), “Annushka” (56) or “Anna” (58). The sign remains without a distinct referent: “The play’s centre is an absence which it endeavours to fill by representations and constructions of the central character in various media” (Zimmermann 109).

These media in turn only appear as signs of signs, as transcodifications. Video tapes, photos, images on TV and movies appear only once removed: characters describe what they see or what they have seen. Scenario 3, for instance, focuses on someone called Anya, presumably the victim of a civil war in an eastern-European country. After a while it becomes clear that the supposedly realistic account is merely the discussion of a film script. Anya turns into the versatile embodiment of mediatized stereotypes whose reactions depend on the negotiations between the speakers: “I don’t think she breaks down and scratches her cheeks like something from an ancient tragedy. I think her eyes blaze. I think she advances towards the camera und begins to curse. You mother-fucking shit-faced murderers, she says” (15–16).

The play takes us from scenario to scenario searching for referents behind the signs. The play evokes images of reality we all know, or rather: think we know from TV, videos or films. The mechanisms of simulation — “the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium such as advertising or photography” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 71) — are reproduced with the help of words. The result remains the same: “Through reproduction from one medium into another the real becomes volatile” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 71). Correlated to the many versions of the elusive “Anne,” the transcodified images cover up the void of a visible and perceptible reality. The play teases us into finding consistency and meaning behind the words only to find out that there is no such thing. Reality “dissolves into dots” (Zimmermann 111).

Sarah Kane’s *Crave* follows the same strategy, albeit with slightly different means: here it is not so much a reference to the life of mediatization and commercialisation, but a complex layer of quotes which again brings the audience face to face with the code of simulation. *Crave* adopts the “hyperreal logic of the montage,” in which “the contradictory processes of
the true and the false, the real and the imaginary are abolished” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 64). The play consists of countless fragments from other texts, which themselves use fragments of texts, which could refer to something beyond the text or which could quote yet again another text and so on and so forth. Almost everywhere one looks, one finds a quote or thinks one finds a quote. Language is no longer a medium for communicating something authentic, real or original, it merely reiterates phrases, fragments and simulacra.

For example, the seemingly colloquial sentence “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME” (10) is taken from T. S. Eliot’s poem *The Waste Land*. In *The Waste Land* the phrase “HURRY UP PLEASE ITS [sic] TIME” (68; 69) is repeated four times and punctuates a scene in a pub, which depicts the sterility and despair of London after the First World War (cf. Voigts-Virchow 214–15). On the one hand, “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME” denotes the call of the publican, on the other hand it connotes a commentary on the futility of modern life. *Crave* takes the ambivalence one step further: “HURRY UP PLEASE IT’S TIME” can refer to *The Waste Land*, implying the continuity of existential despair and emptiness; it can refer to the “original” scene in the pub, which *The Waste Land* refers to; it can refer to someone who quotes the *Waste Land* or to someone who happens to use these words without intending to quote T. S. Eliot. The same holds true for textual fragments such as “A: What do you want? C: To die. B: To sleep. M: No more” (6) from *Hamlet* (III, i, l. 60–61); “That’s not what I meant at all” (40) from Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (16; 17) and “Why?” “What?” (10, 30, 33) from Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (II, 50). The supposedly everyday and “real” masquerades as quote and vice versa.

The relationship between real, fictitious, original and quoted gets more complicated in the translations and re-translations: *The Waste Land*, for instance, quotes a German song in English translation “In the Mountains, there you feel free” (63). *Crave* cites this as the German “In den Bergen, da fühlst du dich frei” (44; cf. Voigts-Virchow 214). The famous last words of *The Waste Land* “Datta, dayadhvam, damyata” and “Shantih, Shantih, Shanti” (78–79), which Eliot’s “Notes” paraphrase as “Give, sympathise, con-

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1 For extensive analyses of intertextuality in *Crave* see Voigts-Virchow; Sierz 118–119 and Saunders 102–104.
“Give, sympathise, control” (Crave 30) and “Peace which passeth all understanding” (45–46; cf. Voigts-Virchow 214–15). Add to this mixture allusions and imitations such as the pseudo-Biblical “Thou shalt not kill thyself” (36) or the quasi-Eliotical “Pain in a shadow / The shadow of my lie. / Red rock of ages” (41; cf. 44; 47; Voigts-Virchow 218), the confusion, or rather the simulation is complete. And it is not only fragments from canonised high-cultural texts. Crave also uses snippets from Pop songs by Nirvana, The Beatles, Simply Red, Joy Division, Stephen Sondheim’s Musical *Into the Woods* and texts by Aleister Crowley (cf. Sierz 91; Voigts-Virchow 207).

The high density of intertextual fragments undermines a clear referentiality of the text. Are “Why not?” (12), “I can’t remember” (15), “they get on” (22) and “onwards” (36) taken from *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (14; 20; 21; 51)? Do “Baby” (16) and “I love you” (38) refer to the oeuvre of Elvis Presley? What is original? What translation? What quote? What is real? Nothing and everything.

3. Hyperreality and Dramatic Worlds

Playing with the media or playing with the hyperreal are not ends in themselves, but are connected to the stock-in-trade of most dramatic worlds: violence, despair and the search for truth. The fusion of the theatrical code with the code of simulation, however, lends these dramatic worlds a slightly new quality, which has been classified as “in-yr-face” dramaturgy (cf. Sierz) and/or postdramatic experiments (cf. Lehmann; Zimmermann).

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2 This also worked the other way round: the song “An echo, a stain” from Björk’s album *Vespertine* (2001) contains quotes from *Crave*. Interestingly enough, participants of the Kane-discussion forum on the Internet (http://www.ianfisher.com/kane/disc_frm.htm) thought that *Crave* was quoting Björk. And “why not?” (12).

3 Or something completely different? Some critics argue that *Crave* is mainly a reflection of Sarah Kane’s psyche and an anticipation of her suicide. But first of all, “It is easy to look back and find hints of Sarah’s life in the work, but to do so is to do a disservice both to the work and the life” (Rebellato 281) and second, this seemingly “real” point of reference is itself the result of the “media frenzy,” the “mythology” (Luckhurst 73) around Kane and just another version of the hyperreal.
The extensions either of the repertoire of signs or of the strategies of signification highlight the tensions created by the ubiquitous code of simulation. They are often combined with an overt or covert critique of the commercialisation, globalisation and mediatization of contemporary society, which are held responsible for the “regime of simulation” (Auslander, “Liveness” 210).

Echoing Lyotard and Fukuyama’s “well-worn credo of postmodernism” (Zimmermann 107; cf. Tönnies 119) Alain in Faust (Faust Is Dead) elaborates what he wanted to express with his book on “The Death of Man” (sc. 2, 1), namely “the End of History because what we understood as history, this movement forward, has ended” (sc. 12, 24). In Ravenhill’s Shopping and Fucking (1996), Robbie voices a similar concept. He declares the end of all the “big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them. The Powerful Hands of the Gods and Fate. The Journey to Enlightenments. The March of Socialism” (sc. 12, 64).

The “little stories” invented to compensate for the loss of meaning and progress mostly revolve around money, lifestyle and sex. The only remaining valid credo is the belief in money and the market, because “Civilization is money. Money is civilization” (Shopping and Fucking sc. 14, 84–85). Thus, relationships turn into financial transactions. Larry in Closer buys Alice’s body; Mark in Shopping and Fucking tries to buy Lulu’s, Robbie’s and Gary’s love; Tom in Handbag pays Phil for sex; one of the many Anne’s in Crimp’s Attempts on Her Life is a new brand of car, which is marketed as the ultimate source of happiness (“our children will be safe and happy in the back seat of the Anny just as the adults will be relaxed and confident at the wheel. [...] Happy. [...] Secure. [...] In control” sc. 7, 31). Everything becomes a commodity, nothing is of any value.

In Morgan’s Splendour, Kane’s Blasted, Crimp’s Attempts on Her Life or Caryl Churchill’s Far Away (2000) the end of grand recits and the commercialisation of society results in violence in its most paradoxical and irrational form: civil war. Like fights against like for similar reasons and with similar arguments. Dramatic conflict lines follow Baudrillard’s (il)logic of the digital: “The simulacrum of distance (or indeed of contradiction) between the two poles is nothing but a tactical hallucination, like the reality effect on the interior of the sign itself” (Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange 62). In the plays, it no longer suffices to distinguish the innocent from the
guilty. These stable oppositions have been eroded. Micheleine and Genevieve in Splendour are both friends and enemies. Ian in Blasted acts as brutal killer and rapist; at the same time he becomes the innocent victim of rape and murder.

If the world as a whole does not make sense any longer, neither do individual lives. Crave presents life as a “stream of haphazard events” (44), occasionally interrupted by “Random acts of meaningless joy” (47). The result: “I just know that life is not worth living” (36; cf. 31). The chaotic world of simulations has to be countered with something substantial and really real. Most of the characters are looking for genuine emotions and/or fulfilling relationships with a real “other” as a means to escape the web of simulations: “I want a real life, [...] A real love” (Crave 38). Or, as Dan puts it in Closer: “Life without riskisdeath [sic]” (sc. 5, 27). Due to the code of simulation, however, authentic feelings are no longer possible.

The alternative, one favoured by both Baudrillard and ‘in-yr-face’ drama, are pain, violence and eventually death. The only way to counter the code of simulation and the lethal contemporary system is supposedly “the surrender of this life, retaliating against a deferred death with an immediate death” (Baudrillard, Symbolic Exchange 40). Donny’s mutilations and his painful dying in Faust (Faust Is Dead) as an “attempt to disrupt the rule of simulation” (Callens 175) is just one example of many such attempts. In Closer Larry confesses to Alice “I love everything about you that hurts” (sc. 7, 70). Tina in Ravenhill’s Mother Clap’s Molly House (2001) adorns her body with piercings, which almost kills her (cf. II, vi, 60–61; x, 100–101). Gary in Shopping and Fucking asks to be tortured to death. Only “a good hurt” (sc. 11, 54) can cure his “big sadness swelling like it’s gonna burst” (sc. 13, 83). In Sarah Kane’s Cleansed (1998) Grace and Graham demand from each other: “Love me or kill me” (sc. 5, 14; cf. sc. 13, 29). Hippolytus in Kane’s Phaedra’s Love (1996) finds the perfect life only in torture and death. After his bowels have been torn out and his genitals cut off, vultures circle his dying body. He summarizes smilingly: “If there could have been more moments like this” (sc. 8, 97) and dies.
4. Theatre, Truth and the Hyperreal

Set against the mediatized hyperrealities or against the polyvalent strategies of simulation, theatre and drama usually connote a reality beyond and behind the hyperreal. Overtly or covertly they position themselves as part of “the” truth. While the mediatized images belong to third order simulacra which do not refer to anything any more, the signs of the theatrical code seems to supersede the “regime of simulation” (Auslander, “Liveness” 210). Theatre and drama “counterfeit” (Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange* 51; cf. *Simulacra* 121; 127) and “represent” (Buse 135), i.e. they refer to something “real” and “natural.” If plays no longer represent — as it often is the case with experimental drama — they perform in the “here and now” of theatrical space, i.e. the “material properties of play [...] voice, movement and gestures, lighting and scenic space” (Finter 157; cf. Kolesch passim) are foregrounded. The “liveness” of the theatre seems to oppose the mediatizations on the screen. All in all, the theatrical and dramatic codes give the impression that they overrule the code of simulation by establishing versions of authenticity and truthfulness (Kotte 43).

In plays which incorporate mediatizations, this can be brought about by providing the audience with a privileged perspective which easily allows them to look behind the facade of virtuality. Thus, although in *Closer* Larry is not aware of Dan’s gender-bending on the Internet, the audience always knows what is what and who is who. The virtual constructions of “Anna” and “Larry” are corrected by the presence of the “real” Dan and Larry on stage. Most of the times, the mediatized hyperreal is contrasted with encounters between the “real” characters, which verify or falsify the images of the Internet or of the video screen. Larry meets the real Anna in *Closer*; Pete is said to meet Donny in *Faust (Faust Is Dead)*.

Plays which simulate the hyperreal refrain from presenting “the” truth. Instead they offer statements such as “a search for a point is pointless” (*Attempts on Her Life* sc. 11, 46); “And if this makes no sense then you understand perfectly” (*Crave* 7). These comments then serve as meta-truths about life in contemporary society: the truth is that there is no truth. If we are left with open questions, these are related to the code of simulation. The characters’ predicaments are causally connected to the mediatized
images of the hyperreal. While the media are part of the problem, theatre and drama serve as instruments of criticism and analysis.

Furthermore, no matter how hyperreal the text might seem, the conventions of the theatre provide it with shape and consistency. The textual chaos gets a beginning and an end — from the opening of the curtain (or the going down of the house lights) to the applause (cf. Goffman 393). The countless voices of the text are controlled and focused by a clearly defined number of actors and actresses. Textual ambiguities are clarified by mimic, gestic and proxemic signs, by intonation, inflection and pitch (cf. Elam 78–83). Here the hyperreality is seemingly superseded by the “aesthetics of presence,” the presence of real, living bodies on stage which provide anchors for the textual “here” and “now” (Elam 139; Kolesch 169; Lehmann 116). Even if nothing makes sense any more, bodies on stage will always be bodies and the theatre will always be the theatre.

Some critics draw the conclusion that theatre therefore is reality; that it does not simulate, but establishes the potentiality for of reality instead: “Performance implicates the real through the presence of living bodies” (Phelan 148; cf. Kotte 40–43).

Although the extension of the theatrical code suggests that theatre and drama can supersede the hyperreal and present truths which go beyond simulacra, this is just another “effect of the imaginary” (Baudrillard, Simulacra 14). The bodies on stage are always already framed as part of the theatrical code. The corporeal referent on stage is not actually real; it serves as yet another “text into which cultural norms for social behavior are written” (Rouse 155; cf. Diamond 52).

Thus, theatre and drama simulate that they are not really simulating. This provides theatre and drama with symbolic capital and secures their position within the contemporary cultural system. The theatrical code signifies nothing and everything; it creates dramatic worlds full of simulacra and at the same time it simulates “otherness” from the (mediatized) mainstream (cf. Finter 166).
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In-Yer-Face Theatre?
Reflections on Provocation and Provoked Audiences in Contemporary Theatre

It is ironic that the question as to how theatre codes have recently been extended bears a millennial urgency to it, harkening back to the radical changes of theatre around the previous millennial turnover in the early years of the twentieth century. These shifts took place on a massive scale and across the arts, an extension of codes that lead to what we now commonly denote as Modernist theatre. Looking back on these developments in the 1930s, Walter Benjamin theorized the emergence of mass culture, in which one of the crucial challenges would be the ability of any artistic expression to short-circuit the inevitable homogenization of difference that was to become the central characteristic of this mass-produced culture. In order to do so, one needed to sabotage routine and customary perception of things. The Futurists’ obsessive focus on the audience, in their artistic practice, was a clear manifestation of this concern, to name only one example. For Russian Futurist/Productivist Sergei Tretyakov, what mattered was the “unanimous reply from the auditorium” brought about by a per-

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2 Tretyakov’s stage directions, like the above one from Do You Hear, Moscow?! (1923) (qtd. in Kleberg 83), often refer explicitly to the elicitation of audience responses.
formance-induced shock with scenes and lines “that will explode like a wad of gun cotton” in the receiver’s stomach (qtd. in Lawton 212) or, in Benjamin’s words, “one requirement was foremost: to outrage the public” (238).

Almost a century later, various shock techniques of the avant-garde have become largely obsolete, which is evident mostly in, what Andrea Huyssen calls, “the exploitation of shock” (15) in Hollywood aesthetics. However, throughout the past century, and especially in the 1960s, there has been a growing awareness that culture is in and of itself a potentially explosive force that poses an innate threat to the structure that tries to contain it. Examples of this dynamic are numerous, and can be found within a wide spectre of cultural practice, from punk music to performance art. In an age where culture is more and more defined by a more or less monolithic experience of television, and controlled by institutional structures, to which, paradoxically, also playwrights and actors’ unions now seem to belong, the urge for what Benjamin calls a “heightened presence of mind” (238) is more acute than ever. Cultural practice in the postmodern era is characterized by two opposite forces: that of homogenization and appropriation, on the one hand, and the strategic need to subvert this homogenization, on the other. One of the strategies used for the latter is a return to turn-of-the-century approaches that focus on reception.

It is perhaps no co-incidence that, since the early 1990s, it is primarily the publicly funded British theatre that has initiated a new interest in the art of subversion by means of shock. Michael Billington is one of many critics who suggest a correlation between the fall-out of the radical politics of Margaret Thatcher and a radicalisation of artistic expression (38–39), which lead to the emergence of playwrights like Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, Anthony Neilson and Patrick Marber in the UK. In North America, the Reagan and Bush sr. era provide for a similar political terrain that gave performance artists like Tracey Lett, Karen Finley, Laurie Anderson and Eric Bogosian notoriety; the controversies around gay and lesbian theatre — some of which, like Terence McNally’s suspended Corpus Christi (1998) in The Earth in Turmoil (1923), after Marcel Martinet, and co-authored with Meyerhold, the phonetic experiments of the text aimed at “influencing the audience directly” (Kleberg 71).
pushing into mainstream production channels — were most notorious. However, if we are to follow Aleks Sierz, a close observer of this phenomenon in the UK, the cycle of what he calls “in yer face theatre”\(^3\) may already be over its nexus, and strategies of provocation on the stage may now, once again, belong to a new orthodoxy (Sierz 248). One thing is certain, however; theatre that extends conventional codes of representation also increases the liminality of the theatrical experience, and by doing so, tries very hard at transcending and reaching out of, what Bert States calls “the little rooms” to which it is traditionally confined or condemned. Because of its increased liminality, its aesthetics are called “experiential” (Sierz 4–6), a somewhat curious term which is meant to describe a theatre that “jolts both actors and spectators out of conventional responses, touching nerves and provoking alarm” (Sierz 4).

Aesthetics of Provocation

Walter Benjamin defines the key problem and challenge of modern drama in terms of a “filling in of the orchestra pit,” which he describes as an “abyss which separates the players from the audience as it does the dead from the living” (154). The Polish director Tadeusz Kantor, not afraid of a good portion of provocation in his own productions, describes this abyss as “a moat in the zoo [which] guard[s] spectators from the attacks of wild animals” (163). Provocation in the theatre finds its locus in the space between stage and audience, blurring and infringing on the protection offered by the representation, thus bridging the abyss and filling in the moat. It does this mainly by pulling the spectator into the dramatic conversation that takes place on the stage.

Roman Ingarden defines the role of the spectator of theatre as primarily that of an outsider: “first of all, the spectator finds himself outside the

\(^3\) Other terms used include theatre of extremes (Saunders) or New Brutalism (James Christopher, qtd. in Sierz, 239). Aleks Sierz’s *In-Yer-Face Theatre* is a compelling testimony and study of the phenomenon in Britain. Recent conferences on theatre provocation and theatre on the edge have been organized, among others, in Grenoble (2001), Bristol (2002) and Meissen (2003). The present writer is finishing a monograph on theatre provocation, which includes a theory of provocation and several case studies.
world represented in the play, second, he is not a partner in the conversation nor does he partake in the dramatic action…” (393). While Ingarden’s position is debatable for theatre in general, it certainly does not hold true in the case of provocative theatre, which brings about an invasion of the spectator’s personal space.

One of the characteristics of theatrical provocation is a tendency to play games with or even destroy the representational aspects of a theatrical event. In so far as provocation has, by definition, a seditious disposition, and brings about a challenge of all kinds of rules, conventions and expectations, it also challenges the most basic convention of theatre as representation. This propensity creates a fundamental paradox. While provocation is always preoccupied with control and the power of control, it is also in danger of losing this control as part of its challenge of its own theatrical framework. Paradoxically, theatrical provocation often involves a suicidal attack on the generic conventions and protections that make it possible in the first place. The moment of successful realisation of a provocative strategy is, at least in theory, the moment in which the representational aspect is dissolved and, in Artaudian fashion, becomes a presentation, a communal ritual or collective act, in which spectators lose the safety net of the generic conventions of theatre. Ideally, it is also a moment that brings about an interactive energy between spectators and performers, which, in Artaud’s words, results in “a certain psychological emotion that lays bare the most profound secrets of the heart” (Artaud 2: 23). It could be argued that this was more or less what took place in a number of isolated cases of theatre experiments in the 1960s, although, in the vast majority of instances of so-called audience take-over, the event was too controlled and contrived to allow the representational framework to be dissolved. On both sides of the Atlantic, theatre artists were focused on audience involvement, with groups like the Performance Group, The Living Theatre, Bread and Puppet Theatre in America, and a whole slew of theatre artists in Europe, too numerous to enumerate. Peter Handke’s (in)famous theatre debut in Frankfurt, the Wiener Aktionisten in Austria, Armand Gatti’s and André Benedetto’s théâtre d’intervention in France, Charles Marowitz’s happenings and the early Peter Brook in the UK, the Proloog group in Holland and the Internationale Nieuwe Scene in Belgium are just a few memorable occasions of theatre provocation in the 1960s and early ’70s.
In the case of the experiments of Richard Schechner’s *Performance Group*, it is possible to argue that there was a genuine interaction between performers and spectators, while the basic functions of the theatrical set-up were still maintained. Although a production like *Dionysus in 69* was still rehearsed and presented within a framework of performance in which certain codes and rules had to be followed, the audience was explicitly invited to engage, either collectively or individually, in the procedures of the event. In the case of *The Living Theatre*, however, strategies of provocation were mostly preoccupied with power in the theatre and control of the theatrical event, which consistently remained in the hands of the performers. In most cases, provocation creates a situation in which the audience is manipulated, in an authoritative way, in the elicitation of reactions of shock, outrage or anger and, also, more importantly, in the attribution of meaning to what is being performed. Provocation invariably boosts the manipulative aspects of theatre, and, alternatively, because of its coercive nature, reduces the spectator’s interpreting paradigm.

There is a violent hierarchy at work within the dynamics of provocation which fundamentally prevents the spectator from assuming, what Roman Ingarden calls, an “aesthetic attitude.” It is this aesthetic attitude which allows the spectator to be “attuned to the apprehension of the work of art or to the constitution of the aesthetic object that is constructed on the basis of this work,” and, at the same time, to locate him/herself “outside the world represented in the play” (Ingarden 393). On the surface, strategies of provocation follow a similar pattern. While distance is created through a defiant disposition, the overwhelming effect is one of integration and absorption. Provocative imagery or rhetoric usually draws the spectators into the bustle of the representation and forces them to locate themselves within this relationship of power that has been drawn up by the provocativeness of the representation. One of the most striking consequences of this process is that provocation is extremely dependent on the audience, and needs the audience as its primary *raison d’être*. It is no surprise that audience-centricity and audience-dependency are crucial characteristics of the theatrical oeuvre of writers like Fernando Arrabal and Peter Handke, or, more recently, artists like Sarah Kane, Jeremy Weller (*Mad*) and Karen Finley. The audience in provocative theatre acquires a function that transcends that of the average theatre; the audience here becomes a
“figure of speech” (Blau, *Audience* 42), and becomes part of the performance text.

A fascinating icon of this phenomenon is drawn up by the Austrian playwright Konrad Bayer, in his description of a theatrical project, entitled *die sonne brennt* (“the sun burns” — 1963), in which two different audiences are surreptitiously forced into the role of audience as well as the role of performers:

then i’ll find or have erected a building whose ground floor or cellar contains a room large enough to partition it with a curtain into two auditoria of approximately half of all the human bodies’ capacity each. they sit there looking at the curtain from both sides. … each curtained off part of the room is a theatre. each of these two theatres has its own entrance and box office. in both theatres they are preparing for the premiere of my play with the title: ‘the sun burns.’ both theatres open at the same time. unimaginable advertising is required. … the curtain rises. the two halves of all human bodies look each other into the eyes. with this the play: ‘the sun burns’ is written. (sic, 104–105)

The project, if it were performed or even performable, would create an acute potential for provocation.⁴ It also shows how provocation itself or the desire to provoke leads to an obsession with the momentariness of shock. In theatre criticism, provocation is often called a game. While the connotation is usually meant as a derogatory put-down so as not to take it seriously, it remains a useful comment. Similar to the self-absorption of the player in the game, so is provocation a phenomenon that is mostly concerned with itself, and, self-reflexively, with the elusiveness of its perceptual instant.

**Hermeneutics of Provocation**

Like the engagement of the player in the game, there is also something primal about the phenomenon of provocation. It often results in gut reactions from the audience, in which theatrical conventions are forgotten on the part of the spectators. Their status as audience is ambiguous. Within

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⁴ I have been unable to find evidence of a production of *die sonne brennt*. 
the strategy of provocative elicitation of reactions, their identity as a watching body seems threatened, while the strategy relies precisely on their watching presence and their availability as a (fairly passive) traditional audience body. These reactions, unavoidably, are a result of an act of reading — in its broad phenomenological meaning — in which a specific meaning is attributed to a certain scene and, in turn, incites a particular emotional reaction, thus bringing about a certain degree of conflict. What is at stake here is the manipulation of this act of reading.

Provocative theatre, in other words, has a profound effect on the spectator’s control of and freedom within the hermeneutic experience. Provocation erodes the spectator’s status as a “relatively autonomous maker of meanings” (De Marinis 101). The moment of provocation, where the momentary impact of the shock takes place, provides an intense and awesome experience for the performers as well as for the audience. Herbert Blau, in his baroque prose, describes this experience as “the alluring prospect of a primal scene, with its incapacitating mystery, disrupting all meaning for an audience that, in the disparition of the echo, is no longer sure it exists” (Audience 49). Christopher Hampton, not exactly known as the most in-yer-face author of the British stage, achieved this very effect at the ending of his controversial stage adaptation of George Steiner’s *The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.* (1982). By the time of the curtain call, after Adolf Hitler’s twenty minute long concluding apologia, the audience were tricked into applauding something they dreaded, and, because of the applause, they found themselves disappear into the rituals of theatre, they themselves were the principal agents of.

Provocation, it becomes evident, brings about a certain reduction and closure of meaning in the mind of the spectator. Anne Ubersfeld defines the role of the spectator as a “co-producer du spectacle” (304), particularly so at two decisive moments of the theatrical production: “au départ et à l’arrivée” (304). The départ refers to the set of conventions that rule the theatre and which the spectator buys into, on the basis of an implied contract between theatre makers and audience, which Ubersfeld calls “un accord préalable” (304). This moment corresponds to a certain extent with Manfred Neumann’s *Rezeptionsvorgaben* [“receptional presuppositions”], which denotes the whole set of socio-political and cultural circumstances in which a work of art is produced and
received. Quite often, with shocking theatre, this point of departure, as far as the contract is concerned, shifts during the production run, mostly because of the effect of the media. What is initially coined as repulsive and unacceptable, may in fact become a catalyst for even greater attendance by a curious (and scandal loving) audience. The escalating box office intakes of Howard Brenton’s *The Romans in Britain* (1980) provide a good example.

The co-productive role of the spectator is of course most evident à l’arrivée; that is, in the acts of watching and the attribution of meaning to the semiotics of the stage. The contract between theatre makers and spectators does not imply a blind surrender on the part of the latter, but is based on the willingness of the spectator to watch what is being performed and presented, and on a readiness of the theatre makers to put on the stage what the spectator is willing and eager to watch.

Unavoidably, the violation of this contract is one of the possibilities of the theatre. As Ubersfeld puts it: “The violation of the spectator is part of the programme” (305). The contract is violated in various ways when the spectator is confronted with things or narratives, which he or she is not prepared or willing to watch. Theatrical provocation violates this implied contract, and provocative techniques used on the stage are directly targeted at the spectator’s anticipated unwillingness to be confronted with certain imagery or rhetoric. It must be pointed out that the opposite scenario is possible too, where the violation takes place as a result of audience intervention in the staged performance, as is the case with theatre uprises or assaults on the stage. These interactions are far less complex than Ubersfeld’s “viol du spectateur.” They happen explicitly and, in the event that they are not just part of a game, usually have a specific cause, which is often to be situated in a particular element of provocation in or around the theatre production. During Handke’s *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (1966), individual spectators would often respond to the play’s provocative rhetoric by intervening remarks and, during the initial Frankfurt run, by actually jumping on the stage in an unsuccessful effort to take over the performance. Two years after the world premiere, the audience of Blaubeuren’s

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5 For *Rezeptionsvorgaben*, see Neumann, Schlenstedt, et al. (87).
(in Southwest Germany) Theater der Westentasche protested and interacted with the play by organising a sit-in and refusing to leave the theatre after the eighth performance of the play’s run. About eighty spectators sat for hours, aloof in the cold and darkness, while the theatre administrators could not close their building. Handke’s dramaturgy, clearly, was not prepared for this rather literal upheaval of the performance enclosure.  

Similarly, but more recently, American performance artist David Blaine was unprepared for the spectators’ vociferous and stretched-out take-over of the performance space while hanging in a Plexiglas case on the side of the river Thames and London’s Tower Bridge.

An audience’s reaction to provocative elements in a play is undoubtedly complex, and is partly a self-reflexive reaction against one’s unwillingness to deal with certain things. Remembering Friedrich Schlegel’s “Es ist unmöglich, jemanden (sic) ein Ärgernis zu geben, wenn er’s nicht nehmen will” (156), provocation relies on an open and willing disposition on the part of the audience. In order to be shocked or provoked, there must not only be a willingness to be provoked, but there must also be an intense level of interaction between the stage and the provoked spectator. Blau points out that those spectators that can überhaupt be shocked in the theatre “are at certain levels of perception the most profoundly engaged” (Audience 189). They are those that are most “dans la représentation” (Ubersfeld 306). This was, for instance, quite clearly what happened during the upheaval surrounding The Romans in Britain where the verisimilar execution of the rape of a Celt by Roman soldiers eclipsed its metonymic meaning of colonization and was consequently opposed by (a few scores of) shocked spectators and (half a nation of) bystanders. Because of the intensity and momentariness of the shock, the hermeneutic exercise of interpreting is reduced to its most shocking option — in the case of The Romans, the hermeneutic paradigm is reduced to the literal picture of male/

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7 “It is impossible to offend somebody who does not have the required disposition to be offended.”
male rape. This phenomenon of hermeneutic reduction is a crucial aspect when talking about the phenomenology of the stage and its hermeneutics in the context of provocative theatre. It also shows that, while the provoked spectator may be the most engaged, he or she is by no means the best — as in most profound or most critical — reader of the stage event.

Provocative imagery and rhetoric on the stage has a profound effect on the way representation is perceived by the spectator. One of the acute problems a shocked spectator is confronted with is a momentary insecurity about the representational quality of the performance, in which the dubiety of his/her own function as a spectator and as a complicit agent in the event plays a central role. The provocative impact of certain imagery or rhetoric is often the product of two opposing forces. As a result of the dissolution of the representational framework, the distance between stage and audience dissolves momentarily. However, because of the psychological distance that results from the shocking quality of the provocative experience, the aesthetic distance is often immediately re-confirmed, and, paradoxically, may well stand in the way for further, subsequent engagement with the performance text.

The plethora of possible reactions to provocation, therefore, may be situated between two possibilities or moments of perception: that of total rejection of this movement of dissolution of representation, on the one hand, and a total absorption or immersion of the spectator in the representation, which then becomes a presentation, on the other hand. The rejective response will go hand in hand with a re-establishment of the distance between stage and audience and a refusal to co-operate, even in the role of spectator, with the theatrical event. The dramatic audience walk out, either communally or individually, is no doubt the most assertive moment of this reaction and either of these are well documented. Pre-emptive or post-production censorship of provocative scenes can also be situated here, since censorship in its prohibitive dynamic is exclusive.
and debarring and thus creates distance between an object and its perceiver. This possibility of a rejective response has (also) been employed as a deliberate strategy in so-called theatre of commitment, which, following the model of Guy Debord’s interventionist “société du spectacle,” uses the imagery and narrative on the stage as an emblematic depiction of real-life situations. Jutta Landa calls this use of provocation “Schocktheater als Rezeptionsinstrument” (23). It is a strategy which uses shock as an instrument in bringing about a certain audience disposition and reception; it relies on the re-establishment of a distance between stage and audience. The shock is instrumental in establishing a Brechtian, pedagogical distance between the provocative scene and its historical reference. It is a technique often used by Augusto Boal in his theatre for the oppressed. Peter Brook calls this aspect of provocation a powerful dynamic that splits off parts of the audience into a vocal “no” (Empty 44); its strategy, in other words, lies in its creation of opposition through provocation. Sarah Kane’s dramaturgy too brings about an inherent, and thus strategic, spectatorial resistance. The violent imagery in her work, is mostly aimed at subverting a complacent consuetudinary — and therefore complicit — disposition towards violence and violent imagery, mostly cultivated by television and cinema. The apparent lack of narrative structure contributes to the elicitation of resistance: rather like standing in the middle of a busy intersection, trying to negotiate hectic traffic coming on in all directions. Similarly, American performer Karen Finley’s subversive performance acts take aim at mainstream culture, which reveres the simulacrum as its prevalent semiotic code, though in her case especially, any possible spectator resistance is very dependent on the chosen performance space and constitution of the audience.

At the other end of the pendulum of reactions to provocation is the situation where, as a result of the abandonment of aesthetic distance, the spectator becomes absorbed into the reality of the presentation. Because of the intensity of the provocative experience, the spectator’s role as spectator is dissolved and he/she becomes an agent in the provocative dynamics of the event. Alexander Tairov describes such a legendary event during a staging of Othello in Chicago in 1909. A certain William Butts, in his role of Iago, was so convincing in his vengeful incitement to hatred of Othello that he provoked one of the spectators to take action:
a shot rang out unexpectedly from the parterre and William Butts fell to the stage dying. When the excitement died down, it turned out that an American army officer had fired the shot, having lost his head over the shameless conduct of Iago. (137)

Similar interventions or participations, though not quite as drastic or with the same tragic effects, were the order of the day in quite a number of theatre events during the 1960s and ’70s. Renfreu Neff describes such an experience when he refers to the effect the final part of the Living Theatre’s Mysteries and Smaller Pieces had on the audience. The play re-creates experiences of madness and physical deterioration:

This piece is so disturbing and so convincing in its impact that as the actors, writhing, wailing, contorted into hideous images of sickness and death, hurl themselves at the audience, people rush forward to help them, cradling them in their arms, lowering them into seats, crying “Help him! Help him!” I have seen their involvement at such a pitch that the tension in the air could almost be touched. (50)

The aesthetic attitude of the audience, here, is one of involvement and leaves no room for critical awareness of the fictionality or representational

9 The event described here may well belong to apocryphal theatrical history, but, as the Italian saying goes, Se non è vero, è bene trovato. I have been unable to find any further references in contemporaneous sources to either the incident or to the actor William Butts. William Donaldson also mentions the anecdote in his Great Disasters of the Stage (12) without further reference. Theatre history, however, is filled with similar anecdotes. Konstantin Stanislavsky reports an analogous incident during a production of Maxim Gorky’s The Children of the Sun at the Moscow Art Theatre (1905). During a staged pogrom, bedlam broke out. The spectators, confused by the lifelikeness of the staged riot, took the extras for members of the Black Hundred, an extreme ‘rightist’ organisation that opposed the staging of ‘leftist’ theatre, and stormed the stage in an attempt to rescue the production (Stanislavsky 337). More recently, performance art has used this sort of confusion as a performative strategy. Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gomez-Peña’s Undiscovered Amerindians (1992), for instance, actually encourage and exploit representational misunderstanding as part of their theatre semiotics. All this is quite different from the case where the intervention is no longer part of the theatre per se. When hundreds of spectators were taken hostage in Moscow’s Doebrovka Theatre during the musical Nord–Est in October 2002, even though initially most spectators thought the covered faces and guns were part of the dramatic reality, clearly theatre had ceased to exist altogether.
aspect of the event. The only possible movement for the audience is to jump further into the performative fray that encircles it. It also starts from the rather troubling premise that was part of “the participation mystique of the sixties” (Blau, *Dubious* 313) that everybody is a performer, regardless of talent or training, and that performance is essentially experience.

Provocation, then, may intensify the audience’s involvement in something, which, in other circumstances, outside of the theatre, would create distance. More often than not, however, the spectator’s reaction will hover somewhere in between the two extremes of rejection and immersion. In many cases, provocative rhetoric or imagery will call attention to the representational framework, while, at the same time, it will also intensify the audience’s involvement in the reality of the fiction or representation. The aesthetic attitude in question here resembles that of the somehow perverse desire that exists in adults who are shocked by particular rhetoric or imagery in film and theatre and yet persist in their exposure to it. Pornographic imagery is an obvious example that comes to mind.

One of Suzanne Kappeler’s main points in her study of pornography is that representation fictionalises its content to the extent that the subject itself is silenced in the fiction. This becomes especially clear in the event of violent pornographic imagery. It is the framework of the representation that allows the perceiver to confront the provocative imagery. Because of the intensity of this experience of shock, his or her focus is locked into a gaze of fascination with the subject, which is deemed safe as an object of interest, because of the awareness of representation. Kappeler mainly talks about pictures and films, while, in the case of theatre, the process is necessarily more complex because of the physical presence of the body and the immediacy of the representation. Kappeler starts off with an example of representation of violence in journalism, and of the way in which facts of torture can become fictionalised through pictures and reportage. Thomas Kasire, an 18-year-old black farm worker in Namibia, accused of being a supporter of the national liberation movement SWAPO, was kept in chains for two days by his white boss until he was killed, eventually, as his boss’s drinking pals applauded and took pictures (Kappeler 5–7). These pictures, Kappeler shows, become “fiction par excellence” (10), and often acquire an aesthetic, which turns them into something we can talk about after the experience of watching, nothing but simulacra.
Pain, all kinds of pain, while potentially shocking, is perhaps the most difficult emotion to re-present with any degree of authenticity, and it will always risk just being looked at, objectified and aesthetisised, or, as in so much Holocaust theatre and film, narrativised and thus elided within the story. In-yer-face theatre of the 1990s responds to the curious phenomenon that pain, physical pain in particular, can hardly be documented or represented in language, simply because it is too much of the body.\(^{10}\) Recently, French cinematographers like Virginie Despentes, with her controversial road movie Baise-moi (2000), and Mathieu Kassovitz Assassin(s) (1997) or Mexican director Alejandro González Iñárritu Amores perros (2000) have tried to get around this problem by adopting a hyper-naturalistic violent aesthetic. On the stage, a similar kind of abject aesthetic is used by authors like Kane, Finley and Tracey Lett. The strategy recycles a sort of naturalism of more than a century ago, but essentialises the approach, so that it transcends the reality it refers too, by bringing, in a sense, too much of that reality into its dramaturgy: chaos, ugliness and all. Naturalism is over-dosed in order to give it back its documentary and revealing potential. In doing so, this kind of shock theatre — like its film equivalent — also does away with the aura of the stage or theatre as a place of artistic production to which the audience owes its deference. Benjamin’s conjecture of a post-auratic theatre, not quite realized as he thought it might be in the theatre of Bertolt Brecht, seems finally brought about, a good sixty years later, by playwrights like Kane, Finley and Lett. Breaking down the aura of the stage — or, more generally, of artistic production — is, however, a risky strategy. While it manages to get across the despair these artists are focusing on, and to ensnare the spectator into a complex set of reception dynamics, offhand dismissal seems extremely easy and, as a defensive strategy, tempting for the beleaguered audience, and especially, for the professional critic, as was very much the case after the first performances of Kane’s Blast (1995). In the eye of some reviewers, the abject dramaturgy these playwrights were/are pursuing seems nothing more (or less?) than “a bucket of bilge dumped over the audiences.”\(^{11}\) Finley’s per-

\(^{10}\) On the “inexpressibility of physical pain” see Elaine Scarry (3–23).

\(^{11}\) Critic Jack Tinker, quoting a review of Tracy Letts’ Killer Joe, in his attack of Kane’s Blast (qtd. in Sierz 97).
performances have met with similar dismissive comments. It remains intriguing that, in a culture characterized by an “overdose of theatricality and supersaturation of image” (Blau, Dubious 142), abject reality of which there is abundance of outside of the theatre door, remains semiotically resistant on the stage.

Theatre as Shock Absorber

Violence and sexual exploitation remain a tricky business on the stage, not in the least because of the hegemony of the simulacrum pounded into us by our daily portions of this kind of imagery on television; as Raymond Williams put it almost thirty years ago: “more in a week, in many cases, than most human beings would previously have seen in a lifetime” (5). Our familiarity with and acceptance of stage conventions often guarantee a seamless transposition of violent imagery to the stage. Herbert Blau’s notion of the “amortizing play” (Eye 161) is useful here. Blau’s use of the term refers to the way in which the representational aspect of theatre disappears in the physical immediacy of its medium: “there is something in the nature of theater which from the very beginning of theater has always resisted being theater” (Eye 165). As already indicated, this is particularly the case with provocative imagery or rhetoric, whose shocking effect is a result of its transcendency or obliteration of the distancing effect of representation. Nonetheless, it is precisely the representation which creates the necessary a-priori conditions for the set-up of the provocation.

The representation, in other words, not only brings the subject to life, but also functions as an amortisseur or shock absorber. This alternative and complementary reading of Blau’s “amortizing play” points toward a crucial aspect of the dynamics of provocation. The amortizing or softening effect of representation plays a critical role in the provocative effect of the cutting edge or shocking aspects of a theatrical production. This function of the representation as amortisseur is the result of one of the essential aspects of representation, which is enclosure. It becomes possible for the spectator, because of the enclosure, to undergo the experience of what Blau calls “the bloody show” (Eye 65), which is the kind of theatre, like Sarah Kane’s or Jeremy Weller’s, that affects more primal emotions in the audience. The enclosure of representation allows a spectator to subject him/herself to “the scorpion’s bite” (Barba 98) of the theatrical experience.
Ultimately, provocative theatre sets up a complicitous dynamic between stage and audience. The factors that lead to a certain provocative effect are obviously complex and diverse, but they invariably rely on the spectator’s willingness or complicity to bring about the provocative effect. Just as much as the production of provocation is historically and geographically determined, so is its reception. There is every indication that provocative theatre is just one way in which theatre makers react to a certain prevailing tradition or practice of production and reception, and as such, they need certain rules in order to be able to break them. Inevitably, this cyclical character of breaking certain norms will bring about periods in which the breaking of norms will, in fact, be part of a new orthodoxy. There are strong indications that, for instance, British in-yr-face theatre has resulted in an orthodox aesthetics which is nothing more than what John Lahr coined “nihilistic urban chic” (qtd. in Sierz 249). Peter Brook, in a reminiscing comment on the effectiveness of his own controversial 1966 production of *Us*, is equally sceptical: “we want our theatre to be powerful. However, when the trigger is so light, when the ejaculation comes so soon, when the first reaction is so strong, it is not possible to go very deep. The shutters fall fast” (*Shifting* 63).

A theatre artist like Jan Fabre, whose *De Macht der theaterlijke dwaasheden* (*The Power of Theatrical Madness*, 1984) went on a world tour amid controversial reactions from its audiences, is largely able to avoid these pitfalls of superficiality by bringing a theatre of physical extremes. The shock we experience while watching his productions is not induced from an oppositional position of aloofness, but rather by the confrontation with our own bodily structures and compositions. The eight-hour long performance locks its spectators into an intense physical experience of presence with actors (and animals) going through repetitive and strenuous actions, supported by repetitive music; the audience perspires in unison with the performers. “What you see is what you see,” says the director/sculptor. The spectator is compelled to respond to the intense exertions on the stage, yet, mostly because of the lack of plot, there is an unparalleled freedom in assigning meaning to the theatrical iconography and experience. His more recent production, *Je suis sang* (2001), with writhing limbless bloodied bodies on the stage, similarly works as a rite of passage for the spectators, feeling and seeing their way through the cultural meaning of blood.
Provocative theatre always “forces audiences to react” (Sierz 5), and always somehow gets under our skin, yet the question remains whether, in the end, its strategy of using shock as an instrument in its own reception is productive. Invariably, as numerous cases have shown us, any sort of shocking dramaturgy will have a price to pay in its clouding of the play’s process of signification or, in its overt explicitness of intent. Playwrights and directors must, therefore, approach this kind of strategy with caution in order to retain the liminal experience they are after.

In a letter to the Austrian playwright Peter Turrini, well known for his controversial plays, a theatre subscriber reminisces on the extremely violent and turbulent production of the 1972 play *Sauschlachten* and asks the rather deadening question: “When will you shock us so nicely, again?” (qtd. in Landa 99). It is a worst case scenario, but always looming as a possibility. While provocative strategies have tremendously invigorating potential to open up boundaries of perception, as numerous cases have shown in modern theatrical history, they also have nestled in them, all the dangers of the very conventions and routines it sets out to break. The strategy often works quite well initially; it impacts on the audience like a “demolition squad,” to use Tretyakov’s analogy for Futurist approaches (212). However, when provocation becomes part of the spectator’s expectations, which it almost inevitably does, it is turned into a form of live entertainment, and the demolition hammers only raise curiosity. The scorpion’s bite of provocative theatre often ends up being rather dull and harmlessly self absorbed.

Works Cited


Body and Machine: Extending the Codes in Theatre of Laurie Anderson and Robert Wilson

*The machine gunner and the contrabassist are extensions of their instruments.*
*Subways, cranes and automobiles are the artificial limbs of mankind.*
(Viktor Shklovsky)

Max Ernst’s paintings from the early 1920s depict human subjects with mechanical engines beneath their skin and aeroplanes with human organs in place of engines. The hybridisation of live and lifeless, body and object, which could be traced as far as Ancient *centaurs* and Renaissance *automatons*, in modernism and postmodernism becomes an amalgamation of biology and technology epitomised in *robots* and *avatars*. In theatre, technology has often served as a means of extending performance codes and conventions to relate to reality in a new way. Theatre of the historical avant-garde, for instance, played with the body/machine dynamics using modern technology and media in search of a new theatrical language. Fascination with technology marked the artistic experiments of the historical avant-garde including Piscator’s theatre *of scientific objectivity* and Brecht’s theatre *for the scientific age*, as well as the stage experiments of Bauhaus, Meyerhold, and Russian and Italian Futurists — their explorations created aesthetic paradigms for the postmodern avant-garde performances. Not unlike postmodern directors, some theatre artists of the historical avant-garde experimented with technology using film, screen projections and other devices of expending space and body on stage that forced live performers to compete with the machinery; others conceptualised new acting and staging techniques to attribute mechanical, puppet-like qualities to live performers. Postmodern performance takes from this arsenal of avant-garde aesthetics strategies to problema-
tise the relationship between body and machine in the cultural context of electronic bits and cyber-space.

In his famous essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1936), Walter Benjamin points out that the new technology has altered the perception of both art and reality, by means of speed with which new artistic media are able to capture and freeze images, enlarge them and slow them down. Benjamin and his fellow Modernists believed that art, based on new technology, would bring a new political function of art, transform the production apparatus, radically alter the performer-audience relationship, and turn art into a mass phenomenon intelligible and accessible to all.

However, the historical avant-garde belonged to a different political and cultural landscape, within which it was still possible to believe in the meaning of history as truth that could be reviled through discourse and through artistic creation. Postmodern performance reveals a very different cultural space, that of multiple perspectives through which the status of reality and the meaning of history as stable categories are questioned and problematised. In our contemporary reality, technology plays the key role reconfiguring the relationship between individual and space; and body and machine. Revolution in the mass media and electronic communication has destabilised categories of space, time and body enabling, through the Internet and other modern media, new forms of human interaction, new ways of travel and new modes of representation. The stable sense of place and presence is shattered; as technology becomes an extension of space and body and as mediated reality substitutes an actual one.

This paper will examine the work of two well-known artists of North American postmodern theatre — Robert Wilson and Laurie Anderson — whose experiments rework modernist devices of extending theatrical codes to new aesthetic and ideological ends. These two artists, who gained prominence in avant-garde circles of the late 1960s and early 1970s to become legendary figures of contemporary North American postmodern performance, have cut across artistic disciplines and media, redefining the notion of theatrical spectacle and reconfiguring categories of space, body and object on stage. Anderson and Wilson explore the various aspects of theatre and technology as a means of altering conventions and strategies of theatrical representation. In different ways, they play with and contemplate the re-
relationship between body and machine, animate and lifeless, presence and absence to find fresh ways of theatrical expression, but also to explore the position of theatre in a hi-tech world. In the process of mechanisation of the human body and humanisation of the object, Wilson and Anderson deal with various aspects of this phenomenon including a symbiotic relationship between body and machine, instances of doubling of the live body through technology and strategies of substitution of live human body by technology.

Anderson often focuses on the possibility of altering the notion of space, body and human voice on stage and her experimentations more often than not have a political resonance. In dealing with Anderson’s work, I will particularly focus on instances of doubling and substitution of the live body through technology, where hi-tech devices are not only used as means of stage innovation, but also to express a critical approach to reality. Wilson, however, is more oriented towards challenging conventional staging practices as well as towards developing his unique surrealist stage language through combinations of stylistically complex, even contradictory elements from different theatrical traditions and cultures. Wilson’s electronic operas such as the legendary Einstein on the Beach (1976) — which served as an inspiration for Anderson’s spectacle United States I-IV, the more recent project opera Monsters of Grace (1989) that experimented with 3D technology, and others make extensive use of a hi-tech staging apparatus. Nevertheless, in this essay, I will focus on one of Wilson’s low-tech shows — Der Ozeanflug, which premiered in 1998 at the Berliner Ensemble. I chose this particular performance because it is a meditation on body and machine, on technology and theatrical, and on text and cultural context, executed, contrary to the expectations, by minimalist, low-tech means.

Man and Machine

Wilson’s Der Ozeanflug is a triptych that includes Brecht’s radio play Der Ozeanflug, Heiner Müller’s Landscape with Argonauts, and Wilson/Kuhn’s adaptation of Dostoevsky’s Notes From the Dead House. Brecht’s play is the point of departure for this production and a backdrop or, rather, the key intertextual link against which the other two parts of the triptych are perceived. Even though this production does not include sophisticated hi-tech staging devices, the relationship between man and the machine is de-
Brecht wrote *Der Ozeanflug* in 1929 for, at that time, the new medium of modern technology — radio — in search of new possibilities of theatrical performance that the traditional theatre was no longer able to offer. The play, performed in 1929 at the Baden-Baden Music Festival, is an almost Biblical parable for the “scientific age” mounted around Charles Lindbergh’s legendary first solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. Charles Lindbergh became the fascination of Europe as his success embodied so many different ideas and dreams of the time. Lindbergh’s flight was the embodiment of the Futurist notion of symbiosis between man and machine; a symbol of human power and technological supremacy that fitted into the Nazi ideology; and last but not the least Lindbergh was an epitome of the Marxist belief in progress.

Brecht’s play is centred around the character of Lindbergh who refers to himself in plural *We*, explaining in a direct address to the audience, that he stands for the collective body that constructed the plane and enabled the flight. It is also the *We* of the centaur body that the pilot and his machine make. This symbiosis between the man and the machine highlights Marxist idea of progress as a collective victory over the forces of nature through technology.

Wilson’s staging of Brecht’s radio play alters both Brechtian dramaturgy and its ideological consequence. Wilson renders naïve both the idea of progress and Brecht’s forms of extending the codes of theatrical repre-

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1 Brecht wrote in regard to this play: “Any other reproduction of our theater play is doing it more just then the theatrical one. [...] Radio is a technical innovation that offers fruitful possibilities for our plays, since it meets the needs of the masses, and does not throw itself into fulfilling the worn out expectations” (*Brecht on Film and Radio* 189).


3 Lindbergh became an acquaintance of Hitler and Göring, and the first foreigner to visit the Luftwaffe factory, where the bombardiers were constructed and soon after launched to conquer Europe. This fact prompted Brecht to change the original title of the play Lindbergh’s *Flight* into *The Ocean-flight*. 
sentation through modern technology. In Wilson’s parodic interpretation, the character of Lindbergh looks like a movie star from the 1920s and 1930s. The powerful machine that took him across the ocean becomes a desk hanging from the ceiling, while the actor who plays Lindbergh sits on a bicycle and pedals the mighty “engine.” This image could also be interpreted not only as a parody of Brecht’s play but also as a mockery of postmodern high-tech performances. Lindbergh’s plane — the technological wonder from the 1920s at the end of the century looks like a poorly constructed toy. The figure of Lindbergh, as an icon of progress and of the belief in better future that the advance of technology is to bring, becomes in Wilson’s staging a naïve dream from the childhood of the twentieth century.

Brecht’s famous *Verfremdung* devices become almost ornamental features in Wilson’s show, since they are no longer able to carry the ideological content of the play with conviction. Wilson defamiliarises Brecht’s defamiliarisation devices and questions the possibility of a meaningful relationship between reality and performance. The combination of Wilson’s and Brechtian theatre is both a symbiosis and a clash of modern and postmodern aesthetics. It is not merely an act of showing Brechtian theatre as no longer sufficient, but of opening a process of its re-negotiation. In other words, Wilson, through devices of parody and comedy in the first triptych, makes Brecht’s dramaturgical and staging techniques strange, offering a possibility for their rejuvenation through new readings and unpredictable interpretations.

Brecht’s theatre for “scientific age” and the modernist belief in progress through technology becomes further problematised in the juxtaposition to Müller’s *Landscape with Argonauts*. When Brecht wrote and presented his *Der Ozeanflug*, he could not know what the future had in store. Theatre of Wilson and also of Heiner Müller survived the future that Lindbergh’s flight announced. In the context of Wilson’s production, Müller’s *Landscape with Argonauts* could be understood as an answer to Brecht. This answer comes after the experience of the Second World War, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and after the planes were used not only for exceptional acts of human endeavour, but as weapons of destruction.4 The

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4 Out of this experience, Brecht too wrote his later plays where, as in his *The Life of Galileo*, the notion of optimism as progress through technology would inevitably fade away.
image of the plane is also present in Müller’s *Argonauts* and the following lines, repeated a number of times by Wilson’s stage figures, make a virtual polemic with Brecht’s *Der Ozeanflug*:

The theatre of my death  
had opened  
as I stood between the mountains  
in the circle of dead comrades on the stone  
and the expected aeroplane appeared above me  
Without thinking I knew  
this engine was  
what my grandmother used to call God. (135)

This is the point in the performance where Brecht’s God of Promise and Müller’s God of Death meet. The notion of the pilot Lindbergh/Icarus who heroically flies across the ocean is replaced by another myth here — that of the Jason who appears as an ominous male subject of a conqueror and coloniser. Like in Brecht’s *Der Ozeanflug*, in Müller’s play the subject — the “I” — is a collective one. Yet, it makes a very different collective body than the one animated through Brecht’s enthusiasm for modern technology and through Marxist ideals. The collective I on Wilson’s stage is on the verge of disappearing. And while in Brecht’s *Der Ozeanflug* the ocean stands for a challenge, through which the collective I becomes fully unified in the symbiosis of man and machine, in Müller/Wilson’s version the water is a space between the presence and absence, I and not I. The notion of symbiosis between humans and technology is replaced with an antagonistic relationship between man and machine. Technology becomes an invisible super-power embodied in planes that drop bombs from the sky.

The last part of Wilson’s triptych, a free adaptation of Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Dead House*, further explores the relationship between man and machine this time as an Orwellesque dystopia at the end of the twentieth century. This segment opens with a boy playing video games, while a number of identically looking men in suits and carrying briefcases, reminiscent of the unified corporate culture of our contemporary Western world, perpetually walk in the rhythm of mechanically delivered lines from Dostoevsky’s novel. The symbiotic relationship between man and machine from the first part of Wilson’s triptych and the confrontational relation-
ship with technology from the second one have turned at the end of the show into an unsettling amalgamation of the human and the mechanical. Monotonous, perpetual movements of the actors expose the human body as a social machine — as pathology of the hi-tech society where the mechanical is encrusted on the living. Staged in the manner of a minimalist anti-utopia this last part of the triptych makes a summary of both Brecht’s and Müller’s worlds within a contemporary framework. Wilson’s Der Ozeanflug traces the twentieth century history through the relationship between man and machine; it outlines three stages of this relationship: utopia, catastrophe, and anti-utopia.

The three parts of Wilson’s show depict different phases in the relationship between man and machine in the twentieth century: In the first part, Brecht’s approach is viewed as an attempt to humanise technology through the symbiosis between man and machine; in the second part, Müller’s take on this subject is used to explore the victimisation of the individual in the modern technological society; while the last part depicts postmodern reality as a hi-tech wasteland.

Presence and Absence

In the work of Laurie Anderson, technological simulations enable both a critique of mediated reality and a genuine interaction with that reality. Technology on Anderson’s stage becomes a means of shifting the boundaries and extending the code of contemporary performance and also a device of establishing the stage figure as a postmodern centaur — half a human being, half an electronic gadget. This amalgamation is particularly evident when Anderson puts a microphone/stethoscope gadget on her chest asking the audience to listen to her heartbeats as at the end of the song “Mister Heartbreak,” for instance. The technological equipment, enabling the performer’s heartbeat to be heard distances the spectator from the performance, while at the same time bringing him/her right into the performer’s body. The sound of the human heart transmitted and amplified through an electronic

gadget resonates as familiar yet strange — it becomes a sound both human and synthetic. Anderson’s heartbeats are sounds of a Centaur’s heart from Ernst’s paintings — part human tissue, part electronic gadget — with a terrifying, fascinating, and deeply ironic resonance.

In his essay “Man and Object in Theatre,” Czech Structuralist scholar Jiri Veltrusky observes that in theatre a lifeless object can be perceived as a performing subject, and a live human being may appear as an element completely without will. Veltrusky starts with the premise that the relationship between the animated and the lifeless in reality is a stable one, whereas theatre has the potential to destabilise this relationship, creating a “dialectic antinomy” between the human body and the object on stage. Although Veltrusky writes with the modernist avant-garde theatre in mind, the postmodern performances of Laurie Anderson illustrate some of his observations.

In her sets, the three-dimensional human body on the stage is often juxtaposed to a two-dimensional slide projection of its image or shadow on the big screen. In Home of the Brave, Anderson enters the stage from a trap door in the floor of the stage, while her face is projected on the screen. In United States I-IV, she plays with screen projections used to extend the stage space. A platform with a single step allows the performer to enter the “film space” and become part of the two-dimensional image. In Songs for Foreshortened Hallway (Anderson, Stories 194), footsteps are recorded on the tap bow and played forwards and backwards as the performer walks along a corridor of light, while on the screen a woman slowly walks in the opposite direction. The configuration of real and filmed space, live and recorded sound, live and projected image creates a constant tension between presence and absence. Furthermore, live body, sound, and real space interact with filmed imagery and recorded soundscape, not necessarily to establish the contradiction between inanimate and lifeless, but to show them as complementary. The representation thus becomes a hybrid — half two-dimensional projection and electronic recording, half a live corporeal presence. The relationship of “dialectic antinomy” between live and non-live indicated by Veltrusky becomes, in the performances of Laurie Anderson, a relationship of “dialectic symbiosis.”

Anderson turns her stage persona into a hybrid of human, marionette and electronic body. This stage persona has as its effigy a puppet that often
plays a “dummy violin.” The puppet, made in Anderson’s likeness, doubles the performer, creating a tension between live and marionette body. In *United States Part III*, in the section about money and greed, an extra set of arms is attached to Anderson’s body. The human body becomes extended through the marionette body. In the performance *Home of the Brave*, Anderson dances the “Drum Dance,” for which she designed a suit with built-in electronic drum sensors. In order to ‘play’ the drum, she has to make wide, sweeping movements. The drum sensors act as a kind of electronic puppet strings, dictating the kind of movements she must make — mechanical and puppet-like — in order to produce sounds. Her design for the “Light Suit” uses a similar concept of dual functionality, where the suit is both costume and lighting device. With the “Light Suit,” Anderson is able to map out the performance space through her bodily movements. This space although created by the human body, at the same time restricts and conditions its movement. The body, as Anderson puts it, becomes the “ultimate portable instrument” (*Stories* 217) — at once performer, soundscape, set, and prop. Furthermore, the body as the “ultimate portable instrument” simulates the stage itself, while the screen as stage backdrop doubles the live body. By merging her body with the stage and its machinery, Anderson animates the lifeless properties of the performance, while mechanising its corporeality.

Anderson further explores radical instances of the relationship between human body and modern technology creating works that involve dummies, hologram doubles, satellite projection and computer generated personage. They are all based on the notion of the double inherent in the relationship between performer and stage figure. In the theatre of the historical avant-garde, directors such as Meyerhold and Brecht, use the gap between the performer and character to establish new methodology based on the ambiguity between identity and difference. Anderson’s more immediate predecessors Vito Acconci and Dennis Oppenheim intended to replace the live performer. Acconci substituted live performance with recordings, while Oppenheim used small puppets instead of live performers.

Anderson’s first attempt to use a substitute double to challenge the dynamic between presence and absence in performance was a fake hologram made for the *At the Shrink’s Show* (1975). The double was created by projecting a Super 8 film of herself sitting in an armchair onto an actual
clay figure. In the 1986 video *What You Mean We?*, hosted by American monologist Spalding Gray, Anderson introduces her male clone, who enables her to be in two places at once. Her CD-ROM *Puppet Motel* (1994) could be read as a computerised performance where the live performer is replaced by a virtual cast. The live audience — the computer interface users — are encouraged to interact with the computerised space and by doing so influence the course of the show. Anderson’s *Del Vivo* project (1998) is focused on telepresence as a version of both dislocation and virtual freedom. In the gallery space of Fondazione Prada, Anderson, by means of televised transport, presents the body of a prisoner from the San Vittore prison in Milan. This project explores new possibilities of presence and absence and new forms of dislocation and confinement. Anderson describes *Del Vivo* in the following way:

I’ve made *Del Vivo* because I’m interested in theatre of real time and in the magic of disembodied body. The prisoner is present in time but spatially remote. Voiceless, unseeing, *Del Vivo* looks at the way telepresence has altered our perception of time and body. It is about voyeurism, our fascination with judgement and justice and the functions of the guarded institution — both prison and cultural institutions. (*Del Vivo* 267)

By establishing the prisoner’s double through telepresence, this project creates a disturbing tension between real and virtual. Freud attributes the quality of uncanny strangeness to the figure of a double: “The subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling and interchanging of self” (234). This project — an exploration in politics of presence and absence both in contemporary reality and in postmodern performance — has an unsettling effect of the uncanny strangeness since it destabilises the line between freedom and confinement and between being and non-being.

Like the *Del Vivo* project, most of Anderson’s explorations in performance and technology especially during the 1980s and 1990s have overt political dimensions. The early 1980s was the beginning of an era when politics, history, and show business have grown dramatically close creating a mass televised spectacle of reality. Anderson’s famous hi-tech spectacle *United States I-IV* — an answer to political reality in Reagan’s America —
is a meditation on the sorry state of the world represented through a dialogic collage of music, songs, and stories. The performance features a technological wasteland using slide projectors, films, hi-tech apparatus of feedback loops, and echo effects to depict ominous and ironic imagery, such as huge clocks ticking on screen, blasting rockets, and the American flag tumbling in a clothes dryer. As Müller and Wilson, Anderson too deals with the destructive powers of technological progress. In 1994, Anderson performed “Night in Baghdad,” an ironic comment on the bombing of Iraq and its coverage in the U.S. media. The song is performed in front of a screen on which the words “Hello, California? Can you hear me?” appear, followed by images of the war, while Anderson utters the lyrics inspired by CNN news broadcast:

Oh, it’s so beautiful, it’s like the Fourth of July,
It’s like a Christmas tree, it’s like fireflies
On a summer night.
And I wish I could
describe this to you better.
But I can’t talk very well right now
cause I got this damned gas mask on.
So I’m just going to stick this microphone out the window and see if we can hear
a little better. Hello California?
What’s the weather like out there? (Stories 277)

This performance, strikingly relevant today in George W. Bush’s America and in the aftermath of the most recent invasion of Iraq, problematises and politicises the technological experience. Anderson speaks and sings from the other place — from the war zone — that normally reaches the audience through televised, mediated and somewhat sanitised images of destruction not unlike in video games. This performance explores a similar time/space dynamic to the Del Vivo project — the event of the war is present in time but distant in space, which makes it confined within a different geographical framework and thus safely remote. “Night in Baghdad” and Del Vivo confront both the ironies and the possibilities of mediated reality, search-

ing for meaning in the gaps between reality and its substitute. By placing together the imagery of bombing and destruction and the iconography of North American religious and state holidays, Anderson achieves a striking, disturbing and disorienting effect. Breaking through the automatised perception of the war filtered by mass media, Anderson displaces common iconography of American cultural landscape and transposes it into the war zone context, revealing the very place she inhabits as unstable and problematic.

Performance in the Age of Simulated Reality

There are a few points that could be drawn out of Anderson’s and Wilson’s practices of extending theatrical codes as a means of relating to postmodern reality. Both artists extend the codes of theatrical presentation to achieve aesthetic newness by radically reworking modernist performance experiments and conventions — Wilson through parody of Brecht’s staging concepts, while Anderson places in a postmodernist framework theatrical experiments pioneered by Piscator and by other artists of the historical avant-garde where live performers are forced to compete with stage machinery and screen projections. Both Anderson and Wilson rejuvenate stage codes using various forms of estrangement technique — Wilson defamiliarises Brecht’s famous concept of theatrical estrangement (Verfremdung); Anderson makes the notion of live body on stage ambiguous and strange. In both cases, the sense of aesthetic newness is not achieved by inventing brand new artistic strategies but through reviving, modifying, parodying, complicating, and adapting old performance codes to the new cultural context. This prompts us to understand the avant-garde quality in the notion of extending performance codes as somewhat paradoxical — since in certain cases it reveals a retro concept or strategy underneath its tendency towards daring innovations.

Wilson and Anderson — one through minimalist means and the other through sophisticated electronic gadgets — explore different aspects of the relationship between body and machine. They amalgamate biology and technology both as a way to relate to our highly technologically impacted reality and as a critique of the postmodern society. The political aspects of Anderson’s work are evident, while Wilson’s approach is often considered as politically/
ideologically neutral. Not only that this kind of neutrality is almost impossible since the very conditions of a performance always impose a certain ideological framework, but Wilson also chooses highly politically charged materials as pretexts for his performances (in the case of Der Ozeanflug, all three texts involved bare strong political dimensions). Unlike Anderson, however, Wilson is not overtly political and almost never openly engaged, but rather he lets the political/ideological dimension unfold through dialectic interplay between different textual and performative codes.

Benjamin’s hope that modern technology will open new possibilities of creation and make art accessible to all has come true, but in certain instances it materialized in twisted almost ironic ways. New technology enabled new possibilities both on stage and in reality — from broadening the scope of creative possibilities to commodification of art and culture; from opening new paths for cross-cultural experiences and exchanges to uniformity and monotonisation of cultures; from improving the quality of life to inventing new forms of warfare. In her performance Speed of Darkness (1998), Anderson, the icon of hi-tech performance, reveals her scepticism: “The thing that scares me is that every day technology is getting more global, corporate, monolithic, and impossible to escape. […] Now the technology is everywhere in the world, most artists, like everyone else, have to figure it out” (Speed no pag.). The works of Laurie Anderson and Robert Wilson deal with the notion of technology not only as a means to extend the aesthetic codes of a performance but also as a means to make its communicational codes more relevant. The body/machine dynamics in their performances defamiliarises the notion of stage figure and addresses various aspects of our hi-tech reality in a playful yet, critical way. However, we are left with some open questions: To what extent are strategies of shifting the boundaries between body and object, as means of extending performance codes, able to challenge and defamiliarise the simulacrum of our hi-tech reality? How is the spectacle of postmodern performance to compete with the spectacle of mediated reality? Whether low or hi-tech, postmodern theatre performance has no other choice, but to always reinvent its means and search for new ways of amalgamating the human and the technological in order to resists its own amalgamation into a reality where mass-culture embodies Baudrillard’s notion of simulacrum in most banal ways and uses Pirandello’s performative interplay between illusion and reality to apply to the lowest common denominator.
Works Cited


II.

Individual Experiments
There’s only the same danger of overdose in the theatre as there is in life. The choice is either to represent it, or not to represent it. I’ve chosen to represent it because sometimes we have to descend into hell imaginatively in order to avoid going there in reality. (Kane qtd. in Stephenson 3)

Provocative, superficially shocking, brutal, sensationalist are just some of the terms which have been applied to Sarah Kane’s theatre. For some, her drama is wantonly brutal and self-indulgent, the product of a precocious but immature writer. Mary Luckhurst, for example, contends that far from being avant-garde, Blasted and Cleansed actually facilitate “another rediscovery of realism” (80). Vera Gottlieb meanwhile is dismissive of Kane’s later work, finding it imitative of Pinter and Beckett “but without their often profound content” (211). Crave for Gottlieb is “a play which is essentially ‘only’ language” emerging from Kane’s “possible fear of being called naïve” (211). Conversely, for others she is one of the most significant and innovative voices in British drama of the late twentieth century. The debate surrounding her work is poignantly accentuated, but also complicated, by the author’s suicide in 1999 at the age of twenty-eight. For the near future, however, the Kane phenomenon seems assured. Not only is she the subject of an extensive website which serves as a locus of much information on the plays and their production histories, but in addition since 2000 in particular, her plays have been performed regularly around the globe (Kane, home page). The website now lists approximately one hundred productions of Kane plays from around the world, to which one could certainly add others.¹ Neither

has academic commentary lagged behind. In addition to a dedicated interest in Kane in Europe and Aleks Sierz’s chapter on Kane in *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today* (2000), the first book on her work by Graham Saunders, ‘Love Me or Kill Me’ *Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes*, appeared in 2002. In contrast to some of the more culturally specific new writing for theatre of the period, the ways in which Kane’s drama depicts extreme physical and psychological states seems to be compelling to audiences who are culturally and linguistically, vastly diverse. Following the focus of Graham Saunders’s book, this essay will examine some of the ways in which Kane’s theatre works with extremes. Specifically, I wish to approach her work through a notion of radical alterity and trauma. In an age of apparently unprecedented ontological uncertainty, Kane proclaims herself responsible, as a writer, only to “the truth, however difficult that truth happens to be” (qtd. in Stephenson 134). As is evident in all her plays, this pursuit of truth involves experimenting with the outer limits of the tolerable, the stageable, as well as with the, at times absurd, torments of the unbearable or abject self. Truth and trauma map onto one another. Finally, reflecting on the conference theme I will suggest that Kane’s drama involves what might be called a double coding in the sense that her interest in “truth” incorporates a mixture of modernist, expressionist and postmodern elements, and in this manner her work extends contemporary theatrical codes.

**Experiential Theatre and Radical Alterity**

Kane’s work has been discussed in terms of neo-Jacobean or neo-Classical sensibilities, Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ and approached through the Lacanian concept of the Real and trauma theory (cf. Saunders, Smith, Buse). I would like to begin from a term Kane used herself to describe her work and its aims — experiential. The notion that that bulk of new writing in British theatre, especially from 1995 onwards, has been structured by an experiential rather than a speculative aesthetic is one which has been widely circulated, not least by Sierz’s seminal book *In-Yer-Face Theatre*. Central to this notion is the inclination toward provocation, toward the stag-

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ing and generation of extreme experience (often privileging ‘gut-reaction’ over intellectual response), and this tendency is acknowledged as one of the hallmarks of much of the new playwriting of the era.

Clearly all Kane’s plays are structured around intense experiences and produce strong reactions, as both the initial media condemnation and current enthusiasms suggest. David Greig in his introduction to the Complete Plays accounts for Kane’s project using a familiar geographical metaphor, “each play was a step on an artistic journey in which Kane mapped the darkest and most unforgiving internal landscapes: landscapes of violation, of loneliness, of power, of mental collapse and, most consistently, the landscape of love” (ix). What all these ‘landscapes’ have in common is an encounter with some form of radical alterity — something which can neither be accessed, comprehended or assimilated, and thus remains fundamentally shocking or disturbing. The encounter, from a Lacanian perspective, is therefore always missed. What is apprehended are the masks of the Other, which appear in Kane’s theatre as an engagement with the (quasi) taboo subjects of torture, sexualised violence, death, absolute/abusive love and madness. The experiential impact of the thematics of desire and obsession, alienation and the performance of traumatic narratives and actions in the plays hinges upon this primary and primal relation to the Other or alterity.

Kane’s drama falls into two stages in which she explores extremes in very different ways and consequently it is important to acknowledge that the shift from a visual to verbal aesthetic moderates the negotiation of alterity and trauma considerably. Blasted, Phaedra’s Love and Cleansed rely strongly upon the force of visceral spectacle, while language is functional. Crave and 4.48 Psychosis shift entirely to a linguistic focus where ultimately, as Kane says, “all there is are language and images. But all the images are within language rather than visualised” (qtd. in Saunders 111). I wish to tentatively suggest a loose correspondence between these stages and different facets of the question of alterity in (post)modernity and a crisis of representation. As Merle Tönnies fittingly points out in an essay on theatres of sensation, much of the action of the “sensationalist” theatre of the 1990s seems arranged primarily “according to visual criteria” (62). The visual overload or excess of Kane’s earlier plays implicitly engages with the logic of postmodern spectacle, where spectacle structures what is communicated, and spectacle is self-perpetuating (cf. Debord and Baudrillard).
The second stage in Kane’s work abandons spectacle as a mode of communication in favour of disparate, polyvocal micronarratives and fragments. The isolated and indeterminate voices of *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* suggest a correlation with the crisis of identity originating in the erosion of an Enlightenment notion of a stable, knowable self. In all the plays ‘fixed’ identity is questioned, and the self, alienated, traumatic and negated grows particularly acute from *Cleansed* onwards. In a manner similar to that remarked upon by Elinor Fuchs in *The Death of Character* (1996), Kane’s later work explicitly interrogates the viability of the pretence of unified character in an age typified by “a dispersed idea of self” (9).

**Trauma Theatre — Form and Content**

In both stages of Kane’s work trauma is integral, thematically and formally. By the term trauma here I mean a psychological and above all, an entirely subjective response to an experience or an event. The event may be an emotional experience which cannot be processed, or it may be a time when the subject has felt radically threatened — a threat to life, bodily integrity, or sanity (Pearman 60). This sense of being emotionally, cognitively or physically overwhelmed seems to be a salient feature of Kane’s dramaturgy, not only of the plays, but also in their relation to the audience. Analysing Kane’s drama in terms of the trauma theory of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, Peter Buse focuses upon the audience experience, remarking how the early plays especially are characterised by the administration of “heavy doses” of “brutalising shock” to the audience (“Sarah Kane in and on Media”). *Blasted*, *Phaedra’s Love* and *Cleansed* communicate trauma in a physical and often visually explicit manner. In contrast, in *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* it is textually generated. However, in both cases as the embedded response to radical alterity — (mis)recognised in death, violence, desire, madness — trauma emerges in coded form, in displacements, fragments, condensations and repetitions.

Kane’s attempts to unify form and content are, therefore, of central importance to any interpretation of the plays. The catalogue of brutal images and events from *Blasted* but also, *Phaedra’s Love* and *Cleansed* have been frequently enumerated. These are images which are deliberately searing in
concordance with Kane’s declared aesthetic project. With regard to *Blasted* Kane significantly has claimed,

the form is the meaning. The tension of the first half of the play, this appalling social, psychological and sexual tension, is almost a premonition of the disaster to come. And when it does come, the structure fractures to allow its entry. The play collapses into one of Cate’s fits. The form is a direct parallel to the truth of the war it portrays — a traditional form is suddenly and violently disrupted by the entrance of an unexpected element that drags the characters … into a chaotic pit without logical explanation. (qtd. in Stephenson 130)

While *Blasted* has been famously criticised for its anti-realism and lack of “external reality” (Billington qtd. in Sierz 96), this idea of collapse in particular facilitates a reading of the structure of the play as psychotic episode in an alternate reality where meaning is organised according to the apparent illogicalities of the unconscious. As Kane admits, in earlier drafts of the play the soldier was a hallucination, in the final version he is given an ambivalently solid presence — significantly however, while in the earlier drafts the soldier was named, he finally appears nameless (cf. Sierz 102, Saunders 46–47). Buse follows the hallucinatory possibilities to some extent in an article entitled “Sarah Kane in and on Media.” He proposes that given the traumatic nature of the play’s story and that trauma is generally communicated in a fragmentary, illogical and non-linear manner, the second part of the play might also be interpreted as an alternate order of experience, perhaps a figment of Ian’s imagination or unconscious (“Sarah Kane in and on Media”). Directors have tended to interpret the second half of the play metaphorically as a dream or nightmare, but Kane also suggests that “by the end, we should be wondering if the first half was a dream” (Sierz 106). Thus, while the play on a thematic level concerns manipulation, violation and war, it simultaneously deals with an interior ter-

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3 Kane’s views on theatre are memorably expressed in “The Only Thing I Remember is …,” *Guardian* 13 Aug. 1999: 12, quoted in Saunders: “Theatre has no memory, which makes it the most existential of the arts. No doubt that is why I keep coming back, in the hope that someone in a dark room somewhere will show me an image that burns itself into my mind, leaving a mark more permanent than the moment itself” (14).
rain, which appears to be structured according to associative principles.

Kane achieves this polyvalence through the use of a number of techniques which I will mention only briefly and mainly in relation to *Blasted*, but which may be traced in the other plays. The most important of these include structural and thematic repetitions, the confusion of literal and metaphorical levels of meaning, temporal disorientation or fragmentation, the role of ambivalent (self) perception or identity and overt symbolism. Certainly a logic of Freudian dream-work of condensation and displacement is suggested by the mirroring effects and repetitions in Blasted. In the figure of the soldier, Ian encounters a character like himself, whose actions to some extent reflect but also exaggerate his own behaviour in the first part of the play. The logic of nightmare is not only articulated through the arbitrariness of transformation brought by the blast, where rationality and causality seem to break down and in the symmetry of the soldier’s violation of Ian, but also in the way he is literally blinded by violence to which earlier he seems morally blind. Extending the uncanny reversals still further, it is perhaps a form of perverse wish-fulfilment that Cate, initially a vulnerable, simple-minded victim, becomes a calculating survivor who (in revenge) prolongs Ian’s suffering by thwarting his attempt to commit suicide. Cate’s repetition of the phrase “You’re a nightmare” (33, 51) though at first understood as a metaphoric displacement, seems, when repeated, to be intended literally.

Time is similarly treated in an overtly non-realistic manner. In the warp of dream logic “[e]vents [tend] to unroll according to a logic of their own like the abrupt changes of season and of the weather in *Blasted* and *Cleansed*, which [aim] at emotional (or symbolical) rather than meteorological accuracy” (Tönnies 63). It is noteworthy that the symbolic use of seasons pertains throughout the play, even the part which is ‘realistic.’ The contraction of time becomes most meaningful at the end of the play in which Ian is shown in various states: masturbating, attempting suicide, defecating, laughing, dreaming, in despair and hungry. Not only does each state express a need or drive, but the spiralling of scenes through seven stages

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4 Buse compares Ian’s callous report on a murder with his later inability to bear witness to the soldier’s horrific stories of war and relates this to Felman’s notion of witnessing and trauma.
ending in death reverses the seven ‘days’ of creation. Ian’s terror at the prospect of total negation, of “not being” is juxtaposed with Cate’s childish notion of death: “You fall asleep and then you wake up” (10). Rather than release into non-existence, Ian’s fears are surreally realised in his death and apparent resurrection at the conclusion of the play.

As the most conventionally developed character, Ian is explicitly the filter for the play’s most extended exploration of extreme states. In the latter part of the play Ian’s self-perception and therefore, identity are radically interrogated. The role of the dream and the unconscious resurface here. Writing of the position of the subject in dreams, Jacques Lacan emphasises how dreams foreground showing so that “in the final resort, our position in the dream is profoundly that of someone who does not see. The subject does not see where it is leading, he follows” (Four Concepts 75). Ian, in the hallucinatory order of scenes two to five, is shown by the soldier the extremities of his own desires and literally becomes the subject who does not see. This starkly contrasts with the self-assured identity he claims in scene one, in which he repeatedly sees himself in opposition to others. This is clear in the simple dichotomies of Self/Other evident in his attitudes to race, sex and even football. Death is a similarly stark opposition, a matter of being or not being. With the appearance of the soldier on stage, all these fixed values and assumptions — the compass points of racism, homophobia, aggression and cynicism — are destabilised, just as the play’s realism also begins to falter.

This unstable Self/Other terrain is articulated primarily through recurring references to perception and sight. For Lacan, a crucial formative step in the development of the subject is associated with the act of seeing the self — the Mirror stage (cf. Écrits 1–7, Four Concepts 67–77). Further, in his discussion of the role of the gaze as a structuring aspect to subjectivity, Lacan notes the fundamental significance of the relation of the subject (I) with the organ of sight (Four Concepts 91). The complex relation of the I to the eye — the act of seeing one’s self is contingent upon the act of imagining oneself as object of the gaze — is gestured toward in the entangled ways in which seeing in Blasted signify at different levels of reality and association. Seeing and looking permeate the play in various ways: for instance, Ian criticises Cate for her appearance — “You look like a lesbos” (7) — she does not perform the identity he wishes of her, i.e. con-
vitionally feminine and “sexy” (7). Ian perceives himself as worldly wise, he has seen everything, even his own cancer rotten lung. Although Cate seems explicitly ‘in the dark’ about so much, during Ian’s traumatic encounter with the soldier perspective is altered in a play of metaphorical light and darkness which recalls Lacan’s assertion that dreams are characterised by showing and not seeing or more accurately, not understanding. Significantly, though Ian claims to be a killer, the soldier highlights his ignorance of real brutality, advising Ian to “Stay in the dark” (46). The relation of light and darkness is then reversed when the soldier demands that Ian testify to his existence. In this instance it is the soldier who is ‘in the dark,’ and, not configured in the gaze, fears his own disappearance. As the ellipsis in his request suggests, all the soldier can ask is a record that he has been seen, “Tell them you saw me. Tell them...you saw me” (48), while Ian asks “[...] Why bring you to light?” (48). Finally, this relation is once more dramatically reversed when the soldier eats Ian’s eyes.

The erotic symbolism of the eye noted in Sigmund Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams*, explored in George Bataille’s *Story of the Eye* and acknowledged in the work of Lacan, shadows the play’s infamous climactic blinding episode. For Freud, and later Lacan, the symbolism of blinding in dreams is connected with castration anxiety. It is possible to see such anxiety at work in *Blasted* at a number of key points. Ian is threatened with castration — when Cate points his loaded gun at his crotch — and then is blinded by the soldier. Although Saunders has discussed the play in terms of its echoes of *King Lear*, Kane also claims the psychoanalytic symbolism of Ian’s mutilation, referring to it as a “metaphorical castration” (qtd. in Saunders 54, 58–63).

A similar territory of power and violation, with juxtaposed micro and macro levels of violence, is to be found in *Phaedra’s Love* and *Cleansed*, which are thematically linked in their dramatisation of the extremes of desire and love. Briefly I wish to remark how in both plays points of crisis are reached when the relationship between subject and object of desire is carried to absolute extremes. Referring to the influence of Roland Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse* on her variations on the theme of love in *Cleansed*, Kane describes love without boundaries as “a kind of madness” (Tabert interview with Kane qtd. in Saunders 93). This is especially stressed in *Cleansed*, where figurative declarations are taken literally and tested. As
Sierz puts it, *Cleansed* is “[a] parable about love in a time of madness [and] full of metaphors of addiction, need, loss and suffering” (114). The desire to possess another permanently or to identify completely with another — fundamentally self-destructive obsessions — are translated into vivid spectacles of torture. Thus Carl’s idealistic desire that his love with Rod be eternal and unchanging effectively leads to his mutilation and Rod’s self-sacrifice, while Grace ‘becomes one’ with her brother/lover Graham by annihilating her self, first by wearing his clothes, then by undergoing a lobotomy and rudimentary sex change.

Again both plays seem to be driven formally by the surreal logic of a traumatic dream. Although more pronounced in *Cleansed*, both adopt expressionist strategies of representation which determine characterisation and dramatic structure. In *Cleansed* Kane hones a non-linear form, comprised of numerous visually intense short tableau-like scenes which deliberately prevent the audience from “calm[ing] down” (Rebellato interview qtd. in Saunders 88). The oscillation between sentimental and tender love scenes and graphic physical torture promotes a keen sense of representational instability. As a result of this strategy of fragmentation, Kane empties out conventional characterisation or development, and to borrow from Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde* “the individual figures frequently become a [mere] montage of separate characteristics or an amalgam of roles, rather than a complete individual with whom the audience might identify […]” (18–19). What remains is a play of synthetic fragments which as one reviewer remarked “accumulate” rather than “unfold” (Saunders 87). The emotional pain of love is rendered physical, and although acts of physical torture in the play were heavily stylised in the original production (and most subsequent ones) they retain their shocking effect. Saunders suggests “[m]any of the features of *Cleansed* — the diminution of language, the extraordinary set and theatrical imagery, the ritualised cruelty, its extremes of love and pain” solicit a comparison with Artaud’s ‘Theatre of Cruelty’ (91). There is, however, some disagreement on this point even among his sources. Jannette Smith, then assistant director to Royal Court production, saw *Cleansed* as approximating Artaud’s “total theatre.” Simultaneously, the director James McDonald disassociated the first production from this objective, claiming that, “we were just trying to translate that extraordinary imagery into a consistent theatrical
language” (Saunders 91, 123). _Cleansed_ with its sensory excess and radical negation of identity in desire, certainly seems distant from an Artaudian interest in ritual or magic.

Indeed, it perhaps is more accurate to align Kane’s work with some of the characteristics and objectives of expressionist theatre. For instance in _Avant Garde Theatre 1892–1992_ Christopher Innes describes the techniques of expressionist drama as including: “the free associations of images [which] replaced logical organisations of mimetic shapes;” the use of “discontinuous scenes;” the erosion of “[t]ime and space […] as categories for organising experience, or rather the attempt to give the action immediacy and direct relevance to all spectators leads to abstract universalisation;” the use of montage; the diminution of character to the “status of figures as archetypes;” the reduction of speech and dialogue in “an attempt to reflect uncontrolled emotional depths of subconscious;” and finally the employment of anti-mimetic effects which were “artificial, exaggerated and rhetorical” (39–43). The aim of all these techniques is a fundamental rejection of realism and an attempt to express a world on stage which is interior and not subject to the rules of naturalistic representation. What is perhaps of most interest and relevance here is the significance attributed to experience, to the total involvement of both the performers and the audience. Through the techniques cited above, the “absolute emotional truth” (Innes, _Avant Garde_ 43) of subjective experience is to be conveyed at a pitch of intensity which is intended to radically challenge the world views and comfort zones of the spectators. The parallels with Kane’s work are self-evident.

In her last two plays Kane continues to work with emotional and psychological intensities and to use non-naturalistic forms. In these final pieces Kane advances toward a painfully obsessive focus upon subjects in crisis, making and unmaking multiple and contradictory selves through language. Unsurprisingly following rebarbative qualities of the first three plays, the linguistic aesthetic of _Crave_ and _4.48 Psychosis_ was welcomed as positively poetic. As Eckart Voigts-Virchow notes, critics complained of the failure of Kane’s first three plays to make their violent spectacles meaningful, to provide recognisable context and characters, or to make her intentions clear, but “ _Crave_ might be rejected on similar grounds — world not recognisable, pointless, no social observation or real people” (210). The difference
in reception was, nonetheless, marked. While *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* are ambiguous and deal with traumatic psychic states, they also share recognisable aspects of modernist literature. There is a disintegrative quality to these plays evoked in their key formal techniques: the erosion of character and citation of other texts. Consistent with Kane’s interest in form and content correlations, both these elements are significant in relation to subjectivity and alterity.

In *Crave* and *4.48 Psychosis* Kane continues to dismantle conventions of character to elaborate her codes of trauma through the play of rhythmic, at times poetic, speech. Any pretence of external reality vanishes, giving way to structurally open and polysemic performance texts which incorporate a variety of citations.5 *Crave*’s four speakers, designated merely by letters, return compulsively to dislocated memories, fragments of stories and volleys of conversation which may or may not concern the other speakers. As Voigts-Virchow remarks, the “reduced individualities” of *Crave* may be traced back to Beckett’s *Act Without Words* (210–11), while “[t]he play’s action, [...] consists of its language, it is anti-linear and anti-final, static, and achronological. The language is virtually disassociated from character [...] which prevents the consistent de-coding of initials suggested in some reviews” (211). In striking contrast to the earlier plays, traumatic or painful events are suggested (child abuse, rape, betrayal, broken relationships), but are always approached tangentially, are related and often cast into doubt or denied before receding again amid the layers of voices. The shifting subject positions in *Crave* short circuit the possibility of verifying these fragmentary stories, rather the truth repeatedly highlighted is the intrinsic role of absence and lack to the performance of identity.

*4.48 Psychosis* finally dispenses with fixed speakers entirely. As Kane has described, she wished the play to approximate:

> what happens to a person’s mind when the barriers which distinguish between reality and different forms of imagination completely disappear, so that you no longer know the difference between your waking life and your dream life. And you no longer know where you stop, and where the world starts. (qtd. in Saunders

5 Eckart Voigts-Virchow discusses the citations in *Crave* at length in “Sarah Kane, a Late Modernist.”
This state perhaps best expresses a form of radical alterity where the subject effectively cannot distinguish between self and other, and exists in a state of abjection or, as the play’s title indicates, psychosis.

**Double Coding — “You get mixed messages because I have mixed feelings” (Crave 165)**

So how might Kane’s experiments in truth and trauma be understood as extending the code of theatrical expression? This question is complicated by the obvious fact that Kane uses different formal strategies for each of her five plays. Yet, in apparent contradiction to one of the tenets of modernism, Kane rejects an interest in innovation or experiment for its own sake — “Art isn’t about the shock of something new. It’s about arranging the old in such a way that you see it afresh” (qtd. in Saunders 28). The unifying characteristic of her work is her engagement with radical alterity and trauma and, rather than a return to realism (Luckhurst) or formal naïveté (Gottlieb), her attempts to encode these experiences in ‘truthful’ may be traced in part to expressionism and, latterly, to modernism.

Kane’s achievement is in the double-coded quality of her theatre which takes place through her disruptions of form and intertextual strategies. While not overtly postmodern, if postmodern is taken to indicate superficial knowingness and anti-intellectualism, Kane’s work responds to the conditions of postmodernity — in particular spectacle and ontological uncertainty. She employs techniques of montage, fragmentation, citation borrowed from expressionism and modernism, yet her drama inflects them to express a contemporary condition of uncertainty with a deep seriousness, frequent irony and, often overlooked, bleak humour. In its foregrounding of extreme experience, while at the same time problematising its truths, Kane’s drama like its expressionist forebears,

takes up [the] experiential complex of alienation and decentering not as an abstraction, a literary topos or describable ‘content’ — such as the way that the ‘theme’ of ‘dehumanisation’ is frequently treated in modernism — but as an unavoidable effect of the [literary] text which the reader is made to experience at first hand. (Murphy 17–18)

As my opening quotation suggests, Kane’s commitment is to the cathartic
function of art. It is an ancient commitment, but one that in an age of habitual and desensitised violence, of unreality and of spectacular simulation gains a fresh moral imperative.

Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature


Gendered Bodies — Historical Bodies: 
The Development of the Brechtian Convention 
in Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* and 
Mark Ravenhill’s *Mother Clap’s Molly House*

Brecht and Feminism

Feminists and gender scholars have always treated Brecht’s theatre theory with reserve, levelling reproaches on various aspects of his dramatic works and theoretical writings. Thus, the author of *The Threepenny Opera* was accused of manifesting a typical Marxist “blindness toward gender relations,” believing that the resolution of the class struggle would immediately put an end to the oppression of women (Diamond 44). His characters, with the notable example of Vlasova, the protagonist of *The Mother*, were believed to promote and strengthen gender stereotypes (Wandor 148–53). He was even reproached for contradicting the tenets of his own theory, according to which theatre should serve as a tool of historicizing social formations and denaturalising ideological constructs. As Ann Hermann has been trying to prove, a play like *The Good Woman of Setzuan* idealized maternity instead of exposing the ideological implications of the concept of the ‘mother of the race’ promoted by the Nazis. Drawing on the studies of various feminist scholars, Hermann claims that Brecht excluded sexual arrangements from his critique of social relations and surreptitiously worked against the emancipation of women in the political sphere (307–308). Feminist theatre theoreticians on their part criticized Brecht’s conception of the theatrical apparatus of representation while his questioning of the conventions of realism was said to miss the point. Indeed, as some scholars asserted, he managed to pinpoint the workings of ideology and make visible
the contingent nature of social reality, but he did not put into question the
notions of stable subjectivity and authorship, believed to be inextricably
linked to the nineteenth-century realism. After all, some said, in epic thea-
tre the author and the performer, both possessed of stable identities, are
always present as agents animating the theatrical apparatus (Harris 77).
Finally, Brecht’s feminist critics relied on Heiner Müller’s critique of the
Brechtian fable, whose coherence and probability was to clearly contradict
the anti-mimetic nature of the epic theatre (Diamond 44).

It is by no means my aim to evaluate the validity of these, randomly
chosen accusations, since a fair assessment of this issue would probably
take a separate paper, if not a book. What is much more important in the
context of the problems I am addressing in this paper is the fact that the
constant re-evaluation of the Brechtian theatre theory within the field of
gender-oriented performance proves that in spite of the criticism levelled
on Brecht, his conception of political theatre provides some invaluable in-
sights for gender theoreticians. As Janelle Reinelt points out, the Brecht-
ian legacy, which has had a strong influence on the post-war British theatre
dating from the Berliner Ensemble’s tour in 1956, has also informed the
aesthetics of the feminist theatre, particularly its socialist wing. The basic
tenets of the epic theatre were adopted and reformulated in the contexts of
socialist feminist theatre, which, all reservations taken into account, found
in Brecht an ally in the critical examination of the socio-political condi-
tions of gender formation and its affinity with class-struggle (Reinelt, “Bey-
ond Brecht” 150–51).

What are those points of convergence between Brechtian theatre and
gender performance? This question was answered probably most extensively
by Elin Diamond in her 1997 book Unmaking Mimesis, in which she puts
forward a theory of what she calls the “gestic feminist criticism.” Diamond,
well aware of the discrepancies between Brecht and feminists, voices the
need to apply Brecht’s theoretical considerations to feminist theatre theo-
ry, because, as she claims, the category of gender in a most revealing way
lays bare the traps of ideology. The “not, but” convention, basic for the
alienation effect, is a most handy tool underscoring the historical nature of
the ideals of “masculinity” and “femininity.” The defamiliarizing alienation
effect can denaturalise dominant gender ideology and put into question
the petrified habitual perceptions, beliefs and behaviours, which, suddenly
quoted by actors from a critical distance, are to reveal their historical character. In this context Diamond admits that despite Brecht’s contempt for the bourgeois subject such a conception of theatre still rests on the assumption that the notion of agency has not been done away with since in epic theatre the theatrical machinery is controlled by the author, the director and the actors. Nevertheless, Diamond writes, Brecht’s theatre deconstructs subjectivity by exposing it as a result of a clash of various ideological forces that prevent a historically situated subject from deciding freely and changing. The sharp confrontation of the historicity of the actors with the historicity of the dramatic figures should prevent the spectator from perceiving a fictitious character as a “self” possessed of a seemingly naturally stable identity. And, what is most important, the A-effect should undermine the belief in the self-evidence and coherence of the spectator’s own identity by making him/her aware of her/his own positioning in the immediate socio-political context. Moreover the identity of the performer also becomes destabilized since, on Diamond’s account, s/he is only a historical subject which “plays” the performer, who, in turn, impersonates a character but remains just as divided and uncertain as the audience watching the play. Finally, on many occasions, Diamond stresses the fact, that her gestic critique requires taking into account the author’s point of view, and it should foreground those aspects of a play-text which manifest the author’s attitude to the problems of gender, or his/her efforts to disclose or hide the manipulations of ideology and the historically conditioned images of “masculinity” or “femininity.”

And it is this last remark, concerning the authorship of a play, that I would like to stress, since it seems to me that it tacitly refers to yet another aspect of the historicity of the author, namely, the way in which the tenets of the Brechtian epic theatre are modified in different historical and cultural contexts. This reservation concerning the historicisation not only of gender relations, or, more generally, the ideological framework of a given historical period, but also of the very conventions of the epic theatre has to be made in order to avoid accusations of treating the Brechtian theory as a timeless and universal model of politically engaged theatre. In my paper I hope to demonstrate how the Brechtian legacy has been adopted by two modern British playwrights to discuss gender-related issues and how the conventions of the epic theatre have been reshaped, according to the larger
ideological frameworks within which the plays have been written. I have chosen Caryl Churchill’s *Cloud Nine* and Mark Ravenhill’s *Mother Clap’s Molly House* as the raw material for this comparative analysis for various, interrelated reasons. Not only both these playwrights work clearly within the tradition of the British epic theatre, which has been developing in various directions from the mid-1950s onwards. Also, Churchill has been one of major influences on the British playwrights of the 1990s, of which Ravenhill is a prominent representative. Therefore, it should not be surprising that both *Cloud Nine* and *Mother Clap’s Molly House* reveal striking similarities of form. The action of both these plays takes place in two different historical periods, and both make use of cross-casting and cross-dressing as the major alienation devices. Finally, both reveal the author’s critical stance towards their contemporary society. And, obviously, I am most interested in those differences which may not come to view immediately, but which, nevertheless testify to the claim that the structure of a play inevitably springs from the larger cultural context in which it was written. And the two decades that separate *Cloud Nine*, written in 1979, and *Mother Clap’s Molly House*, which premiered in 2001, will provide a time-span within which I would like to trace the development of feminist and gender theory and the resultant reformulation of the Brechtian epic conventions.

*Cloud Nine* and the Socialist Feminist Agenda

Although Caryl Churchill collaborated with the feminist theatre group Monstrous Regiment already in 1976, she herself claimed that she started consciously subscribing to the socialist feminist views only by the end of the 1970s, after reading Kate Millet’s *Sexual Politics* and the first volume of Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*. This precise qualification as a supporter of socialist feminism is important in so far as we are looking for the reasons why Churchill resorted to the Brechtian epic conventions. What is significant at this juncture are the differences between the various feminist groups in the latter part of the 1970s. Socialist women activists clearly criticised the bourgeois feminists for propounding the idea of individualism and trying to compete with men primarily in the professional sphere. They also opposed radical feminists, who worked on the assumption that there exists a timeless, universal and ahistorical definition of femininity. This
assumption could be traced back to the second wave of French feminism, and the writings of its pre-eminent representatives, such as Cixous, Kristeva or Irigaray, who, each in her own way, tried to look for a way out of the oppressive social and cultural norms by calling for a return to the biological sex, to the materiality of the female body which was to contain the truth and the essence of femininity. Socialist feminists, on the contrary, wanted primarily to disclose the historical conditions that determined the social position of women and their common experience. Also they aimed at stripping the notion of sexuality of its assumedly “natural” character and to expose it as an ideological construct, just like Brecht wanted to reveal the economical and social constraints that determined the dominant view of reality, by laying bare its historical character. Socialist feminist scholars, particularly those working in Ruskin College, Oxford, attempted at reformulating the methodology of historical research, to shift the focal point from public to the private sphere. The members of the Women’s Studies Group tried to introduce into the college’s curriculum feminist historiography and their research focussed on excavating from the forgotten past the proofs of women’s social significance (Reinelt, “Caryl Churchill” 177).

Cloud Nine, written in co-operation with the Joint Stock Company, neatly fits this framework. Based on the parallel that Genet drew between colonial and sexual oppression, the first act takes place in 1879 in Victorian Africa. Clive is the head of a three-generation family. His wife, Betty, played by a man, is the embodiment of the Victorian ideal of wife. His son, Edward, whose role is played by an actress, clearly manifests homosexual inclinations and refuses to comply with the stereotype of a boy by playing with the doll belonging to his younger sister Victoria. Victoria herself is represented on stage by a dummy. Betty dreams about an affair with Harry Bagley, Clive’s friend and a faithful subject of Queen Victoria, but Bagley very soon turns out to be homosexual and, to make things worse, seduces young Edward. Clive meets secretly with Mrs. Saunders, a widow from the neighbourhood. Ellen, Edward’s governess, falls in love with Betty. The entire Act I, played in a farce convention, shows to the spectators this complicated network of relationships between the characters. And when finally all the secrets are disclosed, Harry, in order not to lose his privileged position, has to marry Ellen, so as to restore order in Clive’s house.
Act II takes place in London, a hundred years later, but the characters are only twenty five years older and almost all of them are played by actors of their own sex. Only Cathy, the daughter of Victoria’s lesbian friend Lin, is played by a man. Clive does not appear in the second act at all, and his absence from the stage is paralleled by the loosening of the constraints that assured the stability of the social hierarchy in the first act. Betty has left her husband and tries to live on her own. Victoria is in a relationship with Martin, a male feminist, who writes a book about women, from a female point of view. However, she abandons him for Lin. Edward, just left by his partner Gerry, wants to play the stereotypical role of a wife, who stays beside her man, doing the housework, cooking and knitting. He claims that he hates men, which leads him to the conclusion that he is a lesbian. Therefore he joins his sister and her lover and they live together, taking care of Lin’s five-year old daughter, Cathy. The girl is played by a man, who, just like Edward in Act I, does not want to adjust herself to the standard image of a girl imposed on her by the adults (Churchill).

The very outline of the action of *Cloud Nine* proves how Churchill thematizes the problem of cultural conditioning of gender by complicating the relations between the actors and their roles, the body and the costume. The most significant strategy adopted by the author and serving as an alienation effect is the relationship between the two acts of the play. By dividing the historical time (a hundred years) from biological time (twenty-five years) Churchill renders the distinction between nature and culture problematic. She proceeds along the lines of Foucault’s argument from the *History of Sexuality*, in which he has criticised the ‘repression hypothesis,’ according to which the liberal sexuality of the seventeenth century was repressed during the Victorian period. Foucault argues that sexuality was neither a product of nature nor of biology. On the contrary, sexuality is a historical construct produced by the proliferation of discourses by the end of the nineteenth century. In this way he has undermined the claim that sex reveals some sort of pre-cultural and pre-discursive truth and offers a way out of oppressive symbolic systems. Thus, he has criticised the association of sexual with political liberation, cherished, among others, by some radical feminist movements (Foucault 95–103).

But how to render the workings of such understood ideology in theatrical terms? How to demonstrate the way in which the body becomes
neatly fitted into discursive structures? How to blur the distinction between nature and culture, so that it no longer offers utopian solutions to political problems? The structure of Cloud Nine is an attempt at answering these questions by employing the machinery of theatre, which is always suspended on the borderline between illusion and reality. Through double casting and cross-dressing, Churchill questions the identity of her characters primarily by violating the iconic relation between the body of the actor and the character. Following in Brecht’s footsteps, she does away with the seamless realistic strategies of representation which concealed the problematic relationships between sex and gender. What is significant in this context is the way she herself describes the relation between the two acts of the play: “The first act obviously isn’t naturalistic but should be played for real; the second act clearly gets played for real but mustn’t get naturalistic. Cathy helps that, of course” (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 48). Thus, Churchill requires keeping constant tension within both acts, the tension between the “un-naturalistic” (“naturalistic” understood as that which represents “nature”) cross-dressing, and the “real” (or rather that which we recognize as real and plausible through reference to the outside world, as it is the case with seamless, realistic representational strategies). How this tension is kept up and what purposes it serves becomes clear when we take a closer look at the way the character of Betty develops as the action of the play proceeds from the first to the second act.

Trapped in a Net of Discourse

In the first act Betty is played by a man. But the actor playing the role certainly should not treat it as material for camp female impersonation. Churchill criticised one of the American productions of the play exactly because Betty was played as a camp parody. In her notes to the play Churchill writes that the actor should play “that person in that situation and not worry about playing a woman” (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 49) And further she adds: “there are moments when she can be really strong and forceful, with all the force of the male actor... like when she hurls herself at Mrs. Sanders. That should be a proper physical attack, a real rugby tackle” (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 49). What we can therefore infer from these suggestions is a rather defiant version of the Brechtian alienation effect. The male actor is
not to “show the woman,” like a distanced observer, pointing to the features of “femininity,” which would be a classic case of the Brechtian epic acting, but rather to identify with the person, or rather with her position in the hierarchy of other characters, as if regardless of her gender. It is probably to achieve this effect, that during the workshop preceding the writing of the play, one of the acting exercises consisted in pairs of actors drawing cards with numbers which denoted the strength of the person in the relationship. The task for the pair would be to enact the subordination-domination relationship, according to the numbers that they had drawn, so as to demonstrate the relational position and not the personal traits of character. But to demonstrate that Betty is, above all, a character defined by its place in a constellation of other characters, or, to use the Foucauldian parlance, in a “discursive field of power,” Churchill demands that this position is occupied by a male body, which has far-reaching consequences for the spectatorial perception of the character. Within the fictional world of the play we recognize Betty as a woman, because other characters recognize her as a woman, because she recognizes herself as a woman and because without this recognition we could not make sense of the story of the first act. The story, which could otherwise serve as a basis for a “naturalistic” staging. In Act I Betty has to be played “for real,” so as to cause a clash between this realistic, i.e. credible, story and the materiality of the male actor’s body. In this way Churchill demonstrates that the socially constructed identity, and the social recognition of that identity are not rooted in any natural, pre-discursive, bodily basis. It calls into question the relationship between the natural and the constructed.

And, paradoxically, the fact that in Act II Betty is played by a woman does not at all restore the character to the unity of sex and gender. On the contrary, when looked at against the background of the first act, Betty’s identity is even more destabilised, when a hundred historical years and twenty-five biological years pass, when the cultural conditions change and when her character is given a new body. We could perhaps ask what assures the continuity of Betty’s identity after the transition to the second act of the play? Her name? Her being recognized by Vic and Edward as their mother? After all, the identities of Vic, represented in the first act by a dummy, and Edward, played in the first act by a woman, are equally radically undermined. Or maybe the shared memories of the common past of
all three of them? Where does our, i.e. the spectator’s, knowledge of Betty’s identity come from? It is definitely not Churchill’s aim to give a definite answer to those questions, but rather, by manipulating the theatrical apparatus, to undermine the well-established patterns of perception and thinking and to impose on the spectators a critical perspective on what they usually accept as natural and unproblematic.

Betty is only the most telling example of how Churchill employs the Brechtian A-effect to discuss gender issues, but the play-text could provide many more proofs of how the author of *Cloud Nine* reveals the constructed character of identity. Incidentally, this theme features prominently in a number of her plays written in the early 1980s. The texts coming from this period are largely informed by Foucault’s philosophical writings, whose influence on Churchill has been perceptively traced by Jane Thomas. Thomas starts her analysis of *Cloud Nine*, *Softcops* and *Top Girls* by reminding that the author of *The Order of Discourse* radically denied the possibility of trespassing the discursive structure of the dominant order. According to him, any instance of breaking the limits imposed by the symbolic regimes automatically extends their power over the subject. There is no going beyond the discursive structures, because on Foucault’s account the subject is immanently the product of the regimes of power. Transgression does not subvert the social order. On the contrary, by stretching its limitations it widens the realm over which the institutional power reigns uncontested. Therefore one has to agree with Thomas when she writes that the characters of *Cloud Nine* do not perform any subversive gesture such as taking off a deceptive mask of culture to reveal the truth of nature. Neither do they break free from the discursive constraints by overthrowing the patriarchal authority, as some of 1970s radical feminists would argue. Although Act II shows a world free from Clive’s patriarchal dominance, the relationships between the characters are still shaped by old schemes, as it is the case with Edward, who wants to play a stereotypical role of a wife. The only achievement of these characters is forging for themselves new positions, within the existing order, however with the awareness of all the constraints imposed on them. As Thomas remarks, this point is succinctly expressed by Lin, who, reproached by Vic for forcing Cathy to obedience by frightening her with a story about a man who kidnaps naughty children, answers: “I’ve changed who I sleep with; I can’t change everything” (Thomas 177–78).
Transhistorical Bodies —
Ravenhill’s *Mother Clap’s Molly House*

And just as the characters of *Cloud Nine* are inevitably constrained and constructed by the exigencies of discourse, the figures in Mark Ravenhill’s *Mother Clap’s Molly House* cannot move freely from one identity to another, from one social role to another precisely because their bodily impulses and their desire impose a limit on the choices they make. Ravenhill thematizes this problem by adopting a dramatic form reminiscent of *Cloud Nine* — he has written a play with songs, set in two historical periods. In the early eighteenth century, Stephen Tull, together with his wife and the apprentice, runs a tally shop, but also lends fancy dresses to prostitutes, so that they can realize their clients’ wildest dreams. When Tull suddenly dies in a fit of some venereal disease, Mrs. Tull tries to take over the shop. After an initial financial failure, she decides to turn her tally shop into a molly house — a place where transvestites could meet at exquisite parties. The other plot is set in 2001 in a loft apartment of a gay couple who organize an underwear-sex party. Like in *Cloud Nine*, Ravenhill uses cross-dressing and double casting. Although the latter has not been indicated in the playtext, in the premiere production of the play at the National Theatre in August 2001 the same actors played the characters in both sub-plots. Also, the interrelation between the two historical periods provides the most important structural principle of the play. However, the structure of *Mother Clap’s Molly House* is, in some respects, a reversal of *Cloud Nine*.

The most significant difference lies in the way Ravenhill connects the two sub-plots of his play. Unlike in Churchill’s play, where the two historical times were neatly divided into two acts, Ravenhill interweaves the events from the eighteenth and the twenty-first century. Moreover, where Churchill stressed the differences between the two acts, Ravenhill underlines similarities. It is not only that the same actors play double roles, appearing in both historical periods. Significantly, the two sub-plots have a symmetrical structure, with the events taking place in one being mirrored in the other. For example, in the 1720s Stephen Tull, due to his promiscuity, contracts a venereal disease and dies in a fit exactly the moment when Amy, one of the prostitutes and customers of his shop is tempting him to have sex with her. Later Amy gets pregnant and has an abortion with an
ensuing massive haemorrhage. The same pair of actors play Edward, an HIV-positive fan of S/M leather costumes, and Tina, who is constantly bleeding because of a bungled piercing of her labia. And when she finally loses consciousness through a heavy loss of blood, it is Edward who brings her back to life, as if in a reversal of the Tull and Amy relationship. Such similarities are numerous in Ravenhill’s play, but all of them are built on the same principles: the same actors impersonate characters which are in some way parallel to characters of another historical period. Unlike in *Cloud Nine*, in Ravenhill’s play the body of the actor is the stable element, providing a firm connection between the two levels of the play. But this is just a superficial link.

For, at the same time, within the eighteenth-century sub-plot the body with its irrational impulses and desires is an ultimate limit of identity. Ravenhill renders this theme by employing cross-dressing convention, but in a way markedly different from Churchill. He shows his characters not only consciously choosing their genders, but also trying to govern their desires. The molly house run by Mrs. Tull is described as a place where a game is constantly taking place — a game in which assumed artificial identities are treated as real ones and where, supposedly, desires can be freely modified on a whim (Ravenhill 72). How this false identity is assumed, enacted and finally rejected is rendered in the ups and downs of the relationship between Martin, Tull’s apprentice, and his friend Thomas Orme, who, clearly attracted to one another, put on dresses, assume the names of Kitty Fisher and Susan Guzzle and enact a love affair. And when Kitty abandons Susan, Mrs. Tull, now running the molly house under the name of Mother Clap, tries to bring the two together by enacting a ritual, in which Susan gives birth to a child, represented by a wooden doll. This is to provide a visible sign of their reunion. But the ritual comes to nothing, as Kitty declares: “I in’t playing that. That’s stupid. Seems to me you better choose the games now on.” (Ravenhill 76). And this recognition becomes an eye-opener for Mrs. Tull, who being infertile, has vainly tried to realize her desire of being a mother by assuming the maternal role for the clients of her molly house.

And probably the moment of this abortive ritual is also the point in Ravenhill’s play where we can observe the crucial difference between the fictional worlds of *Cloud Nine* and *Mother Clap’s Molly House*. Significantly, in both these plays a baby appears on stage as a doll. In Act I of
Churchill’s play, Victoria is represented on stage by a dummy. What is different, however, is the status of this doll in each of the plays. In Cloud Nine the dummy is regarded by all characters as a baby and nobody questions her being human. Her presence on stage is only mirrored by a ‘real doll’ with which Edward constantly plays, in spite of his father’s prohibition. It is only the spectator who should see the correspondence between Edward’s doll and Victoria. The latter already in her infancy is taught by her mother what it means to be a girl, which makes her similar to a marionette obedient to the puppeteer’s will. In Ravenhill’s play, on the contrary, the characters possess the consciousness of taking part in a large-scale symbolic game of identities and they can refuse to enter it by rejecting one of its rules. They can always step out of the fictional universe or change it slightly, according to their current whim. But the price they pay for living in this totally voluntarist, fictional universe is their inability to recognize their own desires and to enter any spontaneous relationship. As Ravenhill seems to suggest, the only way out of the whirl of simulacra is to come to terms with one’s irrational drives, which, although they cannot be mastered, assure the authenticity of experience. And, probably for this reason, Mother Clap decides to sell the molly house and, as Mrs. Tull again, travel away from London to the countryside intending to lead an idyllic life beside her new husband (an ex-transvestite turned heterosexual) and Martin, who also gives up his female role.

Body Beyond Theory

It seems that in this play Ravenhill, who right from his debut has manifested critical stance towards both consumerist society and the basic tenets of the postmodern theory, points to the shortcomings of the radically constructivist gender theories, which proliferated in the 1990s and were inspired to a large extent by Foucault’s views. Along this line, the very discourse on gender construction, which in the 1990s has been striving to go beyond the opposition of gender and sex, was trying to prove that both sexuality and desire are merely discursive constructs. However, this discourse had to admit that it is impossible to theorise subjectivity without recognising the existence of desire, although it expresses itself in terms of the given discourse. In fact, it exceeds discourse and assures the subject’s
individuality and the possibility of transgression. And probably Ravenhill’s play could be seen as a reformulation of the question posed by Judith Butler in her 1997 book *The Psychic Life of Power*: “if a regulatory regime requires the production of new sites of regulation and, hence, a more thoroughgoing moralization of the body, then what is the place of bodily impulse, desire and attachment?”

A clear contrast can be seen between the way Churchill and Ravenhill use the convention of cross-dressing and double-casting. While the former aimed at questioning the identity of the body, the latter rather looks for that which is beyond the choice of the characters of his plays and exceeds the roles that they are assuming. It is the same body of the same actor that enacts the follies of the eighteenth century transvestites and the sexual fantasies of twenty-first century homosexuals. Also the same bodies belong to Martin and Thomas as well as to their female alter egos, Susan and Kitty. In another version of a Brechtian A-effect, the body remains stable not only within one life, but also across history as a sign of irreducible force of desire, that cannot be subdued to free will: “Can’t force the body when the body in’t willing” (Ravenhill 47). In this way one of the characters summarizes not only the futile efforts of Orme to persuade Martin that he should enjoy wearing a dress, but also the major point of the whole play. It is in this sense that desire, and not discursive structures, imposes limits on identity.

And probably the two plays discussed in my paper can provide another proof for a claim put forward by Diamond in the chapter of her book devoted to the gestic feminist theory, in which she argues that feminist theatre can regain its political effectiveness by manipulating the mechanisms of theatrical representation and particularly, those conventions which, on the strength of the principle of reference, link theatre to reality. Both Churchill and Ravenhill subvert the traditional patterns of representation by making visible the tension between the real and the fictitious, the actor and the role, the body and the costume. This tension is a unique feature of theatre and, at least since the time of Brecht, has been variously drawn upon by the politically engaged artists in their efforts to bridge the gap between the stage and the audience as well as to change the course of the external world. And, as the examples of Churchill and Ravenhill prove, this tension can still assure the force of theatre’s social impact.
Works Cited

Contemporary Ireland has undergone rapid transformations and the pace of change has accelerated especially during the 1990s. The preoccupation with the past and the nostalgia which governed much of Irish writing for long, today no longer hold much validity, or, as Declan Hughes put it in his article “Who the Hell Do We Think We Still Are? Reflections on Irish Theatre and Identity:”

We make a show of ourselves as we think we were in the past, because we don’t, or won’t confront ourselves in the present. Because, correctly, we fear the set of identities we have for ourselves won’t add up any more. And foolishly, we think that fear is better avoided than embraced. And the rest of the world colludes in this because they want us to be Irish too; hell, they’d like to be Irish themselves. (12, emphasis in the original)

And he continues to express his hope for the future of Irish theatre:

I’d like to see Irish theatre embrace the profound change that has occurred: that we are barely a country anymore, never have been and never will be that most nineteenth century of dreams, a nation once again; that our identity is floating, not fixed. I could live a long and happy life without seeing another play set in a Connemara kitchen, or a country pub. (13)
The plays of Enda Walsh\(^1\) would certainly appeal to Hughes, as they are neither set in Connemara kitchens nor country pubs. In fact, Walsh’s popularity around the world and the apparent adaptability of his plays to non-Irish contexts suggests that they are not even particularly Irish.

Despite his enormous success in Ireland, across Europe and around the world, Enda Walsh, as a representative of the young Irish drama scene, has received relatively little attention from academia. A recent study on *Contemporary Irish Drama and Cultural Identity* by Margaret Llewellyn-Jones, only mentions him in passing (42–43; 161). In the summer 2001 issue of the *New Hibernia Review*, an assessment of contemporary Irish drama ascribes to Walsh the role of the odd one out. The argument goes that in general the theatre in the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger seems to deliberately look for comfort in revivals of the old and some occasional new plays, an exception being the plays of Enda Walsh. Focussing on *bedbound*, the authors assert that:

> Walsh abandons the traditional set-up for plot and character, preferring to launch headlong into a character’s psyche from the outset, maintaining this frantic pace throughout the fifty minutes of playing time. The audience is startled into accepting any potential premise of character, no matter how bizarre, thus enabling Walsh to move between realism and surrealism. *bedbound* is a rich experience for audience and cast alike. Not only does Walsh successfully offer a new structure to his work, his use of language is also novel. In *Disco Pigs*, Walsh created a language shared by the two young characters that relies almost exclusively on phonetics and obscure colloquialisms. In *bedbound*, he has created a language that allows free movement between the internal and the external, between the deeply personal and the communal. (Haughey et al. 129)

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\(^1\) Enda Walsh was born in Dublin in 1967. He attended the same secondary school where another genius of contemporary Irish literature, Roddy Doyle, worked as a teacher. Later he moved to Cork, where he began to work together with director Pat Kiernan at the Corcadorca Theatre. Apart from the four plays I will be discussing in this article, Walsh has written extensively for page, stage and screen. Before his success with *Disco Pigs*, he had written a radical adaptation of Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* (1994) and a play entitled *The Ginger Ale Boy* (1995). In 1999, his first short film *Not a Bad Christmas* won the RTE/Cork Film Centre Script Award. Walsh also wrote the script for a film version of *Disco Pigs*, which premiered at the Berlin Film Festival in 2001 and was directed by Kirsten Sheridan. Walsh’s radio play *Four Big Days in the Life of Dessie Banks* was broadcast on RTE Radio One in 2000.
In this paper, I take up a similar point of departure. I argue that the exceptionality of Walsh lies rooted in the peculiar treatment of space and language in his plays.²

Both space and language are central determinants of dramatic action and theatrical experience. Not only does the stage setting have an influence on the actors’ performative realisation of the dramatic text, but their experience of the play and its performance will have an impact on how the audience perceives them and the space in which they operate as characters. Furthermore, language as a communicative tool between the characters may bring into existence new, imaginative, and evocative spaces outside of the real, spatial limitations of the stage.

For the purpose of this paper, the following differentiation will be made regarding the concept of space:

1. *productional* space — the spatial arrangements on the stage, i.e. what is visible to the characters and the audience;
2. *dramatic/fictional* space — the space and places inherently provided by the dramatic text (references to certain places of action in the stage directions, evocations of places within the dramatic text);
3. *theatrical* space — the experiential intersections of productional space and dramatic space.

² Short synopses of the plays discussed here are given in the appendix at the end of the article.
The creative interplay of productional and dramatic spaces creates as a third space the theatrical experience for both the actors and the audience. In this paper I argue that one of the novelties of Walsh’s plays lies in their potential to constantly re-examine and critically explore the boundaries and overlaps between the areas of productional and dramatic space. Productional space and dramatic space are constantly clashing, thus making the theatrical space, the experience of the play, the interplay of real and narrated, imagined locales and characters, ever more fascinating and often bewildering and disturbing, both for the characters themselves as well as for the audience. Language, too, is a multifaceted concept, not only in the realm of drama and theatre but in everyday life as well. Language gives expression and sense to space. If space becomes problematic and ambivalent, the language used to name and explain will have to adapt to these new circumstances. In other words, ambivalent spaces and places require new and innovative means of expression. By examining the peculiar ways in which Walsh works with different notions of space and approaches to language as a tool of naming, of ascribing meaning and of communication between both the characters and the audience, I will show that the common complaint that much of contemporary Irish drama is too much language-based and monologous rather than plot-driven and dialogical is in fact a necessary and positive situation rather than a problem or an internal flaw.

In Walsh’s plays, places of action are either only reflected upon by the characters themselves in their dialogues (Disco Pigs, bedbound) or they are conjured up by technical devices such as the tape recorder in misterman, which does not only create the various different locales in the play, but in fact also represents all the additional characters. And even if the place of action is given in the opening stage directions, as in Sucking Dublin, the council flat could just as well be anywhere. In essence, places and spaces in Walsh’s plays are manufactured, verbally constructed or technically reproduced to be audible but they are never visible. Additionally, in bedbound, Disco Pigs, and partly in Sucking Dublin, there is a real sense of enclosure and captivity, as much of the action that the audience is able to witness takes place in one single locale (the bed, the room and the council flat, respectively). The outside world consists of stories, narrated dreams and noises. And even if, via Thomas Magill’s tape recorder in misterman, there is a sense that a whole “real” world exists out there, and there are no walls
trapping the protagonist, the main character remains a singular and solitary figure on stage throughout the entire play.

In Walsh’s plays, there is a significant discrepancy between productional space and dramatic space, to come back to my previously made distinction. Productional space, that which is open to immediate visual experience on the stage both by the characters and the audience, heavily conflicts with the space and the spaces that the dramatic text evokes. Apart from this clash, all plays also constitute a binary opposition of “inside vs. outside” in their representation of spaces. The dangers of the outside spaces (the frequent knocking on the apartment door in Sucking Dublin with the chanting of “Out, out, out!” (SD3 39, 52, 58), the different locales of Disco Pigs that lie outside the walls of the room that Pig and Runt share, the world outside the enclosed bedroom of bedbound, and the people and places that are conjured up by the tape recorder in misterman contrast sharply and constantly threaten the narrative which takes place within the inside spaces. And it is exactly this constant negotiation between “inside” and “outside,” between theatrical reality and dramatic imagination that provides the main thrust for Walsh’s plays.

Walsh’s plays are dominated by isolated characters in small, enclosed spaces who constantly try to escape the insularity and claustrophobia inflicted on them, and narrating their way out seems to be the only possible solution. This becomes especially crucial in bedbound and Disco Pigs where the characters are deliberately exposed to the additional pressurising force of the on-looking audience. When the wall crashes down in the opening scene of bedbound, there is no way for the characters but to act and this is what they do, they narrate, they re-enact scenes from Dad’s life to fill the silences and the empty spaces. They dramatically re-create memory to try to escape the pain and terror of the present. It is the overpowering immediacy of the present which forces the characters to re-act. What haunts all the characters and what they all try to cope with is the present moment. Memory (the scenes from the Dad’s life in bedbound or the scenes from the birth of Pig and Runt in Disco Pigs) is deliberately unmasked as being

3 References and citations inserted in this article refer to the playscripts as published by Nick Hern Books, Dublin: DP: Disco Pigs, mm: misterman, SD: Sucking Dublin, bb: bedbound.
artificially constructed. Memory is narrative and as long as that narrative does not show itself as being related to the immediate present, everything is fine.

The primary tool by which Walsh’s characters aim to achieve this coming to grips with the instabilities and uncertainties of the “outside” is language, as the Daughter in *bedbound* reflects, “I see a silence that needs packing with words/oh christ/calm/‘calm’ is a small word ya can’t shout/calm is what I want/…” (12). But calm is impossible, since, as the Daughter asserts, “for what am I if I’m not words/I’m empty space is what I am/…” (13).

The only problem is that established codes of expression, stable semantic structures no longer work as a tool to name, to describe, and to make sense of the present. In *Disco Pigs*, language itself, thus, becomes the object of artificial distortion. Pig and Runt cannot communicate in the language of the “outside.” As an attempt to achieve security and safety from the “outside,” they communicate in their own special “insider language,” something that only the two of them share. It sets them apart and keeps them safe, but only for so long. In the end, as Runt decides to change her situation, she says,

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Mus ged away! No mo all dis play an pain [...] Go girl! Leave! An it well ovur, drama fans! [...] An I wan Pig an I wan for all da buzz an all da disco we do dance but hey ho an wadda ya know I wan fur sumthin else! [...] Jus me!! Jus da Runt!! So mayb ta Crossheaven, mayb das where a girl can sleep sleep sleep an be alone. Jus me an da big big colour blue. [...] Runt, she calm, calm down ... an I watch ... da liddle quack quacks ... I look at the ducks ... as they swim in the morning sun ... in the great big ... watery-shite ... that is the river Lee.
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Where to? *(DP 29)*

To sleep and to be alone is her desire. She wants to go somewhere else, wants to be somebody else. It is over for the drama fans — the “play” has ended and the “real world” creeps in on her. The sudden change from Pig Talk to “proper” English also indicates this significant break within the play.

In *bedbound*, although here it is not an invented private code, language is the central element. Dad and Daughter are trapped together within the four walls of the bedroom and the only way to pass the time would be to sleep or to talk. Dad prefers the former, whereas the Daughter insists on the latter. As the two begin their “play within the play” (they “stage” Dad’s
life as furniture salesman with the Daughter playing the complementary characters), the nature of their connection becomes clear only very gradually. It is through their dramatic interaction as “Dad vs. other characters” and the monologous ramblings of the daughter that we as the audience as well as they themselves as characters learn about who they are.

What is remarkable about bedbound though, is the way language works in this play. The confinement of productional space, the enclosed bed, is transcended by the “play within the play” (the dramatic re-enactment of the father’s life) as well as by the daughter’s reflections on her situation in the enclosure. Nevertheless, transcending the spatial limitations of enclosure on the stage by the dramatic enactment and the daughter’s narrative, language discloses itself as a dangerous tool. It articulates and, thus, endows with meaning both the world beyond the four walls as well as the lives of those who are trapped within those walls. Only through language do the characters become aware of the horrors, instabilities and insecurities of the world outside.

In Sucking Dublin and misterman, the role of language is not as powerful as in the two other plays. As a tool of communication, however twisted this might be, language does not work in either of them. Sucking Dublin, of course, has people talking to each other. But there is no sense whatsoever that language can contribute to the fostering of any sort of relationship between the characters. Meaningless, inconsequential and superficial verbal exchanges are only occasionally broken up by the drug-induced ranting of Lep, Little Lamb’s reflections as she makes her way out through the dark and dangerous streets of Dublin or Amanda’s reflections on her relationship with Steve. But it is exactly in those moments, when the speed of the “action” decreases, when characters stop to reflect that the play takes on its full thrust. It is important to notice, whenever characters have something important to say, they never say it to each other but to the audience instead. Sucking Dublin, then, is literally “in-yer-face theatre” (Sierz). Although critics have had relatively mixed feelings regarding the play, blaming it for playing the game of sociological analysis too hard, dismissing Sucking Dublin as cliché is too easy a way out. Maybe the play is better

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4 In a review of Lukas Langhoff’s Bremen production of Sucking Dublin in 2001 published in Theater heute, the characters of the play are accused of being “real Irish
judged as a sequel to *Disco Pigs*, showing what might have happened to Pig and Runt, after they both left the safe haven of the imaginary worlds they once used to inhabit.

In *misterman*, Walsh employs a tape recorder that is operated by the main character, Thomas Magill, throughout the play. However, the recordings are not recordings as such, in that they are not testimony of voices of the past but they are just as much present as Thomas’s own words.

Thomas’s mind is focussed on restoring faith and moral order to his hometown of Inishfree. Around him he only sees decay and immorality and he is destined to do everything to change this. A play for one man and a tape recorder (a parallel to Beckett can easily be spotted here), the play consists largely of Thomas’s monologues with all the other characters coming from the tape recorder. The drama unfolds as the tape winds its way in the recorder.

With the play set in the present, Thomas’s insistence on religion as the stabilising factor of his community, on faith and morality is clearly dated. What is striking is that all that which is dated comes from Thomas’s own live lips, whereas the issues and problems that he is fighting against are all conjured up by voices and sounds emitting from the tape recorder. Recorded sin meets live, albeit twisted, virtue.

In addition to manipulating perceptions of time, Walsh also experiments with notions of space. At the end of the play, after Thomas finally realises that his mission is doomed to failure and after he has murdered Edel, his “recorded” and imagined girlfriend, the stage goes up in flames and the stage direction tells us: “Lights remain on THOMAS as he sits happily in Heaven. The lights fade out to black as the stage continues to burn around THOMAS” (mm 55).

If he is sitting in Heaven, how can the stage be burning around him? Traditional notions of Heaven and Hell are being turned on their heads. *misterman* clearly problematises the untimeliness of an insistence on religion as a stabilising factor in Irish society. As a character, Thomas Magill seems completely unfit for the contemporary world. His is a world of underdogs, young, of course, and without orientation, indulging in boredom, drugs and violence, very much in line with the tradition of the embitteredness and frustration of the ‘brit-play’” (Jantschek 38; my translation from the original German).
doubted faith, love and inherent kindness, or so he believes. When he “meets up” with Edel, the girl of his dreams, he says:

That glow about her…a halo…the Holy Spirit shining from her making her almost invisible to me in the sunshine. Oh thank you Lord. She hops over a gate and off through Friel’s field tiptoeing through the lazy cattle and poo poo. I do the same. I catch up with her by the river. (mm 50)

His aspirations and hopes are completely shattered though, both by the continuing amorality of his fellow townsfolk as well as by Edel who, in the end, when he asks to hold her hand, just tells him:

EDEL. Fuck off, Thomas!
THOMAS. I just want ta hold yer hand, that’s all!
EDEL. What the fuck are you doing!?
THOMAS. Please, Edel!
EDEL. Let go, ya fucking moran [sic]! (mm 54–55)

Thomas does not belong in the world evoked by the tape recorder. The tape recorder conjures up the present, the people and sounds of Inishfree in the Ireland of today. What comes from the tape recorder clashes with Thomas’s views on how things should be.

All four plays end on similar, uncertain notes: Dad and Daughter in bedbound drift off to sleep and are enclosed once more. What will happen to them, no one knows. Pig and Runt are separated, both going their own slippery paths. Runt’s final question “Where to?” remains unanswered. Little Lamb in Sucking Dublin may or may not fly off to “Costa Del Fuckin Anywhere But Manky Stinkin Dublin,” possibly “Majorca, Spain” (SD 59), her future is uncertain, too, and Thomas angelically-diabolically sits in heaven-hell and watches the world from above or below.

Walsh does not provide the answer to the fate of his protagonists, but at least he succeeds in dramatising the anxieties and fears, dreams and hopes of the Irish today and thus contributes to the ongoing and necessary discussions about the future of Irish society and culture in a globalised world. With the awareness of the present as a dangerous and uncertain territory which is yet to be mapped out and made sense of, Walsh’s characters are all walking the slippery slopes of contemporary Irish reality.
Appendix: Synopses of the Plays

_Disco Pigs_ (1996)

In September 1996, Enda Walsh’s first major success, _Disco Pigs_, premièred at the Triskel Arts Centre in Cork, produced by the Corcadorca Theatre Company. It featured at the Dublin Theatre Festival in the same year and was given its UK première at the Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh in 1997. It was awarded the Stewart Parker Award and the George Devine Award (together with _Sucking Dublin_) in the same year.

Since then, Pig and Runt, the two main characters of _Disco Pigs_ have travelled the stages of more than sixteen different countries around the world and on various occasions, their original stage language has been replaced with adaptations of other regional or local dialects. Recently, the two have even been spotted in Australia.

In Germany alone, there have been over 40 different productions of the play. Walsh himself comments on this in an interview: “the root of all my work is obviously Cork but in Germany it’s Bavaria” (Chambers et al. 479).

In the play, two teenagers, Pig (male) and Runt (female), recall and relive their lives in Cork City, Ireland, up to their seventeenth birthday when the play takes place. Born just minutes apart on the same day in 1979, they share the same memories, experiences, fears and hopes. They have even developed a language of their own — a mix of local Cork dialect, baby and youth talk enriched by animalistic pig sounds.

Throughout the play, they remain in one and the same room (although different locales are suggested by stage directions such as “sounds of extremely busy pub and somebody singing Danny Boy” [DP 22] — blurring the boundaries of theatrical reality and the dramatic imagination). Their lives in “Pork Sity” (i.e. Cork City) are dominated by their constant search for action and adventure, from dancing at the local discotheque, the Palace, to robbing off-licenses, etc. At the end of the play, Runt decides to leave and live her own life, breaking out of the boundaries of the imaginary world that she and Pig used to inhabit.
Sucking Dublin (1997)

Sucking Dublin was the result of a project of The National Theatre Society/Department of Education Youthreach Drama Project and was first produced with the Abbey Theatre’s Outreach Department in 1997. Since then, the play, although not matching the success of Disco Pigs, has been staged all across Europe.

The play is set in Dublin. It begins with a birthday party for eighteen-year-old Little Lamb that is hosted by the drug dealer Steve and his wife Amanda in their council flat. Lep (male), Fat (female, Lep’s sister) and Dove (Little Lamb’s and Lep’s baby) are also present at the party. The party ends abruptly when Steve rapes Little Lamb on the living-room table. As a theatrical pendant to Irvine Welsh’s Trainspotting, the play continues to conjure up the smaller and bigger tragedies of life in the apocalyptically aggressive drug-infested metropolis. Much of the action of this play is, once again, restricted to the four walls of the flat. But the dark forces of the Dublin underworld are consistently knocking at the door. Little Lamb is the only character in the play that is eventually able to get “out.” Wandering through the dirty and dangerous streets of Dublin, she eventually reaches the airport and, leaving her baby behind, decides to fly off to Majorca with the money she has stolen from her family.

misterman (1999)

misterman was originally produced by Corcadorca in 1999 with the author playing the lead character. Subsequently, there have also been various productions throughout Europe (in Spain, Germany and Hungary for example) and in the US.

In misterman, we enter the world and mind of Thomas Magill. In his mid-thirties, he is living together with his mother in the town of Inishfree. At first glance, he seems to be a calm, friendly and harmless character. But as the action progresses Thomas finds that his mission to bring God to his fellow townsfolk is continuously failing, and he gradually turns more and more violent and aggressive, with the action culminating in the final scene of murder, where images of heaven and hell merge and the stage goes up in flames. Throughout the play, Thomas is the only character on stage and the complementary characters and scenic imagery are conjured up by a tape recorder that Thomas operates.
Walsh’s most recent play bedbound has shocked, bewildered and disturbed theatre-goers around the world possibly even more than Disco Pigs. Since its première at the eircom Dublin Theatre Festival in 2000, the play has been staged all over Europe and across the Atlantic. Walsh himself directed the Italian production at the prestigious Teatro Piccolo in Milan in 2000.

In bedbound we encounter Dad, a middle aged man, and his polio-crippled daughter together in a small bed which is completely enclosed by four walls. The play opens with the front wall crashing down, exposing the bed and the two characters. Throughout the play, Dad and Daughter perform scenes from the father’s life from storeroom boy in a furniture shop to successful furniture salesman in Cork and Dublin with Dad playing himself and the daughter complementing the scenes by playing those characters her father meets.

As it emerges, Dad is ashamed of his crippled daughter and the wife whom he only sees as the producer of this shame. After having to give up his furniture stores in Dublin (due to competition pressures) as well as murdering one of his employees for failing to open one of his new shops on time (he wanted to be the first person to open three new shops in a day) Dad returns to Cork and begins to build walls inside his home. He gradually encloses his wife and daughter in the bed to hide them from himself and the outside world. His wife eventually dies in this bed leaving his daughter there alone (until he joins her shortly before the play begins).

Trying to recover her own past, the daughter continuously urges her father to tell her about his life. At the end of the play, Dad’s narrative arrives at the moment shortly before the play begins, when he finds his wife dead, carries her out of the house and afterwards joins his daughter in bed.
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“Published and Perished”: The Blurring of Boundaries in Margaret Edson’s Wit

New forms of theatrical expression have typically been associated with British “In-Yer-Face Theatre” or American Performance Art. Yet Margaret Edson’s first play *Wit* (1995)1 might have set a new trend for the American theatre scene. Blurring the boundaries of genre, point of view and ontology, her play deviates from traditional mainstream realism and touches on the postmodern in the sense of “the dominant of the ontological” (McHale 10). It shocks without the exhibition of violence plus sex and takes up the origin of drama in communal ritual with the protagonist creating her own audience to negotiate identity and reality, thus repudiating the concept of the autonomy of art.

The ironic opening line “Hi. How are you feeling today?” (Edson 7) sets both tone and theme for the entire play. The apparently trivial question is put to the audience by the play’s main character, Vivian Bearing, a distinguished yet dying English professor specialized in seventeenth century poetry, particularly in John Donne. She is being treated at a research hospital for terminal, end-stage ovarian cancer. The opening serves a manifold purpose: It introduces the clinical setting, allows Vivian to exert control and lead the conversation by asking questions, and of course breaks through the imagined fourth wall by this direct Brechtian approach to the audience. *Wit* extends the traditional code of dramatic expression in both

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1 The play premiered, after substantial cuts Edson made to the two and a half hours manuscript, with California’s South Coast Repertory Company in Costa Mesa, California in 1995. It received (inter-)national attention with the production by Long Wharf Theater in 1997, which was followed by productions by MCC in New York City. *Wit* received the Pulitzer Prize in 1999.
form and content, which results in a blurring of boundaries. Which boundaries and how, will be examined in section two of this paper; the first will scrutinize compositional and thematic innovations.

I.

The above-mentioned very first words of the play already represent one particular formal feature: the epic exposition of the narrative act. This is hardly a new idea, yet it has not really made its way into American theatre, apart from singular examples such as Thornton Wilder’s *Our Town* (1938) and Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). In her play, however, Edson breaks with traditional rules in that she revalues the audience as Vivian’s only significant other, almost as if it were another character in the play. Vivian stages her life only for these implied spectators. They are the counterpart she is dealing with, not the other characters on stage. Surprisingly, the frustration of theatrical expectations produces not an anti-illusionist effect, but rather drags the audience into the fiction. *Verfremdung* leads paradoxically not to distance, as Bertolt Brecht intended, but to empathy, which is in itself remarkable: As an uncompromising academic, Vivian offers relatively little common ground for identification. The relationship she develops with the spectators takes the only form she knows as a scholar: that of a lecture. She tries to impress with coolness, irony and wit — which is very necessary. As Edson herself puts it: “Vivian needs the audience and it’s the only time she’s ever needed anybody” (Albis). What does she need the audience for? Her autobiography is not the usual *confes-sio* or *apologia* that seeks absolution. As an impresario, she stages the last hours of her life. This gives her back the control that is simultaneously slipping away from her because she is transmuted into an object of research: “Now I know how poems feel” (Edson 15). But as she suspects, she will lose that control, she is dependent on the audience for the time when her narration ceases. Vivian’s epic comments also lay bare the structural principles of realistic theatre:

In this dramatic structure you will see the most interesting aspects of my tenure as an inpatient receiving experimental chemotherapy for advanced metastatic ovarian cancer.
But as I am a scholar before … an impresario, I feel obliged to document what it is like here most of the time, between the dramatic climaxes. Between the spectacles.

In truth, it is like this: (She ceremoniously lies back and stares at the ceiling.) […] If I were writing this scene, it would last a full fifteen minutes. I would lie here, and you would sit there. (She looks at the audience, daring them.) Not to worry. Brevity is the soul of wit […]. (Edson 30)

Vivian foregrounds the produced, artificial nature of the performance giving it the form of a play-within-a-play. Consequently, she also gives her life a twofold fictive quality by producing it as a fiction even within the fictional frame of the theatre: “It is not my intention to give away the plot; but I think I die at the end” (Edson 8), questioning the absoluteness of drama. Vivian gives warning signals that even in mimetic theatre practice, there is no faithful picture of reality, but only interpretations. In this way, she makes clear that she, too, has a certain perspective and is by no means a reliable narrator.

That Vivian is more of a story-teller and producer than a chronicler is underscored by two other extensions of the conventional code: namely the monodrama and the memory play. The cast consist of, apart from Vivian, four characters and some non-individualized lab technicians, students and residents. It hardly resembles classical monodrama, such as Samuel Beckett’s *Krapp’s Last Tape* (1958) or Patrick Süskind’s *Der Kontrabaß* (1981). But Vivian dominates the scenes with her physical presence, not leaving the stage for one instance, while the other figures give only short appearances. The professor’s share of lines, with her long monologues, by far outweighs that of the other characters. And she delivers not only monologues, but also soliloquies, which are directed not at other people in the play, but at nobody or, that is, at the implied audience. Interaction with other people is staged for the spectators to illustrate and back up her narration. This supports my reading that Vivian only really addresses the audience and nobody else. While she is lacking the classical deathbed scene, the entire play is one deathbed monologue with the professor as monagonist. She holds a long, eloquent prologue resulting in a mute, silent dying and a rather “non-dramatic” death, the fight for her corpse being then all the more spectacular. So Vivian’s is the only voice in the play. And where there is no one else to confirm or contradict the presentation, reliability remains dubious.
The literary genre memory play reminds us that the self is not a coherent thing, but split in multiple “I”s: the I’s of narration and reflection and their coming to terms with the living I, or here rather the dying I. And quite in the tradition of the memory play, involuntary memory emerges in *Wit* and thwarts the official version of “truth.” Yet here again, Edson takes it even further by presenting Vivian as producer, actor, and narrator, putting the three I’s of narrative biography — author, narrator and character — on stage. This is the formal equivalent of the main theme that runs through the play: how Vivian can uphold a sense of self while she is losing her professorial, exceptional position which is irrelevant since she is a patient and has agreed to contribute to research by undergoing chemotherapy which she knows cannot heal her. In a conventional memory play the conflict lies in the past and the spectators witness how the characters try to figure out and come to terms with what happened before. This is not the case in *Wit*. It is a memory play in that by remembering Vivian is still trying to regain her old identity. But it goes beyond a memory play in that Vivian struggles in the present, and the climax is still to come: Vivian, wrestling with her former self, fights to uphold her own version of self in a humiliating environment. She competes with the physicians on their own turf by learning their vocabulary. This is a life-and-death-struggle, which is evoked in belligerent metaphors. Vivian remarks: “My only defense is the acquisition of vocabulary” (Edson 37). As a consequence of this war of words, the audience is confronted with an unusual intensity of tech talk from the field of medicine and literature: “epithelial carcinoma,” “hexamethaphosphacil,” “hepatotoxicity” and from the latter “tergiversation,” “histrionic outpouring,” as well as “subjective complement,” to name but a few (Edson 9, 31, 35, 37, 41, 7).

It is not only the mixture of language codes that makes *Wit* stand out, but also the blend of genres. One can very well ask whether *Wit* is a play at all. Vivian is engaged in the act of both telling and showing, combining the epic and the dramatic. Poems are recited and a running theme is Vivian’s interpretation of Donne’s Holy Sonnet “Death be not Proud,” thus adding a lyrical dimension. Yet another genre, that of children’s stories, plays a significant role: At the time of Vivian’s initiation into the semantic order, which is triggered in a Lacanian way on her fifth birth-day by her father while her mother is strangely absent, she reads a Beatrix Potter book fea-
turing rabbits. When she dies and exits the world of words, her mentor Professor Ashford reads to her about a runaway bunny. So both her entry into and her exit from language are effected not by so-called high literature, but by a children’s story. This literary mixture is expanded with quotations from and allusions to William Shakespeare, from *Hamlet* to the sonnet “Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day.” No one genre can satisfy Vivian. Literature is her primary means of understanding and filtering reality. Vivian needs all the three basic literary forms together — epic, lyric and dramatic — in order to come to terms with her experience of dying. This hybrid structure of the play constitutes in itself a widening of perspectives. It warns of the blind spots each point of view inherently provides. Is there any sort of implied hierarchy among the forms? In the end, Vivian does not want to hear Donne’s sonnets anymore, rejecting the intricacy of the metaphysical poems. The figure who witnesses her actual dying, her former mentor Professor Ashford, also chooses not to quote from a Donne poem to comment on Vivian’s death. Instead she selects Horatio’s lines from *Hamlet*: “and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest” (Edson 63). So it is implicitly the form of drama that prevails.

The heteroglossia\(^2\) in *Wit*, be it literary or medical, is striking and a deviation from the language in theatre we have grown accustomed to. Usually, the audience is exposed to primarily oral dialects or sociolects. Technical terminology, as it relies on writing, is alien to the genre, and its discursive power tends to be dealt with in narrative prose, not in drama. The central issues of literary studies and clinical research are thematic challenges. Breast cancer has lately received literary attention (for example Philip Roth’s *The Dying Animal*, of 2002), yet ovarian cancer is a rarity in contemporary American literature. *Wit* displays pelvic exams, nausea and pain. The effect of this thematic transgression is the emphasis on the body as a key site of identity. Vivian establishes this connection toward the end: “I am a scholar. Or I was, when I had shoes, when I had eyebrows” (Edson 54). Before, however, she had been living along the Cartesian body-mind split and did not conceive of herself as a thinking body. She experiences the

\(^2\) Cf. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts. M. Holquist calls heteroglossia Bakhtin’s master trope.
cancer as “not me,” as an alien agent. From this confrontation with the body results a new struggle for identity. How the otherwise mind-orientated professor goes down into her corpor(e)ality including bodily input and output resembles a Bakhtin grotesque carnival. Vivian herself calls her nightgown her “costume” and her self-description as an “unwitting accomplice” (Edson 8) suits the clown or the jester who seems unaware of his wisdom or hides his knowledge behind foolishness.

What makes Wit stand out is that the disease is not meant to symbolize anything. It is neither a curse nor an expression of character — it just is. Logically, Vivian never asks “Why me?” Susan Sontag has explained how illness works as metaphor and how, to her dismay, cancer is considered as “an expression of the inner self; the character causes the disease” (Sontag 46). Vivian’s metaphors are different, however. For her, it is an exam, which she can pass, if she just piles up enough knowledge. But it is not Vivian’s IQ that is tested, but her EQ. The disease is here the catalyst which prompts a process of reflection in the professor that brings marginalized facets into the centre and forces her to confront what she has always tried to evade by accumulating knowledge: mortality, and perhaps even the death of her mother. Not cancer is the catastrophe in Vivian’s life, but her anxiety and hiding, which are the key terms that run through the text. Hence her obsession with being in charge, controlling the audience, and giving her version of the story. And yet, she gives so many clues, is so emphasizing the fictionality of her presentation, that I suspect she wants us to distrust her, to find her out. Donne functions as Vivian’s Doppelgänger. In the same way that the lyrical I of Donne’s poems plays hide and seek with the reader, Vivian stages a masquerade. She gives many explanations why she strives for knowledge, which only hide her real motivation: to maintain control and to evade death. And Wit proves that motivation to be the driving force for scientists of all the faculties. In the end Professor Ashford reads to her the story of a rabbit that runs away and hides — and is always found by his mother. Vivian acquiesces and then passes away, after having decided that she will not be animated once her heart has stopped. Assistant doctor Jason, who desires to continue his examinations, calls in the rescue team, with the outcry “she’s research” (Edson 64). But nurse Susie wins the physical struggle over the corpse, respecting Vivian’s last wish. The deceased professor does not remain in a fetal position, in which the dead are so often depicted.
Instead she rises from her bed and sheds her clothes. Vivian recovers her identity, she, at last, claims her body: She is naked for an instant before the lights go out and is described as beautiful in the stage directions. Death is not set in the context of dissociation, but of wholeness and beauty. Eventually, the body figures as both the site of narration and individuation. The last words of the play come from the young doctor, who yells during Vivian’s resurrection from her deathbed: “Oh, God” (Edson 66). Vivian is not a God, but she, too, has been successful in a creation of her own, she, too, has “made a world.”

The other thematic innovation of Wit is its focus on highbrow literature and academic research. In flashbacks we witness university seminars and discussions of term papers. The play overflows with allusions to exemplary texts and manifests Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogism (Bakhtin 93): A literary voice or utterance is transplanted into a foreign textual and cultural context, and from the confrontation of the two there results an alienating effect by repetition and innovation. Vivian learns that literature, as experienced and modelled reality, is an interpretation, not simply an imitation of that reality. The drama represents a discussion of fiction’s relationship to life. In line with new criticism, Vivian expects that the understanding — or interpretation — of a text leads to an understanding of the world. Yet Vivian realizes that for all her knowledge of the “Holy Sonnets,” she knows nothing about death. Her wisdom has remained detached from life, stifled by her obsession with scientific methods in literary studies. In the course of Vivian’s illness the confrontation with literature loses its academic position set apart from life and regains its existential function, which it had at the very beginning of Vivian’s career but which was subdued in her student years. Her first individual interpretation was refuted with the words: “You must begin with a text, Miss Bearing, not with a feeling” (Edson 13). This has been the guideline for her life in academia. Here lies the paradox of new criticism: On the one hand literature is perceived as compensatory opposition to science, on the other hand literary studies are requested to become more scientific. In her emphasis on detailed research she wants to partake of the objective aura of the natural sciences, rather than countering the prejudice that these sciences are unbiased. The analysis of Vivian’s cancer symptoms is an act of interpretation, Vivian’s stomach cramps have been “falsely read.” Yet Vivian counters another preconception, namely
that the interpretation of poetry is subjective and arbitrary. Jason, the assistant doctor and a former student of hers, comments:

It felt more like boot camp than English class. [...] Listen, if there’s one thing we learned in Seventeenth-Century Poetry, it’s that you can forget about that sentimental stuff. *Enzyme Kinetics* was more poetic than Bearing’s class. (Edson 59, 61)

Vivian’s preconceived notions³ are tested as well. She thought herself an expert in life and death and now sees that knowledge has for her remained purely abstract. The seemingly familiar turns alien, into something completely new. Her research and her knowledge are no longer of assistance, do not bestow control and fame and therefore immortality. So she cries out her own interpretation of the central sonnet “Death be not proud.” When Vivian substitutes scientific meticulousness with personal intuition, she has found her own self again. Before, Vivian has spent and wasted her time looking for “the” meaning of the poem to solve the puzzle. It is only at the end that she refutes the canonized interpretation to replace it with her own and that she acknowledges the process character of interpretation and its constantly changing relationship to life — and death.

*Wit* hence extends the code in formal and thematic ways. It deviates from traditional monodrama by featuring several characters, yet giving Vivian the overwhelming presence, converting her into a monagonist. The play plays with the epic form by establishing the audience as the protagonist’s only major interlocutor. The spectators are consequently drawn into the illusion, not alienated from it. Vivian depends on the audience to construct her identity and to act as the inheritor of her story. Since Vivian lays bare the principles of theatre, she emphasizes the fictiveness of her own life. Her multiple I’s, which she presents in the form of the memory play, underscore the unreliability of Vivian’s narration. The problem of perspective is further developed by the heteroglossia and the hybrid generic form of *Wit*. In the somehow democratic inclusion of the narrative and the lyrical in the drama, along with popular children’s literature, the play asks for

a widening of perspectives, drawing the readers’ or viewers’ attention to
the blind spot of each individual point of view. Thematically, *Wit* surprises
by depicting disease “as such,” stripped bare of its metaphorical burden.
Vivian, who conceives of everything as an exam or a question of know-
ledge, finally realizes that illness and death cannot be mastered like a test.
Therefore, mortality means the ultimate loss of control, which she has tried
to avoid all her life. In a carnivalesque inversion of traditional assumptions,
the body and not the mind is the site of identity, and it is also the body and
not the mind that survives. After death, she has no voice, yet her limbs
move. The other unusual theme of Edson’s play is academic literary re-
search and the act of interpretation as the link between fiction and reality.
Vivian grapples with text after text, searching for an unambiguous solu-
tion, passing through Hans-Georg Gadamer’s classical hermeneutic circle
(Gadamer 473) to eventually comprehend that each understanding is only
temporary, never finite, and carries its own deficiency.

II.

The formal and thematic variations lead finally to a blurring of boundaries.
Borderlines are continuously questioned in the play: “The insuperable bar-
rier between one thing and another is … just a comma?” (Edson 15), only
to be re-confirmed: “semicolon, exclamation point” (Edson 57). Specifi-
cally it is the distinctions, first between subject and object, self and other,
and second between literature and reality which start to flicker. The tradi-
tional Cartesian split between *res cogitans* and *res extensa* is strongly sub-
verted by the depiction of research in the play. Each system has its preju-
dice which influences the outcome of the research, be it an experiment or
an interpretation. Vivian’s continual reversal and exchange of roles, here in
charge, then again powerless, here a teacher, there a learner, results in a
confusion of object and subject. By featuring the protagonist as at once
author, actor and interpreter of the play performed on stage, Edson pro-
vokes a revision of the conventional distinctions between subject versus
object. Now if this boundary is vague, then, consequently, the limits of the
self, which has been perceived as “the” subject, as *cogito ergo sum*, are un-
certain, too. Vivian loses her sense of identity because she has been robbed
of her possibility of agency: “What we have come to think of as *me* is, in
fact, just the specimen jar, just the dust jacket, just the white piece of paper that bears the little blacks marks” (Edson 43). She has to reconstruct herself, and that depends on her success in communication. And to communicate with, Vivian has nobody but nurse Susie at her disposal, whom it takes Vivian long to respect — and the audience. So identity is not just the product of a creative personal achievement, it is on the contrary a communal achievement. The genre of autobiography has been thought to represent the autonomous self per se. As John Paul Eakin has pointed out: “It promotes an illusion of self-determination: I write my story, I say who I am, I create my self” (Eakin 43). Yet to make it clear that all identity is relational, some authors have rather used the term mythobiography. The capacity to be addressed as a “you” by others is preliminary to the ultimate capacity of being able to say “I” of oneself. Identity formation then is socially and discursively transacted. The self is defined by its relation to others. If one assumes a relational model of identity, then other people’s selves and lives may become our business just as, reciprocally, ours become theirs. In these cases it is difficult not only to determine the boundaries of the other’s privacy, but also to delimit the very otherness of the other’s identity. The first person of autobiography “is truly plural in its origins and subsequent formation” (Eakin 43). The spectators become co-authors of Vivian’s life story. This overthrows not only the concept of the omnipotent author, but also of the autonomy of art. Narration is not literature before it is read; a play is not a drama before it is performed. Vivian needs us to accept and promote her version of the story. So her god-like creation of a world is ambiguous, only half true, if it were not for the audience. In her mentor Professor Ashford we have a rival, who assumes the role of Horatio, the survivor to rescue Hamlet’s wounded name. She, who has not known Vivian’s suffering and epiphany during her illness, will certainly tell another story. Yet the ontological status of the scene is unclear; the visit from Ashford might just be a hallucination of Vivian’s.

Another category that Wit contests is the habitual distinction between life and literature. It starts with the blurring of boundaries of the actual theatre. Somehow we feel on stage with Vivian. In addition Vivian con-

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4 Audre Lorde gave her novel Zami (1982) the subtitle: A Biomythography and Claude Louis-Combet talks of his novels as mythobiographies.
ceives of her life entirely in literary terms, always comparing it to textual models such as “I would prefer that a play about me be cast in the mythic-heroic-pastoral mode; but the facts, most notably stage-four metastatic ovarian cancer, conspire against that. *The Faerie Queene* this is not” (Edson 8). For the layman it can be hard to distinguish which lines are quotations from other literary works and which are the figures’ “original” words. Vivian is even able to foretell the utterances of other people; she knows about her own prescribed text: “My next line is supposed to be something like this: ‘It is such a relief to get back to my room after those infernal tests.’ This is hardly true” (Edson 43). *Wit* consequently refutes the idea of an “Ur-plot.” What seems to be the authentic original turns out to be already mimesis. Vivian already sees the *Festschrift* for her death in her mind’s eye: “The volume would begin with a warm introduction, capturing my most endearing qualities. It would be short. But sweet. Published *and* perished” (Edson 29). She alludes here to the academic principle: Publish or perish. Instead of linking the two verbs in the active voice by the alternative “or,” the professor uses the participles and the consequential “and.” Vivian perceives that as a comment on her own life — or rather death. Given her anxiety and hiding in the face of mortality, it can be read in the sense that she has realized that her extensive output as a scholar could not buy her eternal life. Instead, her numerous publications rather lead to her death. Another reading considers just these as the crucial events in Vivian’s existence: namely her death and her involvement with literature. So death is not opposed to life, but to literature. Literature means life then, blurring the ontological difference between fiction and reality.

The ending of the play is very peculiar: It continues even after Vivian has passed away although she is the stage manager. The frame that the professor provides is suddenly missing. Who writes this scene? Who is the author behind Vivian? It can be read as a success of hers: the co-authors continue the story. This “metalepsis” (Genette 238–43) or “strange loop” (Hofstadter 10) poses the question: Whose reality is it? The text’s conclusion is that reality does not exist detached from the individual who experiences it, which leads again to the thesis that subject and object are interdependent.

“Hi. How are you feeling today? […] I am waiting for the moment when someone asks me this question and I am dead. I’m a little sorry I’ll miss that.” (Edson 7–8). By the time this moment comes, and of course it
does come, Vivian has touched our lives. Her vita and death have captured our imagination so that we can offer an alternative commemoration of the professor to that of the *Festschrift*.

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Primary Literature


Secondary Literature


On 6 August 2002, Joyce McMillan commented in the *Scotsman*:

If there has been a dominating theme on the Edinburgh Fringe over the last few years, it has been the idea of 21st Century society as a cold place, full of loneliness and disconnection; there are endless images of untouched skin, lonely hearts, lives dominated — in ways that range from the sad to the pathological — not by human contact, but by the mediated images of television, film, the web.

If one adds to this description the loss of the ability to communicate effectively via language and its substitution by physical violence it can be applied to the plays I am going to analyse here. In Gregory Burke’s *Gagarin Way* and Anthony Neilson’s *Stitching*, battles of the mind are transferred onto the body, transforming it into a site of conflict.

*Gagarin Way* premièred during the Edinburgh International Fringe Festival in 2001 at the Traverse Theatre, whereas *Stitching* was first performed at the same venue during the 2002 Festival. Burke’s play was celebrated for its implications of lost values and political rebellion without a cause. *Stitching*, on the other hand, shocked by its challenging and immediate representation of physical violence in tandem with sex, “rubbing the audience’s noses” in the sewage of pornography, sado-masochism, and mutilation.

Of course, at this point one might ask: “So what’s new? Haven’t we seen it all before in all the other ‘in-yer-face’ or ‘blood-and-sperm’ plays?” However, what I would like to prove to be an additional quality in both *Gagarin Way* and *Stitching* is the breakdown of language as a reliable communicative system. Whereas, for example, in Kane’s *Blasted*, language proves
to be a means of aggression in itself (for example when the soldier reports
the atrocities he committed), there is no inherent meaning to language
anymore in Burke’s and Neilson’s plays. Still, it could be argued: that’s
nothing special at all — just look at Pinter and the unreliable language his
characters employ. Yet Burke’s and Neilson’s characters substitute brutal
physicality for verbal language in a way which cannot be found in Pinter’s
plays.

In *Gagarin Way*, Eddie and Gary, two factory workers at a Dunfermline
computer chip warehouse, have taken a management consultant hostage.
They claim to be making a stand about their exploitation and hope to cause
an anarchist uprising. Although it turns out that their hostage, Frank, is
the wrong man, they do not release him and in the end he is killed by
Eddie. The arbitrariness and futility of this killing is further stressed by the
fact that Frank is not frightened of death: “I’ll no be missed. I’m fifty-
fucking-six. I’m over. Had enough ay trailing round the world. [...] Get on
with it. I’ve had enough ay this fucking shite” (Burke 86). What is more,
Frank is the one who really understands the economic and political pro-
cesses of globalisation, whereas Eddie and Gary, almost randomly, merely
make use of political vocabulary. Thus, Frank comments:

> (indicating Tom) silly cunt ... he thinks capitalism can be domesticated ...
> (Laughs. Pause.) They don’t realise how powerless they are. (to Gary) They don’t
understand ... and you won’t make them. (Pause.) But ... if you want someone
who’s easier to kill? (Beat.) If you want me to say I’ve exploited and robbed hon-
est, working people? Caused my fair share of suffering? Destroyed the environ-
ment? Fine. I’ve done it. So has everybody else. [...] There’s no need for defences
when something’s everywhere. (Pause. To Gary) That’s when you’re beat. (Burke
86)

Moreover, “Frank appears to once have been more of a left-wing anarchist
than his kidnappers could ever imagine [and thus] ironically mock[s] their
pretence of being anarchists” (Starck 76).

> It’s a new era. [...] People cannay help feeling it’s a clean slate. Some things deserve
another chance. [...] Start ay the last century ... big fucking upsurge in the anar-
chist violence. Sabotage. Assassinations. [...] You never know, it could happen
again. (Burke 42)
Later on he says: “[w]e’ve got a bit ay a communist tradition round here you ken” (Burke 64). Further, when Frank tells the others that his son lives with a group of travellers on a bus, Gary responds:

What’s living on a bus gonnay day ... ay? [...] Pointless. Fucking pointless. [...] You have tay hay a job. The only way tay stop ... tay oppose capitalist society ... is tay work. You threaten nay cunt sitting in a lay-by. Workers control the economic power. [...] (Burke 78)

Whereas Gary seems to believe in the slogans he sprouts, Eddie makes it clear rather early on that the anti-capitalist/globalisation cause, with all its rhetoric, is merely providing an excuse for his actions:

I’ve never been a political person. Not till now. But I’ve always been interested in violence. Always ... ken ... really enjoyed it. I tried all the gratuitous stuff, the recreational violence ken, the leathering folk just for the sheer, amoral pleasure ay leathering them ... and it was good at the time, dinnay get me wrong ... but ... ken the law ay diminishing marginal returns ... it always kicks in eventually ay. [...] seen as how I’m a bit more mature now [...] I thought I should maybe try something more idealistic [...] see if that’s what I needed. (Burke 41)

As a consequence, Eddie’s political comments mock Gary’s statements. So when their hostage regains consciousness, Eddie suggests: “[...] we might as well put him through a wee bit ay mental torture. [...] I wouldnay mind doing the whole megalomaniac bit tay. Explain the plan for world domination and all that. [...] I was quite looking forward tay that” (Burke 52).

If Eddie’s language of politics is intentionally devoid of meaning, a series of signifiers without any signified, Gary’s ideas are shown to be outdated and exposed to be half-baked by the politically aware Frank. Therefore, the left-wing catch-phrases Gary uses carry no content either. Language fails to fulfil the purpose of meaningful communication. The collapse of the connection between the sender and the recipient of messages is maybe best demonstrated when Tom, a politics graduate who works at the factory as a security guard and involuntarily gets drawn into the crime, talks about his dissertation. He describes his interviewing of old union members:

I’m talking to all these old guys and I start being like all professional ... like ... saying to them, do you not hold that much of the radicalism of the miners grew from the fact that they were forced to work underground and were therefore
further alienated by the oppressive nature of the darkness … They all just looked at me like I’m daft … one of them goes, no, son, you have to go underground, that’s where the coal is. […] There was another bloke who told me he got blacklisted from the pits … I said, were you victimised because of your political activities? … He goes, no, I hit the foreman over the head with a shovel for shagging my wife. (Burke 71)

Joyce McMillan, in her review of *Gagarin Way*, compares this randomness of political vocabulary to a geographical phenomenon when she talks about a “terminal moraine of what we used to call politics. There are plenty of brilliant, sharp fragments of political language and thought lying about in the landscape [...] that [...] no longer have any traction or significance”.

This lack of significance, then, is compensated by physical action, taking Frank hostage and killing him. The substitution of words by violent physical action climaxes in Eddie’s remarks on tradition during his actual stabbing of Frank. When it turns out that their gun is unloaded, Eddie reverts to a “traditional” weapon — his knife: “Good job I’ve got this then. *(Stabs Frank.)* Tried and trusted. *(Stabs Frank.)* Traditional. *(Stabs Frank.)* If you don’t keep the old traditions going the young’ll forget. *(Stabs Frank.)* Then where’ll we be?” (Burke 88). Gary’s earlier talk of having “a bit of a communist tradition here” is completely emptied of its original meaning and replaced with pure physical violence.

Burke comments on his play that “it is mostly about a community: a community that adhered to a certain leftwing politics while the world transformed itself into a much more complex place” (“Funny Peculiar”). So, instead of likewise developing and adjusting their means and language to this new situation, the characters of *Gagarin Way* transfer their political fight onto the body of their hostage.

*Stitching* shows a couple trying to come to terms with the violent sexual history of their relationship. When Abby and Stu are confronted with Abby’s pregnancy, decisions about the future have to be made. Watching their attempt to decide whether to have the child or not, and whether to continue their relationship, the audience is taken through a series of flashbacks in which the couple act out ‘highlights’ of their life together. These are full of aggression and violence, pretend “whore and client” games, pornography and self-mutilation. Whereas the audience is
left believing that Abby and Stu are acting on a kind of natural impulse for most of the play, it is revealed in scene seven that their son Daniel died in an accident due to his parents’ carelessness. When Stu insists that they did not kill him, Abby responds: “We didn’t save him, though, did we? We were too busy fighting to hear him die” (Neilson 44). Thus, “playing games” is the couples’ only way to cope with the pain and guilt of having lost their child. There seems to be a hierarchy of means of communication according to their effectiveness. First, we see Abby and Stu talking to each other:

Stu All right then! So neither of us knows what we want. So maybe if we can figure out what we don’t want — then what’s left will be ...
Abby What we want.
Stu (nods) What we want.
Pause
Abby So what do we not want?
Pause
What do you not want?
Stu It’s not about what I don’t want. It’s about what you don’t want.
Abby What I don’t want depends on what you don’t want. (Neilson 4)

This obviously proves talking to be a futile exercise. Thus, they decide to “do the paper thing” which involves asking questions concerning the way partners behave in a relationship and writing down the answer. This seems to be a serious attempt at communication. If the spoken word is too insubstantial, it needs to be fixed on a piece of paper. However, this likewise ends in a fight and Abby’s statement: “We can’t have a child together. Christ we can barely get through this stupid fucking quiz together” (Neilson 42).

With communication via language having failed, what is left is physicality. On the one hand there is sex, which the couple enjoys, but on the other hand it is shown to be always connected with aggression and violence. Various stages of fierceness are shown as the intensity of violence builds up. In scene four Stu stuffs money into Abby’s mouth when they play whore and client, then he confronts her with pornographic pictures downloaded from the internet. Then he grabs hold of her hair and as some part of her seems to enjoy this, he twists it until her face contorts in pain and they sink to their knees. He goes on presenting pictures of bestiality and women’s self-mutilation to her. The next stage is raw physical action
with both characters rolling on the floor “in the throes of violent sexual passion” (Neilson 33). They are almost choking each other on a plastic phallus and only stop when the pain becomes too much and “[t]hey can hardly speak for lack of breath” (Neilson 33). The scene continues with Abby fantasising about first Stu hurting her with a razor, then raping and killing her with a gun, and then both of them hurting someone else. She goes as far as suggesting the abduction and torturing of a child, referring to the “moors murderers” who did just that in the 1960s, topping it with the proposal of Stu seducing the mothers of the actual moors murder victims, filming this and selling it on the internet (this, of course, caused quite a strong reaction in the audience). So, although the scene starts off with the couple having sex — and by now it has become clear that they do somehow love each other — it ends with Abby trying to think up ever more shocking ways of sexualised violence, breaking taboo after taboo. Although this is put across in a verbalized form, all these words are filled with physicality, a physicality which finally, in scene nine, culminates in Abby’s mutilating herself.

Even worse than Abby’s inability to express her grief in “more conventional” ways is the fact that when Stu recognises that they need to redefinition of their relationship, they have passed the point of no return. Their only connection, the only possible way of communicating their emotions is not through words, but through their bodies.

And if you had to pretend to be a whore and I had to pretend to be your client — if that was the game you needed to play so you could cope with that [Daniel’s death], then fine — for a while. But now we have to go forward. We have to be something new. We can’t be what we’re not. And we can’t be what we were. (Neilson 45)

In response to that, Abby asks Stu whether he likes her new sexual fantasy schoolgirl outfit. This draws Stu’s and the audience’s attention to Abby’s body and climaxes in her showing him the results of her self-mutilation: she has stitched up her vagina.

The loss of meaning is further highlighted by Neilson’s use of a song from a BBC TV children’s programme throughout the play. At various points we hear the song “We will fix it, we will mend it” from the Bagpuss programme which was first shown in 1974. It revolves around the girl Emily who brings things she finds to her shop, Bagpuss & Co, where they are identified and repaired.
It becomes evident quite early that matters for Abby and Stu have long gone beyond repair and thus the song functions as an ironic comment on the state of affairs. Moreover, as Eddie’s remarks on tradition were shown to have taken on a corporeal quality, Abby’s singing of “We will fix it, we will mend it” while showing Stu her mutilated genitals has taken on the literal meaning of stitching up her own body. Not only that, it has also entirely lost its meaning of repairing and restoring, but is transformed into the opposite — destruction of the body.

This emphasis on the body easily lends itself to a high theatricality. Thus, the Traverse setting of Stitching included a large heart crossed with an arrow drawn on the floor in chalk. In the course of the performance the outlines of the heart became blurred and finally invisible which was caused by the characters’ violent physical contact on the floor. As a result, at the symbolic level, it is their physical relationship which destroys their emotional relationship.

If the physicality and the references to Auschwitz victims and the moors murderers caused walkouts from the audience, Neilson rationalises his work stating that he does not

like theatre that simply works on the brain; it’s like a denial of the fact that it’s live, as if the liveness of it was an inconvenience. So, I like to do something that puts people in a difficult situation emotionally so that they have to engage with what’s going on; I mean, I like to create a visceral response which they then have to filter through their intelligence. (qtd. in McMillan, “No Man’s Land”)

This brings to mind Artaud’s ‘total theatre,’ which is often quoted in connection with ‘in-yer-face theatre.’ Artaud claimed that stage performance must not primarily address the mind, but rather call for violent and direct action, “unafraid of exploring the limits of our nervous sensibility” (Artaud 121–22). Furthermore, as Neilson talks of the audience’s filtering their visceral responses through their intelligence, Artaud speaks of subjecting his spectators to an “unforgettable soul therapy” (Artaud 121).

Another theatre practitioner who comes to mind is Jerzy Grotowski with his concept of a poor theatre. He called for a theatre without props, masks, make-up and costumes, relying totally on the body of the actor, instead. “The essential concern is finding the proper spectator-actor relationship for each type of performance and embodying the decision in phy-
sical arrangement” (Barba 20). The specific spectator-actor relationship in *Gagarin Way* and *Stitching* causes an immediate and visceral experience for the audience from which it cannot withdraw. Considering that the actor’s body functions as a place for the encounter of public and private, it is not surprising that one critic even remarked that, watching *Stitching*, he felt like he was being battered himself. This impression, in turn, is intensified by the fact that the physical arrangements of the actors, as Grotowski calls them, are not merely enhancers but replacements of verbal expressions.

Although this physicality works very well in terms of theatricality and audience response, concerning the characters of the plays the question remains whether the meaning of verbal expressions can be *adequately* translated into physical action, whether the body is actually able to fulfil the function of meaningful communication. Considering that the body always exists as already encoded (see for example Christopher Balme on Syncretism in the theatre), as marked by categories such as race, sex, age, class, all of which are socially realised via language, it cannot be seen as independent of language. Thus, the breakdown of verbal communication likewise affects the encoded body. It cannot be an autonomous source for the production of meaning, since it does not exist in a void. As a consequence, attempts to replace the verbal with the physical are bound to fail and end, as shown above, in the destruction of the body.
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III.

Ethnic Interchanges
Cross-Cultural Connections —
Indian Signs/English Conventions

Two relatively recent works on the British stage — Stoppard’s *Indian Ink* and the Lloyd-Webber produced *Bombay Dreams* — raise significant questions about the interpretation of cultural signs. And both do so on quite different levels: through merging contrasting artistic traditions, specifically Indian and British — and through adapting non-theatrical media (painting/film) to live performance. Of course, Indian figures have appeared before on the English stage. So one might well ask why it is worth paying attention to these, particularly when one is usually seen as a fairly minor play in the Stoppard intellectual canon, while the other is an undisguisedly commercial spectacular, the value of which seems largely defined by strictly monetary standards: the eleven million dollars it reportedly took to mount the show. Both those judgments may be true. Yet, each of these works — and *Bombay Dreams* perhaps even more than *Indian Ink* — can be seen as unique signs of cross-fertilization, cultural interpenetration, or (one might even say) productive artistic miscegenation. And this represents something decisively new, as can be indicated by even a brief sketch of how the intersection between Britain and India has been presented on the English stage over the last century and a half.

During the Victorian heyday of Imperialism, there were military melodramas dealing with the Siege of Lucknow, or heavily romanticized stories of mystery and magic revolving round immense diamonds like the fabled Koor-I-Nohr. Although these have sunk completely from sight, leaving no trace outside theatre posters, they undoubtedly echoed Kipling in unapologetically confirming the colonial system, and projected the image of the subjugated ‘Other’ and the cultural/religious imperative of ‘the white man’s
However, the theatre also seems to have led the way in challenging this imperialist picture — the first sign being a play by Bernard Shaw’s friend, the classicist Gilbert Murray, titled *Carlyon Sahib*. Though never published, it was performed by Granville-Barker and Mrs. Pat Campbell (as a rather unlikely Indian princess) in 1896. Highly critical of British colonial attitudes, it prefigured E.M. Forster’s *Passage to India*.

So drama led the way; and from then on, whenever English plays include Indian figures, they are presented as a corrective to the imperialist, or racist, attitudes of the average British audience. But even when these characters are intended to challenge restrictive notions of cultural identity, India was heavily romanticized on the stage. Thus, however serious the cultural critique of *Carlyon Sahib*, inevitably that dusky-skinned princess in Gilbert Murray’s is an exoticized and sentimentally idealized figure. And the problematic nature of this approach can be all too well illustrated by another friend of Shaw’s: William Archer, the translator of Ibsen, who wrote a play with the (deliberately and exaggeratedly) romantic title of *The Green Goddess*. Although Archer first began working on this around the same time as *Carlyon Sahib*, it was only finished and finally produced in 1920.

Like Gilbert Murray, Archer’s clear intention is to satirize the attitudes of the British in India through reversing and inverting the standard biases of racism and colonialism, and by this reversal to promote a public debate on the future of India — the jewel in the imperial crown. And his reason for returning after so long to this dramatic material was obviously linked to his publication of a book on *India and the Future* in 1918, less that two years earlier. Though this book is in many ways paternalistic, all too typical of the period, Archer’s analysis of the Indian culture (seen as a mixture of barbarism with a long history of civilization), economy (recognizing the extent to which it was being exploited by British cotton manufacturers) and education (defined solely by traditional European standards) is extremely detailed. And he concludes by calling for the end of colonization through educating the Indian population to make them capable of self-government in the modern world.

1 It should be noted that the poem with the same title (published in *McClure’s Magazine*, February 1899) where this line occurs, was specifically intended by Kipling as helpful advice to the Americans, following their takeover of the Philippines.
The dualities are made immediately clear at the very opening of *The Green Goddess*. When a plane-crash lands three representatives of imperialism — an army major, his beautiful wife, and a philanthropic doctor (who is developing cures for tropical diseases like malaria) — in an isolated Hindu kingdom in the Himalayas, they are greeted by “a wild procession […]” cumbs to the romanticism of its title. An early indication of this is when the Raja “plagiarizes” a surprise effect “from the excellent Walter Scott” (Archer 24); and indeed the plot descends into standard military melodrama. The Raja turns out to be barbaric after all. He shoots the Major, then attempts to seduce the Major’s wife, imprisons her and the doctor in chains, and is on the point of sacrificing them to the completely lifeless title-figure — the statue of “a six-armed Goddess of forbidding aspect, coloured dark green” (Archer 1) — when the British air-force arrives just in the nick of time, to bomb the Raja into submission and save the Empire by rescuing its surviving representatives: the widow and the doctor, who (in yet another cliché) have loved each other secretly, without ever declaring their passion, and are now free to marry.

Although Archer’s and Murray’s colleague Bernard Shaw never set a play in India, preferring Ireland or the Egypt of *Caesar & Cleopatra* to anatomise colonialism, in his 1930s play, *On the Rocks*, he introduces an Indian as the antitype of a bankrupt British political establishment. Immensely wealthy and a confidant of the Prime Minister, this extremely polite and cultivated character has risen to the top of British society, but rejects everything it stands for when underlying racist attitudes emerge and he is contemptuously called “a silly nigger pretending to be an English gentleman” (Shaw 255). Justifiably outraged, he makes exactly the same point as Archer’s Raja: that when the British “were naked savages worshipping acorns and mistletoe in the woods” (255) his ancestors were founding an enlightened “civilization, compared to which your little kingdom is no more than a concentration camp” (255). (Already the historical superiority of Indian civilization over Britain has become a standard trope — so 40 years later in Stoppard’s *Indian Ink* one of the Indian characters declares “We were the Romans! We were up to date when you were a backward nation. The foreigners who invaded you found a third world country!” [17]) Shaw’s Indian then storms out, announcing “I return to India to detach it wholly from England, and leave you to perish in your ignorance,
your vain conceit and your abominable manners” — and the Prime Minis-
ter comments, “That one word nigger will cost us India” (255–56).

Even though written in 1933, Shaw’s argument for Indian freedom is
prescient. It was, after all, the racism he encountered that radicalised Ma-
hatma Gandhi; and just over 40 years later David Edgar’s play *Destiny*,
which looks back in its opening scene to the British withdrawal at Inde-
pendence, shows the first, uneasy signs of cultural integration.

Almost all the main characters in *Destiny* have served in India; and the
play documents what happens to them on their return to Britain after 1947.
A Colonel finds himself an out-of-place anachronism — his Major and a
Sergeant, disillusioned by the impoverishment and corruption of post-war
England, take over a neo-fascist political party — and two Indian factory
workers in Birmingham (one-time soldiers in the British Indian Army),
represent the mass migration of people from the Commonwealth, who
were all (at least initially) granted British citizenship. As one of them in-
troduces himself:

Gurjeet Singh Khera,
Once a slave,
Returns to haunt the Empire’s grave. (Edgar 38)

Their coming exposes racism in Britain. They provide a target for the ex-
treme right, and the play holds the Indians up as the only people acting on
true socialist principles and capable of fighting the fascist threat.

All this is a fairly obvious — even superficial — response to the devel-
oping colonial relationship with India and its aftermath. While the Indian
characters may be spokesmen for independence (as even in Archer, well in
advance of British public and political opinion), or victims demonstrating
the continuing racism in English society (as in Shaw and Edgar), all are de-
picted from an external perspective. They remain “the Other.” But over time
the British population has become more multi-ethnic — and it is very much
an advance sign of this that David Edgar’s play, staged just over a quarter-of-
a-century ago in 1976, was the first to have Indian characters played by ac-
tors of Indian origin. (By contrast, Archer’s *Green Goddess* was standard in
having the Raja and his tribesmen all played by white actors in black-face.)

Laurence Olivier could still perform Othello in defiantly Negroid
black-face; but by 1989, when a Jamaican opera singer, Willard White, ap-
peared in Trevor Nunn’s production of *Othello*, even Stratford was using black actors to play Shakespeare’s Moor. This, of course, is anything but “colour-blind” casting — nor particularly new, since Paul Robeson had played the title figure of Eugene O’Neill’s early play, *The Emperor Jones*, in New York 65 years earlier. And the step from having actors with the requisite racial characteristics for specific roles, to adapting standard Western plays into African or Indian contexts is perhaps not so great as it is sometimes claimed.

One of the first examples of this on the British stage was Mustapha Matura’s 1984 reworking of J.M. Synge’s classic of modern Irish literature into *The Playboy of the West Indies*, set in 1950s Trinidad. And without doubt the most successful at this approach have been the British Asian group, Tara Arts. By the late 1980s Tara Arts was so well established at performing “Asianized” versions of Western classics, such as Gogol’s *The Government Inspector* (transferred to a village in rural India which does not realize that the Empire has vanished), that signally their version of *Tartuffe*, adapted and staged by Jatinder Verma, was produced in 1990 at the Cottesloe: the very first British Asian show at the National Theatre. Translating Molière’s religious hypocrite into a self-flagellating fakir in a saffron dhoti at the court of the Emperor Aurangzebe (Louis XIV’s contemporary) probably destabilized the cultural expectations of an audience who were largely expecting the standard perukes and frock-coats of seventeenth-century France. And the whole event was certainly a sign of the increasing integration of immigrant Asians into the British arts community. However simply substituting wholesale one set of cultural signifiers for another can hardly be seen as extending either artistic code. In reverse, it is much the same effect as, say, Verdi’s *Aida* must have had in its original performance to the assembled Egyptian dignitaries in Cairo. Indeed, while acknowledging that it is far more than simply a question of costumes and scenery, the Tara Arts kind of translation might be compared with the completely traditional expropriation and naturalization of a story and characters from a foreign source, which Shakespeare excelled at.
Perhaps it is not coincidental that one of the key texts for artistic cross-fertilization turned out to be *A Passage to India* — and indeed the earliest sign of this comes when Forster’s novel was adapted for the British stage in 1960, with the author of the play-version being a well known Indian writer: Santha Rama Rau (though even here the Indian figures were still black-face roles). And when Tom Stoppard turns to Indian themes in *Indian Ink* (first performed as a radio play, more ambiguously titled *In the Native State*), the play is a positive re-writing of *A Passage to India*, echoing the major elements of Forster’s plot, but reversing the fate of the main figures.

It also depicts a history of cultural interpenetration, though — almost exactly 90 years after Forster — Stoppard, of course, is far more open and explicit about the sexual relationship at the heart of the story, and shows the influences as working both ways. He might also perhaps be drawing on William Archer, at least through his son, since in addition to books on *Indian Painting from Rajasthan* and *Indian Miniatures* that would certainly be relevant background for Stoppard’s play, William George Archer’s writings include *The Loves of Krishna in Indian Painting and Poetry*, plus an essay on “Indian Painting for the British” — both of which are directly reflected in the art that is at the core of *Indian Ink*.

Staged in 1995, *Indian Ink* specifically explores the reciprocal merging of artistic cultures; and does so through a double time-frame of the 1930s (the start of Gandhi’s campaign of civil disobedience) and the present. As in Forster, a visiting English woman is attracted to an Indian who admires and emulates British culture. But here, Flora, who has made her reputation on erotic poetry and suffers from tuberculosis, finds authentic emotion in the last days before her early death. She develops a romantic relationship with a young Indian artist, who does two paintings of her. The first, abandoned unfinished, which shows her in a blue dress sitting under a tree with a monkey (representing the god Hanuman) in its branches, is Nirad Dass’s attempt to depict Flora from a borrowed English perspective. As she comments: “you’re trying to paint me from my point of view instead of yours — what you *think* is my point of view” (Stoppard 10). The result is Technicolour realism, described as “fairly ghastly, like an Indian cinema poster” (43) (Bollywood in fact) — and to Flora this lack of
an independent and authentically Indian mode of expression in Dass’s art means that: “You deserve the bloody empire” (10).

However, his second painting of Flora is a nude, which is compared (and indeed confused by other characters) with a classical Rajasthani miniature depicting the love between the God Krishna and “Radha the most beautiful of the herdswomen” in Hindu mythology. And it stands for a fruitful merging of western realism (in the way Flora’s European body is naturalistically depicted) with eastern tradition, where “everything [is shown] on different scales” so “You can’t tell if the painter is in the house or outside looking in,” and with “birds singing in the border — and the tree in bloom” (Stoppard 28). And all this lush perspectiveless colouring has been given a flat and brilliant treatment, like enamel, following the key principle of Hindu art that “everything is to be interpreted in the language of symbols” (Stoppard 68).

On a wider level this erotic painting — and indeed Flora’s romance with the painter — is a metaphor for the English love-affair with ‘the Raj’ and India’s fascination with England. The colonized ‘Other,’ Nirad Dass whose art at first is overwhelmed by English models (specifically Holman Hunt and the Pre-Raphaelites or Alma-Tadema’s soft-porn orientalism), learns to value his native heritage through his love for an unconventional English woman. And it is as a result of his relationship with Flora that he not only recuperates Rajasthani aesthetics (in what the play clearly presents as a viable modern form), but also becomes a Nationalist and takes a leading part in protests against British rule. At the same time, Stoppard makes Flora the epitome of all twentieth-century European culture: not only a modernist poet, but also having appeared as an actress in Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, and being one of H.G. Wells’ former mistresses, whom Modigliani had also, earlier, painted in the nude. And Flora’s poetry changes too, through being made aware of *Rasa* — the “essence” of Hindu art, referring to “the emotion which the artist must arouse” in the reader or spectator (Stoppard 18, 83).

Beyond that, *Indian Ink* (which is also the title for the collection of poems Flora writes while in India) combines her 1930s story with that of her younger sister (now an elderly widow) and Nirad Dass’s son, in the present. Her sister — who in turn also made a pilgrimage to India to see Flora’s grave and, marrying an English officer, stayed on until 1947 and
Independence — still refers to India as “home,” while the young Dass (a painter like his father) now lives in London, and has abandoned Hindu art for contemporary English “deconstructionist” painting. But the play as a whole sets up the interchange between the 1930s painter and poet, and the intercultural integration it produced, as a superior vision to the alienating absorption in the other’s culture of the present-day characters. Firstly: by demonstrating that indeed Flora’s “soul” does “stay behind as a smudge of paint on paper, as if I’d always been here, like Radha who was the most beautiful of the herdswomen, undressed for love in an empty house” (Stoppard 29). And secondly: the play promotes the value of intercultural unity through the way the two different time-frames are integrated, making the performance itself a study in perception.

Much the same sort of intercultural merger, but coming from the other direction, can be seen in a recent film by the Indo-Canadian director, Deepa Mehta, called Bollywood/Hollywood. The leading man (acted by an actual Bollywood star from Bombay) plays a wealthy young Indian, whose family own jewellery stores in Toronto, but who is rebelling against his Indian heritage, and refusing to marry any Indian girl. However his sister (forced to follow strict Indian custom) will not be allowed to marry before he gets engaged — and she tells him that she is pregnant. So — when a university student, moonlighting as an escort, picks him up in a bar and presents herself as Spanish — he pays her to pretend she is his fiancée, dresses her up in a sari, provides her with Indian jewellery, and introduces her to his family as his future wife. Inevitably, following standard movie conventions, they fall in love — and naturally his family culture and the Hindu status quo is actually preserved, since she turns out to be Indian after all. But if the story is pure Hollywood (and very obviously copies the Julia Roberts/Richard Gere vehicle, Pretty Woman), the form is typically Bollywood, with the characters breaking into set-piece songs or energetically choreographed dances, complete with Hindi subtitles, at each and every emotional point. And Bombay Dreams strikingly parallels this movie, transposing a very comparable mix into the theatrical terms of the contemporary London musical.

For a start, some simple counting shows a lot. The musical score is authentically Indian — or at least authentically Bollywood — being by the “Asian Mozart of the Movies” (according to his own publicity) A.R. Rahman, who has won numerous musical prizes and (as the program boasts) composed highly popular soundtracks for over fifty films made in India. Yet the lyrics are all by a Brit, who has collaborated with Andrew Lloyd-Webber on three shows, and done the songs for James Bond films. Similarly, although one of the two choreographers comes from India and has worked on a variety of Bollywood films, as well as Monsoon Wedding, the other choreographer is English, as are the rest of the back-stage production team (all of whom have worked on Lloyd-Webber shows before); and 25 out of the 34-strong Ensemble are also English. However, the “book” was written by an Indian born and raised in England; and exactly the same Anglo-Indian background is shared by seven of the eight lead actors, all of whom were trained in British theatre schools, with only one coming from India and being an authentic Bollywood actor (Dalip Tahil who plays the villain of the piece, JK).

On the surface, the plot is straight Bollywood melodrama — a violent dispossession and illegal eviction of Mumbai slum dwellers, and a mafia take-over of the film industry — complete with the meteoric rise of a slum boy to film star, a crooked lawyer (engaged to the heroine), the shooting of her film-director father, the strangling of a eunuch entertainer who uncovers the villain’s plot, and an obligatory “wet-sari” scene — while the action climaxes with “hero number one” freeing himself from the corruption of success to lead the slum-dwellers in an assault on the mafia boss’s penthouse where the heroine’s marriage (to the “wrong” man — the evil lawyer) is taking place. Single-handedly he takes on the mafia boss, his goons and the lawyer in a bravura display of kick-boxing and wrestling; and — joined by the heroine, who repudiates her new husband once she learns of his guilt — defeats all the forces of evil. The mafia boss makes a last minute escape by helicopter (shades of Miss Saigon), and the hero races back to the slum, just in time to stop the demolition of the shanty-town hovels by standing in the path of a monstrous digger (a mechanized Godzilla).

As those visual analogies suggest, there are distinct parallels between Bollywood and the contemporary London Musical. The defining quality
of both is that they inject songs and dances into acted scenes, as well as sharing slick production values. But Bombay Dreams clearly aspires to going beyond either form, using the vitality of Bollywood conventions to extend the standard Musical, and the direct communication of live performance to enhance the emotional appeal of Bollywood. In effect, however, this also implies a critique of both — as in the ending, where the Hero declares: “All Bollywood films must have a happy ending…” [he could just as well have said “All Musicals…”], only to have the heroine move away from his embrace, with the reply: “We aren’t ready, we have to find ourselves, first…” — and this crossover between the two forms leads to parody, for example in the way the characters are designated in one of the publicity brochures for the musical: JK “The Big Boss,” wearing the black glove on one hand that is de rigeur for any Indian-Mafia villain; Madan “The Movie Mogul;” Rani “The Temptress,” complete with a spider’s web; Sweetie (the eunuch) as “The Dreamer;” or Akash and Priya as simply “The Hero” and “The Heroine,” all soulful gaze and streaming halos of light. In movie-poster terms this is standard for Bollywood: a convention accepted at face value. But seen through the lens of a Western Musical (where, even in Lloyd-Webber, the figures are always more ambiguous) the effect is over-the-top cliché.

And this double vision carries through into the performance. For example, the program keys the audience to see the climatic defeat of the forces of evil as a comic book exaggeration, and the fake Sanskrit lettering of “Kpow!” — “Splat!” — “Aargh!” pasted over a collage of photos from the wedding/fight scene exactly captures the intended doubleness. Similarly in many of the scenes a compounded exaggeration of Bollywood and Musical conventions creates tongue-in-cheek parody: for instance in a prison scene, where the guards are chorus girls in dominatrix leather corsets and the men behind the bars join in the catchy song of “Don’t Release Me.” Or when a seduction scene between hero and “The Temptress” expands into a bump-and-grind but Indian style dance number with mixed language lyrics (part Hindi, part English) that are of such appalling bana-

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3 The text of Bombay Dreams was still unpublished at the time of writing this essay, and the quoted dialogue is from notes made during a performance of the opening run in London. The character descriptions are taken from an illustrated leaflet, advertising the show.
lity — the opening line says it all: “Shakalaka baby, Shakalaka baby, won’t you Shakalaka with me…” — so openly empty in fact, that they simply cannot be anything but a deliberate send-up.

And beyond that, *Bombay Dreams* is self-referential on multiple levels. The typically Bollywood plot of the Musical (with the slum even being razed for a multiplex cinema) revolves around the making of Bollywood movies. And we watch these being filmed on the stage — one is traditional Bollywood fare: a historical spectacular by the independent film-director who is gunned down at its gala opening. (And it is striking how much the scenes of this supposed Bollywood spectacle echo the presentational style of the Musical itself.) The other film-within-the-play represents the new wave: a quasi-realistic contemporary movie being made by the heroine — the dead director’s daughter who takes over his studio, but unwittingly hands control to the mafia who have murdered her father. Derisively described as “a documentary with songs” by the hero, this film deals with a mafia-financed eviction of slum-dwellers. And as such it exactly echoes the situation in the Musical — but in romanticized, sanitized terms (implying that the Musical is far more realistic). As a footnote to this, the dramatic situation is echoed in actual news reports. For instance, only a few months after *Bombay Dreams* opened, Sonia Gandhi was quoted on the front page of the *Sunday Times of India* (29 December 2002) as denouncing a new Slum Rehabilitation Act for creating “a nexus between builders, politicians and underworld elements” — while a headline in the local Bombay newspaper from just two days earlier read “MULTIPLEX BOOM IN THE OFFING: State Government Gets 162 Applications from Developers, Corporates Trying to Cash in on Tax Holiday.” And in order to reinforce this claim to documentary realism, which, while completely incompatible with the conventions of both the Musical and Bollywood, is clearly meant to add credibility to the show as a whole, the program prints a photo of an actual Bombay slum built around an immense sewage pipe that is exactly replicated in the setting for the opening and closing scenes of the show. (And indeed this photo is printed in grainy black-and-white: a deliberately sharp contrast to all the other highly coloured glossy pictures reproducing moments from the action.)

Quite apart from all this play with levels of reality and artifice, *Bombay Dreams* is also self-referential for its target audience. With all the en-
semble songs by the slum dwellers, plus isolated lines in several of the other lyrics being in Hindi, the Musical is specifically designed for a British/Indian audience. And on some nights in the opening week of the run indeed over 70% of the spectators were Indians, now living in Britain. So the slum boy’s abandonment of his home, his rise to riches, followed by his saving recognition of his true roots, is clearly intended to reflect the movement of immigrants from their native land to England, their achievement of wealth — as signalled by being able to afford the expensive West End ticket prices! — and the retrospective yearning for their own culture, as represented by the popularity of Bollywood movies in Britain.

As a final footnote, the degree of integration between Indian and British conventions, and the extent to which this is based on the increasingly cross-cultural nature of English society, can be indicated by the changes being made to *Bombay Dreams* for its transfer to Broadway. Two additional characters have been added: white American tourists on their first visit to Bombay, who wander in and out of the action, with their commentary interpreting the sights and sounds, and the language of India for New York audiences. And this is felt to be necessary (according to the original writer of the show [Meera Syal qtd. in the *National Post*]) precisely because Indian culture — and its signs — are so unknown in the US compared to Britain, that even this integrated form would be inaccessible.

*Where Indian Ink respects the ethnic integrity of each set of cultural signs, Bombay Dreams conflates the different conventions. Stoppard sets European conventions (the Pre-Raphaelites and Modigliani — himself part of the avant-garde movement that adopted non-European forms), against Rajasthani symbolism, and Western poetics against Hindu principles of *Rasa*. English poet and Indian painter each achieve a new level of artistic authenticity through integration; and spectators are exposed to a similar lesson in perception through the double time frame of the action, 1930 and the present interacting to modify our reception of each.*

*Bombay Dreams*, with a creative team and cast that combines both Indians and British, exploits the parallels between Bollywood and the West End Musical, aspiring to create a whole greater than the sum of its parts,
with the vitality of Bollywood conventions extending the standard Musi-
cal, while the direct communication of live performance enhances the emo-
tional appeal of Bollywood films. It also critiques and parodies both, intro-
ducing a further set of post-modernist signs through self-referentiality.

But it is particularly interesting that despite the gap between intellec-
tualised high art (poetry, painting, literary drama) and commercialised popu-
lar culture (movie, musical, physical theatre) both these works are making
very similar points. Each can be read as programmatic: proposing cross-
cultural interpenetration as a new source for extending the theatrical code.
And the same transcultural mixing of theatrical conventions is beginning
to appear everywhere.

In addition to, and following on from Tara Arts, over the past few years
various Anglo-Indian performance groups have emerged on the streets of
English cities, picking up on Eugenio Barba’s principles of theatre
anthropology to devise shows focusing (frequently) on the immigrant expe-
rience, which seek to communicate with both the Indian and British com-
unities while avoiding the assimilative acculturation of “blinglish.” And a
further small sign of the times is a production that opened in July 2003 at the
by Tanika Gupta. Even though brought forward from the turn of the last
century to the present, the Salford setting is the same; and while the title
figure has been transmogrified from Henry, a white boot maker and promi-
nent mason with a brusque Lancastrian accent, into Hari, an immigrant tailor
who heads the local Asian Small Business Association, and speaks with a
strong Indian accent, yet the characters — and the cast — include whites
alongside the Hindu family and the Muslim who works in the shop. The
marriages are racially mixed, rather than crossing over class barriers, as in the
original; and the melding of different accents, signalling contrasting cultural
and religious backgrounds, as well as (at least to a minor extent) slightly
different styles of acting between the Indian family and the characters sur-
rounding them, leads to a greater challenge to audience stereotypes than
the Tara Arts approach. At the same time, the artistic code is strictly realis-
tic in the traditional naturalistic manner. So the re-definition of cultural
signs is more subliminal and psychological than an aesthetic extension.

Even so, such productions can be seen as at least modifying, as well as
displaying the complexity of cultural signs. As with *Indian Ink* or *Bombay*
Dreams they are steps on the way to evolving new forms of theatrical expression, and point to a significant potential for revitalizing British drama.

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“How Many Things Make a Home, and How Many Can We Carry?”: Staged Migrations and Globalized Aesthetics in Tara Arts’ *Journey to the West*

In an article on “London’s Other National Theatre” in the October 1991 edition of *American Theatre*, Maggi Kramm observes, that while England’s post-war immigrants have revolutionized what Britons eat, they have been much less successful in altering their theatrical fare. More than ten years later we have witnessed the burgeoning of new cultural expressions by Black and South Asian British artists. Particularly in the fields of visual arts, literature and music, artists such as Zadie Smith, Benjamin Zephania and Nitin Sawhney or Turner Prize winners Anish Kapoor and Chris Ofili, to name but a few, have invigorated Britain’s cultural landscape immensely. Their emergence has also been accompanied by an increasing commodification of the arts and a renewed Western interest in the mass consumption of South Asian so-called ‘ethnic commodities’ such as food, fashion and the recent cross-over appeal of Bollywood film and music.

But how, if at all, has this been reflected in terms of South Asian British theatre and drama?¹ Looking at the productions on offer in London at the beginning of 2003, the urban connoisseur in search for intercultural theatrical entertainment, might have been pleasantly surprised in having the choice between three — albeit utterly different — shows centred around

¹ ‘South Asia’ is commonly understood as consisting of Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bhutan, Mauritius and the Maldives.
South Asian themes and subjects alone: the RSC’s prominent adaptation of Salman Rushdie’s novel *Midnight’s Children* (1981) at the Barbican, a production of *Passage to India* by the much praised company Shared Experience at the Riverside Studios in Hammersmith and an Andrew Lloyd Webber-musical with the appropriately sugary title *Bombay Dreams* at the Apollo Victoria Theatre. As observant audiences would have quickly realized, however, none of these three shows — despite the participation of South Asian British writers, actors, and musicians — were actually genuinely part of London’s ‘other’ national theatrescape. In his recent exploration of the question “why so many ‘Western’ theatre workers in the last fifty years have been drawn to Indian (and other Asian) theatre,” Ralph Yarrow differentiates between those cases who might be alleged of superficial appropriation, piracy and consumerist catering, those who have done substantial research to familiarise themselves with culturally different performance styles and theories and those directors of South Asian origin, who “provide a slightly different slant on the notion of cultural transfer” (Yarrow 206).

Long before the current rage about works by British artists of South Asian descent, there have been grassroots efforts to diversify British theatre and to dramatize the experiences of those segments of society who could be seen in the streets but not on stage. Critics have traced the roots of this movement back to the arrival of South Asian and Caribbean immigrants in the 1950s and 1960s as well as to the gradual opening of stages to working class and women playwrights in post-war Labour England (Godiwala, “Invention” 44; Kramm 72). Unlike culturally diverse American theatre companies, however, who played a vital role in the context of the political and socio-cultural transformations initiated by the Civil Rights and the Black and Yellow Power Movements in the U.S. in the 1960s, Britain’s ethnically focused companies were not established until the late 1970s. Apart from the coming-of-age of a generation of immigrants who had grown up in England and the emergence of multicultural theatres such as the Tricycle in London’s multiethnic neighbourhood of Kilburn or the Black Theatre Co-operative, various reports by the Arts Council on “The Art Britain Ignores” eventually led to much needed instituted multicultural policies and strategic funding of groups.

2 See Christopher Innes’ essay in this volume.
Notwithstanding the achievements of such prolific individual South Asian British playwrights as Hanif Kureishi, Rukhsana Ahmad, Tanika Gupta and Ayub Khan Din or the innovative work of other pioneering South Asian theatre companies such as Kali and Tamasha, the focus of this essay will be on Britain’s oldest South Asian theatre company, Tara Arts and their latest project entitled *Journey to the West*. According to Jatinder Verma, together with Sunil Saggar, Ovais Kadri and Vijay Shaunak the company’s co-founder and artistic director, who has also scripted and directed the majority of its productions, Tara Arts was founded in 1977 in response to the racist murder of the 17-year-old Sikh boy, Gurdeep Singh Chaggar, in Southall (Verma, “‘Binglishing’” 128). Their first production, an adaptation of the Bengali Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore’s anti-war play *Sacrifice*, set the tone for all their following work which, according to Verma, was to “critique both white relations with non-white, and non-white with each other” (Verma, “Impact” 14). Since then, Tara Arts, due to its make-up as an international touring company which also works closely with school and community groups, has staged more than sixty productions and performed for more than half a million people worldwide.

Over the course of its theatrical life Tara Arts has gone through distinct artistic phases from adaptations and re-interpretations of Indian and European classics to their own writing. It is noteworthy that in 1990 Verma became the first director from Britain’s immigrant communities to be invited to stage a play at the Royal National Theatre, where he chose to adapt Molière’s *Tartuffe* with an all-Asian cast. Subsequent productions at the National included *The Tempest, Troilus and Cressida, A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, and an adaptation of an eighth century Sanskrit play, *The Little Clay Cart*, which was the first non-European text produced by the

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3 For a brief chronology of South Asian British theatre from 1977 to 2001 see Godiwala, “Invention” 54–55.

4 Many thanks are due to Jatinder Verma for granting me an interview and for generously providing me with the script and video tapes of *Journey to the West*.

5 The company also launched the careers of such popular South Asian British actors, playwrights as Ayub Khan Din (*East Is East*), Sanjeev Bhaskar (*Goodness Gracious Me, The Kumars at Number 42*), Vincent Ibrahim (*The Kumars at Number 42*) and the composer and musician Nitin Sawhney. For more information about the group’s history and development see Ley as well as their website at: <http://www.tara-arts.com>.
National. It might be assumed that in terms of their dramaturgy Tara Arts have automatically drawn from the vast aesthetic heritages of European and Indian drama traditions. In view of their complex literary socialisations linked with their various displacements the shift from a merely thematic focus on South Asian issue plays to a conscious effort of engaging with classic Indian (i.e., Sanskrit) drama but also with Indian folk and modern theatre and incorporating some of their stylistic components happened only gradually. Asking themselves the questions usually formulated by the critics, “what is distinctive or South Asian about the company?” and “how does it define itself theatrically?,” the answer, so Verma, could not lie in the “colour of our skin” (“‘Braids’” 129).

As theatre practitioners marked by multiple migrations and situated at the interstices of various, real and imagined, cultural spaces, Tara Arts set out to create a theatre praxis which Verma termed Binglish as well as — on a very practical level — to develop the skills necessary to engage with Indian drama tradition beyond a mere flirtation with form. As James Brandon points out, in most Asian traditional theatre the actor as “the source and repository of most performance information” must first become proficient in the performance codes, that is the artistic language of the theatre form, before taking on individual roles. In short: first learn the craft, then earn to act (Brandon 5). Thus, Tara Arts drew inspiration from one of the world’s oldest treatises on theatre practice, the Indian Natya Sastra, and intensive workshops with Indian directors from New Delhi’s National School of Drama. In a postcolonial context these texts provide welcome alternative aesthetic models. But although the Natya Sastra’s thirty-six extensive chapters, covering everything from acting, audiences and play constructions to theatre architecture, might be drawn upon in the reading even of contemporary Indian texts (particularly in vernacular languages),

6 According to Yarrow, “all Indian aesthetic theory refers back to the Natya Sastra, a comprehensive theory-cum-manual dealing with all aspects of performance […] variously dated between 450 BC and 1200 AD, ascribed to one Bharata. […] Central to the Natya Sastra is the theory of rasa: not only is performance transmitted through the presentation of affective ‘flavours,’ a bit like Indian cuisine’s use of a subtle blend of spices, but more fundamentally the ultimate aim is to cultivate the receptive faculties of the receivers” (Yarrow 11; Yarrow’s italics).
the attempt to discover a presumably authentic Indianness is fraught in an age of rapid global change. Although it might be tempting to recover this part of India’s aesthetic past, artists are aware of essentialising an inherently syncretic culture (Ashcroft et al. 119–20). There are elements of Tara Arts’ stylistic vocabulary, such as their use of dance, music and ritual as well as their employment of a *Sutradhara* as an overall narrator figure, who welcomes the audience and introduces the play’s characters, which can be traced back to Sanskrit Theatre. In their mobility as a touring company, their minimalistic stage sets and their incorporation of a chorus, they have furthermore borrowed components of Indian folk and street theatre, in order to escape what Verma has called “the dead hand of realism” (“Impact” 17).

Their most important strategy of destabilizing the English language — and in that emblematic of postcolonial theatre — is their acknowledgement of the multiplicity of languages they are operating in. According to Verma Binglish theatre, which might stand for “black English” as much as for “beastly English” or “bastardly English” (“‘Binglishing’” 126), is characterized by the “usage of ‘other’ texts, distinctive langue, and non-European stage vocabulary” (“Challenge”). In *Journey to the West* we are confronted with often untranslated passages in Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati or Swahili, which in the case of a South Asian British audience — particularly in

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7 In his analysis of the Hindu diaspora Steven Vertovec calls for a methodological shift “from constantly measuring socio-cultural transformation among diaspora communities against some presumed archetype (usually associated with a homeland), to analysing and accounting for the dynamics of cultural reproduction, innovation and change in situ” (Vertovec 2; Vertovec’s italics).

8 Brandon explains: “At the heart of the [ancient Indian] theatre companies was the stage manager […]. It was his job to direct the players […] he literally held the strings of the performance within his grasp (sutradhara, literally means ‘holder of the threads or strings,’ that is a puppeteer, an architect or a manipulator).” (66)

9 For a comparison of contemporary Indian street theatre in Delhi and Montreal see Parameswaran/Ram.

10 In general, over the last decades Asian theatre practitioners have begun to turn away from imported forms of Western realist drama in favour of more traditional theatrical styles, as realism “does not interest most Asian audiences for it lacks the vital theatricality of familiar traditional forms” (Brandon 11).

11 See Crow/Banfield and Gilbert/Tompkins.
contrast to the use of an Asian language in Asian American drama, for example — does not necessarily pose a problem, as even within the third generation of South Asian British there is a high bi- or even multilingual proficiency. As for western audiences, Tara Arts perceives the danger of their not understanding all of the text as a conscious and necessary danger mirroring the reality of multiculturalism and the challenge to find ways to connect beyond the fear of “I don’t know what they are saying or laughing at” (Verma, “‘Braids’” 129). Their further reliance on elements of the very contemporary medium of Bollywood movies as well as western pop culture is, of course, very close to what Stuart Hall termed a “diaspora aesthetic” (402) or what Latin American critics such as Fernando Ortiz have described as “transculturation,” denoting the loss of certain cultural elements due to the imposition of another culture as well as the fusion of old and new in the creation of a new cultural product (Taylor 61). As various critics have pointed out, within this framework it is the politicised intertextual citation in relation to colonialism which marks the postcolonial text (Parnell 245). Prime examples of this strategy are the trilogy’s manifold intertextual references from Lt. Colonel J. H. Patterson’s saga *The Man Eaters of Tsavo* (1907) and Rudyard Kipling’s poem “Gunga Din” (1890) to Enoch Powell’s infamous anti-immigration “Rivers of Blood” speech in Birmingham in April 1968 as well as the company’s refusal to fictionalise British racist violence, East African nationalism or South Asian religious fundamentalism in *Journey to the West* by commemorating, for example, the names of victims of racist violence in the lines of the chorus.

In view of the subcontinent’s proverbial diversity of languages, cultures and religions, any attempt to approach its migration histories will have to address questions of inclusion and exclusion. Verma, who was born in Dar-es-Salaam, grew up in Nairobi, and at the age of fourteen, in 1968, had to flee to London, resorted to a partly autobiographical narrative by focussing on the stories of three interlinked generations of ‘twice migrant’ South Asians who first migrated from India to East Africa and subsequently to Britain. In this respect, *Journey to the West* stylistically parallels the

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12 In this respect *Journey to the West* is also reminiscent of Robert Lepage’s six-hour long epic classic *The Dragon’s Trilogy* (1985) about Chinese immigration in Canada from the 1920s to the 1980s. In contrast to *Journey to the West*, however, *The
form also favoured by most South Asian novelists who write in English, “the family chronicle, often combined with the Bildungsroman and set within the context of (recent) historical events” (Kreutzer 92; Kreutzer’s italics). All three parts were shown in day-long melas (festivals) in eight British cities in 2002. Apart from its autobiographical perspective, Journey to the West draws from various sources: classic migration epics such as the Odyssey and the Ramayana, Wu Ch’eng-en’s novel Xiyouji (Journey to the West, 1592) as well as from around 1,500 interviews with South Asian British people from different generations conducted over a period of five years which, in a Spielbergian-like effort, were recorded on digital video. Journey to the West is divided into three parts: Part I: Genesis. 1901. Dhores, Deserts and Dirty Tricks, Part II: Exodus. 1968. Rifts, Refugees and Rivers of Blood and Part III: Revelations. 2001. Bhangra, Bollywood and British Bull-dogs.

The trilogy’s alliterated titles with their “acknowledgement to classical western discourse” (Godiwala 48) indicate not only the roots of this particular group of migrants but perhaps even more importantly their routes, thereby emphasizing the production’s future-oriented perspective in contrast to a nostalgic backwards glance. As Verma himself explains: “I prefer to think of it as routes. Roots lead backwards. Routes are more progressive, leading you to make connections with others. I’m not interested in the particular village in India where my grandfather came from. My identity is located on the road” (Arnot). Part I relates the story of the more than 30,000 indentured labourers who were shipped from India (mostly from Gujarat and the Punjab) by the British to build a railway in unchartered

Dragon’s Trilogy was performed by an exclusively white Canadian cast. According to Lepage, one of the reasons for its revival at the Berliner Festwochen in September 2003 was to finally perform the trilogy with British, Chinese and Japanese actresses and actors (Dössel 60). Verma himself refers to Lepage’s concept of ‘tradaption’ as a model for Tara Arts’ work in the late 1980s (see Verma, “Binglishing” 129).

13 Brandon describes the story of the Hindu epic Ramayana as one of the great mythic themes: “the withdrawal of the hero, Rama, from affairs of the world, initiation through asceticism and the gaining of spiritual power (mana, sakti), and return to temporal rule” (Brandon 4; Brandon’s italics).

14 Before they premiered in a slightly modified form as a trilogy, all three parts had been produced individually: Exodus in 1998, Genesis in 1999 and Revelations in 2000.
East Africa at the end of the 19th century. The protagonists of the first part of the trilogy are a group of labourers, representing India’s multiplicity through their different places of origin and religions. On their journey from India to East Africa on a dhow (ingeniously constructed from ropes hanging from the ceiling on an otherwise bare stage) they are stuck on the windless Indian ocean and start telling each other stories. On one occasion, one of the labourers, Fateh, recounts his wedding to his wife Vira and his reminiscence is acted out in a stylised Punjabi wedding with three fundamental elements from Sanskrit theatre: song (the female vocalist remained onstage through most of the trilogy), dance and prayer:

FATEH. Ek tha Rajah [There was a King] ...
VIRA. Ek thi Rani [There was a Queen] ...
FATEH. She was 13.
VIRA. And he was 16.
FATEH. He came riding on a white horse ...
VIRA. Across the river Chenab. She had never seen the boy ...
FATEH. He had never seen the girl.
VIRA. Her mother said, This is your husband ...
FATEH. His father said, There is your wife.
VIRA. She sat me behind a purdah [curtain] ...
FATEH. I was made to sit before the curtain.
VIRA. The Priest did his prayers ...
THE ‘PRIEST’ CHANTS SOME PRAYERS.15

Over the last decade Western audiences have been increasingly familiarised with this specific cultural tradition and its visual codes through the work of South Asian British and American writers and filmmakers.16 On a formal level alone, this scene exemplifies Verma’s Binglish concept of infusing the theatre with South Asian languages, colour and music and the use of storytelling as a performative strategy to challenge realist conventions and

15 All references to the trilogy are taken from the unpublished script.
16 Meera Syal’s novel Life Isn’t All Ha Ha, Hee Hee (1999), for example, starts with a Punjabi wedding scene, as does Ayub Khan Din’s screenplay East is East (2000) based on his play of the same title. Wedding scenes also feature strongly in Gurinder Chadha’s recent film Bend It Like Beckham (2002) and Mira Nair’s movie Monsoon Wedding (2001), as, inevitably, in numerous Bollywood movies.
to facilitate an audience’s transport into different experiences and geographies (Verma, “Binglishing” 133). It reveals the ingenious use of the minimal set, the dramatisation of animals and the incorporation of ritual (prayer). The labourer’s final arrival in Africa is marked by an immediate lighting change from the cold blue sea to the warmly infused terracotta colours of Africa’s heat, desert and sand. And in true postcolonial fashion, the first encounter between the labourers and the white colonizer, Sgt. Patterson, is portrayed from the workers’ perspective.17

Part II of the trilogy is set against the background of British and East African nationalist politics and reveals the reasons for the renewed displacement of the children of these early labourers from Africa to Britain. With Kenya’s, Uganda’s and Tanzania’s independence in the 1960s and the ensuing Kenyasation policy and expulsion of Indians by Idi Amin from Uganda, about 80,000 South Asians tried to flee to Britain but had to enter the country before the new Immigration Act in March 1968 (see Coward et al.). As already indicated in the trilogy’s titles, the protagonists’ lives are situated in and dependent on the geopolitical decisions of their host countries. Arjun Appadurai’s observation that “both points of departure and points of arrival are in cultural flux, and thus the search for steady points of reference, as critical life choices are made, can be very difficult” (Appadurai 44), is superbly visualized in a scene from Part II which shows Sita’s arrival from East Africa to Britain — or not as the case may be. Walking up to the British immigration officer, the South Asian girl, who was born and raised in East Africa, is determined to make a good impression:

SITA. Good morning, sir!
IMMIGRATION OFFICER. Passport.
SITA. This is my future.

17 A postcolonial exploration of past encounters between the British and the Indians is also at the centre of Tara Arts’ next project, entitled ‘Borders of Love,’ where the company will be looking at British-Indian relations before the Raj by commissioning new plays from contemporary British and South Asian British playwrights, producing existing English and Indian texts (considered texts range from John Dryden’s Aureng-Zebe to Vikram Chandra’s Red Earth and Pouring Rain) and devising plays from paintings of the period (unpublished project outline by Jatinder Verma and Claudia Mayer, December 2002).
IMMIGRATION OFFICER. The deadline for automatic right of entry was midnight last night. Back to the last port of embarkation!

SITA. But I have a British passport!

During this dialogue the immigration officer ties one of the ropes (formerly used for the dhow) into a noose, puts it around the girl’s waist and eventually pushes her back across the stage towards ‘Africa’ where she is received by a Kenyan Officer with the words, “British passport. You belong to Britain” and, again, pushed back towards the British immigration officer. Thus, literally suspended in the air between two continents, she is shuttled between the British and the Kenyan immigration officers, who continue telling her that she has no right to enter either country. Sita’s own confused and split self is not least indicated through her clothing, a warm jacket over a shalwar kameez and socks worn with sandals. This scene serves as almost painfully absurd evidence of the long suspected truth that Homi Bhabha’s much hailed “third space” taken out of its cultural framework can be a most precarious, frustrating and, at worst, life-threatening place, particularly when viewed in terms of its legal status. The mask worn by the British immigration officer can again be traced back to Sanskrit theatre traditions, where the use of a mask indicated the transformative power to transcend the self and embody stronger powers.

The trilogy’s third part, relying heavily on South Asian fusion music, charts the complex stories of the South Asian British grandchildren of the labourers. The Rough Guide to Music defines New South Asian dance music, in this case bhangra, as follows: “It’s a fairly simple story. Immigrants arrive in a stiff-upper-lip land. They bring with them their own culture [...] languages and music. Over a generation, the music is merged with the omnipotent influences of the host country, and then — voila! — new sounds are born” (Broughton et al.). Naturally, a closer look at the stories of Kam, the main protagonist of Part III, and his friends show, that their lives as second- and third-generation South Asian British adults are far from being constructed that easily:

CHORUS. Into this multi-culti age is born a multi-culti Kam. Part Hindu, part Muslim, the mingled son of Sita and Liaquat is part Indian, part Pakistani, part African, part English, a hyphenated Brit for a hyphenated age!
The appropriated musical codes of Indian classical and New Asian dance music as well as Bollywood film music and African and Western pop throughout *Journey to the West* are emblematic of the epic’s overall globalized aesthetic which neither strictly adheres to classical Sanskrit drama or African storytelling nor English theatre traditions, but presents a theatre “modified through intercultural exchange and socialization” (Young qtd. in Godiwala 44). With its focus on migration as a microcosmic experience of intercultural exchanges and appropriations, *Journey to the West* can be seen as part of a number of recent artistic explorations of displacement and migration, including plays such as Kay Adshead’s *The Bogus Woman* (2001) and Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Credible Witness* (2001) as well as Ping Chong’s earlier performance piece, *Undesirable Elements* (1992), but also Stephen Frear’s film *Dirty Pretty Things* (2002) and Michael Winterbottom’s movie *In This World* (2002). All, in very different ways, dramatise the anguish, the pain, and the loss as much as the discovery of new possibilities caused by the experiences of migration, exile, and flight, and they all address the question posed by one of the characters in the second part of the trilogy, “how many things make a home, and how many can we carry?” Verma himself describes this ambivalence in view of the losses and gains caused by migratory experiences as follows:

I think some of the things that they [the parts of the trilogy] point to in terms of the general migrant condition is issues of borders, identity, who am I. Those kind of choices are at the forefront of the migrant imagination. Whether you want to or not, it’s kind of placed before you. And yet, one of the things that comes through, is that another choice comes. That once you leave your kind of homeland […] you don’t have an anchor, so you can actually be whatever you want. You could reinvent yourself to an extent. I’m not dismissing particular conditions like race and so forth and particular kinds of racist structures. Those certainly pulled you back. But nevertheless, there are those sorts of two choices: to either fly right out of the shackles of belonging into another kind of belonging, or to remain stuck with it. […] leaving home is a mixed blessing […] there is a lot of ambivalence. One of the ambivalences is that we are all aware of this ambivalence to the new land. That’s fine. But there’s another kind of ambivalence and that’s to the homeland. There’s a real sense of a kind of love-hate, I think stronger than with the new land. (interview)

18 I am grateful to Aleks Sierz for providing me with his reviews of both plays, *The Bogus Woman* and *Credible Witness*. 
In order to escape “the schizophrenia of the immigrant,” the young South Asian British protagonists of the third part of Journey to the West are constantly forced to negotiate these ambivalences in their everyday lives. On his trip from Britain’s South to the University of Durham in the North, Kam has to overcome his conflicting desires to belong (“I wanna belong! In a team! A group, a gang, a tribe — something clear that binds me in brotherhood where I can just be […] I never knew which prayers to do, Hindu or Muslim […] who do I play football with?”), in order to “rise over the closet of nations and the prison of belonging.” In this respect, Verma and Tara Arts in Journey to the West dramatize a concept of migration, which in its acknowledgement of migration as a painful, but nevertheless potentially liberating experience, is not least reminiscent of Vilém Flusser’s exploration of the migratory state as a creative space.19 Yet, as Salman Rushdie’s Saleem Sinai almost despairingly observes in Midnight’s Children, there remain “so many stories to tell, too many” (8).

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19 For a recent collection of the philosopher’s texts on migration see Flusser.


—. Personal interview. 24 February 2003, Tara Arts/London.


Nga tipuna ki mua, ko tatou kei muri — The ancestors in front, we are behind

In his excellent survey of the new Maori theatre published in 1990, Christopher Balme calls it ‘syncretic’ in the sense that “traditional, indigenous elements are fused with European dramatic conventions” (“New Maori Theatre” 149), while thematically the question of “confiscated Maori land […] still constitutes the main source of conflict between the two races” (151). He further argues with reference to language that “at strategic points in the action, the indigenous language(s) is/are adopted” (156) as a means to trigger off an “exclusion-inclusion dynamic [that is] particularly evident in songs and heightened lyrical address, or in the performance of ritual acts” (156–57). Finally, Balme stresses the importance accorded to time and history, to the interplay of past and present that is translated into many a play’s dramatic interaction in a way that the “Maori present is omnipresent and forms the filter through which history is experienced; we see in turn,” he concludes, “how this historical experience refracts on the present” (162).

1 See also Balme and Carstensen; Maufort; and Petersen for further surveys on the more recent development of Maori theatre in English.

2 Records of previous conferences of The German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English show that one of our New Zealand colleagues, Richard Corballis, read a paper on Maori drama in 1998, which fortunately saves me from going over the same ground again. Christopher Balme, another New Zealand academic, presents us with an overview of its development from 1970 to 1990 in his article “New Maori Theatre in New Zealand” and points to central dramatic concerns of Maori playwrights that have, incidentally, continued to engage the minds of younger playwrights.
The syncretic nature of Maori theatre, its thematic focus on the relationship between Maori and Pakeha as well as its use of language, history and time will be of some interest for my comments on Ihimaera’s play. However, the question is, on which of its various versions? The printed text published in 2000 “is the revised fifth draft of Woman Far Walking,” Ihimaera says in his “Introduction,” and a video obviously dates from one of its first performances in the same year. I also got hold of a revised script from Playmarket, New Zealand’s Playwright’s Agency, sent to me dated April 2, 2002. It would be interesting to compare the three different texts because as Ihimaera told me, quite substantial changes have been made by the actors’ and the director’s close collaboration with the author for the various play productions at different venues both in New Zealand and in England. Ihimaera has not objected to or regretted these changes; on the contrary, he felt that a specific Maori cultural practice is being honoured here, grounded in the traditional ethos of communal cooperation and the mutual assistance of the people involved.\(^3\)

I have chosen the 2002 script because its unequivocal foregrounding of the dramatic interchange of the two main characters in Woman Far Walking convincingly illustrates on the one hand the extent to which such features of the new Maori theatre as mentioned above are of special concern to the playwright. On the other hand, the play’s way of telling a story confirms Roma Potiki, herself a playwright, actress, director and a visual artist, who argued ten years before the play’s première that “Maori drama means Maori people telling their own stories, including the stories that women have to tell,” and who considers the “heart of Maori drama [as] during the 1990s, for example Grace Briar-Smith, Hone Kouka and Albert Belz. Balme, talking about their forerunners — Hone Tuwhare, Paul Maunder (who himself is a Pakeha) or Rori Hapipi —, highlights a number of characteristic dramatic elements in their plays, for example in Tuwhare’s In the Wilderness Without a Hat (1985) or in Maunder’s Ngati Pakeha: He Korero Whakapapa (1986), that we also encounter in the more recent works of their successors. I would like to refer to a few of them since I shall not only return to them in my talk about Woman Far Walking, but also believe that they have contributed towards the establishment of a literary tradition that may well continue into 21st century Maori drama.

\(^3\) Communal cooperation has also been a feature in the production of Maori films as can be ascertained from Ihimaera, Niki Caro and the main actors’ statements about the filming of the author’s novella The Whale Rider (2003).
storytelling” (Potiki 154; my emphasis). Such a view takes us right into Ihimaera’s play. When the curtain rises, we see Tiri, a woman of 160 years of age, sitting alone in a wheelchair on an almost bare stage who begins narrating her story taking plenty of time doing so — which is understandable at her age! The slow-moving narrative begins with her whakapapa, her genealogy, and takes her from mythical times to James Cook’s arrival in New Zealand in 1769 and her own birthday. In the course of the play Tiri not only covers the ground of her personal story but also of important events in the history of her people until the present day, her 160th birthday on February 6, 2000 or Waitangi Day. Named after the Treaty of Waitangi or, as Maori say, Te Tiriti o Waitangi signed between Maori chiefs and the English crown on the very same day in 1840, Tiri combines in her narration subjective experiences with historical events, a narrative strategy that keeps the audience aware throughout of her double bind: as a character in her own right and as a symbolic signifier.

However, the narrative process of connecting the private and the public spheres is constantly complemented, commented upon, questioned, teased out and even subverted from the moment a second persona dramatis called Tilly suddenly enters the stage whose appearance is by no means appreciated by the old woman. Conjured up, as it were, by Tiri’s waiata tangi or song of grief bewailing her children’s death long ago, Tilly reminds her that she has visited her on every birthday; which is to say that she too is not merely an individual, a young party guest of about thirty years of age but that she also acts out a second role: that of Tiri’s steady companion or her alter ego. Such reading of Tilly points to a postcolonial split in Tiri’s personality, a fissure in a colonised person’s psyche occasioned by British colonial rule. Indeed, Tiri’s life, as her feelings and her memories reveal, is profoundly shaped by her experiences as a Maori woman first in colonised and later in Pakeha Aotearoa/New Zealand over a period of more than 160 years. As she tells Tilly at the beginning of her story: “It was a shock to know that Auntie Tiri was a piece of paper. And what a namesake. A fraud. Full of lies and Pakeha promises. How would you like to carry the name of the document, which took Maori land?”

4 Witi Ihimaera, Woman Far Walking [Typescript], Wellington: Playmarket, 2002, 9. All further references are to this version of the play.
The shock of losing their own land to the European settlers supported by the colonial army and Maori supporting the government troops made her join the prophet and fighter Te Kooti who resisted the British intruders to lead his people to the promised land, much as Moses had done saving his people from the Pharaoh. Three of Tiri’s children are killed fighting the goblin-Pakeha, as Tiri called them, in the Land Wars of the 1860s. Another son dies in the 1914–1918 war while her second husband succumbed to the influenza epidemic imported into the country by the returning soldiers, among them Tiri’s youngest son Pirimia. Built around these and more recent experiences, her story assumes representative function conveying the history of the Maori-Pakeha encounter over more than 160 years over the legitimate ownership of the land. Telling the past then from a position of here and now draws a vivid picture of history’s bearing on the present. As Ihimaera put it: “Maori say we walk backwards into our future, so we’re constantly looking back and pulling whatever is behind us and putting it in front of us to make sure it has a place in the present. It informs our present” (Witi Ihimaera, personal communication).

Ancestors like Tiri, the girl and the woman warrior; like her mother or the weaver women she had looked after when a young girl; like her two husbands and her children; and finally, like Te Kooti: they all appear in front of her, ki mua, while she, telling her, tale is walking backwards into the future, kei muri.

Nonetheless, it is obviously not the playwright’s intention to merely retell a story that is not altogether unknown to Maori and to at least a number of open-minded and sympathetic Pakeha although his choice of a Maori woman narrator serves him to rectify official Pakeha historiography as much as Ranginui Walker’s historical study Struggle Without End had done earlier. Here, Woman Far Walking relates to the post-colonial counter-discourse laying claim to Maori heritage, validating local history, reclaiming a subversive figure as hero and recuperating women’s history.

5 “Te Kooti Arikirangi Te Turuki, the prophet and fighter […] led the escape of the Maori prisoners illegally held on Wharekauri (Chatham Islands) [in 1868] […] sixty-four women escaped […] fifty women were taken away […] some to become the wives and concubines of the government men […] who would bear children to these partners” (Binney no. pag.).
through the female narrator (see Gilbert and Tompkins; especially “Post-Colonial Histories” 106–25). Much more than this, it is the dramatisation of the story and its theatrical presentation that is of interest because both raise the question as to the meaning of the Tiri-Tilly encounter and of the place of this play within contemporary ‘new’ Maori theatre. How then and why is Tilly made to relate to Tiri’s story?

After her surprise appearance at Tiri’s birthday party, where Tilly hands over the Queen’s telegram, she adopts a prompter’s role asking the old woman to tell us about her family and the origin of her name. Surprisingly, Tiri quickly overcomes her hostility and enters into a dialogue with Tilly that lasts throughout the play. Even more so, she responds agreeably to Tilly who directs her attention to particular events in her life by either asking her or prompting her to talk about them — with a few exceptions when she refuses to answer. Such moments of dialogic encounter where the joint narrative turns into a confrontation always occur when the story moves from the past to the immediate present. In the first act, which covers the period from 1840 to 1860, Tiri suddenly questions Tilly: “Who are you? Why are you always here? Why are you making me remember?” and Tilly answers: “Because you only tell some of the story, not all of the story” (16). As it turns out, Tiri conveniently forgot to say why she had left the old weaver ladies her mother had asked her to look after. The reason, as it turns out, was not merely her wish to return home, but the arrival on the scene of a young man whom she soon lived with and who became the father of her four children. When Tilly suggests that Tiri’s act of disobedience was actually motivated by her lust for a young man and not by her wish to be reunited with her mother, the old woman begins to realize that she has not only wronged her mother and the weavers but her people’s valued traditional precepts.

Subsequently and because of Tilly’s insistent questions, Tiri finally reveals the one remaining secret of her life: that she had been raped by four Pakeha men and had born a son, Pirimia, whom she would not acknowledge since he was not only a bastard child, part Maori, part Pakeha, but also responsible for the death of Maori people whom he had infected with influenza. Trying to explain her buried feelings, Tiri lays bare the inner conflict that had burdened her life for so long — the choice between death and life, between her people and her son:
If I had fought harder, Pirimia would not have been born, he wouldn’t have spread the flu, those people would have still survived [...] I should’ve killed him [...] I tried! But when I saw him, the smell of a new born child, the feel of one’s flesh against your skin, I should’ve killed him, but I loved him. (56)

The secret burden, she feels, was perhaps “my punishment for letting the fire go out” (56). But now after having spoken out she realizes that she had caught herself in a trap. Reconciled with herself she clasps Tilly’s hand. Both end their story by dancing and singing the *haka* Tiri had sung earlier lamenting her fate.

As far as Tiri’s representational role goes, the play puts it to us that Maori people must accept the consequences of their involvement in the common history of the country, be it forced upon them like Tiri’s rape (which also stands for the rape of the earth mother, *Papatūanuku*) or because of their voluntary and by no means innocent actions: their not having “guarded the home fires,” *ahi kaa*, and having massacred European settlers, even those “in the church praying” (27), as Tilly reminds the old woman. In the final *haka* of the play the confrontational Tiri-Tilly relationship symbolically merges into the coming together of person and alter ego:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tiri:</th>
<th>Arara ka panapana</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tiri/Tilly:</td>
<td>I a ha ha Aue!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiri:</td>
<td>Ka rekareka tonu taku ngakau ki nga manariri pōhatu whakapiri –</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiri/Tilly:</td>
<td>Kia haere mai!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tiri:</td>
<td>Te takitini (58)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The song reminds us that on earlier occasions a near-oneness of both women had been achieved when crucial events in Tiri’s life were enacted. For example, her decision to go to war against the goblins brings her together with Tilly, both chanting in unison “Turuki, Turuki, Paneke, Paneke …” (20) and dancing with their weapons executing fighting movements at the close of Act I (22). Act II, ii ends with another joined song in Maori (26) while a sustained singing and dancing performance enacts the final defeat of Te Kooti’s troops (31–32). Enactments such as ritual dances and songs in Maori, Balme has pointed out, trigger off an exclusion-inclusion dynamic that we as non-Maori speakers have to accept (before we learn what the text says); a dynamic that underlines the im-
importance Ihimaera accords his people’s need to re-enact their own empowerment while structurally it connects the past with the present, refracting the present by the past.

The Tiri-Tilly (non-)relationship is dramatically presented in several more ways. Both women address the audience separately, the older one by commenting upon her disturbed dreams, the younger by interpreting them. Further, Tilly takes up the role of the historian when she mentions January 5, 1869 as the day when Te Kooti and his followers were defeated. It is an important day because it ended Maori military resistance and represents a turning point in the history of the country — and, of course, also in Tiri’s life. Yet, her adoption of a particular role is not unique; it occurs throughout the play and becomes one of its structuring devices. Tilly embodies Tiri’s mother and Tiri herself; one or the other of her children and her two husbands; Te Kooti and several minor figures. Each time she incorporates the voice of a person Tiri’s memory has just released it happens in response to the old woman’s story. Which is to say, Tilly is made to serve the playwright’s double strategy of structurally moving away from a mere dialogic narrative and, dramatically, of enacting Tiri’s inner drama.

Tilly’s role-playing foregrounds the body as a means of interacting not only with Tiri but also with the audience in a multifaceted manner through mime, movement, voice and costume. She plays the mother instructing her young daughter how to dance a woman’s haka; the young girl looking after the weavers; or enacts a matakite, a seer, who tells Tiri that she will live on, naming her “Wahine haere tawhiti,” “Woman Far Walking” (37). Ihimaera’s adoption of a European dramatic convention is noteworthy since it points to the syncretic character of his play when regarded in conjunction with his use of such traditional dramatic forms as haka and waiata, dance and song, or a combination of both: essential cultural icons that play an important role in what has been called marae theatre. 

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6 Literally: “woman travel distant.”

7 Christopher Balme mentions the Maori actor and director Jim Moriarty as main spokesman of the movement of a Marae-theatre as an autochthonous Maori theatre with “the application of the cultural semiotics of marae rituals” rather than “the syncretic dramaturgy of an individual theatrical text” (“Between Separation” 42). See also Mei-Lin Hansen’s reference: “the marae and its associated rituals were interpreted as symbolic
The syncretic nature of *Woman Far Walking* is also noticeable in the two bilingual women easily moving from one language to another and back again, which to some extent mirrors the linguistic situation of the Maori people (those who can speak Maori) and illustrates Ihimaera’s fluid stance towards the language question. Besides, the different linguistic registers enable us to distinguish the different layers of the play — the one closer to its Maoriness, *Te Haa*, its essence and breath as Ihimaera calls it, and the other its more European-oriented textuality. Such linguistic ‘juggling’ is not only a sign of Maori literature in English as “a literature of postmodern indigenous writing, involved with pastiche,” but also has its humorous side, for example, when Tilly playing Tiri’s second husband wooing her in a wonderful musical presentation of the late nineteenth century pot boiler “Oh Susanna,” or rather “Oh Huhanna” (since the Maori language does not have sibilants) sings:

Oh Huhanna!

.................
Kaua e tangi cry just for me.

.................
Haere mai au to this valley ki te ki te koe for to see

.................
Haere mai au Alabammy
Taku banjo on my knee!
Haere mai au to this valley –
Ki te ki te koe i a you! (39)

My final remarks on the play’s translation of the memorizing process into physical action refer to Tiri’s own miming of her former selves at different stages in her life. Such moments are short, at times just the length of a sentence, but serve the purpose of confronting the audience directly with her traumatic experience of loss; loss as being the core of Tiri’s inner disturbance, her existential crisis that finds its outlet through mourning, “the context for memory,” as O’Neill says (269–70). Her very first *waiata tangi* expresses this mood, “remembering the babies that have come from her representations for the whole of Maori culture [...] This type of theatre was given the label marae theatre” (no. pag.). For a critical distinction between a Western oriented concept of performance and the concept of ‘marae theatre’ see McNaughton.
womb” (5). She has outlived them all, and her mother, her husbands, “and all the loved companions of my youth” (4). However, it is her Mum who plays the decisive role in her long life, her mother who also stands for the land, papatūanuku. When she is told about her death, her feeling of guilt adds to her sense of loss in a way she will never overcome until, as she believes, she will be reunited with her: a scene she vainly evokes several times (34, 57). Being raped heightens Tiri’s predicament to the extent that she is barely able to carry her burden any longer although, as the critic Judith Dale comments, it is difficult to accept Tiri’s guilt feeling here since she is a victim.⁸ Yet, we could point at the traumatic experience of rape so many women have talked about as having created an almost inextricable tangle of shame and guilt.

The play certainly permits us to read these painful moments of personal suffering metonymically, expressing Maori people’s experiences: of their loss of Hawaiki, papakainga, the mythical place they had left centuries ago to find a new home; and even more so of the loss of Aotearoa to the European invaders. To overcome their feelings of loss and guilt embedded in the process of mourning then would mean to face reality in much the same way Tilly tells the old woman to do, that is by telling the whole truth, the story of the people’s implication in the historical process. Here, the question of guilt has to be addressed as much as in Tiri’s case. Is their loss of home/mother connected to or even due to failing in their commitment to themselves, to their own community? To the failure of observing the precepts of their cultural heritage? Have they also not heeded Tilly’s/the mother’s words: “You have to be the keeper of the fire” (13)?

Woman Far Walking suggests as much although the two women never generalize, never move away from Tiri’s personal story. Nonetheless, support for my reading, I believe, is found in the text as well as from outside.

⁸ See Judith Dale’s excellent review of the original performance who called “this sense of guilt [strange that] seems to govern the old woman’s sense of herself.” Besides, Dale relates this sense to the choice of a female protagonist and asks: “What would have happened had the protagonist of the play been male? There is something disturbing in the use of the woman here.” And further: “In terms of gender analysis, what does it mean that guilt for all that happened is placed in the hands, symbolically, of a woman who ‘accepted’ rape and then failed to kill her child?” (39 and 41).
Tiri’s sentiment about working out one’s *utu*, her payment for all she had done in her life (34), directs her Maori audience’s attention to realize that they live in a world long since removed from the past. The play’s textuality, its syncretism as well as Ihimaera’s stance signify that “Maori literature at its purest is now behind us [while] what we are now in is a literature of race relations, a literature of postmodern indigenous writing […] involved with fractures of time” (Ellis 175).

The dramatisation or stage adaptation of the play underlines the infusion of modern — I prefer to say global — forms into local ones without totally erasing the latter. Non-dialogic communication devices, the bare stage set with its emblematic props — wheel chair, chairs and scales hanging from above — will remind us of Bertolt Brecht’s theatre, the stage lighting modifies the important Maori colours of white, red and black by appropriately either brightening the world of light, lending to birth and rebirth references a red hue and darkening the world of suffering and death in blue and grey colour. Music, of great importance to Ihimaera who has written opera libretti, among them for *Galileo* performed in 2001, ranges from *waiata* tunes sung in Maori at important moments in Tiri’s life which imbue the play with a near poetic mood and ‘modern’ compositions of the Pakeha composer Gareth Farr. The choreography of the *haka* or dancing scenes that communicate the battle between Te Kooti and the British, and the fighting scene between Tiri and Tilly, who impersonates the rapists, is both close to traditional enactments on the *marae* but also connotes staged *haka* performances we can follow at *kapa haka* or contemporary *haka* competitions where ‘modern’ texts referring to contemporary events and people combine with choreographic experimentation.

The staging of *Woman Far Walking* illustrates that Ihimaera’s play forms part of the ‘new’ or glocal Maori theatre that heeds Roma Potiki’s advise to debunk myths such as rural Maori life as idyllic, of the noble savage or the

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9 See also William Peterson’s remarks on the concept of utu that turns our attention to Tiri’s personal predicament of guilt and redress as encoded in utu as a “function of redressing and restoring balance within the community [that relates] back to the loss of mana (power, authority or prestige)” (18).

10 The theatre director Christian Penny felt that *Woman Far Walking* “was more like a poem, a lament, than a play” (qtd. in Ihimaera, *Woman* 2001, no pag.).
all-loving and caring whānau or family (154). Although “Maori theatre,” she says, “must deal honestly with what has happened and is happening to Maori people — the joy and the hell that we, as survivors of the damage of colonialism, have learnt to live with and live through” (162), we should also realize that “it is not a rigid form [because] Maori are living within a social context that is global” (Potiki qtd. in Huria 4).

In my final remarks I shall return to the differing versions of the play and remind us that the typescript of 2002 is much shorter than the published play. It foregrounds the dramatic interaction between Tiri and Tilly, or in other words, its magic, its non-realistic and thus its parabolic dimension. The breaking up of a strict diachronic sequencing of events in combination with the continual shifting of the narrative’s perspective, the moves in and out of Tiri’s mind, dreams and thoughts and the use of both Maori and English: all these dramatic devices create a ‘Verfremdungseffekt’ (alienation effect) that clearly separates Woman Far Walking from the realistic theatre and thereby multiplies the levels of its meaning.11 The published text, on the other hand, has many more affinities to realism with its often comprehensive stage directions and its pronounced juxtaposition of the Tiri/Tilly world on the one hand and the new millennium scenery on the other, where Tiri’s mokopuna, great-great-grand children, a reporter and the Governor-General act in voice-over and in separate scenes that are accorded the status of “The Present.” Here, Ihimaera’s talent as an excellent teller of stories, of impressive novels and short stories comes to the fore, yet at the expense of the play’s dramatic purchase.

“Extending the Code: New Forms of Dramatic and Theatrical Expression”? Yes and No. Yes, because Woman Far Walking adds new aspects to Maori theatre. No, because these forms are not altogether new in modern drama. But their use by Ihimaera illustrates that drama and theatre of a so-called minority culture are moving along trajectories where purely local forms have been left behind but are neither totally erased nor have they

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11 I found it quite interesting to come across a number of similarities between Ihimaera’s play and Paul Maunder’s Ngati Pakeha discussed by Balme, such as the telling of historical events, including a prophet’s resistance to the British and the rape of a woman, the story teller’s mother, through its main character (“New Maori Theatre” 161–64)
been replaced under the impact of global and homogenising influences. It is at this very juncture that we encounter the ‘new’ glocal Maori theatre not only in Ihimaera’s play, but also in works such as Grace Briar-Smith’s *Purapurawhetū* (1997), Hone Kouka’s *Waiora* (1997) or Albert Belz’s *Te Maunga* (staged in 2001) that deserve as much attention as *Woman Far Walking*.

### Works Cited

#### Primary Literature


#### Secondary Literature


Transformed Identities: Cultural Transgression and Postcolonial Transformation in Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s and Ngugi wa Mirii’s *I Will Marry When I Want*

In “Patterns and Trends in Committed African Drama,” a review article included in his 1985 collection of essays *The Truthful Lie*, Biodun Jeyifo discusses committed African drama. He expresses his fascination that some playwrights are able to demonstrate how culture is created afresh in the context of socio-cultural struggle: “the old songs and myths, the erstwhile values, customs, relationships and identities are reshaped and given a new meaning” (Jeyifo 48).

In this sense I am interested in how Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii extend the codes of inherited traditions making them transgress their old artificial boundaries and to overlap with the received metropolitan cultures in *I Will Marry When I Want* their Kamiriithu play. Conversely, I will investigate how the codes of so-called high cultures have also been broken down and made to confront and dialogue with the historically displaced and marginalized of the postcolonial society of Kenya.

The Kamiriithu experiment which produced *I Will Marry When I Want* represents an attempt at creating an alternative tradition of Kenyan theatre and culture. The name “Kamiriithu” stands as a veritable experience in transformation. As Ingrid Bjorkman writes in *Mother, Sing for Me: People’s Theatre in Kenya*, the name originally describes “a flat place on which rests a pool of water defiant to drought” (52). Later, and in the fifties, the name was appropriated to refer to an emergency village on which were settled the displaced natives of Kenya. Eventually transformed into a “permanent fea-
ture,” Kamiriithu village, the neighbourhood of which actually served as a battlefield during the period of open confrontation and which actually threw up some of the frontline Mau Mau combatants, now had about eleven thousand inhabitants. Of this number, about two thousand are engaged by the multinational shoe manufacturing company located in the village. A second group, also quite substantial, works in the agricultural sector, precisely on the “huge coffee and tea plantations formerly owned by European settlers, but now taken over by such foreign companies as Brooke Bond Tea, or by a few rich Kenyan landowners” (*People’s Theatre in Kenya* 51). The third group is completely unemployed.

As Bjorkman further argues, there actually exists little or no difference in the material condition of these three groups. The majority of them are landless and they suffer from wants and untold miseries. Precisely, this is also the condition of the majority of inhabitants of other Kenyan towns and villages. I quote the actual words of Bjorkman as she paints a depressingly homogenous situation of life and living in contemporary Kenya:

> Many small farmers lost their lands during the colonial period or in the latter period of land consolidation. High mortgages forced many more to sell their land, making them squatters, and cheap labourers, on the land now belonging to new owners. The squatters live in squalor, without any public or welfare services. Kamiriithu was in no way worse off than other Kenyan villages. Such were the normal standards of living even in the rich, fertile Limuru district. (52)

In Kamiriithu, a youth centre had actually existed at the centre of the village since the mid-fifties. This centre, again like the name of the village of which it is a microcosm, has experienced multiple appropriations over time. The place first served as a playing arena for children during the period of emergency. After independence, it transformed into a carpentry class under the Limuru Area Council and, following the disbandment of the council in 1974, it became converted into a toilet by the villagers.

In October 1975, Njeeri wa Aamoni, a community development officer championed the formation of a new committee for the centre, proposing a three-dimensional programme of transformation, the organisation of which would be the sole responsibility of the villagers. The three programmes are Adult Literacy, Health, and Cultural Development. This was how, the “mud-walled barrack-type building,” as Ngugi describes it
in *Detained* got re-named the Kamiriithu Community Education and Cultural Centre with the villagers electing Adolf Kamau, a peasant farmer, the chairman. Ngugi wa Thiong’o lived in the village at the time, commuting between it and the University of Nairobi where he was then professor and head of the Literature Department on a daily basis. The other intellectual who, beside him, also lived in the village at the time was Ngugi wa Mirii, a specialist in Freie’s pedagogics and a researcher in adult literacy at the same University of Nairobi. Both of them decided to join the project.

The centre commenced work with the first of the three programmes, appointing wa Mirii the chairman of the education committee. Given his ideological orientation, wa Mirii was concerned, not just with mere literacy, but also with socio-political education. Thus, the first set of forty-five students who graduated at the end of 1976 were excited, not just by their ability to read and write but also by their new understanding of the concrete reality of post-colonial Kenya. They were eager to go further with this at a broader level and in an even more collective and involving way. It was now time for Ngugi wa Thion’g’o who, as chairman of the Cultural Committee was asked to design a play in collaboration with wa Mirii incorporating in it the earlier discussions on the people’s experience of dislocation and displacement. This was how the working script of *Ngaahika Ndeenda*, the Gikuyu original of *I Will Marry When I Want* was put together. This took place between January and April, 1977.

The next two months were devoted to a discussion and revision of both the content and form of the play. Ngugi himself describes what happened as a veritable experience in “collective community effort with peasants and workers seizing more and more initiative in revising and adding to the script, in directing dance movements on the stage and in the general organisation” (*Detained* 77). The rehearsal of the play took place between June and October, 1977 and simultaneously as this was going on, an open air theatre structure was also being put up, with the villagers carrying out both the designing and the actual construction of the theatre. The structure was, and again to go back to *Detained*, “complete with a raised stage, roofed dressing rooms and stores, and an auditorium with a seating capacity of more than two thousand persons” (77). For a vivid representation of Ngugi’s perspective of the play as a jointly executed intellectual and practical pro-
ject I reproduce further his words as he gives account of the play’s production process in the same book, *Detained*:

The rehearsals, arranged to fit in with the working rhythms of the village, which meant mostly Saturday and Sunday afternoons, were all in the open, attracting an ever-increasing crowd of spectators and an equally great volume of running appreciative or critical commentaries. The whole process of play-acting and the production had been demystified and the actors and the show were the gainers for it. The dress rehearsals on Sunday, 25 September, 1977, attracted one of the biggest crowds I have ever seen for a similar occasion, and the same level of high attendance was maintained for the next four Saturdays and six Sundays. (77–78)

At the level of content, *I Will Marry When I Want* reproduces the actual condition of life of the majority of people in Kenya as earlier depicted. Two parties are locked in antagonism. On the one hand is the family of Kiguunda, standing as the representative of the majority of the citizenry who now have become marginalized in post-colonial Kenya. Kiguunda is a veteran of Mau Mau, the Kenyan war of liberation. Under the present circumstances however, Kiguunda wallows in abject poverty. He can hardly feed his family, talk less of being able to send his children to school. All he has to sustain his hope in the present is the one and a half acres of land located on a dry plain.

On the other side of the pole is Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru, a wealthy businessman and a local director of a number of multi-national and foreign owned companies. The point of the conflict between the two is Kiguunda’s piece of land. Kioi and Ikuua wa Nditika, his business partner, would like to have the one and a half acres of land for the construction of an insecticide factory. The confrontation commences initially as a game of hide and seek. Eventually it blows open into a face-to-face battle with Kiguunda, having allowed himself to be deceived at a point, losing out in the end. The point of the play however lies in the need to reverse this kind of situation, the need to alter a structure where the majority of the people wallow in want while a select handful indulge in untold opulence. It is a theme which, for Ngugi and Ngugi, represents the true condition of postcoloniality. In order to achieve it, both authors consider it important to recuperate aspects of past memories.

At the centre of the different aspects of tradition exploited in *I Will Marry When I Want* is the story of Mau Mau, Kenyans’ popular struggle for
political independence. Actually the story of Mau Mau stands at the heart of all of Ngugi’s major works, including drama and prose fiction. Before *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, Ngugi wa Thiong’o has earlier devoted a whole novel to the subject as *A Grain of Wheat* actually represents a re-dramatization of the particular event which underwrote Kenya’s freedom from the yoke of British colonialism.

In “Mau Mau, the Peak of African Political Organisation in Colonial Kenya,” Maina wa Kinyatti, the Kenyan radical historian articulates a perspective of the struggle which represents it as the peak of Kenya’s nationalist agitation. According to him, there actually exists four phases of Kenya’s anti-colonial struggle. The first one described as “isolated, uncoordinated and weak,” (293) refers to the Koitalel led struggle of the Kalenjin people which lasted from 1895 to 1905 and the Gusii’s “bloody resistance against foreign intruders.” The second phase, which began at about 1900 was championed by the Harry Thuku led East African Association (EAA). Originally conceived as a non-violent struggle, the arrest of Harry Thuku and other leaders of the association was to spark off a protest during which about one hundred and fifty people were shot dead. The third phase, which went on for almost thirty years starting from the twenties, was prosecuted by the Kikuyu Central Association, an organisation described by Kinyatti as better organised, more centralised and more nationalist in outlook than the East African Association which it succeeded.

The ultimate phase which, of course, is Mau Mau commenced in the early fifties when the militant wing of the Kenyan African Union struck an alliance with the Kenyan Trade Union and jointly resolved to adopt a hard-line position against the British colonialists. The event served as a radical turning point in the struggle against imperial domination. People simply departed from the “reformist” approach of the Kenyan African Union, opting for “the road of the armed struggle, stirring up a vigorous nationalist political upsurge throughout the country, in which the workers and peasants became an independent leading political force” (*Historical Review* 294). This was under the “new leadership of workers and peasants based in the country-side under the direction of Dedan Kimathi and Stanley Mathenge” (294).

Violence broke out in 1952, with the freedom fighters operating from the forest. Due to the intensity of the hostility, a state of emergency had to
be declared in October of the same year by the colonial government. In spite of this, the struggle went on till 1956 when Dedan Kimathi was eventually captured, tried and executed by hanging. Following the defeat of the guerrilla fighters, the British quietly commenced negotiation with Jomo Kenyatta and other leaders of the Kenya African Union thus conceding independence in 1963.

Maina wa Kinyatti’s paper derives insight from a variety of sources, including Kimathi’s personal diary, the words of hard core Mau Mau cadres, oral interviews from surviving guerrillas and the collected folk-songs of the fighters. It even quotes the words of Jomo Kenyatta who was to become the president of the country after independence and who, in a 1948 interview with an American journalist had expressed a fear of the left-wing group, believing that “their dark and half educated minds will lead them to the use of force” (*Historical Review* 293). The historian’s aim in digging out this fact is to prove that though defeated, it was Mau Mau’s violent opposition to imperialism which won Kenya its independence in 1963. Those who took over the leadership of the country after that were however to negotiate away the people’s struggles. It is in this sense that Kinyatti projects them as sell-outs and collaborators.

Ngugi and Ngugi are certainly in agreement with this line of interpretation. To them, Mau Mau was a patriotic movement and its leaders the people who carried on their shoulders the articulated hopes and aspirations of the masses of the people, and who, therefore fought hard to see to the actualisation of these dreams. The immediate leaders of postcolonial Kenya, on the other hand, are those who negotiated away the people’s achievements, returning them, consequently, to the beginning of the struggle. This perspective of the two writers is re-inscribed in virtually all the songs employed in *I Will Marry When I Want*. The last verse of the Mucung’wa lyrics expresses the need to take away the crown of victory from traitors for it to be:

Handed back to patriots
Like Kimathi’s patriotic heroes. (13)

The Nwomboko dance articulates the people’s defiance of the white invaders of Kenya:
For we shall never stop
Agitating for and demanding back our lands
For Kenya is an African people’s country (26),

while the Ngurario wedding ceremony winds up with a charge to everybody to:

Let’s now go back to cultivate our fields
While seeking ways of getting back
Lands stolen from us by the whites. (66)

In extending the forms of expression of the past, it is clear that the aims of the authors of *I Will Marry When I Want* is not to valorise them but rather to draw attention to their continued relevance, using them to inspire the people afresh and engender in them a determination to continue the struggle against *new* forms of colonialism. Beside Mau Mau, there are several other aspects of past traditions which have been so utilized in the play. Again, Ngugi wa Thiong’o discusses many of these in details in *Detained*, his prison diary. From the pre-colonial times comes the Ituika, a “revolutionary cultural festival” celebrated among the Agikuyu every twenty-five years and which essentially was conceived as an occasion for the handing-over of power between one generation and the other as the people kept step with their forebears, the Iregi generation. Ngugi further describes the Iregi as a “generation of revolutionary rebels, who has overthrown the corrupt, dictatorial regime of King Gikuyu, established ruling councils and […] also the procedure for handing over power” (*Detained* 65). The Ituika festival fell victim to the British colonizers when it was banned in 1930. From the colonial period came the Muthiriigu dances and songs through which people expressed their objection to forced labour and to cultural extermination. This was also banned in the thirties. There was also the Mumboist anti-imperialist singers and composers of the Luo and Gusi nationalists, as well as the Mau Mau writing and publishing industry in the 1940s and 1950s about which Ngugi waxes eloquently in *Detained*:

Volumes of songs, poems and prose were published. Many more songs and poems were sung and recited in most homes and wherever two or more people had gathered. A people’s theatre flourished away from the stifling confines of walls and set fixed stages. Once again the colonial overlords banned these publications;
they banished the authors, composers and publishers to detention camps, prisons and cruel deaths. But even behind the barbed wire and stone walls, they went on composing new songs and singing out their patriotic defiance that finally brought those walls tumbling down. (66)

One immediate purpose of Ngugi and Ngugi in recalling these old texts seems to be what they perceive as the need to negate the Christian tradition which obviously they consider as alienating. They actually define it as “an alcohol” employed by the comprador bourgeoisie to arrest the “souls of the people.” Soon after the play opens, a Christian group invades the stage canvassing for financial support towards the establishment of a church for the poor. Their hymn, which talks about crushing Satan, the harbinger, according to them, of all woes, is soon opposed with Mucung’wa dance. A difference is consequently established between the staccato tunes of the fund-raisers and the fullness and robustness of the traditional performance which celebrates love and life as well as courtship and struggle. The same themes are articulated in Nyagwicu and Nwomboko, being the next two dance steps that are to follow. Later, in act two, after Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and his team have visited as they seek to convince Kiguunda and his wife, Wangeci, to “stop living in sin,” get baptized, undertake a church wedding and accept Christianity, Gicaamba and Njooki take over the stage to conduct a rigorous interrogation of the alien religion. Countering the pretension to holiness of the Kiois and the Ndugires, Gicaamba and his wife argue that the church is no more than a social organization, indeed a forum where the rich hatch plans on how to further deprive the poor of their paltry holdings. To them, all marriages “are blessed once they are not founded on measured love or on bank savings” (64) but on mutual fellowship and on humanity. At this point, the stage bursts into a festival as the audience is taken back in time to witness the final traditional wedding ceremony of Gicaamba and Njooki. Men, women and children from both sides dance to Gitiirö opera just as the lyrics restate the earlier argument that a marriage is genuine only when “a human quality is attracted by another human quality” (64) and not by material wealth. Njooki would therefore not be exchanged:

For anybody’s property
But for a gourd of honey
Give me now the honey
[to] keep beside the bed
So everytime I wake up
I taste a little. (65)

I have earlier underscored the playwrights’ reason for re-enacting historical experiences in *I Will Marry When I Want*. But if I may just go back to the words of wa Kinyatti for the sake of reiteration, Ngugi and Ngugi have made recourse to tradition in order to re-present the Mau Mau “food and drink” to an even hungrier and thirstier Kenyan people, and to re-stir in them a “vigororous nationalist feeling” such as will make them re-launch a program of post-colonial transformation. As can be seen from my very rough summary of the plot of the play, Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and Ikuua wa Nditika, his business partner, have been categorized as inheritors of the colonial legacy of land expropriation and capital accumulation. Climbing upwards to meet these two on the topmost rung of the social ladder is a former home guard, Samuel Ndugire who now has become transformed into a shopkeeper and gardener. Occupying the other side of the social categorization are the families of Kiguunda and Gicaamba. For the first family, a total of three members appear in the play: Kiguunda himself, Wangeci, his wife, and Gathoni, their daughter. The second family is represented simply by Gicaamba, also a Mau Mau veteran and now a factory worker, and Njooki, his wife.

The playwrights make Kiguunda’s home the centre-point of the action and the man himself together with Gicaamba the central characters in the play. Again, as already stated in the summary, Kiguunda’s abode is a vivid articulation of poverty. The stage direction paints it as a “square, mud-walled, white-ochred, one-roomed house” (3). The white ochre, it must be noted, is already fading. There is only one bed in the room and this serves both Kiguunda and his wife. Gathoni their beautiful daughter sleeps on the floor, with only rags to serve as beddings. The play opens with the man mending the broken leg of a chair while Wangeci prepares the food with which to entertain the visitors being expected. It is to be discovered presently that there is no salt in the house and that neither is there money to purchase some. That Gathoni is not in school is also due to the same reason of lack of means.
The plight of Kiguunda is the plight of the majority of the citizens of post-colonial Kenya. And even though the audience does not get to see Gicaamba’s own abode, it is clear that the difference between it and that of Kiguunda cannot lie in material value but in the former’s level of post-colonial consciousness. Gicaamba has a profound grasp of the nature of exploitation, the dynamics of oppression, the injustice of wage labour and the necessity for transformation. As he begins a long speech that explains all of the above and more, Gicaamba complains:

Wages can never equal the work done  
Wages can never really compensate for your labour  
Gikuyu said:  
If you want to rob a monkey of a baby it is holding  
You must first throw it a handful of peanuts  
We the workers are like that monkey  
When they want to steal our labour  
They bribe us with a handful of peanuts  
We are the people who cultivate and plant  
But we are not the people who harvest  
The owners of these companies are scorpions  
They know three things:  
To oppress workers,  
To take away their rights  
And to suck their blood. (33)

Soon after this, the owners of industry being referred to by Gicaamba are to surface. The playwrights leave nothing to chance in registering their revulsion for this class of people. They are presented as vulgar in tastes and pretentious in attitude. They arrive in Kiguunda’s home with “Koi […] dressed in a very expensive suit with a hat and folded umbrella for a walking stick.” Jezebel, the wife, also “has a very expensive suit with expensive jewellery” (42). And as they enter, they all “take out handkerchiefs with which they keep wiping their eyes and faces because of the smoke in the house. They also cough and sneeze ostentatiously” (42). When, later, the reader encounters Ikuua, he is discovered to be “a man with a belly as huge as that of a woman about to deliver” (75).

To fully comprehend the way the latter group maintains its containment of the former, it is necessary to return to the metaphor thrown up by Gicaamba in the speech quoted above — the metaphor of a monkey which
loses its baby while pursuing a handful of peanuts — and relate it to Kiguunda’s experience in the play.

As already known, Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru and Ikuua wa Nditika need Kiguunda’s parcel of land for the construction of an insecticide factory. In scheming to rob him of this, Kioi’s first step is to condescend to a visit to Kiguunda’s home, a visit which he uses to propose to Kiguunda the need for the latter to abandon his “sinful ways” and convert to Christianity. Of course, Kioi has done his home work well. He is quite aware that Kiguunda would like to know how his conversion to Christianity would benefit him materially. This is why he has with him a man like Samuel Ndugire who would readily testify to the transformation in his life since his experience of conversion to Christianity.

Kiguunda is no longer the same again from the moment he listens to the testimony. He should himself, as he thinks, be able to make do with a few shops and some acres of land, especially if it also “has a good crop of tea.” His wife is also on hand to remind him of the relationship between Gathoni, their daughter, and John Muhuni, Kioi’s son. With this, everything falls in place. As husband and wife reason, Kioi actually has made the proposition in order to ensure that his son does not marry into the family of ordinary pagans. And so, with Wangeci following closely on his heels, Kiguunda sets out to declare his acceptance of Kioi’s proposition. He agrees to sign for a bank loan, using the title deed as guarantee. If you want to rob a monkey of its baby, you must first throw it a handful of peanuts. Indeed. But Kiguunda and Wangeci are still in the middle of the rehearsal for the church wedding when Gathoni comes in weeping. John Muhuni, having impregnated her, has thrown her out. Alas.

Through the final confrontation between Kiguunda and Ahab Kioi wa Kanoru, a glimpse is given of the nature of the reversals to expect on the appointed day. On that day when the “trumpet of the masses has been blown” (115), all traitors will be turned into beasts, and like the biblical Nebuchadnezzar, they will be made to “walk on all fours” and to “eat grass.” But this transformation will not be achieved by an individual who simply is goaded by vengeance and who himself, had it been possible, would not have minded escaping to the class of the comprador bourgeoisie. It will rather be actualised by a collective front of workers and peasants, and only
after having renewed their Mau Mau oaths. Here is Gicaamba as he gives a brilliant round off of the argument of the play:

Two hands can carry a beehive,
One man’s ability is not enough,
One finger cannot kill a louse,
Many hands make work light.
Why did Gikuyu say these things?
Development will come from unity
Unity is our strength and wealth
A day will surely come when
If a bean falls to the ground
It’ll be split equally among us. (114–15)

Earlier in this essay, I pointed out how theatre production has almost literally become the exclusive preserve of foreign companies in post-colonial Kenya, and how its patrons also are the highly placed members of black bourgeoisie as well as expatriates. In effect then, what Ngugi and Ngugi have done by writing and coordinating the production of *I Will Marry When I Want* with the inhabitants of Kamiriithu was to “drag down” this aspect of “high culture.” If this is so, the question then is: of what impact was this code on the people to which it has been extended?

I have earlier pointed out how after Ngugi and Ngugi have submitted the draft script to them, the villagers took it up and radically remoulded the “awkward efforts” of the two writers, and how, by themselves, they also constructed an open air theatre with a seating capacity of about two thousand. There are even more striking experiences in the course of the project. Ngugi writes in *Detained* how the Gitiiro opera sequence described as “one of the finest aesthetic experiences on the Kenyan stage and one of the brightest moments in the show” was written “word for word at the dictation of an illiterate peasant woman from Kamiriithu village and performed step by step according to her choreography” (190), and also how the play achieved an incredible discipline for the villagers, especially as it concerns keeping time and curbing alcoholism. It is better, I think, to let Ngugi describe the transformative impact of the play in his own words:

The whole effort unleashed a torrent of talents hitherto unsuspected even by the owners. Thus before the play was over, we had already received three scripts of
plays in the Gikuyu language, two written by a worker, and one by a primary school teacher. One unemployed youth who had tried to commit suicide four times because he thought his life was useless, now suddenly discovered that he had a tremendous voice which, when raised in a song, kept its listeners on dramatic tenterhooks. None of the artists had ever been on stage before, yet they kept the audiences glued to their seats, even when it was raining. Before long, we had received one delegation from Gikaambura village in Kikuyu; and another from Kanyariri, on how they too could start a similar community cultural project. Another group of teachers came from Nyadarwa North and they too wanted to start their own Kamiriithu. (79)

The people of Kamiriithu were to experience a harsh reprisal for this attempt at relocating themselves in the historical context of contemporary Kenya. On 16 November, 1977, and precisely after nine performances, government suddenly revoked the play’s licence. Two weeks later, on December 1 of the same year that is, a heavy detachment of policemen descended on the house of Ngugi wa Thiong’o and after a thorough search of his study, effected his arrest.

Ngugi was to discover, after his release a year later, that his job as a professor of literature at the University of Nairobi was gone. He would nonetheless refuse to be discouraged by this, as, soon after, he was to embark on the scripting of a second Kamiriithu script. It was, this time, a musical drama titled Maitu Njugira, which is translated into English as Mother, Sing for Me. The play once more generated great enthusiasm among the villagers and its rehearsals attracted thousands of people from different parts of Kenya. The villagers had also become quite daring as they applied for permission to produce the play at the National Theatre, Nairobi. Government not only made sure to prevent the production, its agent also razed down the open air theatre constructed in Kamiriithu village, placing a permanent ban on theatrical activities in the village. Soon after this, Ngugi wa Thiong’o left for London to finalise arrangements with his publishers on the publication of the English translation of Citaani Mutharabaini, the novel he drafted while in detention and which is translated as Devil on the Cross. On completion of this assignment, he received a warning against returning to Kenya. He has since then had to remain in exile.

I Will Marry When I Want, to sum up, is a play in which the codes of Kenyan history and cultural traditions are exploited afresh. Through its production, what in postcolonial Kenya was thought, literally, to be the
exclusive privilege of the high and mighty was taken over and transformed by the lowly placed people of Kamiriithu. In this regard, the disjuncture between artist and audience which has become the bane of many contemporary African dramatists is completely avoided. This is demonstrated in the fact that throughout the nine performances of the play, the group played to thousands of spectators. Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii declare, as their goal, “a social system in which no African child would go without a job, a system in which wealth and property and the soil bought by the collective blood of the Kenyan people would not end up in the pockets of a few Africans and Asians and Europeans” (84). If they fail to push through their perspective of postcolonial transformation, it is because the ruling hegemony in Kenya has also refused to take chances.

Works Cited

Primary Literature


Secondary Literature


IV.

Workshops
ADELE EDLING SHANK

Creating Plays for the New Theatre: A Playwriting Workshop

For over a century, playwriting in the Western world has been dominated by ‘realism.’ Of course, there have also been exceptions from, if not overt attacks, on the convention of realism. Authors such as Maeterlinck, Wedekind, Ghelderode, Brecht, and Ionesco have all had their ‘fifteen minutes of fame,’ and Brecht had more like an hour. Certainly, these writers have had a lasting impact on theatre and a modifying influence on the pre-existing concepts of realism. Today dramatists such as Richard Foreman, Sarah Kane, Mac Wellman, and groups such as the Wooster Group, are creating works that present worlds that are conceived as the antithesis of ‘realism.’ A key concept of this (‘post-modern’) attitude towards ‘reality’ is deconstruction. In the words of Jonathan Culler:

Deconstruction is most simply defined as a critique of the hierarchical [and binary] oppositions that have structured Western thought: inside/outside; mind/body, [...], nature/culture, form/meaning. To deconstruct an opposition is to show that it is not natural and inevitable but a construction, produced by discourses that rely on it. (126)

In this sense, the reality that surrounds man is not so much understood and accepted as given and factual but as the result of an ongoing process of collective social construction that has been determined by many factors such as cognition, value systems, the distribution of power, technology, psychology, notions of individuality, of gender, history, etc. By questioning and suspending such a factuality a wealth of neglected and forgotten alternatives might open up.
Realism is a view of the world that was established in the course of that process in the second half of the nineteenth century (cf. Nochlin). Although it went through several subsequent stages of modification it continues in its core the hegemonial influence of the dominant bourgeoisie (cf. Glazener 21–22).

The ‘realist project’ has been able to adapt, survive, and it persists due to a certain degree of structural openness. Therefore, it is hardly surprising to still find it in the theatre, especially as the conservatism of mainstream theatre has been reinforced by the like-minded media of television and films which dominate the cultural pallet. Thus, most modern playwrights have approached writing for the stage through so-called ‘psychological realism,’ a differentiation of realism that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century.

Even today, of the dozen or so playwriting text books I know, nearly all advise writers to start with character: develop the characters, delve deep, plumb the depths, root out all the fascinating neuroses and tics. Developing character has become about motivation, motivation, motivation. And character inconsistency is taboo, despite the post-modern awareness that even the corporeal referent on stage is not really ‘real.’ It is a cultural product historically and socially constructed. In this sense, the frequent presence of nakedness on the post-modern alternative stage is an indication of a deconstructive liberation of the multifacetedness of the body (cf. e.g. Theodore Shank’s and Annette Pankratz’s articles in this volume).

Young writers in post-modern times need new approaches that may induce an awareness of the composition and of the complexity of the world around us as well as of our involvement in it.

I have developed a range of approaches and a number of exercises that lead students to start in a different place, work into fresher directions, and

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1 Glazener, in reference to Janice Radway, shows that the ‘bourgeois realist’ project of cultural hegemony allowed for ambivalences “in order to induce other groups to endorse its values and thereby its leadership. On the other hand, a group whose leadership is premised on class stratification needs to keep cultural competency sufficiently rare that it can monopolize legitimate culture, using its members’ comfort in the cultural realm they control as mark of their distinction and a class-consolidating pleasure” (21–22).

2 Cf. the widely used book by Lajos Egri 32–124.
bring within reach of the spectator’s means of experience the “warring forces of signification” (Johnson qtd. in Culler 126) discovered in an environment.

Each exercise in this series has as a starting point a different inceptive idea — in one exercise it is an image, in another it is a found space or a design concept expressed in a collage. In each case the results are theatrically vital.

I usually begin introductory playwriting classes and workshops by passing out some post cards of paintings, the sort of thing one buys at museums. Each participant should take one and study it very carefully.

**Painting Exercise**

Imagine that the painting on your post card is a three-dimensional stage setting. Write a three-minute play (with dialogue) that takes place in that setting. What you conceive should have the same mood and style as the painting. The figures in the painting should become the characters in your play. If your painting has several figures you do not have to use them all as characters. If your painting has only one or two figures, you may add others that are in the same style. Do not intellectualise — go with your intuitive responses to the painting and develop those. You have fifteen minutes.

When the time is up, some of the post cards are projected so that everyone can see the images. The workshop participant who had been given that post card reads aloud his or her three-minute play inspired by it. The projected paintings include Oscar Schlemmer’s *Blue Woman*, Paul Gauguin’s *The White Horse*, Giorgio de Chirico’s *The Painter’s Family*, Henri Rousseau’s *The Dream*, George Grosz’s *Circe*, and Paul Delvaux’s *The Phases of the Moon*.

**Space Exercises**

I have developed three exercises that use space as the inceptive idea. The first is designed to force young playwrights to actually look at the world around them. Unless they are forced into observing the actual world, usually the first ideas that pop into their heads are pre-digested mediated ideas. These are ideas that come to them through information that has already been edited, shaped, and processed — a news story or “human interest”
story they have heard or read, a song they know, a character they know from television. They have been told what to think, and ideas generated from such sources do not have the authenticity of actual unfiltered experience. I want writers to start with an idea from their own observation and develop that.

**Space Exercise 1**

Leave the classroom and walk around the surrounding area with these instructions: First, find two interesting places to set a play and be prepared to explain what is unusual about them. Next, observe from afar two interesting individuals and create personalities for them that arise from something about the way they look, walk, gesture, talk, etc. Return in fifteen minutes ready to present your observations. Be careful to be discreet — do not harass or “stalk” anyone.

In the second part of this exercise, you should return to the most interesting of the two spaces and study that space noting things such as temperature, colours, the quality of the light, sounds, and smells that are in the space. Now imagine your two characters meeting in this space. Think about what might happen and let these atmospheric elements influence what that might be.

This exercise excites some writers more than any of the other exercises and they go on to develop these ideas into site-specific plays.

There is a variation on this exercise in which the writers are given a limited choice of actual spaces. They are asked to develop a concept for a short play that takes place in one of the following actual environments:

- an empty swimming pool
- a raft on water
- a large crate about the size of an automobile
- a garbage dump

**Space Exercise 2**

The second of these space exercises involves an art project and a prop. The exercise is in two parts. First, playwrights are asked to create a room in their minds, a room where someone lives or lives and works. Imagine the room in great detail, think about all the details — how it looks, how it
smells, what colours are there, what sounds come from outside, etc. And, most important of all, in the room there is something that is completely unexpected, something that absolutely does not belong in that space. After doing this conceptual work, make a collage that reflects the ideas of the room using pictures, ads, bits of fabric, and things that are found or cut out of magazines.

The collage serves an interesting purpose. The idea of the room, that is the picture of it that one has in one’s head, will probably be a realistic version — a room based on rooms in the real world. But the collage is never realistic, it is made of assembled stuff, things are at improbable angles, there is no ceiling and the bed is smaller than the door. When the playwrights are then asked to use the collage as the setting for their play, it is this twisted, non-realistic image of the room which they have in their heads as the setting for the play. They have gone beyond realism into expressionism. And the “something completely unexpected, something that absolutely does not belong in that space” generates plot ideas that are spontaneous, fresh, and unpredictable.

**Space Exercise 3**

The third in this series of space exercises also involves language. I keep beginning playwrights away from language for a good while because people who have little or no experience in writing a play think that playwriting is all about language. This is far from the truth, of course. A play is a structure which in its completed form, that is in performance, exists in time and space and is three-dimensional. So I like to keep the focus on the time and space at the onset of the process, but words are an important part of this third space exercise.

The stage direction below is the beginning of your play. Please continue writing this opening stage direction up to and including the first speech. You must stop writing after that first speech. Your job is to continue making the opening of the play theatrically interesting.

Lights up on a vast stage. There are rolling sand dunes and grey/white sky. Silence. A flash of lightening. The sand begins to move. A top hat emerges from the sand followed by the head and body of a woman dressed in a tuxedo. She sits up and wipes her mouth. A shovel emerges from the sand. She takes it, looks around, finds the right spot, and starts to dig.
After writing for six or seven minutes, pass your paper to a person sitting nearby. After reading what the first writer has written, pick up where the first writer left off. First write a new stage direction and then continue writing dialogue. If there is time, you will pass the paper to a third writer who must also start with a new stage direction before continuing with dialogue.

*Character Exercises*

While it is important to start with exercises that encourage non-traditional approaches to developing plays, there is no reason to avoid character exercises later in the process. There are many very valuable ones. This is one exercise I often use.

*Character Exercise 1*

Unsatisfied Memories. Think about an incident or communication in your life about which you still feel dissatisfied. It may have happened yesterday or a long time ago. At the time of the event it may have seemed to you to have been of major or minor consequence. What is important is that you still feel unsettled about the event — perhaps you did not get what you wanted, or you did and it was a surprise or disappointment, or you did not do what you wish you had done, or what you accomplished went unrecognised, or you were misunderstood, or justice was not served. Try to remember the moment in detail — the sounds, sights, the other people involved, what was done and how it felt. (You will not be required to share this part of the exercise with the group.)

Next, play a series of “what ifs” with this unsatisfied memory. What if he had not been my brother, but he had been my boyfriend? What if I had been fourteen when it happened instead of nineteen? Or change the location or the time of the event. Or change the sexes, ages, or relationships of the characters. Or have the characters stay the same, but make the specifics of their situation more extreme. Maybe change the outcome? Perhaps introduce another character who has the power to change the situation? When you have some good choices, the final step is to choose the situation that has the most dramatic potential and develop an inceptive idea for a play based on that situation.
But my all time favourite character exercise is, once again, one that also uses post cards. And, like Space Exercise 1 where the playwrights leave the room and look for interesting actual spaces and people, this exercise also starts with actual observation and moves from external observation to internal creativity.

**Character Exercise 2**

Study the tourist post card you have been given which has a picture of a sight of some sort — a beach, a building, scenery — on one side, and a message on the other side that was written by an actual person. The picture on the post card determines the setting for the play. The person who wrote the post card is the main character in the play. Play detective with the message. Study it and then guess and make assumptions about what the information in the message indicates about the person who wrote it. Develop a story for a play using the ideas generated by the picture and the message.

This exercise is only really successful if one happens to have a good post card collection, and my husband and I seem to be blessed with a rich assortment of bizarre friends. One of my favourite post cards was from an English friend written while she was travelling in the Philippines. She describes having met a tattooed giant with a fondness for killing cats. I used this as the beginning point for one of my own short plays. Another favourite post card was written by our son when he was in high school and had taken a summer job going door-to-door selling encyclopaedias in the southern United States. The message explained why he was coming home on the next bus.

**Works Cited**


NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

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