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

Edited for the society by Mark Berninger and Bernhard Reitz
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Acknowledgements

As is customary in this series, the current issue of *Contemporary Drama in English* constitutes the proceedings of the 20th annual CDE conference, which in 2011 took place between 2 and 5 June at the Erbacher Hof in Mainz as a joint-venture of the Department of Theatre Studies and the Department of English and Linguistics of Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, Mainz. The lively academic discussion which was sparked by the papers at the conference were accompanied by two theatre performances. Firstly, the Staatstheater Mainz put on Bruce Norris’s *Clybourne Park*, which was followed by a discussion with members of the cast and the production team. The conference organizers are grateful for the cooperation with Frau Marie Rötzer of Staatstheater Mainz, who made this possible. The second theatre production, *Murder Beyond the Sundial*, written by Stuart Marlow, was performed by ACTS (Anglophone Collaborative Theatre of Stuttgart) at the Performance Art Depot in Mainz.

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Mark Berninger
Bernhard Reitz

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Introduction

1/11, the “War on Terror” in Afghanistan and Iraq, the bombings in London and Madrid, Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 and, even more recently, of Muammar Gaddafi, the “Arab Spring,” also the ongoing financial crisis and the economical and political ascendancy of China – the still young 21st century has had no shortage of military and economic events which have challenged the system of values in Europe and America and have demanded a reconsideration of 20th century certainties. The Western perspective on war has shifted several times over the last decade, including the involvement of the spectator in mediatized conflicts and catastrophes. The ethical entanglements of humanitarian aid have come under debate, and economic shifts have, as in the case of Ireland, brought countries full circle from depression to hectic boom and back to recession. The dynamics of global events have also intensified and sometimes reoriented debates about the balance of sustainability and economic growth. As a result of all these developments, the understanding of ethical action has come under discussion.

Contemporary theatre in English has been quick in addressing these ethical debates. Numerous productions in recent years have taken up the said challenges to moral certainty, sometimes by continuing traditional theatrical approaches rooted in pacifism, feminism, or gay rights. Yet, more often than not, familiar ideological standpoints have come under revision and moral didacticism has been deconstructed in contemporary theatre. This critical awareness of the
mechanisms of narrative and of the ambiguity of moral standpoints marks a clear distinction from the highly politicised drama of the 1960s and 70s. Contemporary theatre and drama reaches out to feel for an ethical basis and often finds itself on a highly contested and slippery ground. The audience is thus not presented with fixed messages, but often leaves the theatre with an uncomfortable feeling of disturbance that corresponds to the complexity of ethical decisions.

In formal terms, these new plays involved in ethical debates build on the 1990s “in-yr-face” theatre, from which they take the dramatic energy of the taboo and the concept of moral ambiguity created by tapping into public anxieties. Yet many of the new plays also work with formats drawn from traditional political theatre, e.g. with the “state of the nation play” and documentary theatre. The movement towards postdramatic theatre, i.e. a disruptive, non-conventional theatre which relies on physicality instead of text-based drama and stresses the importance of the spectator, thus creating an aesthetic of “response-ability” (Lehmann 185), has also become essential for the staging of ethical debates in the theatre, as has the ongoing wave of historical and autobiographical drama. A new and fascinating trend lies in the self-exhibition of the author (see, for example, recent plays by Tim Crouch and David Hare), which highlights authorial responsibility and spectatorial complicity through exposure to moral uncertainty.

The renewed interest in the ethical dimension of art and performance has also been much discussed in academic circles for quite some time. This is reflected in numerous publications, conferences and special issues of scholarly journals across a wide range of academic fields. Drama and theatre studies are no exception here, which is not surprising since the very word drama itself means action, which implies ethical decisions. Nicholas Rideout took this fundamental question of “How shall I act?” (1), which includes both ethics and drama, as the starting point for his book on Theatre & Ethics. Elizabeth Wren-Owens has investigated the possibility of “Committed Literature in an Unstable World” (102) and numerous other studies (see, for example, Rebellato Theatre & Globalisation, Grehan, Jernigan) have also begun to explore the interaction of postmodern ethics
and drama. The most recent case in point is a new international journal called Performing Ethos: An International Journal of Ethics in Theatre & Performance, the first issue of which was published in 2010. It therefore seemed logical to make ethical debate the topic of the 20th annual conference of the German Society for Contemporary Theatre and Drama in English (CDE) in order to provide an additional forum for diverse approaches to and lively discussions of the ethical dimension of contemporary drama in Britain, North America and elsewhere.

CDE has a long tradition of inviting playwrights to its annual conferences, and in 2011 we were lucky in being able convince three eminent British authors not only to attend the conference but also to share their views on ethics in drama in written form in the conference proceedings. Rona Munro thus gives a very personal insight into the ethical choices of a writer struggling to mediate between her own core beliefs and the expectations of heterogeneous audiences, in order to entertain the latter without compromising the former. With examples drawn from her plays Bold Girls (1991), which is about the female experience of the wives or partners of Republican fighters in the Troubles in Northern Ireland, and from Iron (2002), in which an imprisoned murderer is confronted by her daughter to share memories about the husband/father she has killed, Munro makes clear that she sees her moral responsibility in capturing human experience against taboos of political correctness or the expectations of the theatre establishment.

Rona Munro’s account of her long career in British theatre is complemented by a text by Julia Pascal, which addresses the problematic situation of a Jewish-British writer. Pascal points out that Jews have a rather ambiguous status in Britain regarding their visibility – they are highly visible in the imagination, but actually quite invisible as real figures. This paradoxical situation has much shaped her work in her many identities as an actor, journalist, theatre manager and playwright. Pascal, who is the author of such plays as Theresa (1990), The Dybbuk (1992), The Yiddish Queen Lear (1999), Woman in the Moon (2001), Crossing Jerusalem (2003), The Shylock Play (2007), and – most recently – Honeypot (2011), notes that she sees the recurring theme of Jewishness in her plays not so much as an obsession with her own
origins, but as an approach to universal ethical concerns from an angle which is often absent in British theatre.

The third contribution in this section is by playwright, screenwriter and political satirist Alistair Beaton, who reveals, in an interview with Michael Raab, his approach to political satire on the stage and in his productions for television. As comedy is only successful when it has the same basis in truth as serious drama, Beaton makes clear that laughter does not cheapen an ethical message to be delivered by the satirist. In other words, his concept of satire embraces entertainment rather than didactic lecturing, which he has amply proven in such plays as Feelgood (2001), Follow My Leader (2004), and King of Hearts (2007), as well as in his TV productions, most notably Channel 4’s The Trial of Tony Blair (2007). Since the conversation took place in Germany, Beaton also taps into a comparison of British and German theatre, talks about German humour and ponders about the delicate balance of laughter and political conviction. All three playwrights thus show how ethical debates inform their writing, even though Munro, Pascal, and Beaton approach different topics from different angles.

The following section with contributions by scholars is opened by Clare Wallace, with an overview of ethically-oriented British and Irish drama at the beginning of the 21st century. Wallace uses Hans-Thies Lehmann’s concept of postdramatic theatre in conjunction with theoretical viewpoints on postmodern ethics by Zygmunt Bauman and Emmanuel Lévinas to discuss ethical ambivalence and transgression in plays such as Martin McDonagh’s The Pillowman (2003), David Harrower’s Blackbird (2005), and Tim Crouch’s self-conscious metatheatrical piece The Author (2009). Moral transgression is also an important topic in Heiner Zimmermann’s article, which takes a look at Howard Barker, one of the leading figures of radical theatre in Great Britain since the 1980s. Zimmermann qualifies Barker’s plays as a “theatre of moral speculation” in that Barker has tested morality at its source for over thirty years now in order to endorse an essentially amoral theatre, in opposition to the “humanist moralist squad” of critics and playwrights. However, as Zimmermann argues, Barker’s theatre is sustained by the very norms it transgresses, as transgression
cannot function without the existence of moral limitations and taboos.

As can be expected after a decade of international military conflict which followed the 9/11 attacks in the US and the 2005 London bombings, a great number of English language playwrights have in recent years addressed the topic of war, which had played a much less prominent role in the theatre of the 1980s and 90s. It is significant, however, that playwrights at the beginning of the 21st century refrain from the straight pacifist stance which was so conspicuous in political plays of the 1960s and 70s. They are, on the whole, more concerned with the ethical dilemmas arising from war and in war, and many plays specifically thematize the involvement of the American and European public in the mechanics of war. This development is analysed by several articles in this collection, which form a section that could be entitled “The Ethics of War, Spectatorship, and Humanitarian Aid in Contemporary Theatre.” Franziska Quabeck discusses Gregory Burke’s plays *The Straits* (2003) and *Black Watch* (2006) in the light of Michael Walzer’s “just war theory.” She shows how these two plays do not focus in a conventional way on the politics of either the Falklands or Iraq war, but on the ethics of war as reflected in a juxtaposition with personal conflict (*The Straits*) and a contrast between political decisions and individual consequences for the soldiers involved in the fighting (*Black Watch*).

Enric Monforte looks at the different aesthetic ways of representing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in David Hare’s *Via Dolorosa* (1998), Robin Soans’s *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook* (2004) and Caryl Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children* (2009). Monforte argues that, contrary to Hare’s personal, yet also authorial approach and Soans’s clearly humanitarian intentions in the format of documentary theatre, Churchill’s unconventional form offers the most copious space for ethical considerations by provoking the reader/audience into creating meaning from the gaps of defamiliarized drama. This central idea also informs Mireia Aragay’s article, in which she looks at Harold Pinter’s *Party Time* (1991), Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away* (2000) and Martin Crimp’s *Fewer Emergencies* (2005), with a special focus on the ethics of witnessing in a globalized space. Through experimental forms,
these three plays put spectators in the position of active witnesses of global interconnectedness, while they remind the audience at the same time of the “superborder” (Étienne Balibar), i.e. the vast economic/cultural contrast between a privileged minority and an underprivileged majority.

Finally, Christiane Schlote addresses the recent trend towards critical representations of humanitarian aid on the British stage in plays such as Richard Bean’s On the Side of Angels (2009), Stella Feehily’s Bang Bang Bang (2011), Colin Teevan’s The Lion of Kabul (2009), and Stephen Todd’s The Remnants of Once Fine Girls (2009). Schlote argues that the international aid worker is depicted as a rather ambivalent figure in those plays. The sometimes tragic, sometimes farcical decisions of these idealistic Westerners in zones of conflict are used by the playwrights to highlight the ambiguous effects of humanitarian aid and to problematize, implicitly at least, theatrical practices of political intervention.

How deeply contemporary theatre and drama is involved in such political interventions and the ethical questions arising from them is also shown in the articles by Dirk Visser, Pia Wiegmink, and Ondrej Pilný, which turn to theatrical representations of the ethics of fringe communities, either in contrast to mainstream society or within the transnational context of global capitalism. Dirk Visser writes about radical gay theatre and what he calls the “ethics of AIDS,” especially with reference to John Roman Baker’s “AIDS Positive Underground Theatre” (APU), which uses the theatre as a radical space/mode of action beyond the dichotomy of assimilating into a society of capitalist consumption or earlier gay liberationism. By contrasting APU Theatre’s work with the Hollywood blockbuster Philadelphia (1993) and Gay Sweatshop’s 1986 production Compromised Immunity, Visser shows that Baker is going radically beyond the usual rhetoric of compassion and the appeal to overcome disgust at homosexuality by confronting the audience with ethically dubious situations which undermine easy moral positioning.

A different form of opposition to mainstream culture is frequently performed by two American political theatre collectives, the female peace activists group “Code Pink” and Bill Talen’s “Reverend Billy and
the Life After Shopping,” which are discussed by Pia Wiegmink in an article aptly entitled “actEthics.” Wiegmink shows how the local and communal performances of these two activist theatre groups seek to undermine nationalist discourses of homeland security in the aftermath of 9/11 by critically employing performative utterances of high symbolic import that do not represent ethical acts but are such acts in themselves. Ondrej Pilný then turns the focus towards Ireland and the global financial crisis by analysing the responses to the “terminal days of the Celtic Tiger” in most recent Irish drama, i.e. Marina Carr’s Marble (2009), Tom Murphy’s The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant (2009), and Enda Walsh’s Penelope (2010). In very different forms and more or less direct ways, these plays all comment on the ethical implications of the recent collapse of the Irish economy after its soaring in the early 2000s. Pilný shows how they unmask the decadent urban middle-class desire for transgression as the ultimate consequence of having all material wishes fulfilled.

A final group of articles in the conference proceedings concentrates on ethical debates against a background of history and autobiography. One of the key figures in this context is Suzan-Lori Parks, whose work is analysed in an article by Frank Obenland. By comparing chiefly The America Play (1994) and Topdog/Underdog (2001), Obenland shows how Parks underlines the importance of remembering the repressed trauma of slavery and racial violence but does not stop at a postmodern reconstruction of history. Instead, Parks turns to ethical meditations on commitment and on responsibility – not only for the past, but also for the future.

The ethics of self with its being shaped by external influence and manipulative acts of autobiographical memory then form the centre of the last two articles in this collection. Barbara Antoniazzi analyzes Paula Vogel’s Pulitzer Prize winning play on paedophilia, How I Learned to Drive (1997), with regards to its presentation of a form of speculative ethics. Antoniazzi outlines how Vogel uses the relationship between the teenage girl Li’l Bit and her uncle Peck to question dogmatic understandings of moral universalism and to reassess the value of regulative ideals in view of the individual subject. Where the memory of the sexually charged driving lessons of niece and uncle
form the central metaphor of Vogel’s play, Ronnie Burkett turns to metatheatrical interplay in order to stage the autobiographical and the ethics of remembering in his puppet play *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy* (2008). **Michael Bachmann’s** article explains how Burkett playfully offers multiple breaks of ontological boundaries that question the “inside” and “outside” of the self and its agency. Burkett achieves this by presenting mirror versions of himself fragmented into different characters appearing as marionette puppets on stage. They thus imply an ethics of autobiographical memory marked by ventriloquism and spectrality (in the sense of Derrida’s *Spectres of Marx*).

Taken together, the articles included here show the vast but also dense panorama of ethical debates in contemporary theatre and drama. Though the individual focus of the plays may vary, the articles of this collection show that the deconstruction of simple political positioning is their shared concern. Whereas the political has often seemed like a straightforward matter of “taking sides” in past decades, contemporary theatre and drama tends to involve the audience in ethical dilemmas which are as difficult to solve onstage as in reality. Yet it also becomes clear from all the plays analysed here that this dismantling of certainty is not an act of nihilism but of a scepticism which demands answers to burning questions without readily presenting them. The political seems to have been replaced by the ethical, or, rather, the ethical seems to be the means to attain the political (see Rebellato "From the State of the Nation to Globalization” and Monforte’s article below).
Bibliography:

I. Contributions by Playwrights
To describe the journey I’d like to share with you, I’ll define what I mean by struggle, what I mean by entertaining, and what I mean by honest politics. All of these will be very personal and subjective definitions. I’m going to tackle them in reverse order. I’ll start with the honest politics. When I say ‘honest politics,’ I mean honest to what I actually believe, as opposed to what might be fashionable or expedient or even totally definable. To allow me to communicate all this in a way that makes sense, I’ll fill you in a little about how I began writing, the context in which I began writing, and the attitudes that are probably still hard-wired into my head every time I write. This is a very personal story. What I hope might be interesting to you is how my plays developed out of that very specific context.

My first professional writing experience was back in the 1980s. I had graduated from Edinburgh University in 1980 and had returned to the city, working as a cleaner, as I tried to ‘make it’ as a writer. The key events that made an impression on me over that time were the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 (it was the first election in which I was legally old enough to vote), the street riots of the early 80’s, the rise of Latin American solidarity, particularly with regards to the ongoing struggle in Nicaragua, the miners’ strike of 1984/5, and the abolition of the Greater London Council. At the height of the war
in Ireland, I also made several working visits to Belfast where I was working with community theatre groups. I was making theatre with organisations and individuals who were mobilised by those events, and I associated both inspiration and opportunity with their politics. The world appeared to be a place where struggle defined everything – internationally, on the streets of our major cities, and within union and political organizations (plus ça change). I was young and excited by the possibility of getting work in front of an audience, even though that work was largely unpaid. The incentive was to be part of these struggles and to be part of any small achievable victory. Making theatre was about making a change. So this is the political context that’s left its residue in my thinking and in my work. I’d also like to fill you in a little about my earliest professional experience. If you’ll bear with me, I’m going to go into quite some detail about this group and how they operated because it did inform my personal politics very directly.

My first professional experience came through contact with a group called the Edinburgh Playwrights Workshop (EPW). They were a group of actors and writers who’d come together to present rehearsed readings of plays. Plays were given a limited rehearsal, usually two readings in an afternoon, and then presented to an audience, script in hand. Scripts were never altered or edited in any way unless the writer chose to do so. The workshop presented any script that came to them, all a writer had to do was attend more than one performance and they became a member of the EPW with the right to submit a script. There was no director, instead there was someone, often another, more experienced writer, who acted as a ‘co-ordinator.’ This person was a line of communication between the professional actors and the usually professionally inexperienced playwright. The working method was always to try to represent the writer’s intention, no matter how bizarre or misguided that might appear on the page. If the cast couldn’t find a way to make it work, they would try and discover how the writer intended it to work and then try, to the best of their ability, to represent that for an audience.

The very interesting result was that often things that appeared to be clumsy, naive, beginner’s writing on the page would be revealed as truly original. Things that were apparently obscure or surreal or in-
comprehensible were often compelling and haunting in performance. So, as a first experience, I learned that just because a certain type or style of theatre is considered skilled or commercial it doesn’t mean an audience won’t appreciate something radically different if only they can be given the opportunity to see it.

It was a very cheap night out. The wage paid a small ticket fee, unemployed and all other concessions were basically paying pennies. That, and the fact that shows went on next to good and popular cafes and pubs, meant there was usually a very good and very diverse audience. Each performance was followed by an audience discussion, and this took a very particular form which again was very influential on my perception of audience reactions. The co-ordinator would open the floor for discussion, but initially that discussion went round every single audience member in turn and invited them to speak, uninterupted (if they chose to do so), before it became a free-for-all. If you were in the audience, you didn’t have to offer your opinion, you could pass, but you would all be invited to contribute. And I have never experienced audience feedback of that kind since.

What I usually expect now is a scenario with which we’re all familiar. A few vocal, articulate people, people who are comfortable with public speaking and with airing their opinions, possibly people who enjoy arguing against opposing points of view, will become the voices that dominate any post-show discussion. By contrast, what I have learnt, at the start of my career, was that those voices do not always represent the opinions of the majority of the audience. However, you will only discover that if you give the majority the opportunity to speak. I was also left with a very particular attitude to what should go on in a rehearsal room. I think that the best theatre is collaborative, but within that collaboration everyone has a very distinct job: it’s not just the collaboration of devising, though I like that too, it’s the collaboration defined by the statement, the ‘no-one has higher status than anyone else in this room – we just do different jobs.’

For me theatre is a dialogue between the writer and the actors, and then between the actors and an audience. A good director facilitates these dialogues. I think of actors as my allies, and my job is to give them the best tools I can to do what they have to do. I think of a di-
rector as my partner in the rehearsal process though I think I should gradually become the silent partner. A lot of what I’ve learned by attending rehearsals and by working with great actors and directors is about when it’s useful for me to speak. I talk a lot at the beginning, when I can describe my intention, less and less as rehearsal proceeds and director and cast have their own way of realising that intention. If I’m still banging on in the third week, it probably means there’s something flawed in the script.

The politics of the method used by the EPW was about inclusion: it was about making connections within a community formed of writers, actors, and ultimately the audience. It was very much a product of its time and place when the left generally was forced to make all sorts of extraordinary alliances that brought gay rights, union struggle, local politics, and Latin American solidarity into the same room, watching the same shows, usually made for no money, and all ticket money going to the cause of the day. This sounds dynamic and idyllic in some ways, but it is actually pants in all the ways that ultimately matter because making shows for no money really sucks. However, in terms of introducing me to a broad, politically informed audience, it was formative. It was around this time that I started writing and performing for the MsFits. We were, we are, Scotland’s longest running small-scale touring theatre company and we met at an organisation called ‘Women Live,’ which is probably the best argument for positive discrimination that I could come up with since, without it, I might never have become a playwright. It existed to promote women in the arts and was funded by the GLC even though it operated nationally. It provided venues, a platform, festivals and places that women could get a play on, and simply get seen. Obviously this had a profound effect on my politics and my writing, and I want now to talk more specifically about Fiona Knowles, the other half of the MsFits, who played the lead in my first play with a professional cast The Salesman (1982). After that we used to meet up regularly to do various women’s events, including a women’s self-defence class. We were absolutely rubbish at the self-defence, but we would sit in the pub afterwards and talk about the kind of theatre we wanted to do, the kind of theatre we never saw. We decided to do it ourselves.
So we started the MsFits, and we were a double act. I am not a natural performer but whisky got me through. We performed sketches around a running narrative theme, which was feminist in a very explicit way. We did shows about Scotland’s matriarchal ancient history and how that might have looked, or about women superheroes who got lower wages than Superman and had to operate without a creche.

At the same time, I was already getting professional commissions for TV and stage work. From the very start of my professional career, everything was informed by my involvement with Women Live, the MsFits and the EPW. And that meant that, politically, I had certain ground rules which were pretty well unbreakable and, to an extent, still are. What’s changed is how I interpret my own inner rules.

I felt a responsibility to represent a broad community. I wanted to write narratives for the majority of the audience, but I was convinced after my experiences in the Playwright’s Workshop (and remain convinced) that this didn’t mean I had to compromise on style or content. I wanted to write stories I hadn’t seen before, represent voices that might not usually have taken centre-stage, and in particular I wanted to represent women’s experience and put that centre stage. As honestly as I can describe them, those are and were my politics.

Now the struggle how can you remain true to those politics, entertain an audience, and – probably most crucially of all – make a living as a writer? The first obstacle I encountered with audiences was simple. What they heard when I honestly said what I meant, might not be what I had intended. Specifically, if you define yourself as feminist, how does what people understand when they hear that label relate to what you mean? In an early play, Bold Girls (1991), I encountered that communication problem very directly. The commission came from 7:84 Scotland, and they wanted me to write a play about the experience of women in Ireland. I think what they had in mind, or what the then director, David Hayman, had in mind, was a very broad narrative, possibly something like John McGrath’s The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil (1973), in which you see a series of sketches or scenes that communicate a version of history.
What I ended up doing was something very particular. I wrote it that way because I became convinced that I had to try and present the experience of women in Ireland in a form that women living in Ireland in the early 1990s could recognise. No amount of intelligent feminist analysis encapsulated in satire would have held their attention, and, if I didn't have their attention first, who was the play for? *Bold Girls* was informed by my own experience of living off and on in West Belfast, in a Republican community. I went out initially to do drama workshops as part of a theatre tour. I went back to work with the local community theatre group. This involved a lot of talking and sitting on people’s floors until four in the morning and singing and drinking, and more drinking. I had some great friends there and some very long conversations about life and love, and the things that people, especially women, talk about anywhere and everywhere.

MARIE: [...] The thing about daddys, all the daddys, is they up and leave you; they go out with their friends, they go inside, they die, they leave you. You’ll always have it all to do so there’s no good wishing on them. (Pause) Half the time I don’t think they want to go. Sure half the time all they want to do is something better for us all, for them, for us. They don’t want to be raging and screaming and hurting more than they can ever forget in the booze or the crack or the men beating men. I don’t think they know what they want at all or how to get it if they did. So they leave and we’ve it all to do but we’re missing each other even when we’re together and so it goes on and so it goes on and so it always will go on, till we learn some way to change – because this place is no different to anywhere else. (Pause) I never told him that. It wasn’t that I lied. I just didn’t tell all the truth that was in me. Sure, what good would telling that kind of truth do you? You’d be crazy to talk about it wouldn’t you? What man would listen to that? If he heard you he’d have to change. Maybe he’d sooner leave. I didn’t want him to leave. I loved him. I can’t throw that away even now. I loved him. (*Bold Girls* 78-79)

I think *Bold Girls* was successful in the UK, Ireland, and abroad because it talked about experience women everywhere could identify with. It also had women centre stage in quite traditional roles: wives, mothers, lovers, victims of their fate and their men. They’re easy to identify with. Their ‘oppression,’ for want of a better word, informs their actions and motivates our sympathy. In a more complicated narrative, it was directly similar to the material we did in the early MsFits.
By 1991, however, we were doing something more complicated with the MsFits. While I still wrote the shows, Fiona was now performing on her own because I’d had a baby and touring was no longer possible. We were also playing to a different audience. The audience who came to see some theatre in order to support the miners, or stick it to Thatcher, or raise money for Nicaragua, had gone, along with its causes and the arrival of the Blair government. We were all supposed to be mainstream now.

In order to reach our audience, the MsFits now had to go to them. We built up circuit of community venues and we dropped the explicitly labelled politics from our leaflets. However, much like my experience of writing Bold Girls, when we actually had to reach out and find our audience, in many ways the actual political content of our material strengthened. We were being inclusive. We were having a dialogue. We presented shows people could interpret for themselves rather than ones that told them what we thought and waited for the applause of solidarity and approval. We had to listen to the women we were talking about. It was a dialogue that gave me the confidence to say more uncomfortable things about female experience.

In my now mainstream role as a commissioned writer I wrote Iron (2002). I was trying to put a guilty woman centre-stage. Fay is in prison for murder. The play is a four-hander with Fay, her daughter Josie, and two prison guards. Fay is in prison for killing her husband, Josie’s father. Josie is visiting Fay for the first time after fourteen years because she has realised she has no memories of anything before her father’s murder. She wants to reconstruct who she was before the death, which she doesn’t remember, and she wants Fay to help. The background to the play is that it was originally supposed to be a movie directed by the actor Tim Roth, and, because Tim was attached, I got amazing access to go into prisons and talk to women who were serving life sentences.

What struck me, was how much I liked them. We could never talk about their actual offence, I’d been warned off that. If you stir up painful feelings for women serving life sentences, you are leaving them trapped in tiny rooms with no escape from what you’ve made them remember. But we talked about other things and there were
great conversations. Then I would go back to the library and read a newspaper report, or their trial transcript, and absorb the details of the offence and go ‘Ah...that’s complicated.’ I think the scenario I was expected to write was one of an abused woman lashing out at her partner in self-defence and going down for it. When I say ‘expected’, I mean by a certain section of the media, by critics, or by an informed audience (of course average punters don’t have any expectations of what a writer might mean until they see the play, which is far healthier in my opinion). What was interesting was how both, the informed media and the average punter (including my mother), reacted. Some of them, a significant minority, refused to believe my heroine was guilty of murder because they liked her. However, this is what Fay actually tells them in the play.

We had a row. I don’t remember what about ... but, after we’d stopped, he was fine and I was raging. We’d had a few but not that many, enough so I can never remember all of it.
I was just sitting, just sitting in my chair like a coal burning in the fire, so full of anger I couldn’t move. I felt like I was scorching my own clothes but I never made a sound. He said ‘Ach there’s no talking to you ...’ So he didn’t. He drank a beer. He watched a bit of television. He read the paper and laughed at the sports news ...
I just sat.
Once he looked at me and sort of snorted through his nose in disgust. ‘Aren’t you going to bed?’ he said.
He had another beer. He fell asleep and snored with the telly lighting up his face, mouth open.
I sat and looked at him.
I felt that no-one could ever waste so much love on anyone.
I felt so full of crying that I was just tight with tears, from my toes to my hair, stretched tight with crying that wouldn’t come out. I sat there for hours and I remembered. And what I remembered, what I couldn’t stop remembering that there was a moment when we are arguing when my anger flashed over and started to burn me alive and that was the moment he laughed at me. He set me on fire and watched me burn and he laughed.
Then the strangest thing happened. I felt my lips pull back from my teeth in a snarl like a dog’s. I tried to close my mouth but my lips kept twitching and tugging away from my teeth. I bared my teeth like a wolf. Like a demon. My eyes felt like they were popping out.
I felt there was a devil in me
I felt I was the devil.
I think I was the devil then, or his dog.
I had a kitchen knife in my hand. I don’t remember picking it up but it was in my hand.
I stuck it in him.
The stupid fuck, thinking he could just do or say anything he wanted and then snore away as if what he made me feel had no consequences at all. The stupid fuck.
You’d think he would’ve woken up more. Maybe we’d had more than I knew.
For two seconds I was glad when I saw him bleed. Then I just wished that none of it had ever happened at all. I miss him so much.
I miss him so much. I wish I’d never met him to hurt him so. You should remember your Dad. He loved you.
You should remember your Dad and go away from here and never come back.
(Iron 95-96)

That is a confession and I didn’t think it left much room for doubt.
She really did it. She really killed a sleeping man for no good reason. I wanted to write a woman like the women I’d met, who were clearly, unequivocally guilty of killing someone, with no provocation, but who still engaged your sympathy. I also wanted to address a whole load of other questions raised for me on my prison visits, such as disproportionate sentences dished out to women and men. However, by posing a question around Fay’s guilt, ‘did she or didn’t she kill someone without provocation?’, I wanted to present the audience with the same dilemma I had faced. Is a woman like that a woman like any other, a woman you’d otherwise like and empathise with— or is she a different breed of human being? Could any of us really be a killer, or does it take a particular personality? The play holds that secret information about the murder at its heart all the way through. The daughter needs to believe her mother is innocent in order to love her, and it’s a loving maternal act, for me, when Fay actually confesses the truth, giving her daughter what she needs: real memories. But a lot of people weren’t having it. Some media commentators assumed it was a different story because of their expectation of what a self-defined feminist writer must be writing. Some punters, and I learned this in Q and A’s and audience discussions, just liked Fay too much to be prepared to let her be guilty; they’d say, ‘Of course he was abusing the daughter really wasn’t he?’ or, ‘Of course she was lying when she said
he didn’t beat her up.’ And I’d think, ‘Why would you think that when the play explicitly says something else?’

A recent (very complimentary, so I’m a mean git for complaining about it) article in the London Metro described the play as being about a woman in prison for killing her abusive husband, a description which had me tearing my hair out. Maybe it’s bad writing, maybe its just not clear enough, even though from that moment of confession the play reinforces the truth again and again ... or maybe we still have a problem with how we are prepared to perceive women characters: they can be victims or dyed in the wool villains, but they can’t be morally complicated. Which is a shame because morally complicated characters are the one’s that become universal, as opposed to ‘women’s stories.’

For my most recent female protagonist, Janet in The Last Witch (2009), I created a character who is thoroughly immoral and unpleasant in every way. She manipulates and lies to her female friends, she abuses her daughter, she extorts money with tricks or sexual favours and she is fairly cruel to animals too. She is also deeply charismatic and was played delightfully by Kath Howden in the Traverse production for the Edinburgh Festival. In this case, the audience had no problem identifying her guilt even though they loved the character. Is that because they saw her pay a large enough price, they saw her burnt alive? Are women still only allowed to be villains if we see them cruelly punished?

I struggle with this because I think I am writing universal stories and universal characters. If their experience is particular to being female, then I don’t think that excludes a male audience or imposes any limitations on what kind of character they can be. There is no doubt that this has become more true, in terms of audience empathy and understanding, over the course of my writing career. Probably that’s partly because I’m just writing better, my craft has developed, but also it’s because the world itself has changed around me.

However, I’d be lying if I said I didn’t still feel you have to fight an extra battle to get people to accept women’s experience as universal human experience, or to approach it with an open mind. And I’d say this closed-minded reaction is often far more evident in critics and
commentators than in audiences, who, on the whole, will be generous enough to engage uncritically with any entertaining narrative.

So what do I mean by ‘entertaining narrative’? It’s pretty simple: anything someone is prepared to shell out over fifteen odd pounds for and which also leaves them glad they came. I have a very deep-seated, possibly naive conviction about how broad a range of good theatre that encompasses. This goes right back to my experiences of those early discussions at the EPW. It goes back to what I have learned in the contrast between that gentle inclusive discussion model and the more usual free-for-all. In fact, the way it looks to me, the majority of the audience can often be argued out of their own reaction by a free-for-all, combative discussion structure. The more self-conscious, more passive majority hear very articulate, very certain opinions being aired, confident commentators sparring intelligently, and they quietly lay their own real feelings down as ‘inferior,’ not correct, not worth voicing.

For me this creates a problem in that the whole publicity and marketing structure of British theatre is geared towards critics, commentators, and the so called ‘quality’ press. We’re in danger of creating a theatre designed to be discussed by people who love discussions, rather than a theatre designed to talk to a broad and diverse audience. I honestly believe that there is a gap between the theatre which people can and will appreciate, enjoy, and identify with and the theatre that they are told they should enjoy or are capable of enjoying. The assumption is often made that people crave a dumbed-down culture rather than assuming that they consume it because it’s all that’s made available. You can take two attitudes about the increasing age and wealth of theatre audiences. You can assume that the younger, poorer majority would actually prefer to exchange narrative on Twitter and only shell out precious money for extravagant musicals. Or you can assume that people have been alienated by an image which theatre carries: it’s elitist, its worthy, and the people who talk about it and the way they talk seem to have no connection to the majority experience.

My experience at the EPW left me convinced that people, all people, any people, will become excited by stories in many forms and respond to live theatre of all different kinds if you can only get it in
front of them. In my head, I’m still writing for that audience, even if it’s often hard to get the plays to them. You shouldn’t have to attend an academic symposium or read eighteen articles or sit through an audience discussion to know what you think about a play. You might not be able to define it but you should feel something, and you should be clear in what you feel, even if you can’t put it into words, and you shouldn’t be worrying if this is what you’re supposed to feel.

Last month, I opened two plays and a movie (amazing, it will never happen again). It meant I was absolutely immersed in what marketing people get you to do to sell tickets. And, what they chiefly seem to get you to do, is talk to the Sunday papers, and the broad sheets, and the tabloids (but the Sunday papers are the gold of pre-publicity). I don’t read the Sunday papers when I’m in them, but occasionally I do read them when other people are in them, and then I remember why they exhaust me. They are just full of opinion. They are stuffed with commentators telling you what things mean before you go and see them, or after they’ve been and seen them for you, and they are the equivalent of the free-for-all discussion with the two eager, articulate, opinionated debaters battling it out with displays of verbal brilliance about what the play’s meaning is, while the rest of the audience, those who haven’t escaped to the bar, sit there feeling inadequate because they don’t actually know what post-modernism is, but they’ve never admitted that to anyone.

That’s what the media buzz around theatre is like. People telling you what things mean. Now, I’m sure a lot of you have a strong professional interest in telling people what theatre means, and I want you to know I have no objection to that. At all. I think that’s a healthy response to theatre. It’s a necessary one, and it’s part of a culture of comparison that keeps old plays alive, and, as an old playwright, I’m all for that. What I object to is the idea that people telling me what things mean should be the biggest influence on whether I, or any other audience member, buy a ticket to see new work.

I had a long conversation with a fellow playwright last week and he was talking about my recent play Little Eagles (2011). He said something about one of the characters that wasn’t true, and I was saying, ‘Oh no, that wasn’t a flashback, why did you think that bit was a
flashback? Did you really think that looked like a flashback?’ He looked blank and a bit stricken, and I suddenly realised, he hadn’t seen the play. He’d just read all the articles and reviews ... and now he was commenting on what the play was about. Not what he thought it was about but what Michael Billington told him it was about! It was as if he hadn’t seen the show, but he’d sat in on the post-show discussion, where the clever people argued. And I don’t want that discussion anymore. People telling me what things mean is exhausting and it creates an exclusive theatre. I still crave the discussion where two old ladies say, ‘Pass,’ because they’re too nervous to speak, and then the third one says, ‘I don’t know what it was about exactly but really liked it, and that bit in the middle, it made me cry because it was just like my mother.’

And now we’ve finally got back to what I mean by ‘struggle’ because, doing what I do, how can I reach that audience again? Because most of them don’t set foot in theatres. I’m still writing for them, but they’re all going to pantos and Legally Blonde (which is actually a cracking show, don’t let anyone tell you its not). Of course, I can blame the Sunday papers, but there’s a lot more to it than that. But, with all that my exhaustively detailed experience has taught me, my (possibly naive) opinion remains that audiences love any live theatre. They will love and can absorb complicated and challenging narratives, but how do we get them in?

I watch audiences when I go to the theatre. I suppose we all do, all us playwrights, I mean. I watch to see who wants to pay money to see my words. Better brains than mine have analysed audience demographics. All I know is that I’m often among the younger people in a theatre, and I’m 51. I’m definitely often the poorest person in a theatre (which says something about another aspect of the struggle to write entertaining narratives), and this situation is definitely worse in London than it is in Manchester or Dundee. That’s a pity because the larger theatres that guarantee a play’s longevity and a sustainable income for the writer are often in London.

I don’t have a solution. But I know that beyond the MsFits, I still struggle to reach the audience I have in my head, as opposed to the one that’s actually seeing my show. I have no political or moral objec-
tion to people who are over sixty and of comfortable income patronising the theatre; I just wish there were more of the other people as well. I'm still writing for them. I still believe they deserve and would desire stronger meat than Les Miserables (though that's another cracking show, don't let anyone tell you its not) if they only felt it was intended for them too.

But that's just part of my ongoing struggle to write entertaining narratives with honest politics. The hardest part remains as it always was, as it probably always is for most writers ... filling the blank page.
Works Cited

Julia Pascal

Do Jews Exist? In England?

This may seem a provocative question and it’s meant to be. I wish to examine Jewish theatre in England (and by extension the UK) and how it is coloured by English attitudes to Jews themselves.

*How many Jews are there in the UK?*

This is the question I sometimes ask when the subject of Jews comes up.

I ask acquaintances and friends of all classes, all ages, and all ethnicities. The answer is usually around three to five million. According to the 2001 Census, 267,000 people classified themselves as being Jewish. *How do you define a Jew?* is at the root of how to count Jews. Is a Jew someone who goes to the synagogue, someone who is an atheist, like me, someone who has a Jewish mother? Or is a Jew someone who defines herself as being of this ethnicity? I don’t want to get into a heated argument about whether Jewishness is a religion or a cultural identity but I do want to make the point that the perception of a sizeable minority of five million in a country of 60 million tells us something of how Jews in the UK are perceived. *They are everywhere.*

Now let us look at a little English history. How did Jews get into England? Although there are rumours of Jews being present in Roman times, it is usually agreed that the first Jewish presence in England was when the Normans brought a small community across the Channel. It’s all the fault of the French. The first date in history any English schoolchild learns is 1066, when William the Conqueror, Guillaume le Conquerant, won the Battle of Hastings and made England French. Or, to be precise, Norman. And as the Normans were really Vikings ... but we won’t go there.
Jews were useful as usurers because the Catholic Church forbade the practice. They were essential to the Crown who expropriated large amounts of cash from the Jews by taxing them more than the general population.

How were Jews identified? As sidecurls and Fedora hats were to emerge centuries later, they needed a marker. England forced Jews to wear a yellow badge. If you like, they made the first anti-semitic logo which enjoyed a fashion revival through the Middle Ages and, of course, hit all the European streets during The Third Reich.

In the British Library, in *The Chronicles of Offa*, there is an image of three bearded Jewish men being beaten by a clean-shaven gentile. The tone of the painting is clearly to show the viewer that the Jews deserved whatever they got. Examining the dress, you can see that the Jews’ robes are clearly marked with a defining symbol in the shape of the book of law. To the modern gaze it is a shocking image of brutal discrimination but the subtext is clear: Jews make money out of Christians and deserve to be punished.

The Jews in England at this time were less than 1% of the population. About two to three thousand. Probably the feeling then, as now, was that there were millions. In 1290, King Edward I.’s Edict forced all Jews to leave on pain of death. They went to France, Germany, Poland and Spain. After 1290, all trace of Jews in England disappeared. England was j"{u}denfrei from 1290 to, and the official date of re-entry is 1656, which made the country Jew-free for just over three and a half centuries.

I was brought up as the granddaughter of immigrants from Romania and Lithuania, being told that I had Oliver Cromwell to thank for Jewish life in England. Cromwell cut off the head of Charles I and massacred the Irish at Drogheda but, to the British Jews, he was a hero. Cromwell was England’s most famous republican but this has not encouraged British Jews to follow his republicanism. Jews still pray for the health of the queen each Saturday in the synagogue.

But to get back to Cromwell, was he really the saviour he was made out to be? If we examine the English history of his protectorate, 1649-1660, we find that what we are told, and what actually happened, is quite different.
In 2006, British Jews celebrated the 350th anniversary of their return and much publicity was given to Cromwell’s friendship with the Dutch rabbi, Dr Menasseh ben Israel, who came to England to plead for Jewish return. Cromwell had a double interest in Jewish settlement. Today, he would be called an early Christian Zionist. The Lord Protectorate of the English Commonwealth was a Protestant Bible reader who believed that the Second Coming of Jesus would be hastened by the return of the Jews to the four corners of the earth (this was prophecy from the Book of Revelations). The four corners of the earth, therefore included England – Angleterre – which was still officially judenrein. However, Jews may have been secretly in England, posing as Spanish Catholics, and we have evidence that this may have been the case with Rodrigo Lopez, Queen Elizabeth’s physician who was hanged, drawn and quartered for supposedly planning to kill her, by Christopher Marlowe’s The Jew of Malta and, of course, for the most famous Jew in English literature, Shylock. If England was Jew-free, then where did Marlowe’s Barabas and Shakespeare’s money-lender come from?

Back to Cromwell and the petitioning Dutch rabbi who wanted him to overturn the 1290 royal edict. The problem was that there may have been a few isolated Jews in England, hiding as Christians, but still there was no official presence. No synagogue and no burial ground. Jews were unable to buy land as they officially did not exist.

Cromwell, a staunch Protestant and virulent anti-Catholic, was sympathetic to a Jewish presence in the land. His Protestantism meant he loved reading the Old Testament and learning about ‘the Hebrews.’ This was the moment in English history when the connection between the grey beards of the Old Testament and the real live bodies who wanted to get into England began to link in the public imagination. But the English were still largely antisemitic. To them, the Hebrews/the Jews were now more than archaic biblical figures but represented an immigrant invasion that might disturb the status quo. As for Cromwell, his faith warmed him to the possibility of Jewish return because, as well as preparing the ground for the Second Coming, it was necessary to have Jews in the four corners of the earth so
that they could be converted to Christianity. This is a prerequisite of Jesus’ Second Coming. And, while Cromwell was considering all these elements in 1656, Millenium fever was hitting England. Only 44 years to go before Judgment Day!

The second reason for Cromwell’s encouragement of Jewish return was money. The new empire/the Commonwealth needed links in other countries. Jews had settled in Brazil and the New World. They could be useful as a conduit for new English economic trade routes.

Therefore, Cromwell was all set to welcome back the Jews under the Protectorate and a new Protestant wave of Old Testament fervour. The only problem was that when Cromwell asked Parliament to say ‘yes’ the answer was a definite ‘no!’ The Conference of Whitehall, which discussed the issue, in 1655, refused. There was fear that a Jewish presence would threaten trade at home and also anxiety that Jews would try and convert Christians, something which was against Jewish custom then and now. Cromwell may have been welcoming, but Parliament and the mood of England was not.

So, contrary to common belief, the return was not sanctioned. England remained officially Jew-free although Jews did trickle in through the back door. They were allowed to sit in Parliament in 1829 or 1858, the jury is still out on the exact date, and Benjamin Disraeli is considered to be England’s first Jewish (and only) Prime Minister. But, of course he wasn’t a Jew. He was a Christian.

What does all this have to do with Jewish theatre in England today? I would argue that the Jewish presence on English soil has always provoked a problem for Christian England. If the medieval rumours of Jews poisoning wells and murdering little boys has disappeared, the perception of their immense power and wealth has not. How does this affect their effect in British theatre? After all, there are millions of Jews, aren’t there?! Towards the end of the last century, with multiculturalism came a feeling that minorities in the arts should have priority funding. From the late eighties, there was an Arts Council directive that minorities should have their theatre presence acknowledged and supported. But where did Jews fit into this as a minority? The Arts Council impulse was based on colonial guilt and a psychological need to make reparations to the former Empire. They envisaged a theatre
which gave presence to those coming from countries which had been exploited from Cromwell’s times to the middle of the twentieth century.

The focus was now on the Afro-Caribbean and on the immigrants from the Indian subcontinent. Britain didn’t really find Jews ‘cool’ at that time and any feelings of guilt towards Jews were more complicated. Jews had not been colonised by the British Empire. Jews were not colonised by the British Empire. And who wanted to discuss British behaviour in the Palestinian mandate? Who even really knew much about it? Unspoken but implicit was the sense that Jews did not need the support that those from the former colonies did. And anyway, aren’t Jews present enough in the media? Again, the common perception in Britain is that Jews, far from being invisible, are a powerful, prosperous and plentiful presence.

But we know that the numbers are small, so what is this really all about?

As a writer who has produced many texts on Jewish history and culture, I can only express my own experience. I was brought up to keep my head down, to not bring attention to my Jewishness because it would provoke some unspoken danger. When I was in primary school, a state school which had morning assembly, hymns and a crib with baby Jesus in at Christmas, my mother told me, if the teacher makes a mistake, don’t point it out, they’ll only call you ‘a clever Jew.’ And when they tell you that the Jews killed Jesus, then you say, ‘No it was the Romans.’

I remember being taught history when the primary teacher went round the class and pointed out everyone’s genetic origins. ‘You are a Celt’, she told one redhead. ‘You are from Roman stock’, she told a boy with dark hair. Others were described as Anglo-Saxons or Viking. When it came to me she looked away. She couldn’t say. Clearly, she must have known I was Jewish but, somehow, this was unmentionable.

The silence was something that became normal to me. Indeed, low-profile Jewish life is expressed in the architecture. In England, synagogues, unlike mosques and churches, are discreet buildings and you’d never know they were Jewish prayer houses. Many Jews angli-
exercise their names to ‘pass.’ Others can pass because they look gentile. The climate of not celebrating identity was the norm for me and when multiculturalism arrived nothing changed.

This invisibility has a mirror effect. Jews who arrived in England were fast taught to keep a low profile. Whether this was because there is some English folk memory or atmosphere that reflects the fact that Jews were never allowed to return, or whether it is a post-Holocaust angst, I don’t know, but I sense there is something very English about it.

And of course it is compounded by another confusion about what a Jew is. Is a Jew an Israeli, who hates Arabs and is profoundly unjust? Is a Jew someone who sticks together with other Jews and only helps their own? Is a Jew some mysterious achiever who rises to the top whatever? Is a Jew someone who is obsessed with Jewishness? And this is the question that leads me to my own work.

When I am asked what I am writing, or when I discuss Jewish history or the intersection between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, which is often at the core of my texts, there is often some embarrassment or the question, ‘do you write about anything else but Jews?’ This makes me aware that, in the perception of the questioner, writing about Jews is somewhat aberrant. As if I am writing about some peculiar species that is quite foreign and disturbing.

But for me, writing about Jews is writing about the Western world. Theresa (1990) was about British collaboration with the Nazis on the Channel Islands and therefore about a hidden British history. A Dead Woman on Holiday (1991) was about the effect the Nuremberg Trials had on the interpreters. It was also about the way transmitting horror can damage the individual who is the conduit for memory. The Dybbuk (1992) was about a group of secular Jews, hiding in a 1942 ghetto, retelling the dybbuk myth in an attempt to stay sane. St Joan (1997) was about a Black Jew who tries to change the history of slavery and the Holocaust while dreaming she is Joan of Arc. Crossing Jerusalem (2003) is about an Israeli Jewish family crossing Jerusalem to get a good meal over 24 hours in the last intifada. Honeypot (2011) is about a Swedish woman who discovers her dead father was Jewish and, in a reckless pilgrimage to Israel, decides to join Mossad and use her beau-
ty as a honeypot to attract the brains behind the murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympics. Although the plays may be about Jews on one level, they are not parochial or inward looking. They are rooted in international issues that touch contemporary debate.

When I was in New York and I told others, of all ethnicities, about my work, nobody asked me that terrible question, ‘When are you going to stop writing about Jews?’ Perhaps because in New York a smattering of Yiddish has entered the zeitgeist of most immigrant groups. There I don’t have to censor my English and its Yiddishisms. I can say schlep and shmuck. I can say shmooze and schwitz. I can use words like chutzpah and nachas. And in New York, Blacks, Whites and Hispanics will understand me.
In Conversation with Michael Raab

Michael Raab: Among the dramatists I have the privilege to translate, Alistair Beaton is unique in so far as I liked his work already without actually knowing that it was by him. That was when I regularly watched *Not the Nine O’Clock News* and *Spitting Image* in the early 1980s. What exactly did you write for those programs, Alistair?

Alistair Beaton: Songs.

Michael Raab: Songs?

Alistair Beaton: Yes. That’s the short answer. That’s the shortest answer you’ve had and it’s the shortest answer you will ever hear.

Michael Raab: For both of them?

Alistair Beaton: No, for *Not the Nine O’Clock News* I wrote sketches and for *Spitting Image* I wrote songs.

Michael Raab: Did that career in satire make you eligible for writing jokes for Gordon Brown and is it at all possible to write jokes for dour Gordon?

Alistair Beaton: Writing jokes for Gordon Brown is the bit that I have removed from my curriculum vitae. It wasn’t a very successful collaboration. He’s not a man endowed with a great sense of humour, and he also got a bit upset when he discovered that I was a socialist. So our ways parted and that’s a great pity because, if I’d stuck with him, I could’ve been going to 10 Downing Street in a big limousine, and secretly I’m very interested in power and I think one of the reasons I’m interested in power is the little bit of me, of which I’m very ashamed, that would like to have power. I’m serious. I think it’s very, very attractive and it
Alistair Beaton

drives a lot of people. So now and then I wish I had not had a quarrel with Gordon Brown.

MR: *Feelgood* is your most successful play so far. It won the Evening Standard Best Comedy Award in 2001 and has since had successful runs in America, Canada, Germany, Denmark, Austria, Portugal, Estonia, Finland and Hungary. In an interview on *theatrevoice*, looking back on her long and distinguished career as a producer, Nica Burns said that it was one of her absolute highlights. She was quoted elsewhere maintaining: “I loved the idea. It was a total and utter risk because Alistair had more of a track record on TV than he did on stage and he was very scurrilous from day one. At the time, satire was not fashionable and, at any time, it’s incredibly hard to get right.” Burns mentioned that you pitched the play with a treatment of six lines. Did you really get that whole thing rolling just on the basis of a short summary?

AB: As I recall it was a little longer than that. But it’s true that Nica took a risk.

MR: Nica Burns brought you together with Max Stafford-Clark, the former artistic director of the Royal Court, who got a huge reputation not only as a director but also as an editor/dramaturg. How did he work with you on the text of *Feelgood*?

AB: I think everybody thought that the combination of me and Max Stafford-Clark was rather unlikely. He’s not noted for his sense of humour, and *Feelgood* is a comedy. It’s a comedy, I hope, with serious politics in it, but it is a comedy. It was an unlikely pairing. Not as unlikely as Alistair Beaton and Anthony Neilson, but perhaps we’ll come to that later. Actually, it was terrific because what Max Stafford-Clark brings to a script is immense intellectual discipline. I don’t think there’s any writer – maybe Shakespeare, maybe Schiller, who knows – who can just produce a play and it’s ready to go on the stage. I think every writer benefits from somebody who challenges him, asks difficult questions, and even before the first day of rehearsal, I had done maybe three more drafts by having meetings with Max, listening to his criticisms, not always agreeing with them and sometimes arguing, and so, when we went into rehearsal, there was, I think, a very high
quality script. Then in the course of rehearsal other things emerged, ideas from actors, ideas from the director, and it changed. But Max never really, in his heart, believed it was a comedy. I discovered later that the night before the first preview he went to Nica Burns and said: “I'm very worried. Someone is going to have to look after Alistair after the show tonight.” Nica said, “Why?”, and he said, “Because Alistair thinks it's a comedy.”

Actually, behind that misunderstanding was something I think quite important. I know these generalisations are dangerous because there are all kinds of comedy, but I think really interesting dramatic comedy is rooted in the same basis of truth as a serious drama. If you engage with the characters honestly, you engage with the issues honestly, you're working at exactly the same level as if you're doing something where there isn't a single laugh. So that comedy comes out of genuine conflict, genuine clash of characters, genuine motivations. And, although it seems like an unlikely meeting point between me and Max, in the end I hugely followed his improvements as he is a man with enormous experience. There aren't enough directors around who really respect the text. Max's job as he sees it is to deliver for the writer what the writer hoped for. That doesn't mean the writer tells the director what to do but that his job is to serve the text. In other words, it's the opposite of Regietheater, and I have a certain prejudice against some aspects of a Regietheater. That combination of respecting the text but still fighting with the author to make him change it, fix it and improve it is a very good combination.

MR: In Germany, readers at the theatre-publishers and dramaturgs work with authors on their texts. In Britain, this rather seems to be the director's task?

AB: That's right. It might be different here, but I don't want to work with a dramaturg. In England, a dramaturg is normally 25 years old and knows nothing at all, and I want somebody who knows about theatre to tell me what to do. And I will listen. I'm not arrogant enough to say to Max Stafford-Clark, “Scene 2 is perfect, I'm not going to change it.” I will listen. Over the last few years, I did two television films and in both cases they said, “Right now we should discuss who's
going to be script-editor." And I said, "I know who’s going to be script-editor. Nobody's going to be script editor. I'll work with the producers, I'll work with the director but I don't want a script editor." Maybe you don’t have a choice in Germany if you work for the theatre. We do have the concept of dramaturg but it’s quite weak compared to here, and if you are difficult enough, you can avoid it.

MR: Not for nothing you wrote The Little Book of New Labour Bollocks in 2000. In the anti-war satire Follow My Leader, which premiered in 2004 at Birmingham Rep and then moved on to Hampstead Theatre, you really seemed to be absolutely fed up with the whole New Labour thing, and sometimes the play didn’t appear satirically “translated” at all but rather nakedly confrontational. Did you see agitprop as the single appropriate way to react at the time?

AB: That’s interesting. I don’t think what I do is agitprop. I think there’s a difference. I hate going to the theatre and being lectured. I will go a long distance to avoid a Howard Barker play. I want the audience to be entertained. I think it’s my job to tell a story and to entertain them. If the audience is bored, it’s my fault, not the audience’s fault. I know that Unterhaltung is a bit of a Schimpfwort in German, but I think Unterhaltung is important and that you can combine concepts of entertainment with concepts of intellectual integrity and serious politics in the theatre. It’s my job to make the evening entertaining, it’s my job to tell a story and to interest the audience. I don’t think that’s agitprop. For me, agitprop is being lectured at. Maybe somewhere there’s a little bit in Act Two of Feelgood. Just a little bit.

But Follow My Leader really was agitprop. It was an interesting experience because I started writing that play – it was somewhere between a play and cabaret, with songs and sketches – I started writing that as the Iraq war began. I remember there were two million people in the streets in London, just before that war broke out. I was in that march and it was the biggest political demonstration of British history. We failed to stop the war of course, but I felt an anger that was the keenest anger I’ve ever felt politically. I started writing it during the war. I actually think the play is too angry. I think satire starts in anger, or perhaps outrage is a better word. I think that play was so angry that it
left the audience no space that they could fill in themselves. A good play leaves a gap. If the gap’s too big, the audience is baffled and doesn’t accept the play. If the gap’s too small or doesn’t exist, the audience feels oppressed. I think I oppressed the audience with Follow My Leader. It was very good therapy for those who had been activists; people who’d been on the march would come with the group they’d been on the march with and it gave them heart, so it wasn’t all bad. Looking back on it, the lesson I learned was that as a satirist, you have to take your anger and you have to transmute it into something that works as entertainment. There were good moments, but I think people came out of the theatre feeling a bit like I had been hitting them with a sledgehammer. It was still more fun than Howard Barker though.

MR: That’s not terribly difficult. You went on to write the award-winning television film A Very Social Secretary about the David Blunkett affair. This was followed in 2007 by the Channel 4 film The Trial of Tony Blair, rather prescient at the time. Is it true that British TV gives its authors more leeway politically than continental broadcasters but is rather more squeamish when it comes to language and sex? So did you have to trade in a couple of “fucks” for the occasional “cunt” in your scripts?

AB: The last word wasn’t there at all. This is an interesting question because from my experience with German television, this ranges from film right through to just watching the news bulletin. If there’s an interview with a politician on German television, it’s much more respectful and even deferential than it is in British culture. British interviewers are really rudely aggressive with politicians. There’s a difference in culture which is actually quite striking. I think we’re quite prudish and the stuff surrounding sex and language is quite restricted and you have to be really clever. I don’t care all that much. I want the political heart of the film to survive. I don’t really care if I have to lose a “f***” or can’t use the c-word. It doesn’t seem to me a fundamental issue of artistic liberty. I just don’t think it is, and in the theatre you can say what you want. Actually, every time they have one of those ghastly events, which is a post-show discussion, I sit up on the plat-
form and there's, I don't know, twenty, thirty, forty, sixty, eighty des-
perate people who really want to go home because it's eleven o'clock,
and half the questions are, "Why do you have your characters swear-
ing so much?" It becomes a barrier. I actually think it's not a big issue
of artistic freedom whether your characters can say "fuck" or not.

MB: Whenever I go to see a production in London or Edinburgh, I
really like many of the dramatists, am impressed by a lot of the actors,
respect some of the directors but am appalled by practically all the set
designers. When the light goes up on one of those dreary and pedes-
trian pseudo-realistic concoctions or even worse an inept attempt at
abstraction or - God forbid - symbolism, I feel like doing my bad Tony
Hancock impression and shouting: "Have you people got no taste?"
Why is that?

AB: First of all, I think it's fundamentally true. One side of the coin in
British theatre is respect for the text, respect for the writer and the
primacy of the text over what the director wants to do with it. But the
other side of that coin is a lack of interest in the visual and visceral
aspects of theatre. Max Stafford-Clark, for example, is just not inter-
ested in the stage picture; he has no interest in it at all. It just has to
function as a play. And that's quite common in British theatre. Our
tradition is so text-based that that side is simply neglected. There are
some exceptions; I think you paint the picture a little bit too black,
but I think it's true. My only explanation is the other side of the coin.

MR: When Anthony Clark ran Hampstead Theatre from 2003 to 2010
his only discernible policy seems to have been to send out a round
robin letter from time to time saying: "Dear dramatist, if you got a
really bad play in the nether regions of your bottom drawer which
nobody else would touch with a bargepole, do send it to us and we
will put it on immediately. Yours sincerely, Anthony Clark, artistic
director." And he was true to his word. Now I am not suggesting that
King of Hearts was your reply to one of those circulars but surely
Hampstead wasn't a very promising place to open it in 2007?

AB: I think you're being a little unfair. Anthony Clark ran Hampstead
Theatre after it moved to a very expensive new building - it had previ-
ously been located in a very old-fashioned, small, primitive building
under artistic director Jenny Topper and was a very vibrant place. What happened then was a tale for our times really because now we're all complaining about lack of money and budget cuts, certainly in England; I imagine the same thing's coming to you in Germany. The money that was available to build this wonderful new theatre actually became a bit of a problem because so many energies went into the creation of a wonderful new building and I think some of the creativity got lost. Tony Clark is a very, very nice man, and it's very difficult to get angry with very nice people. I didn't always agree with his programming, but he had a very difficult task to perform. I suspect maybe Tony is happier being a writer and a director.

So why did I open *King of Hearts* at Hampstead? That was a very difficult story because Max Stafford-Clark had a stroke just as we were casting the play. It was one of those difficult situations. We actually cast the play from Max's hospital room. We had an assistant who would go down the hospital's stairs to where patients were lining up on one side and actors on another. They would be called up and down to the room to interview or audition. So it was a very, very difficult situation. I think that became so hard to handle that we didn't really think through exactly where it should go. It was one of those deadly press nights. Since then, there's been a very nice production of that play in Berlin. I don't know what the tradition of the press night is in Germany. People are now trying alternatives because the focus of having all the press in on one night can be a bit deadly, especially for a comedy, because comedies, as you know, have good nights and bad nights. Comedy is a very delicate machine. If for the first ten minutes, a couple of jokes don't work and the actors are nervous because the press is in, and they do the third gag a little bit too fast and it doesn't get a laugh, then everything begins to fall apart, and the audience begins to sit there saying, "I thought this was going to be funny and it's not." I had a press night like that with *King of Hearts*. Right in the middle of the stalls was this great black, dark pool of important famous people and critics, and it just died. One critic came along the following night, *The Sunday Times*, and the place was a riot with laughter. That was the one good review I got. It's particular to comedy that the first night is even more dangerous than it is for a drama –
because you notice it if a comedy isn't funny. A drama can still be interesting if it isn't serious. In a comedy, there is still something left but you're still going to go home feeling a bit cheated.

MR: I still remember how your German agent Eva Giesel and I sat in the balcony at Hampstead, looked down on one of those ghastly British sets and saw actors rather desperately straining for effect. Early on, my favourite quotation from Schiller's *Wallenstein* came to my mind: "Vater, es wird nicht gut ablaufen." And so it proved. When Eva and I briefly talked at the first night party, we both immediately said, "Somehow there is a play there which could be fine also for Germany but the author would have to rewrite a bit, particularly the rhymed ending which wrapped up the proceedings like the end credits of a film telling us what happens with the characters in the future." That didn't work for us and we both were slightly worried about how to put our views to you.

AB: I recall you put it to me very directly. I think your exact words were: "Can you cut the rhyming bit?"

MR: Without giving names, we know fellow dramatists of yours who would have responded with a good old headbutt and marched off in a huff, but you seemed to positively welcome our opinions on the play and duly rewrote it. That impressed me a lot, and I think that for once the German version of *King of Hearts* is actually better than the English one.

AB: It's true.

MR: And we had a production with Dieter Hallervorden starring as the Prime Minister at the Schlosspark Theatre in Berlin, which rehabilitated the play. This showed that the German municipal theatres aren't doing a play like that, only the private-run theatres take it up because they see a political or satirical quality there the big, heavily subsidised, state-funded theatres don't care for.

AB: They did take *Feelgood*.

MR: *Feelgood* was different. *Feelgood* slotted into their mind-frame. With *King of Hearts* none of the subsidised theatres did it.
AB: This is more a question for you rather than a statement, but I think in German culture this meeting point between entertainment – we call it boulevard – and serious theatre is a more difficult thing for the culture to accept than it is in England. It’s very common for us to have a very distinguished actor, like Robert Lindsay, for example, who would do a sitcom that’s fairly renowned and who makes lots of money, but he’s a wonderful actor and will also go on to the West End stage. Or actresses who will do Shakespeare and major performances, but they’ll also do a sitcom on television. Is that cross-over happening in Germany now?

MR: It’s starting to pick up now. It’s a relatively new development, but things are getting a bit better.

AB: To some extent, I like a degree of commercial pressure. I’m sure everyone here knows that the set-up in England is different because there are so many private theatres in the West End that are only about money. They’ll make a fortune or lose money on whatever might happen, same as a writer. Of course it can be unfair. You can have bad luck. Wrong actor, wrong theatre, whatever. But there’s a degree of commercial pressure in there that I don’t think is all bad.

MR: Alistair, you were born in Glasgow, educated at the Universities of Edinburgh, Moscow and Bochum of all places. You graduated from Edinburgh University with First Class Honours in Russian and German. You not only translate from Russian as with The Government Inspector and your adaptation of Gogol’s The Nose or from the French as with La Vie Parisienne but you also did new versions of Die Fledermaus, Der kaukasische Kreidekreis and The Arsonists, known over here as Biedermann und die Brandstifter. We’ll leave aside the Russian and the French connection today. However, you can call yourself a “Germanist,” which surely in Britain must sound like an insult but which uniquely qualifies you to talk about problems of cultural transfer between Britain and Germany. Michael Frayn once surprised me by claiming that the Germans have a perfectly normal sense of humour, something many of his fellow countrymen would doubt. What is your view as a satirist on that particular point?
AB: I sense this is a slightly dangerous question. I lead a one-man battle, perhaps it's a two-person battle, I don't know, against British insularity and ignorance of Germany. It's very profound, and it's actually very awful. Germany's been an important part of my life since the age of sixteen. I love coming to Germany. I love the language. I love the culture. It's hard to put that over in England because they're so self-righteous and smart and they think the world stops at the English Channel. It's still a problem. And you meet people who are aged 16, who you think would've changed, and they make jokes about the Nazis. It's incredible and deeply depressing. Over that whole fascism issue you then get overlaid that the Germans have got no sense of humour. It's so depressing. I also worked – and probably this is something that serious German playwrights would not put on their CV – but I developed new comedy series with RTL in Cologne.

MR: And you wrote a tv-film for Margarethe von Trotta called Mit 50 küssen Männer anders.

AB: Yes, I think it was Margarethe von Trotta's first experience with comedy. I think she needed the work to be honest. Anyway, I was very pleased to get her. There's certainly a difference between German humour and English humour. Something in the area connected with directness and indirectness. The way the English interpret it is deeply depressing. They'd say, "Why are you going to Cologne again?" And I would say, "Well, I'm helping develop new comedies for German television." And they'd say, "Comedies for German television? Is that not an oxymoron?" All the other prejudices are: Germans have no humour, and they're like little clockwork models, and they think the only way to do things is exactly like in Germany. We had eine Untermieterin, a tenant in our basement. We were running out of money, but we had an empty basement so we let it out and gave it to a German student who was the perfect cliché. We would be burning leaves in the garden and she'd come out and say, "Why are you burning leaves? In Germany that is not allowed!" And I would say, "25 years I've been fighting to make the English like the Germans and you destroyed it at a stroke!" The other thing is that the English think you
are very efficient. But I’ve worked here and I know better! I think we’re going too far away from the theatre. Bring me back.

MR: Many British dramatists got hilarious stories on how they felt misunderstood in German productions like Simon Gray being flabbergasted when one of his characters stumbled on stage in an extensive plaster cast and was reminded of his scene direction: “Enters completely plastered.” Did that happen to you, too?

AB: I didn’t see all of the productions. I saw most of the productions of *Feelgood* here and they were all really good. The text was respected. I think some of it was the influence of Eva Giesel choosing the right directors, getting the right theatres. My experience has largely been good. I’m sorry to disappoint you; I got no tales of horror. The nearest it came was a play that I had on at Maxim Gorki playhouse based on Gogol’s short story *The Nose*. You see, for me, funny moments have to come out naturally out of the truth of the scene. What happened in *The Nose* at the Maxim Gorki-Theater production was that somebody would come along with a rubber nose and put it on the wall and some strange music played. We all sat in silence – I think it was meant to be funny, but I’m not sure. Other than that, I haven’t really had that experience. I know there are all these horror stories. I’ve been well served by German theatre. I’m not going to say much bad about it. And they pay me as well.

MR: A play of yours that won’t be done in Germany is your last one up to now. It deals with an unfortunate Scottish colonial adventure in the late 17th century. *Caledonia* received a prestigious Edinburgh International Festival production at the Lyceum in 2010 and was directed by a fellow dramatist of yours, Anthony Neilson. What I gathered from the British press, to put it mildly, you didn’t get along too well with him?

AB: It was stupidity on my part. Stupidity and vanity. The National Theatre of Scotland commissioned the play for me. They assumed I was going to write a contemporary play about banking instead of which I found this moment in Scottish history at the end of the 17th century, which was like the South Sea Bubble or the Tulip Fever. It was such a fascinating story that had never been told on the British stage. So I thought I’d do a historical drama. I love doing new things.
I'll do that instead. They said, “Great, fine, write it.” They asked to see the first act, which I normally don't like doing, but the clock was ticking and they asked to see it, they liked it and said, “OK, we're going to put it into the Edinburgh Festival.” Big prestige, the only British play at the festival, I was flattered. And then they said, “BUT – Anthony Neilson must direct it.” I thought, “He’s not a natural director, can we talk about other directors?” – “No, we can’t.” His primary area is putting on his own work and making up the rest as he goes along.

I'm trying to think of a short version of this story. It was the worst professional experience of my life. It is my duty as a writer to change and mend the text in the process of rehearsal. However, I think it’s the duty of the director not to touch the text without my agreement. If I am out of the rehearsal room for a few days, which is sometimes very helpful for the director as he needs some space – and that’s fine – and if I then come back and find that 30 pages have been re-written behind my back, extensively re-written, I find that unacceptable. Also, I have a contract that says that this is not allowed. So legally, that is not permitted. I asked politely a number of times, if there are any changes, I make them. You don’t make them, and you don’t make them behind my back. And it continued and it went on, and on and on. It got really unpleasant, almost to the point of lawyers’ letters. Basically, I got him to agree. We had a conversation I will never forget because it’s the most unpleasant thing … I’ve had a few unpleasant things said to me in the theatre, but this is the most unpleasant. It still shocks me when I think about it. Finally, Anthony Neilson said, “Ok, I agree. I will not touch a word of your play. I will direct your play exactly as written. But I promise you one thing, you are not going to like what I fucking do with it.” And he was so right.

At some point you’ll be in conversation with Anthony Neilson and hear his side of the story, but the heart of it was that he wanted the politics out of this play. And this was a historical play with a lot of politics in it. Anthony is not really political, and he wanted the politics out and I wouldn’t take the politics out. So he turned it into a kind of post-modern vaudeville, a kind of pantomime, really. It drained it of all meaning. The whole show became post-modernist
gibberish. It was disastrous and I walked away from the production. It was the most unpleasant experience of my professional life because it seemed to me to have outright hatred and aggression in it which I've never experienced in the theatre. We all have arguments; that's part of it. That felt like a real attempt to destroy the play. I think Anthony should probably stick to directing his own material. Then he can be crass and vulgar to his heart's content.

MR: The famous German actor Bernhard Minetti was known to tell colleagues at first night parties, “Better luck next time,” so naturally that's what we all sincerely hope for you. What, when and where will your next production be?

AB: I just delivered actually. I got on a train from London on Thursday morning at 6 o'clock and I finished the play on Thursday morning at 2.30 am, so three and a half hours before I left. There's nothing like a deadline to get you working. I was very interested in all this Irish drama discussed in this conference because it is dealing with the issues of Irish society since 2008, since the banking collapse. Can a country be independent and still answer to the needs of international capital, which is basically telling us how to lead our lives? It doesn't sound funny, but it will be. That's basically what the play will deal with. So that's the next project and it's very nice to have written that. There will still be rewrites and changes, but I feel very happy about it.

MR: And you'll have right of refusal on directors ...

AB: ... I have right of refusal on directors, casting, writing and on design.
II. CONTRIBUTIONS BY SCHOLARS
Uncertain Convictions and the Politics of Perception

At the conclusion of Postdramatic Theatre, Hans-Thies Lehmann argues that the “[t]he politics of theatre is a politics of perception” (Lehmann 185), a theatre which would engage responsibly with the dilemmas propagated by a society of spectacle would inevitably involve an “aesthetics of risk” (ibid. 186). He goes on to elaborate on how such a “politics of perception”

could at the same time be called an aesthetic of responsibility (or responsability). Instead of the deceptively comforting duality of here and there, inside and outside, it can move the mutual implication of actors and spectators in the theatrical production of images into the centre and make visible the broken thread between personal experience and perception. Such an experience would be not only aesthetic but therein at the same time ethico-political. (185-6)

While the “ethical turn” in (continental) philosophy has been mooted since the 1980s, several recent publications such as Helena Grehan’s Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age (2009), Nicholas Ridout’s Theatre & Ethics (2009) and the journal Performing Ethos testify to a desire to bring the discourse of ethics into conversation with that of theatre. Indeed, in a decade marked by violence, paranoia, propaganda and assaults on basic human rights, in which anxiety and cynicism about reality and truth have become commonplace and radically affect the question of how to act, it is little surprise that
theatre that engages with questions of ethics is in no short supply. This paper proposes an exploration of the politics of perception with reference to examples drawn from British theatre of the last decade and in relation to four contingent concerns: (postmodern) ethics, provocation, spectacle and spectatorship. These concerns surface in the three main areas where the discourse of ethics might interact with theatre practice: content, form and audience response.

The term ethics commands broad and disparate sets of significations. Attempting to provide an overview of the field, Gordon Marino contends:

Whatever else it may be, ethics is the study of oughts and of relationships; that is, of how we ought to relate to ourselves, ought to relate to others, and as of late, of how we ought to relate to the earth. If there is a factual or descriptive side to this discipline, it inheres in trying to comprehend human nature so as to guide it.

Ethics, thus framed, broadly connotes “the science of oughts” (xiii-xiv). Within this science, various different trajectories open up – “rationalist self-legislation and freedom (deontology), the calculation of happiness (utilitarianism), or the cultivation of virtues (virtue ethics)” (Bergo), or approached another way, metaethics, normative ethics and applied ethics. However, perhaps of most use to matter of theatre is the increasing importance of notions of ambiguity, relationality and ambivalence to the study of ethics since the Second World War.\(^1\) Although according to definitions of the branches of ethics just enumerated, Emmanuel Levinas’ work may not even be regarded as an ethics, clearly he has become, as Simon Critchley describes, “an obligatory point of reference [...] across a whole range of disciplines” (5), theatre studies included. Levinas’s ethics turns from the tradition of conceiving ethics as self-realisation or being to an alternate obligation – the responsibility to the Other, the compulsion to respond to the face of the Other. Significantly, this realignment runs counter to Marino’s description of the function of ethics just cited. Rather, as Nicholas

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\(^1\) See for instance Simone De Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1948), but also the work of Jean Paul Sartre and Emmanuel Levinas.
Ridout puts it, “[b]y starting from the ‘other’ and deriving everything from the responsibility the ‘other’ demands, Levinas seeks to remove the human subject from its former place at the centre of the world” (53).

Also of use to my immediate project here is sociologist Zygmunt Bauman’s *Postmodern Ethics* (1993). Bauman challenges the view that the advance of modernity signals the “the demise of the ethical” or as “the substitution of aesthetics for ethics” (2). And he reminds us that “[t]he great issues of ethics – like human rights, social justice, balance between peaceful co-operation and personal self-assertion, synchronization of individual conduct and collective welfare – have lost nothing of their topicality. They only need to be seen, and dealt with, in a novel way” (4). Such an assertion seems to echo Lehmann’s claims for the postdramatic in an age of spectacle. Finally, for Bauman “the postmodern perspective” is, above all, marked by an acknowledgement of “the essentially ambivalent condition of morality” (10-11): the foundations of traditional ethical enquiry – fixedness and universality – have been eroded, the task now is to comprehend how to act ethically given these conditions.

Given its abundance, it is a relatively easy task to select examples of theatre work that treats ethical quandaries; the question remains as to how ‘novel’ the treatment actually is. So, for instance, one might ask whether either of the major works on business ethics and financial crisis, Lucy Prebble’s *Enron* (2009) or David Hare’s *The Power of Yes* (2009) actually bring anything new in terms of our perspectives on free market greed, or add much to what Caryl Churchill’s *Serious Money* achieved in 1987. The former garnishes rather pedestrian dialogue and schematic characterisation with dance, lighting and projection, the latter is basically an animated lecture. Arguably *Enron* succeeded precisely because it converted a rather complicated set of events into a visually attractive spectacle. *The Power of Yes* maintains complexity but sacrifices theatricality. Perhaps more provoking are plays that present such dilemmas in covert or oblique ways: the two examples I would like to spotlight are Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* (2003) and David Harrower’s *Blackbird* (2005).
The Pillowman stages the interrogation of a writer in a decontextualised, totalitarian context. The writer’s fiction repeatedly depicts the torture and murder of children. When crimes mimicking the horrific acts depicted in his stories begin to occur, he is charged with actually committing the acts he has imagined. In the course of the play, various brutal narratives are revisited, re-enacted, and revised. The Pillowman opens to a number of ethical concerns. First, at the time of the play’s premier the War on Terror was gathering momentum with the sanctioning of intelligence gathering techniques that involved torture. Indeed, the debates surrounding these techniques and their application by the American military in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo in particular have reintroduced fundamental questions as to the limits of humane behaviour in combating terrorism. While McDonagh’s play refuses an identifiable setting preferring a vaguely communist era point of reference, this global context directs attention analogously towards authoritarian power and violent abuse (Jordan 175). Second, what McDonagh does with narrative is also of interest. Eamonn Jordan describes McDonagh’s technique as a “war on narrative.” He reiterates reviewer Ben Brantley’s observation that although The Pillowman “is about, above all, storytelling and the thrilling narrative potential of theater itself” (cited in Jordan 192), that narrative here is anything but redemptive. “Narrative is a battlefield, given the globalization of the media and its communication through images if laceration, carnage, trauma, and death [...] All kinds of horrors can be validated and storied” (Jordan 193), as McDonagh cleverly and ambivalently demonstrates.

Blackbird similarly thrives on moral ambiguity, tapping into public anxieties around the abuse of children in contemporary society. The play, a two-hander between a young woman and an older man, was partly inspired by a 2003 child abuse case that involved a thirty one year-old American who groomed a twelve year-old British girl over the internet before running away with her to Paris. After five days in Europe with him, the girl returned to her parents of her own will, while he was arrested and later jailed for abducting and sexually exploiting a minor. Harrower was drawn to the way in which the man, Toby Studebaker, “still went through with going away with her as if he
was thinking he would test the limits of the moral world” (Kellaway). He was also actively encouraged by director Peter Stein to structure the work around “a metaphor of love” (Kellaway). It is not insignificant that neither Harrower nor Stein use the word paedophilia (in an interview with Philip Fisher for *Theatre Voice* the first word Harrower uses for the relationship is “affair”). And although Nabokov’s *Lolita* may seem the more immediate point of reference, Stein denied this (see Billington). Rather than Humbert seeking his long-lost Lolita, the pattern is reversed, but with an even more disquieting outcome. If Una’s goal in meeting with Peter is indeterminate, she certainly threatens the stability of his new life. Harrower channels the dramatic energy of taboo as the characters lurch through emotions ranging from rage to guilt to desire and violent disgust. Accordingly, the play achieves an acute level of ambivalence and emotional tension obliging reflection on the moral codes of the characters and the society from which they emerge.

As is evident from his attempt to “develop an aesthetic logic of the new theatre” (18) Lehmann argues for an ethics intrinsic to form rather than content. In order to respond to the conditions of mediatized postmodernity, theatre’s obligation lies not, therefore, in dramatic depiction, which merely contributes to the circulation and proliferation of spectacle and a contingent disconnection or failure of effect. As Lehmann goes on to contend,

> the continual presentation of bodies that are abused, injured, killed through isolated (real or fictive) catastrophes creates a radical distance for passive viewing: the bond between perception and action, receiving message and ‘answerability’, is dissolved. We find ourselves in a spectacle in which we can only look on – bad traditional theatre. (184)

The problem, while presented here in postmodern pitch, is hardly a new one. If spectacle post-Debord takes on new denotative duties, its earlier negative formulations in modern theatre can be traced to Brecht at the very least. While it would be foolhardy to pretend their respective critiques are equivalent, a common commitment to collapsing safe distance and the space of passivity by formal means undergirds each.
The question remains as to what an “aesthetics of risk” might entail in practical terms if theatre’s “ethical reality” is substantiated through confrontation and critical resistance to conditions of spectacular postmodernity. In the British context, a number of instances might be offered as evidence: both Suspect Culture and Forced Entertainment are vital examples of companies that have for some time created work that attempts to question the conventions of drama and to communicate experiences of globalized and mediatized reality through performance. However, one might also turn to playwrights (even though according to postdramatic logic they may be defunct): in particular work by Martin Crimp and Tim Crouch has actively engaged with the politics of perception.

As is by now familiar, Crimp’s theatre avoids dramatic stability or resolution. Irony is Crimp’s primary device to challenge the voyeurism, exhibitionism and cynical consumerism of the contemporary. Crucially, Crimp wishes to prise irony from its default postmodernist associations and attach it to a notion of scepticism. In his own words, scepticism is an ethical attitude yoked to satire:

[It is] not the same as postmodernism, because postmodernism – it seems to me – is an embrace of the strange contradictions and even injustices which are so deeply part of our culture, both locally and globally, whereas scepticism is quite different because it does imply a moral position – not an ideological position, but a position of what you might think is right or wrong. That’s what my irony is about. (Zozaya and Aragay 60)

Crimp’s sceptical irony thus aims to render visible the mechanisms that mask responsibility and by which spectacle propagates itself.

Tim Crouch’s play The Author, deploying different methods, also provides a keen example of an ethics of form. The Author is a metatheatrical piece that broaches authorial responsibility and spectatorial complicity. Tim Crouch performs Tim Crouch, while other roles – the two actors in the play and an audience member – are performed by actors under their own names. There is no stage, just a bank of seats where actors and audience sit together. The Author unfolds the story of a play by Tim Crouch for the Royal Court, where this performance is also set. The play is about violence, the representation of violence and the ethics of researching the topic and the effects of
performing the work on the actors and, ultimately, the audience. Built into this premise are spaces for audience response, a facet of the piece I will return to in a moment. Crouch’s work formally operates in a double manner – it fosters self-consciousness about British theatre culture and specifically Royal Court traditions of provocative new writing – with various references and in-jokes. It also displaces the act of seeing or witnessing to the act of listening. Crouch’s author is challenging also in a double sense, within the conventions of theatrical provocation pace Bond, Kane et al. with his play of uncompromising violence drawn from real-life inspiration. He is provocative as the amiable raconteur who reveals a weakness for internet child pornography. The result is a type of ethical short circuit that zaps the listener.

There is an obvious and significant contrast here between Hare’s version of himself in *The Power of Yes*. According to the subtitle, a “dramatist seek[ing] to understand the financial crisis” serves as a mediator in Hare’s play and remains safely outside the crisis even while intellectually and morally challenged by it. *The Author* places the dramatist/performer at the centre of the crisis, seductively sincere and viciously culpable. Conscious of the ubiquitous presence of violence in visual culture and the theatrical traditions of violence as (necessary) provocation, Crouch directs attention to risk of brutalisation, desensitisation contingent upon the consumption of the extreme and ethically reprehensible as mere entertainment.

Evidently, to impose strict separation between theme, form and anticipated audience response is artificial and unsustainable, as Tim Crouch’s piece indicates. Before returning to *The Author*, I want to first consider Helena Grehan’s *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age* (2009) which attempts to conceptualise the intersections between spectatorship and ethics. Grehan posits performance as a space that facilitates questions and reflection, in order to examine the ways “[p]erformance engages its spectators emotionally, viscerally and intellectually” (2). Her theoretical framework involves the work of Levinas, Bauman and Lehmann to ruminate on subjects as citizens and as spectators who [...] look to the theatre to provide a space in which there is a rejection of totalisation in favour of a pluralism of
views or responses, and they are informed by and motivated in response to
this to find new ways of thinking about or responding to, important political,
historical and social questions. (Grehan 16)

Like the term performativity, which has migrated from linguistics to
gender theory and thus to theatre, Levinas’ preontological unconditional response to the face of the Other is an attractive metaphor for
theatre theorising. Yet Grehan concedes the “limits of Levinas” (25), in
particular his deep misgivings about art which she is at pains to min-
imise – primarily on the basis that his suspicion of art is founded on
mimesis, and the performances she discusses are non-mimetic. But it
is worth remembering that in his provocative essay “Reality and its
Shadow,” Levinas criticises art in general as the substitution of images
for reality; “art,” he claims, is “essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a
world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion” (141).
Grehan’s argument then rests on the transvaluation of ambivalence
“as a radical unsettling”:

Ambivalence involves negotiating between the real bodily feelings unleashed
by a work (for example, goosebumps, the retreat behind clasped hands, the
feeling of nausea, the audible gasp, etc.), and the intellectual responses to
what those reactions might mean both in terms of the performance and its
ramifications outside the space and into the ‘real’ world. Ultimately an indi-
vidual subject’s responses, while contingent, fragile and potentially unstable,
are always politicised, as s/he delves deeply into a work and uses the ideas and
experiences it generates to shape moments of resistance to the fatigue and
fear that dominate feelings about the contemporary global order. Spectators
who leave the performance space feeling some degree of ambivalence are like-
ly to continue to reflect on and consider the work for some time. (35)

Strikingly, feeling is recuperated as the basis for ethical response; yet
the outcomes of ambivalence of this nature are for all intents and
purposes indefinable and not necessarily yoked to any action beyond
feeling.

Crouch’s play confrontationally tackles the ethics of performance
and spectatorship. The work actively solicits audience participation

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2 Nicholas Ridout is still more sceptical as regards the relevance of a
Levinasian inter-subjective ethics to performance.
and, initially, pleasurable complicity in a self-conscious theatre game. Yet as the speeches turn to the creation of the fictitious play within the play, the limits of participation gradually are tested. As descriptions of atrocities and their incorporation into the play accumulate, so too does a discomfort with collusion in such a game, even at a remove. Throughout, Crouch is disarmingly sensitive to the audience, inviting ease and empathy, politely pausing at moments that might cause embarrassment, asking permission to continue. However, given the space afforded to the audience, unpredictability was a feature of the performance; this seems to exemplify what an ethics of ambivalence and an aesthetics of risk might comprehend. Audience responses to the play also were marked by instability and illustrate the “politics of perception” in a concrete manner. As Crouch relates,

[t]his is a play during which audience members have read newspapers and novels, built paper airplanes, performed Mexican waves, sung happy birthday to one of their own, recited poetry, slow hand-clapped, physically threatened the actors, hummed out loud with their fingers in their ears, muttered obscenities, shouted the actors down, and thrown copies of the text at the playwright. (“Death of The Author”)

Perhaps the irony here is that The Author, like Crimp’s declared scepticism, is rooted in a fairly clear moral stance. As Crouch himself has stated, “The Author is a play about responsibility, how active we are as spectators and how responsible we are for what we choose to look at” (Mansfield). But the difference in responses to Crouch and Crimp’s work derives from the differing engagement with spectators – patently The Author touched a nerve in many audience members as regards their own convictions – be they concerned with what a play ought to deliver, with being deceived or seduced by a performance, or with the force of violence and abuse recounted during the performance. Being personally implicated in “the culpability of the eye” (Kinskey) here challenges not the saturation of spectacle in the abstract, but in the specific and hallowed minority community of the theatre.

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3 Crouch notes none of the cast was “able to successfully develop a strategy whereby a performance of The Author was anywhere near to being standard or easy” (Tim Crouch, “Death of The Author”).
The ways ethics is inflected in contemporary theatre and theatre studies are myriad, and indubitably this paper merely inaugurates a consideration of the modalities of the politics of perception and modes of critical resistance involved (see Hoy). Arguably a number of questions, emergent in the work discussed above, suggest the contours of debates to come on the question of theatre and ethics. To what extent is ambivalence an empowering or animating ethical state? Is ambivalence action? Are there limits to the efficacy of formal experiment vis à vis ethics? To what extent can spectacle be dismantled, disarmed or circumnavigated? In theatre, what is the ethics of empathy and the status of feeling in relation to ethical dilemmas?
Works Cited


Howard Barker's Theatre of Moral Speculation

"The ethical is there to be disposed of"
(Howard Barker, "Interview with Charles Lamb" 105)

Barker’s Theory and its Inter-textual Affinities

Howard Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe relates negatively to traditional drama by opposing both “the shallow entertainment” of West End comedy and the “theatre of Enlightenment,” whose humanist ideology he rejects. In several volumes such as Arguments for a Theatre, Death, the One and the Art of Theatre, and A Style and its Origins, the dramatist has defined his approach to theatre as amoral and without a conscience. His plays refuse to endorse traditional social values; they test morality at its very source by exploring the consequences of forbidden thought and probing the ethical standards that “society believes it lives by” (Arguments 37 and 52). They do not delude themselves with a civilising mission by teaching their audiences what they already know (Arguments 47). Barker counters the traditional theatre’s docere et delectare with a stance that declines all moral utility and all claim to entertain, upsetting its spectators with ethical speculation in which the imagination is liberated from the control of reason and morality. Barker believes that “[i]t is precisely in the hinge between the independence of moral will, claimed and performed, and the crushing imperatives of public order and its necessary pieties, that a

1 Quotes from Arguments for a Theatre are taken from the 2nd edition of 1993 unless indicated otherwise.
drama of moral speculation discovers its resources" (Arguments 99). This “spectacle of a free imagination [is] disciplined not by morality but by an aesthetic of language and vision” (Arguments 120). It imagines intentional wrongdoing and what that entails. As non-realist drama with no claims to the truth, it ignores the determination of individual behavior by hereditary, neurological or social conditioning (see Arguments 103).

Barker’s critique of Enlightenment is inspired by Nietzsche and in particular by Adorno, whose conviction that Enlightenment, and thus humanism are infected by power impregnates Barker’s theatre. His detraction of reason is, however, also redolent of the surrealists whose manifesto pleaded as he does for the liberty of imagination that rejects the mimesis of reality, and for emancipation from the norms of ethics and rational order. André Breton (Manifeste du surréalisme 1924) and Antonin Artaud (Le théâtre et son double 1938) were early excavators of the subject’s unconscious self, which they saw as repressed by socialisation, subjection to rationality, and the norms of morality. In particular Jean Genet’s stylised, phantasmagorical theatre, which challenges the tyranny of realism and inverts the traditional system of values, displays various commonalities with Barker’s dramaturgy and ethics.3

Contrary to the daylight clarity of the theatre of Enlightenment à la Brecht & Co., Barker’s theatre of darkness is a black box, where imagination, desire, and passion are unleashed, and “darkness permits the criminal and the promiscuous act” (Arguments 74). Unlike realist theatre, his plays offer no information and contain no message. Instead, they are distinguished by a “supreme unknowingness” (A Style 102) as the author writes “blindly” (A Style 38). This does not mean, however, that Barker’s texts are the product of automatic writing as practised by the surrealists. By the author’s ‘ignorance’ he means the absence of solutions to the problems raised in the plays. For example, no moral

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2 See Theodor W. Adorno’s Minima Moralia and Dialectic of Enlightenment by Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer.

3 Peter Brook showed a production of Genet’s Les paravents in his legendary Theatre of Cruelty season in 1964.
can be construed from any of the eight parables in *The Last Supper* (1988).

Like Genet’s theatre, Barker’s plays shun the mimesis of reality, their narratives are devoid of linear development, and their self-invented protagonists do not behave in accordance with the logic of conventional psychology. In his theatre ‘catastrophe’ means a radical disruption of social and moral order; it signifies the overthrow of the protagonists’ rationality, their remorseless infringement of ethical laws by following their instincts and desires and thus acquiring self-knowledge beyond the limits of their civilised selves. Catastrophe is willed, and behind it “lies the sense of other varieties of the self repressed” (*Arguments* 144). The characters’ spontaneity makes them unpredictable and contradictory. Lvov’s statement in *The Last Supper* that “[o]nly catastrophe can keep us clean” (23) sums up the inversion of the principles of rational morality in the Theatre of Catastrophe, where transgression of the norms of morality is an act of liberation whose sincerity guarantees authenticity.

Barker extols the “supreme irrationality” of Greek tragedy, where like Nietzsche, and in contrast to Aristotle, he finds neither *catharsis* nor *diánoia*, nor retribution of evil or reward of virtue, but moral *aporia* and unpredictable gods. He admires the Greeks’ appreciation of the exaltation hidden in the spectacle of pain (*Arguments* 166f). His aim is to create a modern equivalent to this view of the classical model. His protagonists obey their irrational drives for the same reason as Nietzsche’s superman gives way to his desire for power: their repression would stifle life (*Arguments* 118). The price is suffering, both in Dionysian tragedy and in Barker’s theatre. Contrary to society’s efforts to extinguish pain the dramatist highly values suffering as a key to knowledge.

His tragedy eschews the punishment of vice and the reward of virtue or reconciliation with moral order once it has been transgressed. It subverts the bi-polar opposition of good and evil and de-constructs the ‘ideology’ of rational ethics exposing the dialectic relationship between virtue and vice, and the self-contradictory nature of humanist values. Like Nietzsche’s Dionysian tragedy, Barker’s Theatre of
Catastrophe conveys an intimation of the horrifying roots of our being.

Similar to Artaud’s theatre, whose “cruelty” consisted in shocking its audiences out of their complacency by confronting them with truths and violent images that they did not want to see, Barker’s theatre addresses its spectators at a level that transcends the limits of tolerance by exposing them to the representation of their repressed desires, and making them “accomplices in an illicit act” (Arguments 50, 53, 97 and 103). His purpose is to destabilise his spectators’ moral convictions in “a de-civilizing experience” (Arguments 110) by leading them into ethical contradictions where the conventional distinction between good and evil is suspended and reactions are elicited that fly in the face of accepted moral values. Plunging his audience into an “ecstasy of moral uncertainty” (Arguments 113), which for Barker means the divorce of the self from its social and moral other, he expects them to oscillate between fascination, disgust, and shame. This would liberate them from the authority of morality and subvert their idea of the order of reality. In their moral confusion they would be haunted by the anxiety of unknowing and need to re-assess their ethical standards (Arguments 110f).

I. Amorality and the Decline of Christian Faith

In The Last Supper Barker evokes one of the fundamental reasons why, like Nietzsche, he rejects the Christian ethic: the enlightened modernist loss of faith in God has bereft it of its foundation. In order to survive as a mythic figure, Lvov, the Christ figure in the play, asks his followers to kill him and to consume his body as proof of their love. The version of the biblical myth of Christ’s death and the Eucharist presented by the play takes the symbolic consumption of flesh and blood literally, thus evoking archaic sacrificial practices and ritual cannibalism. The disciples kill their leader in an act of revolt against his authority, but also in obedience to his will. Contrary to the exaltation accompanying union with the Lord through the celebration of the Eucharist, their ritual eating of their leader’s body proves to be a traumatic experience. It is not shown on stage, but a tableau vivant
represents its aftermath, which the author also depicts in an ink drawing on the cover of the play’s first edition (see Fig. 1). The disciples present an image of utter disorder, and appear to be spiritually and physically exhausted. Their postures in the picture and their words in the play express dejection, bewilderment, and discord. Only their consciousness of guilt and despair unite them. They try to repress the memory of their act. The absence of the Lord bereaves Barker’s picture of the Last Supper of its traditional centre on which hierarchy and moral order are founded. He is replaced by one of his followers, who accusingly points with his index to another one. Good and evil is no longer God given but a human construction. Individualism, heterogeneity, and moral pluralism are the consequence. The autonomous subject is entirely responsible for her/himself.
The parallels between Barker’s transformation of the biblical myth and Nietzsche’s *The Gay Science* are striking. In the philosopher’s essay a madman cries: “God is dead. ... And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives ... Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us?” (Section 125, 181) The disciples in the play share this anxiety with regard to the moral responsibility that the absence of God foists onto them once they have achieved self-determination. Like Nietzsche’s superman, Barker’s protagonists invent their own values.

II. The Protagonist’s “Ethical Déshabillage”

Most of Barker’s plays focus on the breakdown of their protagonists’ moral convictions, their “de-civilisation” in a process similar to the impact the author expected his theatre to have on its audience. In the plays, however, the transformation is induced by a catastrophic situation. Barker’s poetics of immorality found increasingly radical expression in his later plays, so I shall discuss this central feature of his dramaturgy with reference to an earlier and a later drama.

Bradshaw, the regicide’s widow in *Victory* (1983), is an early instance of a protagonist forswearing her received moral principles under the impact of catastrophe. The victorious Royalists’ disinterment and vengeful desecration of the regicide’s corpse induces her to submit to humiliation and pain in order to recover her husband’s remains from her enemies and restore them to the peace of the grave. She chafes with pain at the sight of his decayed body on display for public revilement or when the royal party plays skittles with his skull. However, when, like Isis, she sets out on her quest, she betrays her Puritan values. Having “done with shame, conscience, duty and guilt” (18), she gives in to the instincts and emotions she had formerly repressed. She defends her interests like an animal. Without any moral restraint, she cheats and robs the friends who feed her, and sleeps with her foes.

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4 Barker also speaks of the author “undressing himself of the comfortable garments of conscience” (*A Style* 91).
She spontaneously acts out her resentments and aggressions, and discovers her sexuality, formerly suppressed by Puritan hostility to the body. Condemning her husband’s cold asceticism and a rationalist work ethic that explicitly proscribes all pleasure, she gives in to sexual desire. Her reckoning with the Puritan ideology culminates in her slapping of Milton, the figurehead of the Republican ideology. Her labour of mourning for her husband is in fact a process of emancipation for her subjugated self. In taking leave of her husband’s body, she recovers her own.

Apart from Bradshaw’s radical rejection of Christian morality, Barker’s *mise en scène* of a Republican woman’s liberation of her femininity and sexuality from the prison of Puritan ideology in the Restoration still contains basic affinities with a story of female emancipation as told by Enlightenment theatre.

*The Bite of the Night* (1988) leaves all reminiscences of traditional drama behind. It evokes a patchwork of fragments from Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Virgil’s *Aeneid* and references to Schliemann’s discovery of Troy as ‘context’ for a radical archaeology of illicit knowledge. The process of ‘de-civilisation’ is ironically announced by the play’s subtitle, “An Education.” The blended images of the fall of Troy and the collapse of the university library – suggesting the breakdown of traditional knowledge – are the catastrophic events that incite Savage, the classics scholar, to explore his “savage” ego. The exponent of classical learning rends the bonds of his family asunder, rids himself of his son, and incites his father to commit suicide. His wife leaves him. Social identity as determined by family structures is dissolved. Savage’s impiety is enhanced by his ironic identification with Virgil’s Aeneas, the classical model of piety. His efforts to liberate his thinking and feeling by infringements of social and moral laws finally make him lose his mind. Like King Lear’s madness, the breakdown of his rational self gives him access to another way of seeing and understanding. He rids himself of all feelings of guilt and accepts the existence of evil within him.

His desire for Helen of Troy is emblematic of his pursuit of the irrational will; for she is the plane of projection of man’s desire and embodies all that is forbidden and repressed in the different ideolo-
gies of the twelve Troys referred to by the play. Savage knows: “She is all that’s unforgivable” (20). She is responsible for the horrors of war and the wreck of domesticity. She embodies the illicit knowledge sought for by Savage. As Helen’s personality is amputated by repression through civilization, reason and morality, her body is gradually dismembered in the play and reduced to a torso. At the end of his Faustian quest, Savage kills Helen and throttles Gay, her daughter, before he vainly attempts to commit suicide. Macluby, the soap boiler and chorus figure comments: “You murdered everything, and long for nothing. Aren’t you already dead?”, to which Savage responds: “That’s knowledge then...” – an insight evoking the void of the tragic experience without hope or meaning investigated by Barker’s theatre.

III. The Amorality of Sexuality

Sexual love is the locus where desire and instinct are most irrepressible and the unconscious erupts into the sphere of reason, overthrowing civility and moral responsibility. Barker remarks: “In all my work I reassert the catastrophic potential of the sexual encounter” (‘Interview with Charles Lamb’ 99).

His adaptation of the Old Testament myth of Judith to the poetics of the Theatre of Catastrophe in Judith (1990) is one of his numerous dramatic variations on the menace to social order created by the “arbitrary and irrational impulses” (A Style 88) of desire. In his play Judith betrays her political mission to kill Holofernes as her strategic seduction of the enemy turns into love. Both protagonists rebel against the blueprint of the myth. The execution of the tyrant aggressor changes into an encounter of love and death echoing George Bataille’s idea of eroticism. The enemy lovers court death by opening themselves to each other. It is love that subjugates Holofernes, not Judith’s sword. She becomes impervious to her dutiful servant’s exhortations. When the latter finally tricks her into beheading Holofernes, he abandons himself to her sword while still professing his love. Overwhelmed by pain and desire Judith loses all restraint and desperately attempts to copulate with the dead body.

Ironically the involuntary sacrifice of her love transforms her into a national heroine. Her personal defeat leads her to an unwanted public
triumph; by saving her people she has lost herself. She no longer owns her body, which becomes the emblem of the state morality against which she rebelled.

The play shares some ground with traditional tragedy, which from Euripides’ *Hippolytos* to Strindberg’s *Dance of Death* is based on the power of irrational passion to subvert virtue and social responsibility. However, Barker’s protagonists have no conscience, no sense of guilt. They abandon themselves to their passions without any conflict between desire and duty. This inverts the values promoted by the biblical myth and distinguishes the play from conventional tragedy.

In his more recent plays, Barker’s poetics of immorality has become even more extreme. I should like to illustrate this by looking at the first scene of his *Gertrude – The Cry* (2002), where in contrast to Shakespeare’s allusive representation of the king’s poisoning in *Hamlet*, he explores every imaginable kind of perversion that can be read into the orchard scene in Shakespeare’s tragedy. His speculation on the Hamlet myth focuses on Gertrude’s sexual drive and the affects related to it. His queen is possessed by a savage wish to kill her sleeping husband in order to remove the obstacle to her passion. She vies with her lover for the prerogative of murdering the king. If she committed the deed, it would be a double breach of the law, which would make it even more attractive for her. But Claudius insists on killing his rival as a token of his love for her, and so she finally orders him to murder the king. He enhances the euphoria of power by torturing his dying victim through making him watch the naked Gertrude betraying him with his own brother. The scene of copulation over the murdered king is another variant of Barker’s favourite theme: the fusion of sexual desire and death. It appears as a perversion of Pozzo’s “They give birth astride of a grave” in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (89). The hierarchic structure of the configuration underlines the compounding of the adulterers’ sexual lust with their lust for power. According to Barker’s theory, the audience should be torn between voyeuristic attraction, revulsion and shame viewing the ‘sublime beauty’ of this accumulation of adultery and sadism, which culminates in the blending of the king’s death cry, Gertrude’s cry of joy at his murder, and her
Heiner Zimmermann

and Claudius’ orgiastic groans, referred to in the stage directions as a “music of extremes” (10).

IV. Sexuality and the Power of the Law

At first sight, Barker’s The Fence in its Thousandth Year (2009) appears topical. It focuses on the frontier between countries and cultures, creating the idea of the nation and the notion of the alien, preventing immigration and emigration, protecting against attack but also incarcerating those within. Putting up a fence also creates the desire of its transgression and of tearing it down. Its historical variations, from the Great Wall of China to the wall between the US and Mexico, have been as much condemned as approved of. The play, however, evokes a wide range of metaphorical meanings of the fence as a dividing line, meanings that point up the distinction between such categories as legal and illegal, sane and insane, and thus function as a cognitive principle behind the establishment of rational order. As the leitmotif of the play, the fence is a visual image for the interrelationship between ethical norms, prohibition, transgression, and sexuality.

At the beginning of the drama, an elegant woman approaches an iron fence, throws up her skirt, and presents herself for copulation from the rear to a rabble of foreign men on the other side. In the following scenes she is identified as Algeria, a duchess, who regularly comes to the fence at night to enjoy anonymous sex amongst others with a foreigner, whom she avoids seeing and who cannot see her because he is blind. The ambiguity in the role of the fence separating Algeria from her partner during sexual intercourse becomes explicit when the duchess invites her alien lover to her residence but cannot feel any sexual desire. At her palace, in daylight, Algeria is disgusted by the sight of the depraved immigrant, who for his part is conscious of and intimidated by the social rift between them. Both Algeria and her partner need the anonymity and secrecy of darkness to overcome the social and cultural barrier in their minds and liberate their libido, which is aroused by the feeling that they are trespassing (see A Style
The image of copulation through the fence makes it all too obvious: sexuality is titillated by the moral coercion that is to prevent it (see *A Style* 80).

The introductory pantomime presents the drama’s central theme like an allegorical dumb show in an early Elizabethan play; for Algeria has another secret: her love affair with a blind youth that not only breaks the law against sexual relationships with minors, but violates the incest taboo since he is ultimately revealed as her son. This makes it clear that the play is a fantasia based on the Oedipus myth, the paradigm of illicit sexuality, and that it investigates the contradictory impact of ethical norms on sexuality.

Algeria’s son, ironically named Photo, is blind. His fate is an example of Barker “testing morality at its source” (*Arguments* 35). Though highly intelligent and extremely intuitive, Photo does not sense the true identity of the object of his love. In his mind, the incest taboo is an insurmountable barrier. He admires the beauty of the fence, and is capable neither of murdering Algeria’s third husband nor of killing her or committing suicide as he wishes. Despite the attraction he feels to his half-sister, he rejects the idea of marrying her. When he learns that Algeria is his mother, he cannot cope with the truth. He is shocked into infantilism, and withdraws to a pram shaking a rattle. Photo’s internalisation of the incest taboo and his feeling of guilt imprison his mind to the point of spiritually transforming him into a child. His ideological blindness renders him incapable of perceiving the truth and impairs his sanity when it is revealed. In his agony he is torn between his cravings for his mother and the disgust inspired in him by incest.

Having made a mockery of decency and moral rectitude, Algeria is ultimately confined to a madhouse. Once more she transgresses by

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5 Freud explained female frigidity as an internalization of the prohibition of sexual experience before marriage. The mental connexion between sexual experience and the forbidden can no longer be dissolved. The awareness of trespass remains even when sexual intercourse is sanctioned by matrimony, in fact it becomes its very condition (cf. “The Most Prevalent Form of Degradation in Erotic Life” [1912] in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*).
copulating with the blind father of her blind son, this time through the perimeter fence that separates the sane from the insane. When in the last but one scene of the play she gives birth, the child’s first cry is accompanied by the last gasps of its father, who is throttled by Algeria’s servant. The author calls the scene, “the epitome of his dramatic theory as well as his visual and literary style” (A Style 81). Later on, surveyors prepare the reconstruction of the dilapidated fence. Photo destroys the pram, declaring that the baby has died. Having freed himself from the constraints of conscience, he has ‘matured’ and is able to confront the truth of his desire without qualms.

V. Dialectic Interdependencies and Dramaturgical Contradictions

Barker’s Theatre of Catastrophe is not quite as unprecedented as he would have us believe. As we have already observed, the clash of opposing ethical principles or the corruption of ethical standards by sexual desire are current in the tradition of tragedy. The piling up of atrocities does not shock audiences who are used to ‘in yer face’ theatre.

Barker describes his protagonists’ motivation for their violation of ethical norms as a desire for “illicit knowledge” beyond the barriers of moral law. His characters believe that trespassing liberates them and strengthens their autonomy and authenticity. Just like the breach of ethical norms in classical tragedy or as predicted by the biblical myth of original sin, their self-fulfilment through the violation of moral laws entails pain, suffering, degradation, and death. However, there is no feeling of guilt or justice in Barker’s theatre. His protagonists’ experience merely confirms the depravity of the human condition and leaves no place for hope.

Barker’s antagonism to the drama of social realism results partly from his loss of faith in the remedial power of socialism and educa-

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6 Barker prefaces his play Found in the Ground (2001) with a quotation from Adorno postulating that “[i]n the innermost recesses of humanism, at its very soul, there rages a frantic prisoner” (Minima Moralia, aphorism 53).

7 See also Claudius in Gertrude the Cry on killing God (22 and 78).
tion. His theatre attempts to explore what social realist theatre represses or ignores. His critique of Enlightenment is, however, contradictory. On the one hand he denounces today’s “neurotic demand for the illumination of all dark places” (*Arguments* 3rd edition, 171), on the other he takes the Roman Catholic confession box as a paradigm for his Theatre of Darkness and Secrets, which grants privacy to the self-exposure that brings out “the normally unspoken, the counter discourse, the private” (*Arguments* 3rd edition, 166).

The representation of transgression can only shock an audience into re-examining their values if they believe in moral norms. Barker’s amoral theatre thus derives its raison d’être from the respect for norms and laws. However, he observes himself that in the era of postmodern relativism, all ethical consensus has largely dissolved (see *Arguments* 51). Why does he take humanist morality to task if it is moribund anyway? Is there a warning implicit in his aim “to return the responsibility for moral argument to the audience itself” (*Arguments* 52) through the negation of morality in his theatre?

In spite of his denials, Barker’s theatre is indeed ‘didactic,’ though it admittedly inverts the traditional sense of the word. His plays attempt to shatter his spectators’ ethical beliefs in a process of “moral déshabillage” that frees them from the authority of morality, leads them into anxious confusion and compels them to reassess their moral standards.

It seems to me that a prerequisite for reactions of this kind is that the audience should be able to relate emotionally to the characters on the stage. Barker’s protagonists, however, flaunt their own artificiality, and their behaviour breaks with the laws of everyday reality. This makes it difficult to identify with them. Particularly in the later plays, this alienation is heightened by an accumulation of atrocities that have the characters tottering from one extremity to the next. Their high-flown poetic diction also casts a histrionic or melodramatic light on the events taking place on stage. Barker’s stylised *mise en scène* further promotes a distanced, largely aesthetic reception of his theatre, although he denies that his dramaturgy of “disengagement” undermines the endeavour to cause moral confusion and anxiety (see A
Heiner Zimmermann

*Style 87-88). However, Barker would not be Barker if he did not delight in contradictions.*
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FRANZISKA QUABECK

Just War Theory and Gregory Burke’s *The Straits* and *Black Watch*

In an interview with the *Observer* in 2008, Gregory Burke described his initial interest in dramatizing the deployment of the Scottish soldier division Black Watch in the 2003 Iraq War as follows: “Why, I wondered, were so many people who were opposed to the Iraq war, for any number of fine principles, also apparently opposed to (or indifferent to) the soldiers, unable to differentiate between the amateurs doing the planning and the professionals doing the dying?” (qtd. in Ferguson). With this question, Burke draws on the first fundamental presupposition of just war theory: this theoretical approach to war makes an essential distinction between the justice of war and the justice in war, a duality which is traditionally termed *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. As Michael Walzer points out in his seminal book *Just and Unjust Wars* of 1977:

> *Jus ad bellum* requires us to make judgments about aggression and self-defense; *jus in bello* about the observance or violation of the customary and positive rules of engagement. The two sorts of judgment are logically independent. It is perfectly possible for a just war to be fought unjustly and for an unjust war to be fought in strict accordance with the rules. (*Just and Unjust Wars* 21)

This initial presupposition forms the core of the debate that is concerned with the discussion of the moral reality of war. In Walzer’s words, it is “not an apology for any particular war, and it is not a renunciation of war itself. It is designed to sustain a constant scrutiny and an immanent critique” (*Arguing About War* 22). This constant scrutiny is first and foremost necessary, because the discourse of just
war theory is unfortunately liable to be abused in everyday politics, but arguing about war must not necessarily be confined to the spheres of philosophy and politics.

As the following discussion of two plays by Gregory Burke will show, the discourse of just war theory is also prevalent in contemporary drama. It is given extraordinary prominence in both plays through the discussion of the Falklands War of 1982 and the Iraq War of 2003. The Straits, which premiered in 2003, focuses through allegory on the injustice and disproportion of the casus belli of the Falklands War, while Black Watch, which premiered in 2006, addresses the necessary distinction between jus ad bellum and jus in bello. Through the inclusion of the moral concerns of just war theory, Burke’s plays give prominence to an ethical debate that is one of the most important ones of the present day, and draws our attention to moral problems that lie beyond politics.

Gregory Burke’s The Straits tells the story of two wars: three British teenage boys in Gibraltar fight their own battle against the local Gibraltarians during the summer of 1982, while the events of the Falklands War between Britain and Argentina loom over them. The rather fragile community between the three boys, one of them a new arrival in Gibraltar, is ideologically seemingly strengthened as the play progresses through the opposition to the local boys as their common enemy. This creates a direct parallel to the increase of nationalism the war caused during Thatcher’s government, and it becomes clear that the adolescent struggle is as arbitrary as the international conflict between Britain and Argentina. As the teenage boys struggle with their identity, the group they have formed seems to provide them with a sense of belonging, which is, however, inextricably linked to their understanding of themselves as soldiers. As the sister of one of the boys cynically asks: “Watchin soldiers and playin soldiers. Is that all you an your mates can do?” (Burke, The Straits 23). They identify themselves with their fathers and brothers, who are simultaneously fighting in the real war thousands of miles away, which culminates in the killing of a Gibraltarian boy. This shocking and unnecessary incident constitutes an implicit allusion to the sinking of both the General Belgrano and the Sheffield as two of the most crucial moments of the
Falklands War. These incidents on both scales of the play thus immediately draw the attention to unnecessary casualties that result from a war, when the cause is not proportional to the costs.

Darren’s murdering of the boy constitutes a strategic means to demonstrate to the others that he can “hack” it, that he belongs to their army and deserves their respect, which is a direct reflection of the unjust sinking of the two ships in the power struggle between Britain and Argentina. Fighting over, as the play puts it, “a little spot in the middle of nowhere” (Straits 27), the two nations caused the deaths of over nine hundred people in a territorial conflict that remains unsolved to this day. Several times within the play, the teenagers refer to this war and its cause, justifying it circularly with the status quo: “There must be something. They wouldn’t send them all the way down there for nothin” (Straits 25). They believe that the deployment of the soldiers necessarily implies a moral justification of aggression: Britain has cause for war because it is already at war. The same is true on the minor scale: the boys have cause to fight the Gibraltarians because they already do. The consequences of this are tragic. Darren’s motive of demonstrating his belonging to the group and gaining their respect is vastly disproportional to the act of killing another boy, which is further emphasised by Burke through depriving the character of any signs of remorse when his crime goes unpunished:

  Jock: You alright Darren?
  Darren: Yeah. Why shouldn’t I be?
  Jock: You ain’t bothered about the bloke?
  Pause.
  Darren: Makes sense, dunnit? I’m only fifteen so they can’t really do nothin with me. If it had been one of you, you’d have got done. (Straits 92-93)

The boy lacks a fundamental moral understanding of his action, only regarding it from a consequentialist perspective. Thus, he is shown to be as oblivious to the deontological status of his action as the two nations are presented to be ignorant of the injustice of their war. As Lyn Gardner points out in a review of the play in the Guardian, “Burke not only shows how violence and war have a brutalising and anaesthetising effect, but also provides the historical framework for a flaw in
the national psyche that makes us susceptible to jingoism and the glamour of war." Through juxtaposing the conflict between the British and the local boys with the international conflict over the Falkland Islands, Burke thus draws an unmistakable parallel between these two forms of unjust aggression.

Burke’s later play, *Black Watch*, on the other hand, turns away from the questions of just or unjust aggression and focuses on the ethical concerns that arise post-aggression in a state of war that is already generally condemned as unjust. The discourse of just war theory in this play draws attention to the difference between politicians and soldiers, or, in Burke’s own words, the duality of “the amateurs doing the planning and the professionals doing the dying” (qtd. in Ferguson). The focus lies on the logical distinction between *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* and takes up the ethical concerns about war from the perspective of the soldiers. The character Cammy opens the play by immediately indicating that he feels a need to justify himself for what he does:

> At first, I didnay want tay day this. I didnay want tay have tay explain myself tay people ay. See, I think people’s minds are usually made up about you if you were in the army ... They poor fucking boys. They cannay day anything else. They cannay get a job. They get exploited by the army ... And people’s minds are made up about the war that’s on the way now ay? They are. It’s no right. It’s illegal. We’re just big bullies. Well, we’ll need to get used tay it. Bullying’s the fucking job. That’s what you have a fucking army for. (Burke, *Black Watch* 3-4)

Cammy thus points to the lack of distinction between the justice of the war and the soldiers’ involvement in it, which is shown to be dominating public opinion. The soldiers are not responsible for the act of aggression against Iraq, they merely carry it out, but, through the two different time levels Burke juxtaposes in his play, it becomes clear that they feel increasingly uneasy about their part in this unjust war until the present perspective of the play fully establishes their role as collateral damage in this international conflict. Burke juxtaposes past and present, simultaneously presenting the soldiers’ situation in Iraq and their *post bellum* moral evaluation of it: they have come to realise that the injustice of the war has also caused a degradation of their moral status in the public eye.
Most of the soldiers of the Black Watch are presented to have joined the army out of a sense of tradition, which is emphasised by reference to the long history of this Scottish soldier division. About midway throughout the play, the character Cammy narrates the history of the Black Watch in a beautifully arranged scene, which places heavy emphasis on the long sense of tradition that is equated with this particular soldier division. This has caused some critics to claim that exactly this focus on the history of the division is affirmative of imperialism and ignores central ethical issues about the wars the Black Watch were involved in. S. E. Wilmer calls the play “an exercise in nostalgia and national pride” (34), but there has been much harsher criticism of what has been understood as a nationalist streak of the play. David Archibald, for instance, claims that “Black Watch slots unproblematically into an official (Scottish) state version of the past. It has issues with Iraq, but not with the previous three centuries of imperial subjugation” (“Big Bullies” 9-10). In his eyes, Black Watch represents an uncritical celebration of empire. In an even more recent article, Archibald repeats his argument thus:

In one beautifully choreographed sequence, a young soldier […] recites all of the countries to which the regiment toured, yet there is no mention of the regiment’s controversial tours of duty in Ireland. Indeed, the play, perhaps like the Golden Thread, is based on the erasure of the problematic aspects of the regiment’s imperial past. […] Th[e] scene highlights the way that national myths are propagated; on the whole, however, Black Watch does not deconstruct the mythology promoted by the British Army, but develops and indeed builds on it (“History” 93).

Similarly, Trish Reid points to this lack of critical contemplation of the history of the Black Watch in the play:

Certainly, the production earned and deserved widespread applause for both embodying and invigorating Scotland’s eclectic and populist theatre traditions, and opening up a space where Black Watch soldiers could be represented in something like their own terms. Its engagement with Scottish identity politics nevertheless remains complex. Demonstrably, for instance, key and deeply-disturbing events in the regiment’s history – especially its Ireland involvements – are effaced in the production in favour of a totalising narrative of continuity through heroism. (195)
Franziska Quabeck

The focus on the history and tradition of the Black Watch as a Scottish soldier division can be seen as an affirmation of national identity, but both critics disregard the fact that the play puts emphasis on the destruction of this tradition even while the soldiers are still in Iraq. Reid goes on to say that “[w]hile the notion of lions led by donkeys is given some prominence, absolving individual soldiers of responsibility for successive governments’ political decisions, especially the Iraq conflict, the tone is overwhelmingly of pride in Scottish soldiering traditions” (195). The aspect she identifies here, though, the passivity the soldiers are forced into on the grounds of their superiors’ decisions is exactly the point that should be emphasised in the reception of the play. The scenes that constitute the celebration of the Black Watch’s history follow each other closely in the first half of the play and are almost immediately succeeded by the news of the amalgamation of the Black Watch with other regiments. In one of three “Officer Emails” that are intermitted between the different scenes like soliloquies, the tragic irony of this amalgamation is openly declared:

[...] We’ve heard of little else but the anger that has greeted the news of the amalgamation of the Scottish regiments. And although I find it dispiriting to have the focus of the people’s ire on the reorganization, I have to say the Government’s timing leaves a lot to be desired. To dissolve the Black Watch during this deployment is bizarre ... My main worry is the effect all this fuss could have on the morale of those serving now (Black Watch 42).

The officer’s main worry here directly aims at the point: through the amalgamation the soldiers serving in Iraq are deprived of their motivation for service and through the structure of the play, the news of the dissolution of their traditional division constitutes a direct parallel to their gradual realisation of the injustice of the war. Thus, the honour that is associated with the Black Watch and given prominence in the play despite its colonial history is shown to be tainted and prone to gradual destruction. The soldiers have come to acknowledge that they cannot approve of the casus belli, which deprives them of the sense of honour which originally made them join the Black Watch. While Cammy claims at the outset of the play that “bullying’s the fucking job” (4), he later refers to the injustice of the war with increasing clarity throughout the play. First, he brings the fundamental dif-
ference between a war of aggression and a war of defence to the fore
in a press interview: “[Y]ou’re no really doing the job you’re trained
for but it’s no like they’re a massive threat tay you or tay your country,
you’re no defending your country. We’re invading their country and
fucking their day up” (Black Watch 38). At the same time, Cammy’s
statement draws on the ethical implications, which arise from post
bellum occupation. As Walzer has pointed out, “[i]t sometimes turns
out that occupying is harder than fighting” ("Just and Unjust Occupa-
tions" 168). Second, Cammy realises that the injustice of the war has
also had its effects on the morality of their conduct: “This isnay fuck-
ing fighting. This is just plain old-fashioned bullying like” (Black
Watch 40). Legitimate war conduct has turned into bullying and all
sense of doing something honourable has disappeared. Now the sol-
diers have to fight merely out of a legal obligation and under an in-
creasing risk for their own lives.

From the beginning of the play, the point is made that the soldiers
are put into unnecessary danger due to political strategy with a total
disregard of their lives: through the verbatim inclusion of a debate
between Geoffrey Hoon and Alex Salmond, the play draws attention
to the manipulation of the soldiers, who fall victim to a political strat-
agem:

ALEX SALMOND: The Black Watch have been sent in to do an impossible job –
eight hundred soldiers are replacing four thousand American marines and
we’re actually expected to believe that one hundred and thirty thousand
American soldiers in Iraq couldn’t do that job. (Black Watch 9)

Burke draws attention to the fact that the soldiers fight for a lost
cause, bringing to the fore the vast discrepancy between those who
decide and those who have to execute those decisions. Thus, despite
the emphasis that Burke puts on the history of the Black Watch and
despite the clear implication that the war is unjust, the focus of the
play is nevertheless on the soldiers, not on the politicians, as Michael
Billington points out:

While acknowledging the inbred loyalty of army life, Burke neither sentimen-
talis the soldiers nor ignores the lunacy of the war. The "golden thread" of
regimental tradition has, he suggests, been snapped by the regiment’s absorp-
tion into a larger unit and the disillusion of the soldiers with their task in Iraq.
Although Burke disclaims a political intention, the play reinforces an officer’s description of Iraq as “the biggest western foreign policy disaster ever.” Burke honours the men while deploiring the cause in which they are involved.

Burke does indeed disclaim a political intention and in contrast to The Straits, Black Watch is not a political play. Through the play’s focus on the distinction between *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, it diverts the attention away from the politics and policy of the Iraq war, away from the question of the justice or injustice of international aggression towards those involved, who most deserve our attention: “the professionals doing the dying” (Burke qtd. in Ferguson). As Brantley put it in his 2007-review of the play, “it never seems dictated by an imposed political agenda.” The play simply does not focus on the politics of war; it discusses the ethics of war.

In contrast to The Straits, which makes an unmistakable statement about the Falklands War, Gregory Burke has chosen a different focus in Black Watch. The political statement implied in the play: It becomes evident that neither the invasion of Iraq nor the deployment of the Scottish soldiers to the so-called ‘triangle of death’ was just. But it is not the main intention of the play to draw attention to those aspects. Instead, it presupposes the injustice of the international aggression but shifts the focus to the ethical concerns that should be regarding those who are involved and suffer, but are not responsible. The play is therefore not intended to discuss the injustice of the Iraq War. It is intended to point out the necessary consequences this immoral status of the war has for those, who are not to blame for it. Burke utilises the material of his original research in this verbatim play in order to draw attention to the fact that the distinction between *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello* is drastically ignored in the context of the Iraq war. As Officer Email No. 3 points out: “Glory [...] is something which my boys are very unlikely to emerge with. The controversy around this war means there’ll be no victory parade for us” (Black Watch 58).

In the context of the Iraq War, public opinion has shown the tendency of focusing exclusively on the aspects of *jus ad bellum*, condemning the war and those who make it. Unfortunately, as the play demonstrates, the necessary distinction between those who decide and those who execute the decision has faded into the background, so
that the fact that the soldiers risk their lives remains unappreciated. Entirely unfairly, they are seen as big bullies since people confuse politicians and soldiers. By giving such prominence to the first presupposition of just war theory, Burke emphasises that this confusion is made too often, as the Sergeant exclaims towards the end of the play: “It takes three hundred years to build an army that’s admired and respected around the world. But it only takes three years pissing about in the desert in the biggest western foreign policy disaster ever to fuck it up completely” (71). Public opinion tends to confuse rather than distinguish between *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*, which causes most regrettable consequences for those who suffer the hardships of war directly, as Burke’s play intends to remind us. Thus, he directs our concerns away from the grand scale of international politics and towards the soldiers who die in wars that others make.

The forcefulness of the means by which the audience’s attention is drawn towards the individual soldiers represented in the play arises in performance through the physical and sensual impact of the production, which makes it difficult for members of the audience to emotionally distance themselves from the happenings on stage and the emotions that are intentionally evoked. This is another point of criticism the play is liable to according to Archibald:

> We are a long, long way from Brecht’s desire for a theatrical practice where, to paraphrase, the audience didn’t leave their brains in their hats when they deposited them in the cloakroom. There is no simple dividing line between cognitive and emotional responses, but here, the opposite seems to be desired: an anti-Brechtian E-effect. It takes a conscious effort to stand back, to sidestep the attempted emotional manipulation of sound and movement, and the entanglement with the celebration of empire (or at least an act of willful forgetting) that the piece demands. ("Big Bullies" 12)

However, the emotional involvement that the audience are forced to feel, at the same time causes them to really relate to these unfortunate soldiers. They are unable to distance themselves from them or even criticise them because the audience is manipulated into feeling sympathy for the soldiers. In this respect, Archibald might be right: the play does manipulate its audience. But it does so in order to make them understand those soldiers and not treat them with uninformed and misguided disrespect. The audience is supposed to understand
what war is really like for those who have to fight in it, and it achieves this with great effect. Now, even if this should so negatively be called manipulation because it creates sympathy for a subaltern group who are not given enough appreciation, this is hardly a negative effect. The soldiers are not responsible for the fact that they have to do what they are doing and they are never given enough credit for this. *Black Watch* draws our attention to this fundamental lack in the discussion of the war. Moreover, the popularity of the play points to the fact that Burke touches upon something fundamental. From its first production, the play has almost only been met with raving reviews. Joyce MacMillan regarded it as “the greatest of all the 25 productions and projects staged by Scotland’s National Theatre during its now legendary first year of operation” and, ever since its first performance, it has been “widely acknowledged as the most important Scottish post-devolutionary theatrical event” (Reid 194). However, in her review McMillan directly puts her finger on the aspect of the play that has caused this overall fascination:

> What made it truly great ... was something that no theatre director – not even Vicky Featherstone of the National Theatre of Scotland, nor her associate, John Tiffany, who directed *Black Watch* – can ever entirely predict or plan; and that was the perfect coincidence between Gregory Burke’s script, based on detailed interviews about the experience of ordinary Scottish soldiers in Iraq, and the mounting concern and anger over the war in places where the play was staged, first in Scotland, and then across the world, from Sydney to Los Angeles. (McMillan 194)

As Reid points out in her remark about lions being led by donkeys, the play does create a forum for Black Watch soldiers, but to view the play as a celebratory piece of merely the history and tradition of this soldier division is certainly reductive. What the play promotes first and foremost is understanding and sympathy for the common soldiers, who have to deal with the conundrum that they are blamed for something they are not responsible for. It therefore reminds its audiences to distinguish between the ethical issues of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. 
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This paper approaches the ways in which three contemporary plays analyse the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its theatrical representation from the perspective of ethics. The plays – David Hare’s *Via Dolorosa* (1998), Robin Soans’s *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook* (2004), and Caryl Churchill’s *Seven Jewish Children* (2009) – belong to different developments in British theatre of the last decade, in what can be defined as a revitalisation of verbatim/documentary, its combination with poetic naturalism, and the redevelopment of the radical/postdramatic, thus bearing witness to the stimulating moment contemporary British theatre is experiencing. At the same time, a consideration is given to the relationship between the implications of the ‘ethical turn’ in theatre studies and issues of spectatorship by situating the plays in specific theatrical and philosophical traditions and by analysing the diverse (and diverging) dramaturgical strategies used.

Indeed, in recent times there have appeared a number of (re)considerations of ethics and theatrical experience. The turning point, as Nicholas Ridout states in *Theatre & Ethics* (2009), is “the Nazi genocide” (49), which thinkers such as Theodor Adorno or Max Horkheimer considered the direct consequence of “enlightenment and modernisation” (50). As a consequence, what needs to be devel-
Enric Monforte

oped is a “post-enlightenment ethics” (61), one that escapes the constraints and misdirections of the previous ethical outlook.

A possible avenue centres on Emmanuel Levinas’s work on the relationship between Self and Other. The emphasis on the human subject characteristic of modernity and the enlightenment period should be replaced by “a dedication to an ethics based on the existence of the ‘other’” (Ridout 52). This is in fact an “ethical obligation” (ibid. 53), as “[w]e come into being only through this responsibility to the ‘other’,” (ibid.). In Levinas’s words: “Responsibility for the Other, for the naked face of the first individual to come along [...] as if I were devoted to the other man before being devoted to myself” (83). This dedication to the Other takes place in the form of an “encounter with the ‘face’” (ibid.) – what Peggy Phelan calls “the face-to-face encounter” (577) – which puts us in touch with the sheer “otherness of the other” (Ridout 53), who “becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me, calls for me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question” (Levinas 83).

This recent (re)evaluation of ethics is especially relevant to theatre practice, “a situation of mutual spectatorship” (Ridout 15). In this sense, the emphasis placed on the presence of the spectator and the active role given to him/her in recent theory (see e.g. Lehman or Phelan) highlight the theatre as a cultural field where Levinas’s formulations can be put into practice. The spectator becomes a witness, according to Ridout, who “experience[s] a live encounter with the other” (60). Thus, the theatre becomes a place where, between the spectator, the actor and the aesthetic experience itself, “a feeling of ethical responsibility to the people suffering” (58) might be created.

It should be noted that, in this process towards a post-enlightenment ethics, the political seems to have been displaced by the ethical (see Rebellato, “From the State of the Nation to Globalization”), or, rather, the ethical seems to be the means to attain the political. In recent critical discourse, this comes together with an emphasis on form, on the purely aesthetic, which creates a distance between spectators and actors with the aim of developing “a model of performance as an ethical encounter, in which we come face to face with the other, in a recognition of our mutual vulnerability which encourages

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relationships based on openness, dialogue and a respect for difference” (Ridout 54).

Via Dolorosa

Prompted by “an instinct” (Hare, Via Dolorosa 30), by an urgent desire to understand the situation in the Middle East, and as a result of the Royal Court Theatre’s interest in producing a play about the British mandate for Palestine (1922-48), David Hare travelled to Israel and Palestine in November 1997 to gather information to write a play. Out of this and subsequent visits emerged Via Dolorosa, an example of what the playwright defined as “stage poetry,” “the development of a new form of political drama ... a kind of smaller-scale, ‘submerged epic’” (Boon, “Introduction” 4; see also Wu 79).

According to Hare, Via Dolorosa is “a classic, old-fashioned, Joint Stock show [...] where the writer distils mountains of research” (qtd. in Boon, About Hare 153-54). Even though the element of collective creation à la Joint Stock is absent from the play, what conforms Via Dolorosa is the information Hare collected from the conversations with the different people to whom he spoke. Thus, in his visits he met with a vast array of individuals which included actors, theatre directors, theatre producers, poets, historians, politicians of varying tendencies and ordinary people. As a result, and also as a consequence of his conviction that his subjects as a playwright are “faith” and “belief” (Hare, Via Dolorosa 6), he wrote the play half way between naturalist fictional dramatisation and verbatim/documentary theatre, in which thirty-three different characters are given a voice by the playwright, as Hare’s persona travels from London to Tel Aviv and subsequently to the Israeli settlement of Sheri Tikva, Jerusalem, Gaza and Ramallah, before returning to Tel-Aviv and flying back to the UK.

The play is a monologue “ideally to be performed by its author” (Hare, Via Dolorosa 3), which marked Hare’s professional debut as an actor. Indeed, Hare’s “casual yet biting stage presence” (Bull 154) is underlined from the beginning, even though he pointed out at some point that the persona in the play is ‘David Hare’, “a dramatized, semi-fictional and selective version of himself” (Boon, About Hare 54). Ac-
According to the playwright, and after stating that the play’s aim is to allow audiences to reflect on the Middle-Eastern conflict “without a whole load of gratuitous, interpretative gloss from me,” and that the play therefore contains “no opinions” (qtd. in Boon, *About Hare* 157),

> [t]he idea of the play is that I step in and out of the play all of the time. And that meant that we were always trying to throw the focus either on to the events or on to my reaction to the events. And Stephen [Daldry] gradually produced this wonderful path through the evening whereby the audience slowly realized that I was both in the events and describing them. (qtd. in Boon, *About Hare* 157)

To this he added that with very serious subjects “you have to be careful what you are doing by fictionalizing them at all” (qtd. in Boon, *About Hare* 157).

Hare’s reinforcement of the figure of the author instead of its dissolution is interesting in the sense that it shows his desire to take the spectator back to pre-poststructuralist times, when the author was considered as the one having the utmost interpretative weight on the work of art. According to Roland Barthes, the death of the enthroned figure of the “Author-God” (57) gives way to the emergence of the “modern sceptor,” “born at the same time as his text” (ibid.). The reader, for Barthes,

> is the very space in which are inscribed, without any of them being lost, all the citations out of which a writing is made; the unity of a text is not in its origin but in its destination, but this destination can no longer be personal: the reader is a man without history, without biography, without psychology; he is only that someone who holds collected into one and the same field all of the traces from which writing is constituted. (59)

Hare is, on the contrary, intent on mapping out any single mile on his trip and not leaving any leeway for the spectator to participate in the production of meaning. The author, for him, is still very much alive and kicking.

Another relevant point that needs addressing is the playwright’s alleged “anti-theatricality” (Megson and Rebellato 243). In this sense, Chris Megson and Dan Rebellato claim that both in *Via Dolorosa* and in his later production Hare is moving away from the theatre and into what looks like the public lecture in “plays that engage with pressing
political issues” (241) and that “scrutinis e the world and make us wit-
nesses of it” (244). According to them, parts of his more recent work
present a willingness to escape the fictional and, more specifically, the
“artifice” (244) embedded in the theatrical by emphasising the content
of the play. This would be in total contradiction with Hare’s own
words about the power of the theatrical experience: “[M]y claim has
always been that people think more deeply when they think together.
That’s what theatre does” (qtd. in Boon, About Hare 154), or, as he also
put it in his essay “The Play Is in the Air: On Political Theatre”: “A play
is not actors, a play is not a text; a play is what happens between the
stage and the audience. A play is a performance” (30). This looks like
an interesting and contradictory dilemma, bearing in mind that Hare
is a man of the theatre.

Bearing the above in mind and relating it to Ridout’s ideas exposed
earlier, Via Dolorosa presents us with various unresolved problems.
On the one hand, one should note Hare’s rejection of fictionalization,
his “distrust of acting, rhetoric and theatricality” (Megson and Rebel-
lato 241) and his wish to undress the play of any elements that deviate
the attention of the audience from the bare facts delivered by the
playwright as Author, as the sole creator of meaning. From this per-
spective, the uniqueness of the theatrical situation as a site of ‘mutual
spectatorship’ is prevented from happening since the role reserved for
the audience has ceased to be an active one, becoming instead a mere
recipient of the meaning fixed by the playwright. The implications of
this are that, from the perspective of aesthetics, becoming a witness
will turn out to be difficult for the spectators of Via Dolorosa, and the
subsequent creation of a feeling of ‘ethical responsibility’ will be much
more determined by the pontifications of the playwright. Hare’s play
is then characterised by this contradiction at its very centre.

The Arab-Israeli Cookbook

The origins of The Arab-Israeli Cookbook can be found in the ardent
wish of its directors, Tim Roseman and Rima Brihi, British-Jewish and
British-Lebanese respectively, “to write a verbatim play about how
ordinary people, caught up in the Arab-Israeli conflict, were managing
to go about their everyday lives” (qtd. in Soans 19-20). Both directors, together with playwright Robin Soans, were sent by the Caird Company on a research trip to Israel and the Palestinian territories of Gaza and the West Bank in September and October 2003, out of which came the writing of the play. The play is based on a number of conversations with “theatre directors, farmers, priests, transvestite hookers, photographers, soldiers, butchers, students, the young, the old, the orthodox, the unorthodox, the wounded, the mended, the pessimistic, the hopeful, the angry, the defiant, the stoical and the conciliatory” (Soans 20) in an attempt to give “a voice to those whose opinion would not normally be heard” (ibid. 20). The play therefore conforms to the verbatim technique, a problematic term (Reinelt 13-14) thus defined by Hammond and Stuard:

The term verbatim refers to the origins of the text spoken in the play. The words of real people are recorded or transcribed by a dramatist during an interview or research process, or are appropriated from existing records such as the transcripts of an official enquiry. They are then edited, arranged or recontextualised to form a dramatic presentation, in which actors take on the characters of the real individuals whose words are being used. (9)

_The Arab-Israeli Cookbook_ can be seen as a “humanitarian” play which intends to be “funny, moving and political” (Soans 19). In this sense, the playwright advises not to “try to write a political play” (ibid.) when writing a verbatim play, since it will very easily “end up as agit-prop” (ibid.), in his own words “worthy, one-dimensional and boring” (ibid.). He also advises that attention should be paid to “detail, the minutiae of people’s lives” (ibid.), and, finally, “never pre-judge” (ibid.) in order to reach as “faithful” (ibid.) an account as possible.

_The Arab-Israeli Cookbook_ offers an analysis of the situation in the Middle-East using food as a common link between the different cultures approached. From the beginning of the play, various characters voice their views and experiences while cooking Middle Eastern food. Soans is interested in the common people, in “the people whose lives are most affected by the conflict” (qtd. in Hammond and Steward 31) and in how they deal with the situation on a day-to-day basis. From this perspective, the play gives a voice to Jews, Christians, and Mus-
lims as they cook or are related to food in one way or another, food that in many cases – and significantly so – turns out to be the same for each community and an element that “reflect[s] economic and social circumstance” (Soans 25).

Bearing aesthetics in mind, there are timid attempts in *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook* to apparently escape some of the tenets of naturalism or social realism. However, the way these attempts are used eventually impedes such a breach from taking place, making the play a much less daring attempt than expected from the perspective of form. Thus, there are eight actors playing 42 different characters, with actors playing both Arab and Jewish characters of diverse religious denominations. The doubling of actors is a relevant device in the sense that it might work as a way to prevent the identification between actor and character, and therefore between audience and stage; this makes visible “the space between the writing and the reading in which meaning is produced” (Aston and Savona 33) and allows the spectator to concentrate on the ethico-political analysis of the situation. To this should be added a potentially challenging breach of the notion of the fourth wall, with some characters directly addressing the audience at some points in the play to the same defamiliarising effect. However, the way in which the breach is effected and the specific moments in the performance in which it is placed render it totally ineffective. One of the examples can be found well into the first act of the play, when Vitya, an Israeli woman, delivers a long speech directly addressing the audience in which she recounts the story of a suicide bombing at a Jerusalem supermarket at Passover, which she survived:

> It wasn’t as loud as I would have thought a bomb would have been. I turned round. All the lights went out, and all the glass, all the way along the front of the shop shattered. And – and this is what saved me – this is what saved all of us inside the shop – the whole air was filled with millions and millions of flakes of shredded lavatory paper, like a blizzard; and the paint pots ... remember the paint pots ... they split open and a fountain of white paint covered half the shop. [...] An Arab worker led us out the back of the shop through the storage entrance, and on our way we passed all these figures moving through the aisles, and they were covered in white paint, completely white, like ghosts, like a Fellini movie, utterly grotesque. (53-54)
The dramatic poignancy of the speech, which concludes with the disheartened realisation that coexistence between the two communities is unviable, makes any distancing between audience and stage utterly impossible.

Notwithstanding the aesthetic contradictions present in The Arab-Israeli Cookbook, the play eventually manages somehow to turn the spectator into a witness. Soans’s timid attempts to create a form that enables this to take place facilitate to a certain extent the existence of an ethical encounter and the awakening of the ethical responsibility of the audience, even though this is sometimes impeded by the perhaps excessive emphasis on sentimentality that tinges the whole play.

Seven Jewish Children

The theatre of Caryl Churchill could fit well in the traditions of the ‘radical’ and the postdramatic, as developed by Elaine Aston and George Savona and by Hans-Thiess Lehmann, respectively. In their influential Theatre as Sign-System: A Semiotics of Text and Performance (1991), Aston and Savona state that ‘radical’ texts, through a constant subversion and transgression of the main tenets of the ‘bourgeois’ play, “highlight the rules and conventions governing theatrical construction” (31) and, as a consequence, “defamiliarise and de-automatise our perceptions of the world, jaded through habitualisation” (31). In his seminal Postdramatic Theatre (1999), Hans-Thiess Lehmann explains the “new paradigm” (24) as “a way of defining the contemporary” (23) and narrows the scope of postdramatic plays to the last third of the 20th century, triggered by what he calls the “caesura of the media society” (22), that is, “the spread and then omnipresence of the media in everyday life since the 1970s” (ibid.). Postdramatic theatre is distinct from ‘dramatic theatre’, the type of theatre prevalent in the European tradition, based on mimetic/analogic representation, text primacy, and a naturalistic aesthetic which contributes to the formation of illusion, all this creating a social bond between play and audience and aiming towards wholeness. As a consequence, the “principles of narration and figuration” and the order of a ‘fable’ (story) disappear (18), while “the ‘depth’ of speaking figures” (ibid.) and an “autonomization of language” take place (ibid.). All
this affects and results from a changing “perspective of human subjectivity” (ibid.). Thus, instead of “intentionality,” “conscious will,” or “the ‘I,’” we are left with the “failure” of intentionality, with “desire” and with the “subject of the unconscious” (ibid.).

Another important aspect of Lehmann’s conceptualisation is the acknowledgement of the key role of the audience, which is implied in his use of the expression “materiality of communication” (16). That is, for Lehmann the theatrical experience is “a joint text” (17) made up of both the “aesthetic act itself” and “the act of reception” (ibid.). This offers profound ways to intervene in society (borrowing Alan Sinfield’s notion), since “aesthetic investigations always involve ethical, moral, political and legal questions in the widest sense [and] theatre […] exists in the field of real socio-symbolic practice” (18-19). The “politics of perception” (185), or the “aesthetic of responsibility (or responsibility)” (ibid.) points towards a practice of theatre which allows audiences to empower themselves and achieve agency in the midst of a cutting-edge aesthetic experience that is inevitably ethico-political (186).

*Seven Jewish Children: a Play for Gaza* (2009) is Churchill’s very controversial latest play to date and a clear example of a daring radical/postdramatic play dealing with witnessing/testimony and ethics. The play was Churchill’s angry “response to the situation in Gaza in January 2009” (Churchill, *Seven Jewish Children* viii), and was written as an attempt to raise awareness against the three-week armed conflict between Israel and Palestine which started in late December 2008, when Gaza was attacked by air, ground and sea in Operation Cast Lead leading to the death of 1,417 Palestinians, of which more than 400 were children. The play is divided into seven sections, each one dealing with a different Jewish child – significantly female – and intends to be a ten-minute history of Israel. It was performed at the Royal Court Theatre in February that year and was significantly directed by a Jewish director – Dominic Cooke – and performed by a largely Jewish cast.

The piece is a “family play, told from within the family” (Kushner and Solomon) paradoxically characterised by the actual absence of children on stage, which reinforces their utter disempowerment. The
Enric Monforte

play, a “multivocal, dialectical drama” (ibid.), "shows the difficulty of explaining violence to children" (Churchill, “My Play Is Not Anti-Semitic”) and deals with how the children’s adult relatives discuss whether to explain the painful facts which constitute their own history to them. The adults are delivering their thoughts with short sentences, most of them beginning with the imperatives “Tell her” and “Don’t tell her,” significantly interspersed with the words “Don’t frighten her.” Sections 1 and 2 deal with the Holocaust and its responses, such as “memory and mourning” (Kushner and Solomon), followed by sections on Jewish immigration to Palestine and the creation of the State of Israel (3, 4, 5), charting the trajectory of Zionism through the displacement of Palestinian Arabs (5) and the general intensification of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (5, 6, 7), to end with the actual Gaza onslaught (7).

The most noticeable postdramatic elements in the play are its use of setting, time, dramatic shape, character and dialogue, which clearly escape the dramatic/bourgeois traditional use. To begin with, there is no clear indication of place or time: everything has to be inferred by the words of the characters. In addition, the play is characterised by spatial and temporal/chronological discontinuity, covering approximately a 70-year time span in a diachronic way but with gaps between the different historical moments referred to. Churchill makes use of “poetic compression” (Kushner and Solomon) and dramatic minimalism to a clear effect. On the other hand, the opening stage directions read: “The lines can be shared out in any way you like among [the] characters. The characters are different in each small scene as the time and child are different. They may be played by any number of actors” (ii). Thus, instead of using dramatis personae as psychologically-deep entities, the play places the emphasis on their function as constructs. The fact that no names are attached to the lines, which are (ideally) to be negotiated between the director and the actors – a strategy famously used by Martin Crimp in Attempts on Her Life (1997) and subsequently widely adopted by other contemporary playwrights –, also contributes powerfully to the general feeling of defamiliarisation. Moreover, other elements such as the size of the cast, their ages or genders are also left to the directors and actors (Kushner and Solo-
mon). It is my contention that such an emphasis on the artificiality and arbitrariness of the notion of ‘character’, which completely precludes empathy between actor and role, and thus between spectator and actor, facilitates the creation of an ethical process with political consequences.

Once again, in the play the spectator becomes a witness of the events on stage and this enables him/her to encounter the Other – here the seven Jewish girls of the title, the Jewish people and the Palestinian Arab population. Paradoxically, in *Seven Jewish Children* this reflection takes place with the spectator witnessing how the adults onstage discuss whether to turn their own children into witnesses. Some find ways “to protect [their] children” (Churchill, “My Play Is Not Anti-Semitic”), to prevent them from becoming witnesses themselves – to the holocaust, the colonisation of Palestine and their inevitable violence. Others defend the opposite view: their children should be aware of those facts and therefore told the whole ‘truth.’ All agree that the girls are not to be frightened, which is expressed in the line “Don’t frighten her” (vii), which significantly closes the play.

*Seven Jewish Children* is also relevant because of its emphasis on form and because it represents “an embrace of a politics rooted in the dynamics of theatricality itself” (Rebellato, “On Churchill’s Influences” 176). Thus, it is a challenge to more traditional forms of political theatre which, adopting a naturalistic/social realist approach, are more based on dialectical debates through the use of “a transparent language, a clear glass through which to observe social realities” (Bigsby 35), something long ruled out by postmodernism. Even though the play was written in a likely impulse of anger and impotence, Churchill’s approach to the ways in which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might be explained to children is highly significant. Thus, the way in which she evades a traditional political approach is precisely what makes the ethics of the play emerge and what, eventually, gives it its powerful political charge. As a consequence, the spectator is once more invited to concentrate on the (ethical and socio-political) issues at stake in the theatrical situation. Last but not least, and in Kushner and Solomon’s words,
Surely it’s essential to understanding *Seven Jewish Children* that against the specifics of the script, the playwright, relinquishing nearly all traditional authorial control, engineers a far-greater-than-usual slippage among text and performance and audience reception, producing an unusually large amount of room for variant readings.

Thus, the gap that is created through this slippage is the one the reader/spectator needs to concentrate on in order to produce meaning. It is nevertheless significant that, in any case, Churchill’s case appears to be the complete opposite of Hare, who in *Via Dolorosa* clearly asserts his role as sole conveyor of meaning.

The pushing of representational boundaries in Churchill’s play needs therefore relating to the ‘ethical turn.’ The fact that ethics has displaced politics to a certain extent goes together, in artistic discourse, with an emphasis on aesthetics as a way to underline the ethical. This would be the case of *Seven Jewish Children*. Challenging the spectator with daring postdramatic aesthetic ‘moments’, the playwright interrogates and troubles contemporary societies (Middle-Eastern, British, Western at large) in order to prompt thought and find solutions to afflictions characteristic of the ‘post-postmodern age’ (Phelan 577).

To conclude, this paper has offered a consideration of how the same topic can be approached in widely different aesthetic ways and to diverging results. We have seen how the three plays pose relevant ethico-political questions both about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and its theatrical representation. Part of the discussion has revolved around the issue of authorship. In this sense, the heavy authorial presence of ‘David Hare’ in *Via Dolorosa*, albeit a construction, is opposed to both the cases of *The Arab-Israeli Cookbook* and *Seven Jewish Children*, which give spectators more leeway for them to build their own reading of the plays. Apart from this, a significant element has analysed the relationship between form and content and its different implications. Thus, Hare’s emphasis on content has been discussed, whereas the paper has also shown how both Soans and Churchill give special consideration to form as a means to convey content. Having said that, perhaps *Seven Jewish Children* is the most accomplished of the three plays here discussed. The play’s ‘radical’ treats and postdramatic ‘stylistic moments’ make it into a powerful alternative to (poet-
ic) naturalism and realism, avoiding illusion and wholeness and establishing a connection with the recent movement towards ethical awareness. Through the most daring exploration of aesthetics of the three plays discussed, it offers the most effective instances of our ethical responsibility towards the Other, of encountering the `face' and, in doing so, recognising ourselves in Otherness as a first step to becoming truly ethical. Only this way can the theatrical experience reveal itself to be political too.¹

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**Secondary Literature**


Mireia Aragay


“If Raymond Williams were contemplating the entries for his celebrated text on Keywords today, he would surely have included the word ‘space’” (Harvey, *Spaces* 119) – thus opens the essay “Space as a Key Word” by geographer and anthropologist David Harvey, which identifies a ‘spatial turn’ in social, cultural and literary theory of the last three decades. Harvey himself has of course played a central role in such a turn, particularly since the publication of *The Condition of Postmodernity* in 1989, where he coined the phrase ‘time-space compression’ to designate a defining characteristic of globalization, the latest “fierce round in that process of annihilation of space through time that has always lain at the centre of capitalism’s dynamic” (293).

For Harvey, the growing dissolution of spatial barriers and the increasing perception of spatial interconnectedness result in the “reaffirmation and realignment of hierarchy within what is now a global [...] system” (ibid. 295). Therefore, while this latest round of time-space compression compels us “to alter [...] how we represent the world to ourselves” (ibid. 240), such transformed representation needs to take into account both the unprecedented possibilities that are opened up and the dangers with which the new global space is fraught – “fragmentation, insecurity, and ephemeral uneven development” (ibid. 296), or what Judith Butler describes as an “unequal distribution of precarity” (27).

As a means of representation, theatre is, by its very nature, intimately bound up with the category of space. In recent years, critical
thinking about space, theatre and globalization has identified some of the fundamental questions to be addressed. If, as Patrick Lonergan puts it, globalization radically alters the way we experience space, what effect does that have on theatrical form (cf. 37)? If, as Paul Rae phrases it, a growing global interconnectedness leads to “the formation of a singularity [where] ‘somewhere’ and ‘everywhere’ are practically one and the same” (9), how does contemporary theatre mediate between the limited space of the stage and the extensivity of global processes? In this essay I suggest that the form of Harold Pinter’s *Party Time*, Caryl Churchill’s *Far Away*, and Martin Crimp’s *Fewer Emergencies* does indeed appear to be inflected by the globalized experience of space in the sense that in the three plays non-naturalistic “slippage[s] of place,” to borrow Dan Rebellato’s resonant phrase (“State of the Nation” 258), mediate between the circumscribed space of the stage and the expansive spatial experience of globality, thus soliciting an intensified perception of global interrelatedness. Crucially, I extend the discussion to argue that the three plays are particularly concerned with highlighting some of the serious threats posed by the globalized experience of time-space compression, particularly on the ethical front.¹ Not unlike Harvey, Zygmunt Bauman claims that the key challenge thrown up by globalization is precisely an ethical one – the fact that the opportunities it opens up are only available to a minority. This is coupled with the paradox that, while it is undoubtedly the case that globalization has given rise to an increasing sense of planetary interrelatedness, at the same time the psychic distance between the privileged minority and the underprivileged, exploited majority does not cease to grow, just as global economic inequalities continue to intensify. I will return to Bauman shortly, via an exploration of political philosopher Étienne Balibar’s concept of the ‘topography of cruelty.’

¹ Interestingly, reviewers of the three short plays’ original productions perceived connections between them, although not in the specific terms of this essay. Thus, *Far Away* was linked to Pinter generally (Billington 2000) and to *Party Time* in particular (Edwardes), while *Fewer Emergencies* was seen to recall both *Far Away* (Logan) and, again, Pinter at large (Cavendish).
For Balibar, globalization is inseparable from cruelty or extreme violence, which he discusses in the spatial terms of a topography ripe with theatrical metaphors – “the causes and effects of extreme violence are not produced on one and the same stage, but on different scenes’ or ‘stages’” (15, emphasis added). Globalization depends on a permanent state of extreme violence “without borders or beyond borders” (ibid. 22) resulting from the collapse of the Cold War system after 1989, which blurred the boundaries between ‘war’ – ‘civil’ or ‘foreign’ – and ‘peace’ and between the fields of politics and violence. Extreme violence is in fact “the very heart of [the] everyday life” of contemporary democratic societies – it is banal, in Hannah Arendt’s terms, rather than exceptional (ibid. 18-19) – but the crucial fact to be grasped is that it is systematically displaced ‘elsewhere.’ For Balibar, pace Rae, ‘somewhere’ and ‘anywhere’ are not really one and the same in the context of globalization. His key contention is again a spatial one, namely, that at the moment when globalization is creating unprecedented possibilities for worldwide interconnection, both economic and cultural, it is also enacting a violent bio-political division of humanity into ‘life-zones’ and ‘death-zones’:

Between these zones (which indeed are intricate, frequently reproduced within the boundaries of a single country or city) there exists a decisive and fragile superborder, which raises fears and concerns about the unity and division of mankind [...] It is this superborder, this enmity line, that becomes at the same time an object of permanent show and a hot place for intervention. (Balibar 24)

Bauman’s concept of ‘distantiation’ interlocks in significant ways with Balibar’s analysis of the spatial, bio-political schism brought about and underpinned by globalized extreme violence. From Bauman’s Lévinasian perspective, ethical behaviour depends on a sense of moral responsibility for others, which is predicated on proximity (Modernity 184). Distantiation sets in when, through bureaucratic or technological means, proximity is eroded and responsibility for fellow human beings is replaced by ethical indifference. To go back to Balibar, in the contemporary globalized world such ethical distantiation both crystallizes in and replicates the superborder between life-zones and death-zones, a line of demarcation that, being both ‘decisive’ and
‘fragile’, in Balibar’s terms, is the key point for intervention in the ongoing, apparently overdetermined and inevitable processes of global turbocapitalism. I suggest that *Party Time*, *Far Away*, and *Fewer Emergencies* operate as ethical solicitations vis-à-vis spectators precisely by simultaneously highlighting and disturbing the superborder.

Balibar’s delineation of the dominant paradigm of space within globalization resonates strongly with Henri Lefebvre’s seminal interpretation of forms of space as material products constituted by the social actions enacted in them, rather than as mere containers for events. At any given point in history, Lefebvre points out, power produces a particular spatialization which it seeks to reproduce endlessly, which aims to be all-encompassing and which is based on the assertion of boundaries – three features, it will be noted, of the Balibarian bio-political division of humanity within global turbocapitalism. How, or more precisely, where can resistance take place under such conditions? For Lefebvre, resistance has to be spatial (cf. 258) – it is only by producing an alternative spatialization, a space of exteriority beyond the boundaries of the dominant, that the utopian potential can be generated to enable us “at least to imagine living against the grain” (Nield 59).

In this connection, crucially, the ‘theatre situation’, the “joint text” that emerges out of the interaction between “the behaviour onstage and in the auditorium” (Lehmann 17), is itself a socially or materially-produced space, with its own dominant (naturalistic) boundaries and rules of representation. *Party Time*, *Far Away*, and *Fewer Emergencies* thematize the superborder precisely through exploring alternative ways of representing the expansive yet profoundly divided space of globality on stage and, in the process, intervening in the ongoing debate about agency or the possibilities of resistance in relation to globalization. They do so not only by moving away from the naturalistic limits of representation of space but, crucially, by urging spectators to respond to ethical questions of proximity and distance. The three plays interpellate spectators as witnesses through producing an alternative space of exteriority within the theatre situation, thus foregrounding, albeit temporarily and symbolically, both the ethical dimension of globalization itself and the ethical function of theatre vis-
à-vis globalization. These are plays, in other words, that impel spectators to become witnesses to themselves (Felman and Laub 58) by reflecting on how “[their] privileges are located on the same map as [the] suffering [of others]” (Sontag 92; emphasis added) and ultimately becoming acutely self-aware as regards their ethical ‘responsibility’ (Lehmann 185) within a global, deeply divided turbocapitalist culture.

*Dissolving the Distantiation in Party Time*

*Party Time* opened at the Almeida on 6 November 1991, almost exactly two years after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Apart from a couple of passing references to the Wall itself (Hassell) and to the Gulf War (Billington 1991), reviewers approached the play within the then already rapidly dissolving framework of the sovereign nation-state, reading it as a depiction of a repressive regime in Britain, Africa, Latin America, Turkey – or all of these places at once, given the play’s unlocalized, metaphorical setting (see, for example, Gross, Lawson, Morley or Wardle). Terry Eagleton’s commentary on the play in the *Times Literary Supplement* opened by praising Pinter for being “a Foucauldian avant la lettre,” but went on to object, precisely, to its treatment of space. According to Eagleton, “what was always most disturbing about [Pinter’s] drama was the intersection of the two realms [...] of violence and exploitation on the one hand, everyday life on the other” (20); the problem in *Party Time* is that “the two worlds simply occupy different theatrical spaces” (20).

In the play, ‘everyday life’ is represented by the guests at Gavin’s party, who sit or stand about in a large room that takes up practically the totality of the stage while they discuss a new club to which most of them belong or are about to join – a club with “real class” (Pinter 427) that is inspired, as one of the guests puts it to general applause, “by a moral sense, a moral awareness, a set of moral values which is – I have to say – unshakeable, rigorous, fundamental, constant” (ibid. 454). The realm of violence and exploitation is represented by Jimmy, who appears in one of the two backstage doors at the end of the piece, the one that is never used by any of the other characters yet remains
“half open, in a dim light” (ibid. 427) from the start. Eagleton’s crucial point, as already noted, is that the two realms or spaces never interact in any meaningful way.

In what follows, the nation-state is left behind in order to read Party Time in the light of globalization and suggest an alternative approach to its treatment of space. To start with the question of witnessing, Party Time introduces an onstage witness, Dusty, Jimmy’s sister as well as Terry’s wife – Terry being the main champion of the club. From the moment she walks in to join the party, Dusty begins asking questions that disturb the superborder between the life-zone and the death-zone, the party and the extreme if unspecified violence going on beyond the half-open, dimly-lit door – the bio-political division of humanity that the rest of the guests, Terry above all, want to keep decisively in place. Dusty’s questions about her brother Jimmy are unsettling precisely because they highlight the fragility of the super-border, unnervingly reminding the other guests and spectators alike that the immoderate security and comfort of the life-zone they inhabit is structurally dependent on the extreme, obscene violence going on ‘elsewhere’, in the death-zone that Balibar refers to as a different ‘stage’ – in this case quite literally off-stage, beyond the half-open door.

Even if through most of Party Time the two spaces, the life-zone and the death-zone, do indeed remain physically separate, they are brought together in a number of discursive ways, particularly through the insistent questions of the onstage witness Dusty. Every time she threatens to disturb the superborder between the life-zone and the death-zone by asking about her brother Jimmy’s whereabouts, Terry responds by refusing to grant the death-zone any (discursive) existence at all and, in a telling parallelism, by simultaneously menacing Dusty in a crescendo of macho violence that culminates in the threat of physical annihilation. Thus, through the favourite Pinter focus on the sadistic brutality often underlying sexual and gender relations in the life-zone, the banality of extreme violence is foregrounded, the fact that, as Balibar argues, although it is normally physically displaced, it actually sustains “the everyday life” – a phrase used by both Eagleton and Balibar – of contemporary ‘advanced’, globalized socie-
ties. Crucially, Terry’s attempts to silence Dusty fail to stop her from constituting herself as a witness and beginning to exercise some kind of resistance in the face of the all-encompassing spatialized biopolitical division of humanity that is both produced by and underpins globalization. In this respect, Dusty becomes a nexus of audience interpellation, one of the means by which the play attempts to make spectators self-aware and responsive as regards their own ethical ‘re-

sponse-ability’ as inhabitants of the life-zone of globalization.

Ultimately, it is through theatrical means that the “cast iron peace” (Pinter 437) of globalization – its dependence, as Balibar notes (22), on a state of permanent violence – is forcefully brought home to the audience. Twice in the course of the play “[t]he lights in the room dim. The light beyond the open door gradually intensifies. It burns into the room. The door light fades down. The room lights come up.” (Pinter 442 and 452). Quite literally, that is, the death-zone threatens to ‘invade' the life-zone of the party, ‘burning into it’ as well as across the fourth wall into the auditorium. Thus, again, spectators are interpellated as ‘response-ible’ witnesses, the intense light seeking to mobilize their capacity to see the divisive spatialization of globality and the place they themselves occupy in it. At the end of the play, the room lights are dimmed one last time while the intensification of the light from the door is reinforced by Jimmy’s presence in the doorway and his voice as he delivers a hallucinatory testimonial speech that evokes the extreme violence he has experienced in the death-zone of globaliza-

Sometimes I hear things. Then it’s quiet.
I had a name. It was Jimmy. People called me Jimmy. That was my name.

[...]
Sometimes a door bangs, I hear voices, then it stops.
Everything stops. It all stops. It all closes. It closes down. It shuts. It all shuts.
It shuts down. It shuts. I see nothing at any time any more. I sit sucking the dark.
It’s what I have. The dark is in my mouth and I suck it. It’s the only thing I have. It’s mine. It’s my own. I suck it. (456)

Thus, finally, the play brings physically together on the same (theatri-
cal) stage the causes and effects of violence, which are normally kept apart on different ‘scenes’ or ‘stages’ (cf. Balibar 15) – precisely the
reason why the bringing together must be non-naturalistic. At this point, spectators are clearly cast as witnesses both by the burning light and by Jimmy’s speech. In these ways Bauman’s distantiation is dissolved, temporarily and symbolically, in the theatre situation. An alternative spatialization is produced wherein spectators are interpelated as double witnesses, both to Jimmy’s testimonial speech and to their own responsibilities vis-à-vis the violence of globalization. The play thus ends by turning the theatre situation itself into an alternative space that opens up possibilities for ethical self-awareness and, potentially, resistant agency.

Far Away: Staging the Resistance to Witnessing

Distantiation, the ethical indifference of the inhabitants of the life-zones towards human beings in the death-zones that underpins globalization, is arguably the main concern of Churchill’s Far Away. Part 1 of the play actually dramatizes the production of distantiation in a young girl, Joan, who is having trouble sleeping at her aunt’s home after she hears a noise outside, “a shriek [...] like a person screaming” (Churchill 6). Like Dusty in Party Time, Joan insists on asking her aunt Harper probing questions about the noise; she even goes out a window and down a tree in the middle of the night because, she says, “I wanted to see” (Churchill 7; emphasis added). She is, in other words, a would-be witness, repeatedly dissatisfied by Harper’s patent-ly false replies and bent on exposing the violence she has seen, performed by no other than her own uncle in his own backyard. Again, Joan’s questions work to remind spectators that such extreme violence is banal – it tends to be both physically and psychologically displaced, but it actually underpins the ‘normality’ of existence in the life-zones of globalization. The original production of the play at the Royal Court Upstairs foregrounded this by having “everybody talk[ing] quietly as if all [was] normal” (Bassett), as well as by making use of a curtain at the start and the end of the play on which was painted an idyllic rural scene featuring a cosy white cottage nestling in very English-looking rolling hills.
Significantly, the ultimately successful instillation of distanciation into Joan is celebrated by Harper in spatial terms:

> Of course. I'm not surprised you can't sleep, what an upsetting thing to see. But now you understand, it's not so bad. You're part of a big movement now to make things better. You can be proud of that. You can look at the stars and think here we are in our little bit of space, and I'm on the side of the people who are putting things right, and your soul will expand right into the sky. (14-15; emphases added)

The play thus suggests that ethical distanciation – the cancelling out from consciousness of both the bio-political division of humanity and the violence that sustains it – is the dark underbelly of globalization. It is what the inhabitants of the life-zones need to ‘learn’, as Joan does, in order to be able to experience and, indeed, enjoy the expansive perception of space that characterizes globalization. In other words, Part 1 of *Far Away* discursively brings together, through Joan’s insistent questions, both sides of the superborder, the life-zone and the death-zone, while Harper, equally insistently and ultimately successfully, strives to keep them decisively apart in Joan’s consciousness.²

In Part 2, an older Joan and her co-worker Todd are engaged in making hats for a competition. The hats become bigger, more and more brightly decorated, more and more extravagant, until the point is reached when the play stages “A procession of ragged, beaten, chained prisoners, each wearing a hat, on their way to execution” (24). When Joan casually points out that “It seems so sad to burn [the hats] with the bodies,” Todd counters, “No I think that’s the joy of it. The hats are ephemeral. It’s like a metaphor for something or other” (25). The younger Joan’s insistence on witnessing has obviously been completely erased; she has been tamed into productivity. Todd’s leftist, trade-unionist discourse is not only piecemeal and ineffectual, but it

² The fact that, contrary to the cross-age acting in, for example, Churchill’s *Top Girls* (1982) or *Fen* (1985), Young Joan was played by a young girl (Annabelle Seymour-Julen) in the original Royal Court production underlined the focus of Part 1 on the production of distanciation.
utterly fails to bear witness to the brutal reality of a world in which the preposterous hats are worn by manacled prisoners being marched to their deaths. The scene is of course also intensely self-reflexive – the hats, made solely to stand as metaphors “for something or other” (ibid.), problematize solipsistic artistic creation.

In short, while Part 1 focuses on the production of distantiation, Part 2 highlights the unrelenting resistance to witnessing and to ethical proximity on the part of the inhabitants of the life-zone – Joan and Todd. Through the surreal parade, the life-zone and the death-zone are brought physically together on stage, while simultaneously the utter incongruity of the juxtaposition highlights the fact that, in the real world, they are actually decisively kept apart by the superborder that sustains the bio-political division of humanity. At the same time, however, the incongruous theatrical juxtaposition powerfully interpelates spectators as ‘response-ible’ witnesses of Joan’s and Todd’s – and possibly their own – resistance to witnessing and to proximity. Significantly, this was underlined in the original Royal Court production of the play by a specific spatial treatment of the parade scene, the only scene that made use of the recesses of the playing space – the rear of the stage opened up to reveal line after line of chained prisoners, including children, shuffling forward towards execution and incongruously being displayed “as if on a catwalk in a beauty pageant” (Aston 119). In this way, an alternative spatialization was produced within the theatrical situation, whereby spectators were impelled to question the violent bio-political division of humanity that underpins globalization and their own position in relation to it.

In Part 3 of Far Away, located in Harper’s house several years later, the focus is on the consequences of the resistance to witnessing and proximity. A truly global, apocalyptic war of all against all is raging, in which all kinds of animals and humans, coffee, light, noise, the weather and more are all involved. Neither Harper, nor Todd nor Joan, who comes in at a later part of the scene, ragged and covered in the filth of war, occupy a privileged position within the life-zone any more – indeed, the superborder seems to have all but collapsed into a permanent, chaotic state of war. In this context, Joan’s final monologue both attests to her continuing ethical indifference to the suffer-
ing of others – the child under five she has killed, the girls whose 
mouths were bleeding, the piles of bodies by the side of the road (cf. 
Churchill 37) – yet also, crucially, asks the question on which the play 
ends: “But I didn’t know whose side the river was on” (38).

Joan’s question foregrounds the point the earlier proliferation of 
sides involved in this bizarre global war had started to make, namely, 
the utter absurdity of and the risks involved in the bio-political divi-
sion of the world into life-zones and death-zones when we all actually 
live in the same space, the same global ecosystem. Joan’s final tenta-
tive gesture of putting one foot in the river amounts to an attempt to 
cross borders, to actively opt for proximity rather than distantiation 
and, hence, to begin taking ethical responsibility for others and for 
globe itself. Together with the young Joan’s role as witness in Part 
1, the hat parade in Part 2 and the global war in Part 3, Joan’s gesture 
of stepping into the river powerfully interpellates spectators as ‘re-
response-ible’ witnesses, asking them to see that the death-zone is not 
truly far away, but actually, in its banality, sustains life in the life-
zone.

Fewer Emergencies: Imagining a Space of Exteriority

Crimp’s short piece Fewer Emergencies is the most experimental of the 
three plays being considered here. As is well known, it involves three 
nameless speakers, 1, 2 and 3, unmarked for gender and other personal 
characteristics and located in an unspecified setting, who narrate a 
series of events affecting the child of a well-to-do family, confusingly 
named Bobby and, on one occasion, Jimmy. Neither the three anony-
mous speakers or ‘text bearers’ (Barnett 18) nor the absent protago-
nists are traditional naturalistic ‘characters.’ But rather than enact a 
(postmodern) “constant resistance to meaning,” as has been suggested

3 Fewer Emergencies was jointly published with another short play, Face to 
the Wall, in 2002. In 2005, Crimp wrote Whole Blue Sky, and the three plays were 
published together and staged at the Royal Court Upstairs as a triptych, also enti-
tled Fewer Emergencies, with Whole Blue Sky as the first, Face to the Wall as the 
middle, and Fewer Emergencies as the last play.
(Ledger 131), the play’s lack of naturalistic specificity is itself one of the means by which spectators are prompted to “consider relationships between text and possible contexts” (Barnett 17). The play actually points to a very specific kind of context – the core conflict of global turbocapitalism, epitomized by the superborder between life-zones and death-zones – and interpellates spectators regarding the position they occupy in such a violently polarized world.

In Fewer Emergencies Crimp creates a highly satirical parable of the global ‘topography of cruelty’ through imagining Bobby’s house and neighbourhood as a paradigmatic life-zone, the space where the riches of the West are kept. The contents of Bobby’s room range from “a shelf full of oak trees, and another where pine forests border a mountain lake” to pornography (Crimp 45). He keeps “the island of Manhattan” in a secret drawer, “the city of Paris” and “a Japanese golf course” in another cupboard, a “wardrobe full of uranium and another full of cobalt [...] and a row of universities – good ones” on a little shelf (45). And the key, of course, “hanging from the shelf, like the Beethoven quartets and fertility clinics [...] the key to use in emergencies, the key to get out of the house,” where he is locked in “for his own protection” (45). As a rioting crowd threatens to bring down Bobby’s home, the life-zone (Bobby’s home and neighbourhood) and the death-zone (the deterritorialized, nomadic mob of immigrants, whose designated space within globalization lies beyond the superborder, always “under permanent threat of elimination [...] and perceived as a threat to ‘civilization’,” Balibar 26) begin to violently intersect in the speakers’ narrative. Thus the fragility of the superborder and the banality rather than exceptionality of the emergency recounted in the play are foregrounded. To put it differently, the distance between the causes and effects of violence, which do not normally occur on the same ‘scene’ or ‘stage’ (Balibar 15), becomes blurred in the speakers’ narrative, which thus resonates strongly at this point with both Balibar’s and Bauman’s view of the deeply divisive, ‘cruel’ nature of globalization. At the same time, however, the distance between causes and effects, and hence the superborder, remains firmly in place in terms of theatrical space, since neither the life-zone nor the death-zone is directly displayed on stage, much less shown sharing the same physical ‘scene’
or space. The very real bio-political division of humanity that underpins globalization is thus forcefully highlighted – this is the decisiveness of the superborder that Balibar speaks of.

At the end of the play, the key for use in emergencies becomes the main instrument for interpellating spectators as witnesses to themselves. After Bobby is caught in the hip by a gunshot, Speaker 2 exclaims he “wants to reach the key” and Speaker 1 adds he is going to use it in order to “open the door”; Speakers 2 and 3 concur he “must be / completely mad” (Crimp 47). As the speakers’ narrative imagines the possibility that Bobby might share his space – i.e. let the rioting crowd into the life-zone – their insistence that in the life-zone “[t]hings are definitely looking up [...] Brighter light – more frequent boating – more confident smile – fewer / emergencies” (48) is troubled both by their account of how a bleeding Bobby attempts to reach the key and, in performance, by the gradual darkening of the stage until a complete blackout is reached and all spectators can hear is

1: [...] He’s closer to the key. [...] see how / it swings.
2: See how the key swings.
3: That’s right, Bobby-boy. Watch the key. Watch the key swinging. (49)

On the one hand, by becoming invisible to Bobby, the speakers, and the audience alike, the key paradoxically trespasses the fourth wall, thus effecting a transformation of the theatre situation that conjures up an alternative spatialization. Simultaneously, the key is foregrounded in the speakers’ narrative in such a way that it becomes the locus for the ethical dilemma confronting the spectators as much as Bobby. Opening up the life-zone to others and refusing or failing to do so are two options that ‘swing’ over their heads, just as the key (invisibly) swings before their eyes. Earlier on the speakers have queried the very possibility of such an alternative spatialization and have concluded: “We don’t know – it’s as simple as that – we don’t know what’s past the / rim of the world” (44). Yet at the end of the piece, the theatrical situation places spectators on the edge of a space of exteriority from which a resistant kind of agency vis-à-vis the apparently inexorable character of globalization might be possible. It is this unknown, uncharted, exterior space of resistance beyond “the edge of
the world” (Crimp 43) that Fewer Emergencies asks spectators to begin to imagine.

Conclusions

Party Time, Far Away, and Fewer Emergencies are utopian plays because they show globalization as it is – based on division, distanciation, violence and ethical indifference. But they also suggest what could be – a global order sustained by ethical proximity and connectedness. In a recent interview, Pep Gatell, director of the Catalan physical theatre company La Fura dels Baus, has highlighted their aim to “disturb the spectators’ inner space by disturbing the physical space” (Roura 17) of the theatre situation. These are precisely the means whereby Party Time, Far Away, and Fewer Emergencies seek to produce spectators as double witnesses, both to the violently unethical reality of globalization and to their own ‘response-ability’ in relation to it. This is posited as the indispensable first step for the construction of a truly shared space among human beings, and seen not only as an ethical imperative, but as the pre-condition for global survival.
Works Cited

Primary Literature


Secondary Literature


CHRISTIANE SCHLOTE

A Different Theatre of War: Humanitarian Aid on British Stages

From Euripides’s tragedy Children of Heracles to more recent productions such as Eve Ensler’s Necessary Targets (1996/2001), Ariane Mnouchkine’s Le Dernier Caravansérail (2003), Timberlake Wertenbaker’s Credible Witness (2001) and Every Year, Every Day, I am Walking (2009) by Cape Town’s Magnet Theatre, the figure of the refugee and asylum seeker has been one of the most important protagonists of ancient and contemporary drama. Yet while these plays share an engagement with refugee and migrant discourses, especially in regard to refugees as objects of humanitarian intervention, the figure of the international aid worker remains underanalyzed. This is all the more surprising, given the numerous accounts by aid workers themselves (in the form of memoirs, blogs, eBooks, documentaries, etc.)¹ and the growing number of their (often problematic, partly bizarre) cultural representations: from Martin Campbell’s movie Beyond Borders (2002), Fernando Meirelles’s film adaptation of John le Carré’s novel The Constant Gardener (2005), and the short-lived ABC series Off the Map (2011) to Helen Fielding’s Cause Celeb (2002), a children’s book entitled The Adventure Diary of Hannah, the Humanitarian Aid Worker (2002) by Carole Marsh, a music video featuring the charity single

‘Pimp My Aid Worker’ by Zambian musicians, and even a reference to a “dressed-by-aid workers look” on the British fashion blog ‘What Katie Wore.’

In British drama Floss Weatherby, the British aid worker in David Edgar’s *The Prisoner’s Dilemma* (2002), has recently been joined by a host of new colleagues. In April 2009 London’s Tricycle Theatre hosted an Afghanistan festival, for which Nicholas Kent and his team also “commissioned 12 half-hour plays” (Billington 2009), entitled *The Great Game*, a term referring to the nineteenth century “Anglo-Russian maneuvers centered on Afghanistan,” which were “popularized by Rudyard Kipling” (Garthoff 977). The Tricycle’s theatrical marathon covers Afghan history from 1842 to the present and is divided into three parts: ‘Part One: Invasions and Independence, 1842-1930’, ‘Part Two: Communism, the Mujahideen and the Taliban, 1979-1996’ and ‘Part Three: Enduring Freedom, 1996-2010.’ As Kent explains, some of the playwrights “have chosen their own subjects, and some have been ‘coerced’ into periods of Afghan history about which they knew nothing” (*The Great Game* 8). Three of the thirteen plays (Richard Bean’s *On the Side of Angels*, Abi Morgan’s *The Night Is Darkest Before the Dawn* and Colin Tevan’s *The Lion of Kabul* – all 2009) are mainly devoted to issues concerning humanitarian aid. In May 2009, *The Remnants of Once Fine Girls*, a full-length play about aid workers by Stephen Todd, premiered at Aberystwyth Arts Centre.

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4 *Wood for the Fire* by the American playwright Lee Blessing was added for the American tour of *The Great Game* in 2010.

In September 2011, Stella Feehily’s play Bang Bang Bang, also addressing the work of NGOs and human rights organizations, opened at the Octagon Theatre in Bolton before touring.6

But why the increasing (dramatic) interest in the figure of the humanitarian aid worker? In view of the “phenomenal growth of the development NGO sector in recent years” (Velloso de Santisteban 200) and its ubiquitous media presence, enhanced by celebrity activists, have playwrights simply picked up a hot topic? Do they share the hope that “addressing human rights” ensures theatre’s “social relevance” (Rae 1)? Or can theatre as “a social art form” indeed, raise “the ethical stakes […] in a way that is not quite possible anywhere else” by inserting “its ethical questions into the lives of its spectators in a situation in which those spectators are unusually conscious of their own status as spectators, and thus as people who may exercise ethical judgement” (Ridout 13-15)?7 Proceeding from these notions, this article takes a comparative look at the dramatization of humanitarian aid, its actors and its politics and ethics in the aforementioned plays.8

Most critics agree that there are two dominant responses to global poverty: humanitarianism and development. Whereas humanitarian aid should address “immediate and extreme situations of need, such as famine” (Hutchings, Global Ethics 83), development aid “is intended to address ongoing, systemic poverty” (ibid.). Humanitarian intervention, on the other hand, has been defined as “an act of intervention in the internal affairs of another country” in order to end “the

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7 In his “Afterword” to The Prisoner’s Dilemma Edgar already pointed out that in “practice richly dramatic, the theory of peacemaking too is dominated by the language of play-making. Academics, diplomats, soldiers and politicians use sophisticated roleplay models to prepare for actual negotiations as well as to explore contemporary, historical and invented conflicts” (135-136).

8 I would very much like to thank Stella Feehily for providing me with the playscript of Bang Bang Bang (which has now been published) and Stephen Todd for kindly sending me the playscript of The Remnants of Once Fine Girls (unpublished).
physical suffering caused by the disintegration or the gross misuse of the authority of the state” (Parekh 55). All of these policies have been highly criticized. Jan Nederveen Pieterse has called humanitarian intervention “a deeply ideological notion” (71), Bhikhu Parekh has emphasized its “limited value” (68), and, as a consequence of the “failure of aid,” Alex de Waal has called for the need for “a democratization of the aid encounter” (de Waal 623-624).

According to Kimberly Hutchings, in most ethical traditions charity is seen as a virtue, and humanitarian aid is considered a “species of charity” (*Global Ethics* 85). Yet, ethics differ “over whether charity is a requirement or a work of ‘supererogation’ (morally commendable but not obligatory)” (ibid.). Another ethical issue concerns less the goals of these policies, but how they are being implemented. As such aid should be less seen as a gift by rich states but as an “instrument of state foreign policy [to] cement mutually advantageous relations between […] state elites” (ibid. 96-97). As an alternative to paternalistic and top-down approaches, there has been an increased use of NGOs in the “delivery of aid” and in this scenario aid workers are seen as essential in building “ethical and dialogical” relations between themselves and local people (cf. ibid. 97-98). The “problem of environmental sustainability” (ibid. 104) complicates matters further, since, as Hutchings drawing on Tim Hayward shows, “if all countries developed to the extent of the richest nations, ‘four planet earths’ would be required to provide the necessary ecological space” (qtd. ibid. 103).

Inevitably, humanitarian aid workers are entangled in these numerous ethical debates and in “recent years, the ‘humanitarian’ has become news and aid workers have become personalities” (Beristain 81). This is also mirrored in their personal accounts9 which, as Stella Feehily explains, triggered her own interest in the subject:

9 In May 2011 ITV 1 broadcast a documentary, *The Life and Loss of Karen Woo*, about the British doctor Karen Woo, who was brutally killed with nine other members of a medical team in Afghanistan in August 2010. The film also uses footage from her own documentary which she was making at the time. Another informative example is the blog, ‘A Road to the Horizon’, by the Flemish aid worker Peter Casier see <http://www.theroadtothehorizon.org/>.
Life on the edge provides a rich seam for the dramatist. [...] I found some personal blogs on the internet about working hard/playing hard in a third world country. Crazy stuff like wearing a burka all day and then getting hammered in a Kabul nightclub. [...] Go to Google and type in 'humanitarian worker' and you'll find articles that include kidnapping, injury, robbery, rape, shooting, murder. The threat to safety and security faced daily is very real. Of course you want to make a difference but you don't do this job for the recognition and you definitely don't do it for the money. It's serious stuff. (Octagon Theatre Programme)

Despite shifting critical notions from the belief in the “continuing vitality of theatre as a form of cultural intervention” to strong doubts in any human agency and the “postmodern critique of the humanist subject” (Colleran/Spencer 2), The Observer’s critic Kate Kellaway observed that not “only have 9/11, the Iraq war and the Bush administration energised playwrights, the acoustic has never been so good. People want from political theatre a clarity they are not getting from politicians.” This much sought-after clarity is, of course, as elusive in its theatrical representation as it is in public political discourses. Nonetheless, on the whole, critics have reviewed the plays included in The Great Game as “instructing delightfully” (Billingston) and “a crash course in history” (Coveney). According to a British Council press release, The Great Game was, in fact, shown at the UK’s Ministry of Defense as well as at the Pentagon (“Pentagon to View the Great Game Trilogy. A Day-Long Marathon of Plays on Afghanistan”). This problematic perception of the plays as ‘history lessons’ obscures their generic ambiguity, not least since, as Niloufer Harben has shown, “while other plays make no pretence to be more than a simulation of reality, the history play tacitly claims to be engaging with reality, for its effect is often based on the audience’s belief that it is dealing with

10 In a surprisingly frank, albeit worrying statement, the “UK’s top military commander General Sir David Richards” explains: “I can tell you that the Ministry of Defence as a whole, and certainly the armed forces desperately want to understand the country well, and this series of plays – if I had seen it before I had deployed [to Afghanistan] myself in 2005 for the first time – would have made me a much better Commander of the ISAF Forces” (“Pentagon to View the Great Game Trilogy. A Day-Long Marathon of Plays on Afghanistan”).
a past actuality” (18). It remains to be seen whether by foregrounding the ambiguous role of aid workers and the realisation that humanitarian aid can not only “contradict democracy” but “become an instrument of war or genocide” (de Waal 628-629), the plays discussed here can disrupt audience’s expectations.

In Abi Morgan’s *The Night Is Darkest Before the Dawn*, Huma, an Afghan teacher and one of the very rare representations of local aid workers, travels with Alex, an American charity worker, outside of Kandahar to see relatives. In order to reopen a school for girls and to receive the charity’s funding, she needs six more girls in addition to the nine she already has. Thus, she tries to convince her brother-in-law, an opium dealer, that education is better for his daughter and her niece than picking poppies in a field.

The verbal duel-format between locals and aid workers is also employed in *The Lion of Kabul*, where Colin Teevan addresses Taliban fundamentalism by staging an argument between the Pakistani UN aid worker Rabia and a Taliban leader. Rabia questions him about two of her local assistants who have gone missing. Teevan’s reference to Marjan, a real lion who has become an Afghan “symbol of survival” (“Lion of Kabul Roars his Last”), and his setting, the Kabul zoo, provide important clues as to the workers’ whereabouts. When the murderers of the two assistants are found, the Taliban ask Rabia to decide whether they should die in the same way her assistants have died. Here, Rabia is put in a position similar to that of Floss Weatherby in *The Prisoner’s Dilemma* (2002), who must decide whether her co-worker James or a 10-year-old boy should be killed. When Floss delays the impossible choice only briefly, both (James and the boy) are killed (“Nikolai: You see. You may save one. But you refuse. If you will choose one, one will be now alive. But you cannot choose.” Edgar, *The Prisoner’s Dilemma* 95). Likewise, Rabia refuses to “be party to this” (168) and leaves (“Rabia: I shall go then. They are awaiting my report in Geneva.” 168), whereupon the two prisoners are killed.

Richard Bean’s *On the Side of the Angels* provides a wry portrayal of British aid workers working for ‘Direct Action World Poverty.’

Jackie: [...] What’s the name for that kind of scarf?
Graham: It’s a keffiyeh. It was useful in Somalia. It’s iconic, isn’t it, of er … something.
Jackie: Where did you get that one?
Graham: Top Shop. (223)

The play is framed by scenes in their head office in Croydon, while in the two scenes inbetween the aid workers are shown trying to negotiate a land deal without losing their integrity. Bean’s trademark provocative stance aside, he clearly thematizes the danger of NGOs becoming implicated in upholding dictatorial regimes.

In Stephen Todd’s *The Remnants of Once Fine Girls*, Sarah, a midwife who has been working in Darfur\(^\text{11}\) for Médecins Sans Frontières, returns to London because her twin sister Hannah has been murdered and leaves behind her young daughter Amy. As in *The Prisoner’s Dilemma*, *The Lion of Kabul* and *On the Side of the Angels* the figure of the aid worker (Sarah) has to confront an ethical choice. In her case, Sarah has to decide whether to continue to take care of the orphaned children in Sudan or whether to take over the role of surrogate mother for Amy. Ethically, the latter option is further complicated by Sarah and Hannah being twin sisters. The ambiguity inherent in both choices is also supported by the theme of memory (significantly, Hannah is murdered in a Jewish cemetery), which pervades the play as a whole and is, likewise, marked by its ambiguous nature as a complex construction.

Stella Feehily’s *Bang Bang Bang* also foregrounds the experiences of its female heroine, the Irish Human Rights researcher Sadhbh, who has built a career on collecting evidence from traumatised women and children in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and those of her immediate circle: her colleague, the rookie aid worker Mathilde, Ronan, a cynical Irish Foreign correspondent, Vin, an ambitious young photographer, and her London-based boyfriend Stephen. In usual Out

\(^\text{11}\) See also *In Darfur*, a play by the American playwright and journalist Winter Miller, which traces the lives of an aid worker, a journalist and a Darfuri woman at a Darfuri camp (http://winterniller.com/darfur.html). Incidentally, in 2007 the Tricycle Theatre already “commissioned six dramatists […] to come up with ten minute plays” (Kent 8) in response to the Darfur crisis.
of Joint-manner, *Bang Bang Bang*, which Feehily calls ‘verbiction’ (“a conflation of verbatim theatre and fiction”; Nelson), is also based on interviews with aid workers, journalists, etc. In fact, Edgar sees *The Great Game* as “part of a theatrical sea change,” marking a return from fact-based British drama to faction and fiction (“In the Line of Fire: Theatre and Afghanistan”).

Thematically, all five plays focus on the Western aid worker, and on the experiences of women aid workers, in particular. According to Feehily, “the whole industry, and it is an industry, is buoyed by the benevolent spirit of women. The majority of humanitarian workers in most organisations are female. I wanted to write a leading female character” (Octagon Theatre Programme). All five plays open with a scene which shows their female protagonists in action in (partly extremely) tense situations. The disorientation of the (women) aid workers in countries such as the Congo or Afghanistan is often portrayed through their inability to understand the local language(s) and decode local culture. While in the opening scene of *The Night Is Darkest Before the Dawn* the aid workers learn how to drink tea in Afghanistan, the essential lessons (such as the ongoing opium poppy industry) follow quickly afterwards and are barely comprehensible for the aid workers: “Alex: [...] What ... am I doing here? Really I should have ... Gone to Mali ... built toilets for elementary in Zambia [...] we offer them free education and they just laugh at us” (203). Feehily employs a particular gripping prologue to set the scene: “In a melodramatic, cliffhanger opening, two white women [Sadhbh and Mathilde] are held at gunpoint by a black man in combat clothes who shouts at them ‘Déshabillez-vous!’” (Brennan).

Yet, as Michael Billington states in his review of *Bang Bang Bang*, “private problems win out over political enlightenment,” and this focus on the private and professional lives of aid workers marks all plays discussed here. Rabia is accused of being a “Muslim woman who has gone wrong” (Teevan 161) and forced to address her religious and gender identity. Huma’s brother-in-law makes her responsible for his brother’s death who, instead of Huma, taught a class of Afghan girls. Jackie continually feels pressured to justify her pragmatic approach: “Graham, I think you have mistaken my pragmatism for some kind of
moral vacuum. Before I leave my apartment to come to work, I put my values in the fridge so to speak. I have not gone native. I am not Kurtz.” (Bean 229). Sarah has to grapple with her complex sibling relations and Sadhbh has to decide whether to continue with her fieldwork or join Stephen who has been offered “a six-month contract in Beijing” (Bang Bang Bang 69).

Just as some of the plays shift between locations (mainly between London and war zones such as Afghanistan, the Congo and Darfur), there is also a constant shift between the public and the private conflicts of the aid workers (Stephen: “For once – think like a human being not like a humanitarian.” Bang Bang Bang 16). The geographical shift is mainly marked by the playwrights’ use of code-switching between English, French and various native languages, often untranslated and, again, reminiscent of Edgar’s untranslated passages in the fictional Kavkhaz and Drozhdani languages in The Prisoner’s Dilemma. The untranslated passages, in particular, do not only signify the character’s feeling of being out of place, but also contribute to bringing home this experience to the audience.

On the one hand, these glimpses behind the mediatized images of aid workers allow the playwrights to explore the aid workers’ often ambivalent motivations for becoming an aid worker: “Mathilde: “I only want to do work I’m passionate about.” (Bang Bang Bang 20); “Ronan: So what are you, Mathilde? […] Mercenary? Missionary? Misfit?” (Bang Bang Bang 56).

Notwithstanding the acknowledgment of their overall commitment and integrity, Bean and Feehily, in particular, problematize this particular career goal in regard to some of their characters. As one journalist, whom Feehily interviewed, put it: “Kabul is the new adventure playground. It’s full of Sloaney girls and ineffectual, floppy-haired young men” (Nelson). On the other hand, and almost inevitably, it is thus the aid workers’ perspective of global war zones that is being

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12 Recent studies have shown an enormous interest among young people to join NGOs, but, at the same time, those interested in gaining experience as an aid worker also expect their engagement to further their actual career in a different field (Nowotny 12).
staged, leading critics like Billington to remark that _Bang Bang Bang_ “tells us more about Sadhbh’s conscience than it does about Congolese reality,” which Feehily, in fact, satirizes in the play herself:

Ronan: [...] There are so many NGOs they’re trippin’ over one another and they’ll tell you the best place to get a steak [...] but they haven’t a fucking clue about the disaster that’s happening in North Kivu (_Bang Bang Bang_ 54).

While, on this level, the plays do, in fact, counter expectations in regard to political theatre by refusing to provide the clarity audiences may seek, what can be seen as problematic is the transformation of, as Brennan put it, “the Congolese as background types: ‘war lord’, Mother, Child Soldier.” Just as Kent did not manage to find an Afghan playwright (“Initially I did a trawl for writers [...] from the sub-continent, but apart from Siba Shakib [who contributed ‘specially commissioned monologues’ to be performed ‘between the plays in Parts 1 & 2 of the Trilogy’] I met with little success.” 8), the absence of well-rounded non-Western characters is clearly noticeable and partly troubling in all plays. In this respect, we may even ask whether the gradual shift from a focus on refugee figures to the character of the aid worker may be read as indicative of a return to First World and middle-class concerns and a desire for the ‘humanitarian hero’ (Hutchings, “Gendered humanitarianism: Reconsidering the ethics of war” 38). What the playwrights’ portrayal of aid workers does illustrate is what Doreen Massey has called “the power geometry of time-space compression” (149) in regard to global movements:

Different social groups have distinct relationships to [...] differentiated mobility: some people are more in charge of it than others; some initiate flows and movement, others don’t; some are more on the receiving-end of it than others; some are effectively imprisoned by it. (ibid.)

This difference between “the jet setters, the ones [...] controlling the news, organizing the investments” (including “a fair number of western academics and journalists” on its “more prosaic fringes” ibid.) and refugees or labour migrants leads directly to what Ingrid Palmari has termed “the myth of the transparent intellectual” which, despite acknowledging one’s own subjectivity, continues to set up a researcher or a “non-refugee, Western aid worker as free from cultural constraints” (37). Both, Massey’s power geometry and Palmari’s demand
for “locating ourselves within the process of knowledge production” (37), find expression in the plays, whether in regard to the aid workers’ privileged position (thus Ronan advices Vin: “Man, your best bet is to bed one of the aid workers. [...] They’ve got security, the houses, the cars and the contacts. [...] If I were you I would go back to the nice girl from Médecins sans Frontières and ask to see her stamp collection. They’re not called ‘Nurses Without Knickers’ for nothing,” *Bang Bang Bang* 52) or concerning the imposition of Western values (“Jackie: Graham! Listen! You know perfectly well that there’s no such thing as right and wrong in our business, there’s only culture. It’s not our job to impose our values.” Bean 229).

All five plays further include scenes which go beyond the slice-of-humanitarian-aid-worker-life format towards a more self-reflective stance and discussion of the thorny issues at hand. Thus, while Bean only briefly alludes to the power of public photography and the phenomenon of compassion fatigue (“Jackie: [...] I know that if you can show a photo of a young Afghan girl on her first day of school looking ‘happily bewildered’ / “Jonathan: – I might be able to maintain funding at something like 2006 levels” 220), Feehily takes up the controversial issues of “the pornography of the ‘direct’ representation of misery” (Allan Sekula qtd. in Linfield 40) and “development pornography,” defined as a “charity vision of the Third World,” which supposedly reinforces harmful stereotypes of Third World countries as hopeless (Smith/Donnelly 132), in more detail by employing a photographer figure. On the one hand, Vin functions as the male mirror figure of Mathilde’s enthusiastic yet naïve and immature newcomer (they also become lovers). On the other hand, and in regard to his professional persona, he may also be read as embodying Feehily’s critique of his (as represented in the play) voyeuristic medium. He only appears for the first time in Act Two and is portrayed as ignorant, annoyingly ambitious and irresponsible throughout the play. When Sadhíbh catches Vin taking a photo of one of the traumatized children, she shouts at him: “What the fuck are you doing? [...] You are not allowed to photograph or talk to the children. [...] The last time they had something pointed at them it was a gun. They’re traumatised” (*Bang Bang Bang* 79-80).
On a thematic level, this passage may not only be read as a critique of photography but as a wider critique of the methods and impact of humanitarian aid. In her research on theatre and war in Northern Uganda, Laura Edmondson has also shown how “practitioners of new wars openly perform their acts of violence” (454) and how they force “others to witness the atrocities carried out on neighbors and loved ones” (ibid.), which, in turn, leads to witnesses relating “their testimony to the international observers […] who repackage this testimony for the global stage in the format of human rights reports, world news, and international aid policy” (455), thus providing a “crucial context for the ways in which terror-warfare is scripted and performed” (ibid.).

On a formal level, a straightforward reading of Sadbhbh’s reproach is even more problematic. As Susie Linfield has shown in regard to documentary photography (for example James Nachtwey’s and Sebastião Salgado’s work), terms such as ‘development pornography’ can also be rather misleading and used to “silence free discussion” (Linfield 42), particularly since, as Linfield asks, is “there an unproblematic way to show the degradation of a person? Is there an untroubling way to portray the death of a nation?” (45). Dramatically, in most of the plays discussed, instead of a direct representation of violence, playwrights have resorted to having characters narrate their experience of violence or have it happen offstage. By the same token, in regard to the representation of local war lords, for example, the audience is often put in a most uncomfortable position of understanding towards the perpetrators, emphasizing the disturbing ambiguity of a character’s and a spectator’s attraction and repulsion.

Somewhat condescendingly, critics have observed the overall linear structure of The Great Game. While Feehily and Todd do employ structural devices such as flashback, it is, indeed, surprising that the absurdity of what critics have called a “First World ‘post-sales service,’” where states first sell arms and then offer “bandages and tents” (Velloso de Santisteban 205), is hardly reflected formally. Even Bean’s

13 In her interviews researchers told Feehily of their fear “in re-traumatising people” (Nelson 2011).

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satirical treatment of humanitarian aid ends on a most sober note, when we find out that two of the aid workers have been killed in Herat. The plays discussed here neither engage with sites such as refugee camps and war zones as sites of everyday social and public performances, nor do they address the ultimate issue, that “poverty cannot be eradicated within the current system” (ibid. 207) and the sober knowledge that there “is no such thing as painless social change,” but first and foremost the need for a fundamental change of lifestyle in the First World (ibid.).

Yet, as James Thompson, proceeding from his applied theatre work in global war zones, poignantly asks: “Complete narratives are nurtured and provide comfort in war, and whatever my theoretical unease with these, am I right to engage in a theatrical process that fosters further disintegration?” (155). In a similar vein, Edmondson explains that in Ugandan theatre, in “place of the ‘epistemic murk’ of terror warfare, the linear sequence of serenity, suffering and terror […] and restoration is laboriously sustained despite the chaos” (452). Thus just as NGOs must be wary of being co-opted by a system that needs them “just as a pressure cooker needs a valve” (Velloso de Santisteban 208), humanitarian aid plays may benefit from applied theatre discourses on the ethics of storytelling.
Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature


Battle Zones of the Conscience:
Queer Theatre and the Rhetoric of Blame

In his 1994 study on the use of drama in contemporary gay culture, theatre scholar and gay rights activist Ian Lucas expounds his view on the pivotal role that drama should play in the AIDS crisis:

If AIDS is, as we’ve been told, and we continue to see, one of the biggest challenges the modern world has had to face in the twentieth century, then it is only right that theatre, and the arts in general, should reflect, debate, dramatize, attempt to make sense of, these developments and concerns. Theatre, the most public of the arts, the art form which most encourages participation, debate, involvement, a sense of communal presence, is the most obvious – and most useful – art form to tackle such a major issue. (64)

However, Lucas goes on to say that there is hardly any AIDS drama that meets these standards, the work of some fringe theatre groups and theatre-in-education companies excepted. Although he acknowledges the prolific output of AIDS plays, he criticizes British mainstream theatre for “heterosexualizing” the context, for simply importing commercially successful American plays, or for ignoring AIDS altogether (64). Clearly, Lucas feels that theatre has a moral duty not only to represent the AIDS crisis, but also to represent it in a manner which encourages involvement and debate.

With his moral demands on AIDS drama, Lucas shows himself an exponent of the “ethical turn” of the 1990s. And perhaps a moral approach is indeed the most fitting for drama representing a disease which itself has been framed in a moral discourse, almost from the moment of its first diagnosis. In this essay, I will follow in Lucas’ footsteps and again explore the ethics of AIDS drama. However, whereas, in keeping with the proponents of ethical criticism, most studies of
AIDS drama tend to focus on representation of the (gay) AIDS patient as the “other,” I intend to zoom in on AIDS drama specifically written for a gay audience; drama which, in other words, does not aim at an audience of not directly involved bystanders, but at the “risk group” which was (and is) most commonly associated with the disease, arguing that, however much this drama attempts to resist the discourse that frames AIDS in terms of blame and guilt, it finds itself unable to escape the moral framework imposed on AIDS by a none too gay-friendly environment.

The negative moral framework in which AIDS was cast is most prominent in the way in which the media reported on the disease. The tabloid press, both in Britain and the US, represented AIDS in a manner which typically sensationalized the disease and framed it in terms of “guilt” and “blame.” Illustrative of the typical tabloid reporting on AIDS is the following actual headline from the *Mail on Sunday*:

**BRITAIN THREATENED BY GAY VIRUS PLAGUE.**
20,000 are infected … and it’s getting worse. (qtd. in Clews)

The suggestion made in this headline, and there are more examples like it, is that Britain is under threat from a disastrous epidemic, which is caused by gays. In other words, “they” (i.e. gays) have brought a plague to “our” country, which poses a serious threat to all ordinary, innocent citizens. That these headlines did indeed cause panic, or at least serious worry, is borne out by the testimony of a volunteer worker at the Terrence Higgins Trust – the first British AIDS organisation, named after one of the first people in the UK to die of AIDS – who says that, before the mainstream press had got hold of the story of the “gay plague,” the telephone lines at the Trust’s office had been fairly quiet. Once the AIDS-scare stories were being published, the lines were often jammed, “not because of any increased concern about people with AIDS but because of the hysteria generated by the Press” (Clews).

Other newspapers brought news on the disease in similar terms, paradoxically labelling AIDS as an exclusively gay, but dangerously infectious disease. This led to a kind of reporting which, in the words of one of Britain’s leading AIDS activists at the time, “is indicative of the values and priorities of an international information industry that
continues to oscillate daily between meretricious gloating over the fate of those deemed responsible for their own misfortune, and the supposed ‘threat’ of a ‘real’ epidemic” (Watney, “Spectacle” 72). Moreover, this kind of reporting was not limited to the British tabloid press, or Britain, only. Quality newspapers, both in Britain and the United States, though in less venomous tones, also attributed blame for AIDS to the gay community (Watney, Policing 2, 44; Gross 99).

The combination of representing AIDS as a major health threat to the population at large and, whether intentionally or not, identifying homosexuals as the ones responsible for it, made sure that in the public’s eye AIDS was framed in terms of guilt and innocence rather than in terms of sickness and health, resulting not only in health concerns, as demonstrated by the jamming of the Terrence Higgins Trust’s phone lines, but also in a widespread, openly expressed hatred of homosexuals. As an interviewee in a study of gay life in Britain in the 1980s says, “the gloves were off” (qtd. in Jivani 188). And in the United States, “[o]nce the public became aware that AIDS could be transmitted through the blood supply, fear, panic, and a pent-up hatred for homosexuals was unleashed in a sudden and virulent storm of media coverage” (Andriote 65).

Three elements that are most striking in the discourse surrounding AIDS are that it is framed in moral terms of “blame” and “guilt,” that it appeals to emotions of fear, hatred, and disgust, and that its major focus is not on the disease itself but on those held responsible for spreading it. The connecting link between the three, as moral philosophers have pointed out, is the role that emotions play in our moral judgments. In her major study on the nature of emotions, Martha Nussbaum argues that “emotions are forms of evaluative judgment that ascribe to certain things and persons outside a person’s own control great importance to the person’s own flourishing” (Upheavals 22). However, AIDS discourse goes beyond the expression of fear of a new, mysterious disease. It also displays a coping mechanism which seeks a culpable party for this health threat. As philosopher Theo van Willigenburg remarks, “where there are victims, there needs to be a perpetrator: an addressee for our bewilderment and anger” (119, my translation). Of course, once a “guilty” party has been identified, fear of the
disease is automatically reduced: the threat of something beyond our control has now become a threat for which blame can be attributed. That it was gay men who were labelled as the exclusive source of contagion should come as no surprise. Not only were the first diagnoses of AIDS made among gay men, – which prompted scientists to name this disease GRID: gay related immune deficiency; a name which inextricably linked the disease with homosexuality – homosexuality itself has often been associated with illness and contagion. The first cases of AIDS occurred only a relatively short time after homosexuality had been struck off the list of psychiatric disorders. And the persistent popular myth that homosexuals “recruit” innocent victims is just another version of this discourse of contamination.

A central factor in AIDS discourse is the emotion of disgust, an emotion which is closely related to the fear of contagion (van Willigenburg 127; Nussbaum, Hiding 74). Homosexual acts in particular have invoked this feeling of disgust and this fear of contagion. Nussbaum interprets this phenomenon as a displacement of unease about our own bodies:

"[T]he discomfort people feel about their smelly, decaying, and all-too-mortal bodies has ubiquitously and monotonously been projected outward onto groups who can serve as, so to speak, the surrogate dirt of a community, enabling the dominant group to feel clean and heavenly. For many people in America, gay men provoke such disgust-projections, particularly in (straight) men. (Disgust 7)"

A scene in what is probably the widest known AIDS drama, Jonathan Demme’s Philadelphia (1993), perfectly illustrates the mechanisms of disgust. When (straight) lawyer Joe Bennett, a role played by Denzel Washington, exclaims that “these people make me sick,” he simultaneously voices his disgust at homosexuality and his fear of being contaminated with AIDS. Remarkably, he makes this comment near the end of the film, when he has been in close contact with the gay AIDS patient (an Oscar-winning role by Tom Hanks) for quite some time, and should have learned enough to know better. In other words, "moral judgments and reproaches appear to be able to go hand in hand with emotions which cause irrationality and lead to exclusion [...]" (van Willigenburg 129, my translation).
It is the irrationality of the emotions connected with AIDS that is their main problem. As van Willigenburg says, disgust is “an emotion which appears to be highly immune to rational correction” (128, my translation). If disgust and its companion fear of contagion cannot be overcome through rational instruction, such as government health campaigns and sex education classes, other means, which speak directly to the emotions, are needed. For Martha Nussbaum, works of literature can play a role of utmost importance here, because “[e]motions are not just likely responses to the content of many literary works; they are built into their very structure [...]” (*Justice* 53). And although Nussbaum considers the novel the primary means for moral reflection and instruction (*Justice* 6), a similar case can, of course, be made for drama as well.

Most AIDS drama, especially from the early years of the epidemic, addresses the emotions of the audience in two different ways: it sets out to evoke compassion with the AIDS-patient, and simultaneously encourages a mainstream audience to overcome their disgust at homosexuality. Two examples, one from the Hollywood blockbuster *Philadelphia* and one from a play aimed at a much smaller audience, Gay Sweatshop’s *Compromised Immunity* (1986), will illustrate this. Both dramas have similar protagonists: a gay AIDS patient, and a straight carer—in *Philadelphia* they are the unlawfully dismissed attorney Andrew Beckett and his lawyer Joe Bennett; in *Compromised Immunity* they are AIDS-patient Gerry and his male nurse Peter. Both dramas aim to evoke compassion with the AIDS-patient by portraying his plight: Andrew has lost his job because he has AIDS, and Peter has become an isolated figure since his family and friends turned their backs on him. Especially *Philadelphia* contains a number of heart-rending scenes which do not fail to move the audience to tears. The second element that they have in common is the heterosexual character who functions as a lead-in to gay culture. This character is just as ignorant about homosexuality and AIDS as the general public, and together with the audience he will receive a lesson in AIDS education from the AIDS-patient. In *Compromised Immunity* nurse Peter spouts all common prejudices about AIDS—when he is told by his superior that he is to take care of the first AIDS-patient on the ward he auto-
matically concludes that this man must be homosexual, and boasts “I read the papers, yes. I know all about AIDS” (Kirby 53) – until Gerry forcefully confronts him with the fact that his so-called knowledge of AIDS consists of nothing more than prejudice. Both Philadelphia and Compromised Immunity follow the straight characters on their educational journey, which leads them from abhorrence and prejudice to compassion.

A striking characteristic of AIDS drama is that, like the media rhetoric which it sets out to counter, its main focus is not on the disease itself, but on homosexuality. Both Philadelphia’s Joe Bennett and Compromised Immunity’s Peter are gradually introduced to gay culture – which in Philadelphia culminates in Joe’s (and his wife’s) attending their first gay costumed ball, and which in Compromised Immunity sees Peter making his first visit to a gay disco. Inevitably, because of its intention to educate a mainstream audience by means of the straight characters in the play, AIDS drama like Philadelphia and Compromised Immunity cannot escape portraying the gay AIDS-patient as the pitiful “other,” who does not deserve our irrational fear and disgust, but who needs our compassion. It is the straight character who becomes this kind of play’s moral yardstick and its “real” protagonist. This phenomenon has led Sarah Schulman to criticize Philadelphia for gross misrepresentation. She considers the film “an example of heterosexual conceit and disregard for truth” (49). Depicting the gay lawyer as lost and helpless until he is rescued by a heterosexual and homophobic lawyer, in her view, does too much honour to the straight community, which for many years stood idly by while the AIDS crisis raged, and denies the role of the gay community, which had offered a network of support since the outbreak of the epidemic. It is this distorted perspective that Ian Lucas refers to in his criticism of AIDS drama which “heterosexualizes” the issue.

Leaving Schulman’s criticism aside, what can be concluded at this point is that AIDS drama aimed at a mainstream audience evokes compassion and furthers education on homosexuality and AIDS through inviting the audience to become emotionally involved with a gay character. However, the moral demands made on AIDS drama which is not aimed at a mainstream audience must be different. Alt-
hough such drama could not possibly avoid engaging with the moral discourse surrounding AIDS, one would, for instance, not expect a play aimed at a predominantly gay audience to include scenes that intend to help the audience overcome their disgust at homosexuality.

In order to explore this issue further, I will focus on the work by playwright John Roman Baker, who in 1989 founded his own theatre company, which went by the name of “AIDS Positive Underground Theatre.” Originally based in Brighton, the driving forces behind the company – playwright John Roman Baker and producer Rod Evan – moved to Amsterdam in 1997. This move also influenced the general themes of their plays. Whereas the Brighton plays focus explicitly on AIDS, the Amsterdam plays focus on male prostitution, the position of gays in Eastern Europe, and the rise of the extreme right. Though the company kept its original name, it mostly used the acronym in their press releases and other publications. APU presented its last play, *Touched*, in Amsterdam in 2008.

APU’s manifesto, published on the company’s website, is a clear indication that their work is informed by an ethics and politics which is entirely different from that of the humanistic, compassion-invoking mainstream drama discussed so far. Entitled “To Have a Homosexual Conscience,” this manifesto sets out a philosophy which is as critical of the gay community as it is of mainstream society:

> We as homosexuals can spend money and assimilate into society, receiving capitalist respect, or retreat as old Gay Liberationists into our defeated ivory towers. Gay politics is dead or dying, and the possibilities of gay consumption endless. The third way is to see this division as a battle zone of the conscience, where the homosexual who can accept neither proposition tries to work out new methods of confronting society. Theatre is one of those methods with presentations of the extreme, the marginal and the queer. (Baker, “Manifesto”)

In his outline of what might be interpreted as a “gay ethics,” Baker assigns an important role to the theatre. However, instead of envisioning a theatre that wishes to evoke compassion for the victims of AIDS, Baker sees the theatre as a place where an appeal to the conscience of homosexuals themselves should be made. His manifesto states, “[a]t this moment in homosexual history we have the opportunity to ask valid questions of how we want to be perceived and how we perceive ourselves. Again, theatre and film are the ideal media for
this questioning." Clearly, Baker considers the era of AIDS a time when the gay community is at a crossroads where it has to decide not only how it wishes to be perceived by mainstream society (i.e. wheth-
er or not it wants to see itself represented as the pitiful AIDS patient as portrayed in *Philadelphia*) but also whether or not it wants to as-
similate into either the mainstream or the gay consumerist culture.

Characteristics of Baker’s plays that set them apart from most oth-
er AIDS drama are their “in-yr-face” tactics and their daring to move away from representing gay characters, particularly AIDS-patients as saints. Where, for example, educational drama usually features a gay character whose sexual mores are flawless – usually being in a monog-
amous relationship and always practising safe sex – gay characters in APU’s plays are not automatically portrayed as model citizens.

Baker’s confrontational tactics come to the fore in various forms. In *Easy* (1991), a play which revolves around a dying AIDS-patient, his partner, and his nurse, they involve a deconstruction of the maudlin hospital scene that is a common feature of AIDS drama. Whereas usually this kind of scene is aestheticized, *Easy* shows bodily suffering in all its harshness. It shows Frank, the AIDS-patient having to cope with blindness, the indignity of incontinence, and dementia, before meet-
ing a painful death, and it portrays the helplessness and guilt that his partner and nurse feel in their ineffectiveness to alleviate his suffering. Frank’s partner, Jim, in particular at various points in the play con-
fesses to feelings of guilt because he hates being confronted with Frank’s pain and suffering. Early on in the play he confesses how he is being torn between his desire to be far away from it, and his moral obligation to care for his lover.

Oh, I went one day and held his hand as they turned him over in the bed, and I calmed him as he screamed. All the time, though, part of me was feeling, I want to be out of here, I want to be among men who don’t look sick, who don’t act sick: who don’t scream when they are touched because of the pain. [...] It’s hard for me, this. It’s bad for him in that bed, but then in a few days or a few weeks he will be dead. (7)

This is a far cry from the melodramatic family-goodbye that *Philadelphia*’s Andrew Beckett receives, or the gay marriage ceremony per-
formed immediately prior to Felix’s death in Larry Kramer’s *The Normal Heart* (1985).

The echoes of Baker’s manifesto can be clearly discerned in *Easy*’s representation of AIDS. In confronting the audience with the all-too-real suffering and pain of AIDS-patients, the play clearly intends to shake those into awareness who have locked themselves up in the gay party subculture, where they can pretend that AIDS does not exist. In showing Frank’s suffering, *Easy* appeals to the conscience of that audience, without resorting to preaching. In *Easy* there is no character which functions as moral yardstick. Frank’s illness brings out the best and worst in each of the play’s characters and the play shows sympathy for each of them, without necessarily condoning their attitude.

A shock tactic that Baker has used in various AIDS plays is the public display of pornographic images. The first play in which this device was used is *In One Take*, which, when it was first performed at the Edinburgh fringe festival in 1994, provoked the ire of a city councillor, who called for theatre funding to be withdrawn. Had the councillor taken the trouble of actually attending the performance and given some thought to the reason why drama would confront its audience with images that some might find shocking or even disgusting, he would have seen a play that was an attack on a specific part of gay consumerist culture, viz. gay pornography. Instead of glorifying gay pornography, *In One Take* represents its protagonist, a gay hustler, as the victim of this industry. Clearly, the disgust that the councillor felt is the very emotion that the play intended to evoke; only the councillor channelled his disgust towards the wrong party.

Baker returned to this theme in 2006, when in *Bohemian Bareback*, part of his cycle of five one-act plays on the topic of unsafe sex, *Prisoners of Sex*, gay pornography came under attack again. Similar to *In One Take*, the play’s concern is not the supposed immorality or indecency of pornographic images, but the evil character of the industry behind this kind of porn. *Bohemian Bareback* is set around a confrontation between an HIV-infected porn actor and the film director who used to employ him. At various instances of the original performance, the audience was confronted with big-screen images from a porno-
graphic “bareback” (i.e. featuring sex without a condom) movie. In a personal note, Baker gives the following reason for this:

Bareback images are not seen outside of some darkrooms and people’s private homes. I hoped to make them a collective image so that the possible discomfort of this could be felt. It should be seen collectively because [...] we are possibly in these films fucking someone to death. This is not a private issue, but a public one when a person who has been infected comes into societal situations bearing the consequences of these sexual situations. (Baker, E-mail)

APU’s confrontational tactics as employed in In One Take and Bohemian Bareback are well in line with the philosophy set out in its manifesto. Both plays are clearly an indictment of gay consumerist culture, confronting their audience, who are possibly partakers in this culture, with the harsh reality behind the pornographic images that many enjoy in private or in secret. They throw down a gauntlet, challenging their audiences to engage in what the manifesto calls a “battle of the conscience,” and to reflect on what kind of gay culture they actually wish to subscribe to. In Baker’s view, the confrontational tactics that he employs in this kind of play are conducive to this reflection. As he says, “I really don’t mind if people get upset, whatever their political persuasion. It’s a good thing to be upset, and what better place than [the theatre for] sharing that discomfort with others” (E-mail). Clearly, to Baker the “battle of the conscience” is not something that each gay man should partake in individually, but it is a communal battle, which is best fought in the communal experience that is theatre. In this respect, APUtheatre’s plays make for the ideal kind of theatre that Ian Lucas calls for in the moral appeal that opened this article.

However different APUtheatre’s plays may be from mainstream AIDS drama regarding their content and moral outlook, they appear to resort to similar rhetorical tactics in order to achieve their goal. An example of this is Crying Celibate Tears, first performed at the Brighton Festival in 1989. The play features two roommates who find their sex life has died with the advent of AIDS. When complaining about this, one of them, Eric, remarks, “They have brain washed us into being too terrified to go near each other. Every time I see someone deep kissing I feel they are spreading germs. It’s a gut reaction now” (28).
The “they” whom Eric blames are the government, who through their health warnings have apparently struck such fear into him that he does not dare to have sex anymore. What is significant here is that, similar to AIDS discourse in the media, blame is being attributed, the difference being that this time round it is not gay men who are blamed for the AIDS crisis, but that the government is blamed for an apparently off-putting AIDS campaign.

Blame and guilt are as omnipresent in APU’s plays as in mainstream AIDS drama and in AIDS rhetoric in the media. Mirroring the moral distinction often made between so-called “guilty” (i.e. homosexual) and “innocent” (i.e. haemophiliacs and children) victims of AIDS, APUtheatre employs similar dividing tactics: its gay universe consists of “good gays” (i.e. those who, despite their setbacks, dare to face both the challenge of AIDS and that of the “battle of the conscience”) and “bad gays” (i.e. those who have sold out to the gay consumerist culture or who are taking the easy way out of assimilating in mainstream society). Two examples from APU’s most recent plays may illustrate this.

In *Number Twelve*, the first play in the *Prisoners of Sex* cycle, the character of Joey, a tourist in Amsterdam who has had unsafe sex with eleven men in one day, explains the philosophy behind his behaviour.

I’m just a disco queen who has no other intention than to chase bugs. I don’t like to be asked reasons why. [...] I think this fucking cruel world is just a reception centre leading to nothing. Why should I wait in it longer than I have to? (71)

Though the play clearly stays away from the common sentiment that all “bug-chasers” (i.e. those willingly engaging in unsafe sex) must be mad, it does employ a rhetoric of blame. *Number Twelve*’s sympathy clearly lies with this man who has been so dulled by the gay consumerist culture that he has become incapable of emotional intimacy and can only resort to unsafe sex.

*Carlo*, another play in the *Prisoners of Sex* cycle, points the blame not at gay consumerist culture but at what the APU manifesto calls “old gay liberationism.” The character seeking unsafe sex in this play does so because he experiences his marriage as too stifling. When his
partner confronts him with his infidelity, the following dialogue ensues:

**GEORGE:** I know you believe there is more equality between people who are not married.

**MARTIN:** They choose to be together.

**GEORGE:** Didn’t we choose to be together?

**MARTIN:** The gay press chose for us to get married. We saw all those male bridegrooms, dressed in their white clothes, or their grey clothes, or their funeral clothes, and we decided to become part of them. Pornography and partnership. The two new god-given rights that the 21st century has fully endorsed. Even put their stamp on. Don’t you feel the media hype and a need for hetero-respectability has put its stamp on us? (78)

Clearly, where mainstream AIDS drama would take George’s side and attribute blame to Martin for his risking both his relationship and his health – in fact, one of the key scenes in *Philadelphia* shows Andrew Beckett’s being forced to confess that he had had anonymous sex in a gay movie theatre – APUtheatre sides with Martin in his criticism that gay marriage is only another straightjacket imposed by those advocating assimilation. The reason for Martin’s infidelity, therefore, is not a personal moral flaw; it is a result of gay men succumbing to an oppressive mainstream world.

Throughout its twenty-year existence, AIDS Positive Underground Theatre has advocated a radical gay politics and has challenged its audiences not to subscribe to easy moral positionings but to dare to "work out new methods of confronting society.” However, in its rhetoric it has resorted to the same tactics as the tactics of those whom it opposes. Similar to the media discourse on AIDS, it has used emotions of empathy and disgust in order to attribute blame and distinguish between “guilty” and “innocent” parties in the AIDS crisis, which resulted in merely shifting the blame instead of moving the moral goalposts. APUtheatre may reject the moral framework of blame and guilt in which mainstream discourse cast the AIDS crisis, but it has not fully succeeded in creating an alternative rhetoric either.
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Baker, John Roman. Email to the author. 16 April 2008.


I. How Shall I Act?

In May 2011, President Obama laid down a blue, white, and red wreath at Ground Zero to commemorate the victims of the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001. Although this year marks the tenth anniversary of 9/11, Obama came there in May due to another reason: only three days earlier, he had announced the targeted killing of America’s most wanted terrorist Osama Bin Laden. Within 40 minutes, Special Forces had entered Bin Laden’s house in Pakistan and had shot America’s most-wanted terrorist. His corpse was immediately disposed in the sea, and so far no images of the dead body exist. While the public was denied this image, other images, however, dominated the news: images of common American citizens, most of them in their early twenties, celebrating the death of Bin Laden in form of a spontaneous public gathering in various cities throughout the US and at Ground Zero in particular.

Although the ten-year commemoration of 9/11 transformed the site of the terrorist attack into a national space of solemn remembrance and healing, the celebration of the killing of Osama bin Laden as a patriotic victory at the same site a couple of months earlier still powerfully reverberates in public memory. It is in this context that I discuss the potential of performance to function as a political practice that publicly questions and negotiates “social consensus around a particular set of rules” (Ridout 11) and ethical values. More precisely, the two activist collectives that I discuss below seem to counter in their performances this consensus and offer an alternative vision on what ethical basis “we organize the ways in which we live with one another” (ibid. 12) post 9/11.
First, led by Reverend Billy, The Church of Life After Shopping is an Obie-Award winning theater collective that addresses the politics of consumerism. Actor Bill Talen (aka Reverend Billy) adopts the stage character of a preacher and his gospel choir for political critique, and the group’s performances usually represent “a political [...] parody of a fundamentalist church service” (Hunka E3). After their performances, the “Church” often leads the audience out of the theater to perform a political action (for example, they protest the Disney store or Starbucks coffee shops). My second example, Code Pink, does not perform in theater venues at all but is a collective of American feminist peace activists who protest the U.S. military involvement in conflicts in the Middle East by means of performance. Thus, the work of both collectives can be considered a form of political street theater, or activist performance.

How did these two collectives “act” in the aftermath of 9/11 in both ethical and theatrical terms? As Nicholas Peter Ridout has observed, the question “How shall I act?” not only hints at the ethical contingencies of individual and collective human behavior, but also has a theatrical dimension (9-16). The verb “to act” refers to two different forms of acting which coincide in what I refer to as activist performance. The first is acting as a theatrical activity: “to act” here means to play a role, to represent a fictional character. The second is acting in the sense of carrying out or conducting an action, “to take action” and “to produce an effect.” (Merriam Webster, def. 2; 4). This production of an effect has an ethical dimension because “if we wish to think of ourselves in positive terms, from an ethical point of view, the things we do are good and the things we don’t do are not. Ethics is about being good and staying good by acting well” (Ridout 11). To discuss the relation of ethics and theater thus requires thinking of acting in both these terms. The question, “How shall I act?” then, asks for the ethical grounding of human action or the production of positive effects, but it may also address the idea of how theater can function as a means of reflecting about and more importantly acting out what is considered good, i.e. ethical behavior.

With regard to street theater or activist performance, however, the relation between theater and ethics needs to be specified. In my two
examples, the ethico-political and aesthetic implications of “acting” differ from a performance in a theater. The theatrical and the ethical connotations inherent in acting coincide in activist performance. In other words, the “act” represents both a theatrical action as well as a conscious ethical decision. While theater in general might represent a space in which ethics can be presented and debated, my examples of activist performance, are already ethical acts, forms of doing ethics (rather than representations or debates of such acts).

II. Activist Performance Post-9/11

As a playful response to the color-coded terrorist threat advisory scale introduced after 9/11, Code Pink’s protest aims at countering the rhetoric of fear and threat of the war on terror with humor and peacemaking efforts. During protests, Code Pink’s activists can be easily recognized as they usually wear pink clothes. Although the color refers to their feminist background, Code Pink’s agenda refuses to tap into essentialist feminist notions of women as nurturers and their “motherly responsibility to the world” (Featherstone 24), by arguing rather pragmatically, “Women have been the guardians of life – not because we are better or purer or more innately nurturing than men, but because the men have busied themselves making war” (Code Pink, “About Us”).

As a network of American women peace activists, Code Pink “work[s] to end U.S. funded wars and occupations [and] to challenge militarism globally” (“About Us”). In a similar vein, the activism of The Church of Life After Shopping informs American consumers about the global entanglements of their consumer goods. The connection between the group’s political consumerism and the commemoration of 9/11 became particularly explicit during a performance called “9/11 peace revival” at the fifth anniversary of 9/11, only a few blocks from Ground Zero. In this performance, Talen harshly criticized President George W. Bush’s call for citizens’ “continued participation and confi-
Pia Wiegmink

dence in the American economy” as a way of coming to terms with the tragedy (see, e.g., Pellegrini, “Rally a Nation”). Instead, Talen introduced a “competing anniversary:” the centenary of Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolent action, an anniversary which celebrates the history of peaceful civil disobedience. Here, the national tragedy was thus juxtaposed with a globally significant anniversary.

Taken together, the political activism of Code Pink and the Church attempts to replace patriotic sentiments with a cosmopolitan claim for peace and reconciliation. As novelist Alice Walker recollects her participation in a Code Pink rally: "We were women and children who loved ourselves in the form of Iraqi women and children because we knew that to love ourselves as humans means to love ourselves as all humans. We understood that whatever we did to stop the war, we did not for the other, but for a collective us” (Walker xiii). It is within this context that I discuss Reverend Billy’s symbolic action at Ground Zero subsequent to the “peace revival.” I am particularly interested in how the activists employ theater as a means of mourning a national tragedy without fuelling patriotic sentiments of protecting the nation against the threat of terrorism. How does performance as a local and communal practice counter national sentiments promoted by images of rejoicing Americans distributed via global news and television media” (see Román 2)? How, then, may performance prove an effective cultural practice against national narratives of homeland security? In other words, how can performance be conceived of “as ethical practice” (Ridout 54)? My analysis of this symbolic action at Ground Zero will be complemented by examples from Code Pink’s activism.

III. The 9/11 Peace Revival

On the evening of September 11, 2006, at the fifth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center, Reverend Billy and The Church of Life After Shopping performed at the Spiegeltent only six blocks away

1 Examples for George W. Bush’s speeches are his “9/11 Address to the Nation” delivered on Sep. 11, 2001 or his “Address to a Joint Session of Congress Following 9/11 Attacks” delivered on Sep. 20, 2001.

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from Ground Zero. During the “peace revival” (which consisted of a sequence of “mock sermons” by Reverend Billy, anti-consumerist gospel songs performed by the Choir, and the appearance of three guest speakers and performers)\(^2\) director Savitri Durkee passed around sheets of paper, which had phrases printed on them. These lines, or sometimes only words, Talen told his audience, are authentic “remarkable, loving, peace messages that were conveyed from the towers” at 9/11.\(^3\) The audience was also invited to add personal messages. Then, Durkee instructed the audience to fold paper airplanes, which should later convey these messages (written inside the folded paper) as “seeds of peace” onto Ground Zero. At the end of the performance, Talen invited the audience to follow the performers to Ground Zero\(^4\) to “send” the paper airplanes on the construction site. This symbolic action commemorated that the victims who died in the Twin Towers actually had sent thousands of messages of love to their wives, husbands, children, and relatives. By symbolically sending their messages back to Ground Zero, the audience did not only commemorate the victims who had died in the towers, but their commemoration also foregrounded that in their last moments they had not called for retaliation but had remembered what had been dearest to them.\(^5\)

\(^2\) The three guests were Jonathan Tasini, running as democratic candidate for the New York Senate Election running against Hilary Clinton, Malachy McCourt, younger brother of Pulitzer Prize winner Frank McCourt and candidate of the Green Party for mayor of New York, and Bernardo Palumbo, an Argentinian artist.

\(^3\) These texts were taken from a collection of eyewitness accounts and other first hand material published by two New York Times journalists, Jim Dwyer and Kevin Flynn. The title of their collection, 102 Minutes, refers to the time it took the two towers of the World Trade Center to collapse.

\(^4\) Such a collective march at the end of a performance from inside the performance venue into the streets is reminiscent of the performances of radical theater collectives of the sixties such as, e.g., Dionysus in 69 by the Performance Group. Subsequent to this performance, audience and actors left the theater space together. In order to render the distinction between art and life obsolete, the group continued their communal, celebratory experience in the streets.

\(^5\) Talen acknowledges that this action is inspired by a Zapatista action, which took place in Chiapas, Mexico in 2000. The Zapatistas or Zapatista Army of Na-
In a similar vein, Code Pink performed various symbolic actions to publicly express their opposition to the Iraq War. In addition to their presence at anti-war rallies and other political events, the women activists also used a broad variety of theatrical tools to stage their protest. These vary from flash mob actions or symbolic “prescriptions for peace,” to handing out discard notices, i.e. “pink slips” to politicians. One particular interesting form of symbolic action is the staging of a citizen’s arrest for war crimes. Medea Benjamin, co-founder of Code Pink, comments on one of the various attempts of a symbolic citizen’s arrest of Karl Rove in 2008, “We are demanding accountability from Karl Rove who lied to get us into the war […]. If law enforcement and Congress won’t do it, we the American people will!” (Code Pink, “Official Release”). This symbolic action took up the legal possibility of a “citizen’s arrest,” namely, the right of a citizen to temporarily “arrest” a suspect until police arrives and takes the suspect into custody.

In January 2000, the Zapatista army sent hundreds of paper airplanes with messages across the fence of the military camp of the Mexican Army asking the soldiers to leave their land (Lane, “Reverend Billy” 130). Here, the Zapatistas made use of symbolic action, which the Mexican army mistook for an actual attack as the soldiers began to shoot the airplanes (Dominguez 395). During the performance, Talen referred to this action as a “wonderful misunderstanding,” which “underscored their [the Zapatista’s] devotion to nonviolence.” Here, one could argue that it appears inappropriate to adapt this incident of a struggle of an indigenous minority for their land and freedom to a commemoration of victims of a terrorist attack. However, one must equally take into consideration that the EZLN is considered to be closely connected to the global justice movement because the beginning of their protests against the Mexican government coincided with the coming into effect of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in January 1994. Thus, as Massimo de Angelis points out, the Zapatista struggle is an indigenous struggle, but it is also an international one as the guerrilla movement targets global economic policies which the group claims responsible for their poverty and suppression by the Mexican state (see De Angelis 18-20). From this perspective, The Church of Life After Shopping and the Zapatistas, one can say, fight the same “evil” but on different battlefields and with different scales of personal engagement.
custody. Although a citizen’s arrest rarely occurs, this is still a legally recognized, though debated practice (there are certain criteria with justify a citizen’s arrest, such as the immediacy of a crime). Usually Code Pink’s attempts to conduct a citizen’s arrest resulted not in the arrest of politicians such as Karl Rove or Condoleezza Rice but in the arrest of the activists. Nonetheless, these performances are more than mere symbolical actions but could rather be described as what J. L. Austin referred to as “performative utterances,” expressions which by being uttered already execute a certain action. In performative utterances, the enunciation of an action and its performance coincide (such as saying “I do” in a wedding ceremony, see Austin 5-6). As a both theatrical and political act of protest such an action represents a form of engaged citizenship with which citizens creatively seek to reclaim participation in politics.

Let me return to Reverend Billy and Ground Zero to elaborate on this argument in more detail. After the paper plane action, “sister” Laura Newman, the soprano voice of the choir, raised a speaking trumpet and performed the Church’s “First Amendment Song.” She sang:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for redress of grievances. (Wiegminck, “Reverend Billy at Ground Zero”)

Newman repeatedly sang the Amendment until the audience (and here the audience comprises actors, former theater audience, tourists and commemorators visiting the site) was familiar with the tune, joined in with clapping hands and participated in the public recital.

When “sister” Laura Newman began to sing the First Amendment in front of the metal fence surrounding the construction site of Ground Zero, this form of public performance did not only address the audience as a community of theater-goers but as American citizens. Furthermore, as a recital of the First Amendment, the “song” at the same time enacted the very freedoms the performers sang about. In Austin’s sense of performative utterances once the people gathering in front of the construction site sang the First Amendment, they
also acted out the very freedoms they were reciting. At the same time, this public recital also drew attention to the violation of the Amendment since Reverend Billy has performed this song with his choir many times, and he has often been arrested for doing so. For the activist-actor, Ground Zero represents an especially "contested space" because of its political significance. In the political aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Center, the formation of new administrative centers (such as the Terrorist Threat Organization Center) and government acts (such as the USA Patriot Act) has allowed the US government to increase forms of surveillance on its citizens (and visitors), which substantially curtailed citizen rights (Eisendrath, "September 11, 2001"). Comparable to Code Pink’s citizen’s arrest, for Talen, the First Amendment and its public recital becomes a political act which intends to bring these freedoms back into public sight in a place where they are substantially threatened.

Staged at a historically significant public space, a national memorial site, and, furthermore, at the fifth anniversary of the tragedy, the performance manages to evade patriotic sentiments and enables a different form of commemoration. At the same time, the communal,

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6 Here, the aspect of new media plays a vital role for documenting and also for distributing these forms of activist performances. On the Internet, amateurs have uploaded several videos depicting Talen being arrested for reciting the First Amendment. In June 2007, for example, Talen recited the First Amendment on Union Square, the historical site of free speech, prior to a monthly bicycle event, the Critical Mass Ride. A New York based political collective called Glass Bead Collective recorded his arrest and uploaded the video onto YouTube. So far, more than 30,000 people have watched the clip on the Internet platform (Glassbeadian, "Rev. Billy Arrested"), which functions here as another form of public space that allows citizens to document, collect, and discuss momentary and local events like these.

7 In this context, I also want to draw attention to another theater project, which actively participated in the process of commemoration of 9/11. Already in 2002, the Flea Theater, located close to Ground Zero, premiered the play The Guys by Anne Nelson. The play is based on the journalist’s own experience in the wake of the tragedy when she got in contact with one of the New York fire captains who lost many of his men during the attack on the World Trade Center and who saw himself unable to write their eulogies (Nelson xviii-xix). While Nelson
public recital of the First Amendment could be considered a citizens' performance. By means of peacefully assembling and singing the Amendment, citizens reminded their fellow citizens of the necessity of defending these core values against the nationalist backlash following the events of 9/11. The performance at Ground Zero (the sending of the peace planes and the recital of the First Amendment) not only represented a rehearsal for civic action but already performed “civic engagement” (Dolan, *Utopia* 7). As a citizens’ formation, the performance constituted a political gathering of citizens who were peacefully and unpatriotically mourning the dead.

For further inquiries, I think, it would also be useful to continue this thought by embedding the public performance within larger discussions about Ground Zero and its subsequent commodification as a tourist site. As Marita Sturken observed, soon after the attacks on the World Trade Center, Ground Zero was transformed “from a site of emergency to a site of tourism and commerce” (211). In her analysis of

helped the captain to write the obituaries, she also wrote the play about a journalist helping a firefighter captain to write the obituaries for his dead comrades. The play premiered only three months after the tragedy (Nelson xxv) and helped to re-establish the Flea Theater as a community space in which people from the neighborhood came together. Most interesting is how Nelson uses the theatrical space created by the play and transforms it into an actual, physical space of mourning for the theater audience: the play ends with a commemoration of the dead firemen in which the audience actually becomes part of the play’s community of mourners, thereby trespassing the fourth wall of the play and creating an actual space of commemoration and mourning inside the theatre. Comparable to activist performance, the distinction between the fictional world of the play and the world outside the theater collapses. Nelson reflects on this capability of theater to function as a communal space. She explains: “A play couldn’t cure anyone, but it could bring people together in a dedicated space and allow them to experience emotion together” (63). Similarly, director Jim Simpson elaborates on the function of theater in this context: “Theater’s obligation is to be more than escapist. It should offer an opportunity for the community to come together to encounter the catastrophe on human terms” (qtd. in Kadlecak, “WTO Tragedy”). In this sense, in the wake of 9/11, the Flea Theater became a true community space in which the play was performed in particular for the firemen community as well as for the Stuyvesant High School, whose students were equally traumatized by the collapse of the nearby twin towers (see Kadlecak, “WTO Tragedy”).

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this transformation of the site, Sturken draws attention to both the potential of the site to be turned into a merchandising item as well as its place within a global market economy. “It is one of the ironies of postindustrial and global economies that the majority of patriotic American merchandise, such as small flags and ‘I love New York’ stickers, are produced outside the United States, in China and Korea. While these souvenirs circulate through many informal economic networks, they are also part of a much broader consumer economy related to 9/11” (214-15). Within this context of a commodification of Ground Zero, the public performance and recital of the First Amendment could hint at a public practice within this space which might have the potential to resist the confines of such economic networks of tourism and patriotic mourning. To borrow the words of David Román from another context, Reverend Billy’s performance represented a “local and temporal” moment, which “challenge[d] or refute[d] local or national sentiments prioritized by other media” (2).

However, what seems alarming to me is that five years later both the global flow of images celebrating Bin Laden’s death and Obama’s symbolic action of laying down a wreath at Ground Zero reinvigorated the very sentiments the performance worked against. Three days after he had announced the killing of Bin Laden, Obama’s commemoration of the victims of 9/11 conflated the mourning for the death of loved ones with the celebration of the death of another human being – a gesture that catapulted the hope for a cosmopolitan ethics of peace to a far too distant future.
Works Cited


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Modern Irish drama amply testifies to the fact that a play’s ethics and meaning are always constructed within a specific socio-historical context of its production and are shaped by audience expectations. John Millington Synge’s *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) provides a radical example, as a controversy concerning the ethics of the drama evolved into an open riot when the play was originally produced by Dublin’s Abbey Theatre. Synge’s masterpiece was perceived as immoral, blasphemous, and slanderous of the Irish women in particular. The outrage voiced by the audience may appear somewhat exaggerated from a contemporary perspective but was in fact quite natural, given that the play was produced at the peak of the national revival by a newly established theatre that called itself national, to the chagrin of ideological competitors. The spectators were thus focused almost exclusively on the authenticity of the representation of the Irish nation on the stage, while many were on the lookout for offensive aspects of the work of an Ascendancy playwright who had usurped the right to speak on behalf of the nation.

Ever since, the play has been received largely as an exuberant comedy. Even as such, *The Playboy* still centres on the issue of a father-killer being worshipped as a hero. Bruce Bigley argued in the 1970s that Synge “forces us into uncomfortable moral positions [...] through
our responses to generic convention" (Bigley 90). In other words, as the violence of the reported initial patricide is presented within a comic convention, the audience is not inclined to regard it as a moral issue; however, when the father suddenly appears onstage and is killed 'for real,' the convention of the genre is subverted and the spectators are shocked into judging the hero's actions. This was certainly a very plausible observation; yet, after the wave of in-yer-face theatre that has established bloody violence on the stage as commonplace, it may now be argued that the ethical impulse has become rather less acute.

More recently, the Irish plays of Martin McDonagh have spurned a certain degree of controversy as regards their ethics. Indeed, violence, murder, lying, swearing, and the finger lifted in the face of political correctness have become essential trademarks of McDonagh's work. Notwithstanding that, the charges of immorality levelled on McDonagh have come chiefly from Irish drama critics of a certain disposition who, at heart, have been unhappy with the way McDonagh has represented Ireland on stage. As I have argued elsewhere, one of the seminal aspects of McDonagh's Irish plays is that they satirise the obstinate focus on Irishness in a lot of the contemporary writing and criticism that has continued to insist on the need to reproduce, over and over again, images of a graceful nation(cf. Pilný 163-69). Such concerns are alien to other critical contexts and to most international audiences alike. It is true that McDonagh's work patently features acts that are, per se, morally wrong; however, any thorough analysis of the ethics of McDonagh's drama would perhaps need to address the issue in a broader context by looking at the ethics of what may be termed grotesque entertainment, i.e., plays like Tracy Letts's Killer Joe, the dramas and films of Mark O'Rowe, the gangster films of Quentin Tarantino and a whole range of their derivatives, to list but a few examples.

While that is outside the scope of the present paper, it is hardly its intention either to elaborate on the self-evident point that the interpretation of drama is shaped by the context of its production. Instead, this essay wishes to present a case study of plays from 2009 and 2010 that looks at how recent productions have been related to the ethical
issues attendant on the collapse of the Irish economy after more than a decade of unprecedented boom. Rather than focusing on plays that have addressed overtly what their authors saw as the moral shortcomings of Irish society that have contributed to the demise of the Celtic Tiger, I would like to discuss more salient – because of more complex – instances marked by a more oblique relation to specific reality. Marina Carr’s *Marble* (2009), Tom Murphy’s *The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant* (2009), and Enda Walsh’s *Penelope* (2010) are among the more remarkable original dramas produced in the last couple of years in Ireland. All have been written by esteemed playwrights, and have been viewed as addressing the overwhelming materialism and absence of virtue in the Celtic Tiger era, despite the fact that none of the plays is explicitly set in Ireland. Moreover, these works are worlds apart in terms of genre: *Marble* is an eclectic urban dream play, Tom Murphy’s drama adapts a Russian rural novel as a contemporary tragedy, and Walsh’s play exuberantly transposes Homeric myth within an absurdist sitcom.

Marina Carr’s *Marble* premiered at the Abbey Theatre, Dublin on 17 February 2009, directed by Jeremy Harrin and featuring a memorable set by Robert Innes Hopkins. The play deals with two affluent married couples who seem to be crucially lacking something essential in their lives, despite the lucrative jobs of the men, the successful raising of offspring, and the general splendour of the families’ houses. One of the husbands, Art, starts having dreams about making love to his friend’s wife in an astonishingly beautiful room of marble, and she begins to dream the same dream about him. The inexplicable, recurrent fantasy leads inevitably to the destruction of both marriages.

For Carr, the play represents a major shift in focus towards the urban. In the words of Fintan Walsh, “Carr replaces her familiar troupe of blood-thirsty midland in-breeders with ostensibly polished urbanites; a class of contemporary Irish who perceive rural Ireland as an ‘open asylum,’ and instead of practising perversion, they spend their days imagining it, pausing only to read about ‘high-class incest’ in French literature.” What is notable is Walsh’s identification of the characters as Irish: this may presumably be attributed to the fact that the play is the work of a prominent Irish dramatist and was produced
by Ireland’s national theatre, with actors speaking with an Irish accent. However, the text itself is written largely in neutral contemporary English which features a strategic Americanized inflection at times, while the city in which the action takes place is never identified.

Carr herself described the play as dealing with people who suffer from having too much cash: “They have everything materially, yet have nothing; they want more, yet are terrified” (qtd. in Lonergan). Correspondingly, characters are seen in their dehumanized designer homes or in a polished café at an art gallery; cigars and expensive spirits are ubiquitous props for the men, and glasses of wine are a must in almost every scene. The extraordinary set designed for the Abbey production eloquently reflected the internal world of the characters, exuding coldness, emphasizing the emptiness of the space and simultaneously dwarfing people under a gleaming marble column.

The reviews were mixed nonetheless. Most commentators agreed that the characters came across as lifeless and the play had an “unfinished quality about it” (Colin Murphy, Rev. of Marble). When summarizing the 2009 season in Irish theatre, Patrick Lonergan contextualized the lukewarm reception of the play by observing that “the recession had made the play seem dated before it had even premiered.” The theme of material excess that causes an inexplicable feeling of void could have been resonant as late as 2007, according to Lonergan, and “two years from now [sic!], it might again make sense. But for an audience coming to terms with the possibility that the country might be about to go broke – for people facing the loss of their jobs or their homes – Carr’s play might have seemed frivolous or even insensitive, because of its timing.”

As indicated above, however, there is no particular need to assume that future productions of Marble will be interpreted as depicting exclusively Celtic Tiger Ireland, particularly any that would be staged outside the country, since the play makes no explicit reference to Ireland whatsoever. Its focus on a wealthy, urban middle-class would most likely be perceived as relevant, at most times, in a great part of Europe and North America at least. So would the notion of emotional and spiritual emptiness caused by excessive riches, an emptiness that
is seen to stir up an incessant urge for something more: as Catherine, the dreaming wife, puts it, “I want more than good. I want spectacular. I want marble, marble, marble” (44). This yearning is emphatically not for more material possessions but takes the shape of a powerful transgressive drive, a fundamental questioning of ethical and social norms: “Catherine: [...] What are these senseless rules we live by? Who decided them and why? [...] I’m so tired behaving myself” (32). Typically for Marina Carr, the compulsion to transgress is laced with references to classical tragedy: once the plot starts to properly unravel, Catherine announces that she has “a premonition of an impending catastrophe” (31), only verbalizing the sense of the doom that is forthcoming. Later on, she even exclaims, rather out of tune with the realistic nature of the dialogue, “may the gods not strike me down” (44) for not being happy with what she has. It is hardly surprising that “marble” becomes associated in the play not only with the spectacular dream of aesthetic and sensual perfection, but eventually and forcefully with death, as the material that not just expensive floor tiles are made of but also tombstones. The intertextual underpinning of the characters’ story by Greek tragedy combined with the gradual shift in the meaning of the trope of marble thus suggest that when Art and Catherine leave in pursuit of their transgressive dream in the end and destroy both of their families, it means a move towards certain death, rather than liberation. Finally, the palpable association of the play with Freud’s work on dreams on the one hand, and the concept of melancholia on the other carries of course a likewise universal resonance, as highlighted in Fintan Walsh’s keen analysis. In his view, Marble presents melancholics “spectacularly frozen in grief” as in Giorgio de Chirico’s painting that Carr used as an inspiration for the play’s atmosphere, while at the same time “beckon[ing] forth all that has been repressed, or imagined, from the blackened base of everything that appears glorious [in the] grandeur of our age, which is already monumentally dead” (Fintan Walsh).

The production of Tom Murphy’s The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant at the Abbey Theatre followed closely on the heels of Marina Carr’s latest offering, opening on 3 June 2009 with Conall Morrison directing. It is an adaptation of the bleak naturalist novel The Golovly-
Ondřej Pilný

Ov Family by Mikhail Evgrafovich Saltykov–Shchedrin (1872-76), which Murphy focuses on Arina, a strong landowning matriarch who witnesses in her old age the total disintegration of her family and her estate. The reception of the play was crucially influenced by the publication of the so-called Ryan Report two weeks before its premiere, providing thus a remarkable example of how a work of art may be judged in very specific local terms at a tumultuous moment of history. The report made shocking revelations, in five volumes, about the scope of physical, sexual and emotional abuse of children in residential schools run by the Irish Catholic Church. Reflecting the horrified atmosphere in the country, reviewer Colin Murphy then summarized the impact of The Reluctant Tyrant as follows:

Perhaps, in decades to come, it will be possible to separate Tom Murphy’s new play from the dominant news story of the week that preceded its premiere. Or perhaps the play will come to be seen as the first, great attempt to wrestle with the demons that produced the Irish children’s institutions. For now, though, The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant is an almost uncanny insight into the mindset and culture that sustained Letterfrack [a particularly abominable school run by the Christian Brothers in Co. Galway] and its like.

Numerous Irish commentators have related Murphy’s new drama to the present moment in a broader sense, seeing it as a reflection of the moral and spiritual shortcomings of the Celtic Tiger era. Echoing the point made by Colin Murphy, Patrick Lonergan asserted that “Tom Murphy’s Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant at the Abbey took on our two biggest problems: the obsession with property, and the way in which the Catholic church carried out, and colluded in, the abuse of the most vulnerable.” Sara Keating highlighted in turn the role of the Abbey Theatre in her enthusiastic review, claiming that

The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant is the play that the Abbey has needed for years. If the Abbey’s remit as Ireland’s “national theatre” is to engage with the continually shifting concepts that define the island that we live on, in Murphy’s play they have found a drama that cuts right to the quick of Ireland’s changing times. [...] It reaches into the roots of our 21st-century nation, exorcising the fundamental hypocrisies from which the crisis-ridden Ireland that we live in emerged. [...] It uses the fate of a single sprawling family and its dominant mater familias to anatomise the greed, duplicity, and moral apathy that has left the country reeling in these post-Celtic Tiger days.
Notwithstanding all that, adapting an 1870s novel that depicts the collapse of a petty landowning family in rural Russia in order to offer a historical parallel to contemporary Ireland does not appear as an obvious choice to make. For one, *The Golovlyov Family* is set in a pre-modern, autocratic society marked by a yawning gap between the handful of the rich and the thousands of the subsisting poor, a situation that would make an easier analogy with distinctly earlier periods in Irish history. Moreover, the Golovlyovs are depicted in the novel as a pathological, rather than a representative family, with an emphasis put on the role of heredity in their progressive degeneration. This aspect may be in the best tradition of naturalist fiction and its adoption of Darwin; however, it is hardly conducive to featuring in a plausible contemporaneous parallel.

*The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant* is perhaps not as exciting as the very best of Murphy’s work; nevertheless, the way in which he adapts Shchedrin’s bleak novel is intriguing and indicates a keen focus. Prominence is given exclusively to Arina, the mother of the three sons and uncompromising ruler of the estate, but in many other regards Murphy remains faithful to the novel, using most of the key scenes, images, and frequently also memorable turns of the phrase. At the same time, the setting of the drama is deliberately changed towards the more general: the play takes place “Once upon a time in a provincial rural area” (2) and the family estate – Golovlyovo – remains anonymous. Place-names and the names of characters are anglicized without being given a particularly Irish ring. The large distances between the villages and estates are shortened, and the monotonous planes of inland Russia are changed to feature the poorest farms nestled up rocky mountains. The suggested lack of local and temporal specificity then of course suggests a more universal validity of the story than Shchedrin’s novel does, a fact that was further emphasized in the Abbey production by Tom Piper’s ingenious set, which used plain wood as the basic material to indicate a rural setting but avoided details specific of a particular period, encircling the characters in a non-representational timber structure.

Contrary to Murphy’s apparent tendency to universalize, the Abbey Theatre decided to use a distinctly local resonance in the promo-
tion of the play when they chose as a central image an impressive photo of the actress Marie Mullen as Arina clad in black, in which she strikes an astonishing resemblance to Lady Gregory (the picture of Arina was simultaneously used on the cover of the printed edition of the play). Apart from the fact that this is a rural play centred on a powerful, potentially symbolic female protagonist presented by the national theatre of Ireland, the production was thus further linked with the Irish Revival and its politics. Despite the effort, however, the protagonist can hardly be viewed as a Woman of Ireland figure, since any sense of nation, patriotism, or even community are entirely absent from the play.

On the other hand, what would have contributed to the reviewers’ interpretation of *The Reluctant Tyrant* as dealing with Irish, rather than global, society, was Murphy’s elaboration on a scene in which an unwanted child is dispatched to an orphanage: in his adaptation, the infant is baptised by and placed in the care of a Catholic priest, while its hypocritical father implies that the fate of the child is determined by the will of God rather than by his own deed (68-70). Murphy passes a clear verdict here by having Arina put a curse on Peter as a direct result of him having removed his baby (74); moreover, in a complementary change of Shchedrin’s plot, Murphy has Peter dramatically stabbed on stage by the mother of the child.

While the chilling local reverberations of the child being placed in a church-run institution would fortunately be lacking for most international audiences, other prominent moments in the play may clearly be expected to pass for an apposite reflection by an ordinary citizen on contemporary capitalism at the point of a global crisis. These include observations by Arina’s sons such as that on “official types” speechifying about the need for the people to bravely face the consequences of the disastrous state of the economy: “politicians, government contractors, receivers, mayors, profiteers – all scoundrels. I don’t know how a country survives them, do you?” (8)

Arina may be the central embodiment of avarice, someone who has forgotten about the spirit and about love and turned to amassing property instead, but the heart of the play clearly lies in Murphy’s fascination with the intricate psychology of this unique woman. A
complex individual who will not be subdued, Arina ultimately turns out to be a tragic heroine: in the final scene, she has realised her fatal error of abandoning concern for her family to greed, but is still railing against the judgment of gods – witness her dying words: “It’s not that I’m going to enforce a claim on salvation. I won’t. Maybe I don’t even deserve it. But I’ll get it” (85).

Enda Walsh’s *Penelope* is, so to say, a different kettle of fish altogether. Premiered at Theater Oberhausen on 27 February 2010 (dir. Tilman Knabe), it was the result of a commission for a joint project titled “Odyssee Europa,” in which six European playwrights were asked to write a play inspired by any passage or motif from Homer’s *Odyssey*.¹ The plays were then jointly shown in several theatres in the Ruhrgebiet as part of the programme for the Ruhr 2010 European Capital of Culture season, with spectators taking buses or driving among the individual locations. The English-language original of *Penelope* opened at the Galway Arts Festival on 13 July of the same year, produced by Druid Theatre and directed by Mikel Murfi. Characterized by Michael Billington as “a wild, crazy, word-drunk piece that intoxicates and baffles, but is destined to lodge in the memory,” the play focuses on four remaining suitors who are ardently trying to win Penelope’s love from the bottom of a disused swimming pool on a Greek island in a summer’s boiling heat. Lounging in front of a CCTV screen, young and beautiful Penelope watches the effort of these desperate wrecks in their swimwear; they know that they are doomed, since Odysseus is arriving today and will hack them all to pieces. In their dismal situation, the aging suitors are catching at language as the last straw and the comic dialogues often escalate into overblown absurdity and empty verbal fireworks; the climax of linguistic elaboration is reached in the riveting confessional monologues which the respective protagonists use to seduce the beauty seated in the villa above. Ultimately, the men resort to sheer theatricality, enacting a wordless cabaret number with rapid costume changes about famous lovers from

¹ These were Grzegorz Jarzyna, Péter Nádas, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Christoph Ransmayr, Roland Schimmelpfennig, and Enda Walsh. For details, see <http://www.odyssee-europa.de>.
Napoleon and Josephine to Scarlett O’Hara and Rhett Butler, Romeo and Juliet, and Jackie and John F. Kennedy.

Of the three plays discussed here, Penelope is the one that most reviewers did not relate to contemporary Ireland directly, despite the fact that it in many ways reflects prominent aspects of the post-Celtic Tiger atmosphere. The protagonists are ex-businessmen surrounded by the wreckage of former prosperity, including a deluxe barbecue that would not fire, and they are running out of supplies. Their names are based on those of prominent Irish business moguls, bankers and developers who were directly involved in the downfall of the Irish economy, as Eamonn Jordan has aptly observed: Quinn comes from Sean Quinn, a major shareholder in the Anglo-Irish Bank whose business has been destroyed by its collapse, Fitz’s name is that of Sean Fitzpatrick, the corrupt head of the same bank, Dunne is eponymous with Sean Dunne, a notorious property mogul, and Burns is most likely inspired by Johnny Burns of the Burns Construction company. The origin of the names was briefly glossed only by Lorraine Courtney in her review for the *Sunday Tribune*.

Moreover, there is a remarkable passage early in the play that makes an evident comment on Ireland: this happens when the characters discuss the well-known fairy tale of the Magic Porridge Pot that would not stop cooking as a story of “investment and growth or the fast development of an unstable economy.” (9) In this satirical interpretation, an entire town is seen as having “ground to a standstill when it became awash with porridge” (ibid.) incessantly provided by the magic pot for “a community that took with no notion of responsibility or future” (ibid.). Consequently, the affected country is viewed in a telling Yeatsian allusion as having “a heart fed on a diet of sweet stodgy oats” (ibid.). The course of action recommended, after the fact, by these businessmen facing ruin, is that “the pot needed […] regulation. It needed that little girl to stay at home with the sole purpose of saying, ‘Cook-pot-cook’ and ‘Stop-pot-stop’” (ibid.).

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2 Eamonn Jordan in a guest lecture at the Centre for Irish Studies in Prague (October 2010) and in correspondence with the present author. The attempted identification of Burns is mine.
My contention is that all these references to Ireland were ignored by reviewers due to the most eclectic genre of the play which is, for want of a better term, essentially Enda Walsh. It seamlessly joins together elements of the theatre of the absurd, melodrama, monodrama, conversation comedy, and in-yer-face theatre, combining these with the TV forms of sitcom and reality show. Simultaneously, *Penelope* introduces a plethora of momentous subjects and weighty issues, from simple male rivalry to the abnegation of basic ethical values in global capitalism and the concurrent loss of authentic emotions, and the resulting feeling of the futility of existence. However, it does so in a baffling way, since these issues are entrenched in grotesque pyrotechnics. In this aspect, the play forms a natural development of Walsh’s previous acclaimed dramas, *The New Electric Ballroom* (2004) and *The Walworth Farce* (2006), which moreover centre likewise on characters entrapped in relentless re-enactment of theatrical routines.

The bewildering nature of Walsh’s recent work is only attested to by the reviews of *Penelope*, which were generally enthusiastic for both the Oberhausen production and for the Druid wherever it went, but which displayed relatively few points of intersection and often confessed sheer puzzlement. A number of reviewers mentioned Beckett as a parallel: Ralf Stiftel described the play in the *Westfälischer Anzeiger* as “eine krude Mischung aus geerdetem Volkstheater und Beckett’scher Verzweiflung,” and Ben Brantley in *The New York Times* as “waiting for [...] Odysseus” (cf. also Coveney), with other reviewers referring merely to unspecified Beckettian features (Billington, Marks, Zinman). The other point of consensus has concerned the manifest display of the male ego, its competitiveness and the dire results (Courtney, Billington, Marks, Crawley); Ben Brantley even added a remark in which he likened the behaviour of the protagonists to that of “the savage boys from *Lord of the Flies*.” Matthew Harrison in *The Irish Theatre Magazine* somewhat implausibly juxtaposed *Penelope* with Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, since both plays feature a “narrative [that] runs contemporaneously with a well-known text.” The point was developed some months later by Peter Marks in *The Washington Post*, who spoke of the “characters com[ing] to the tragic realization that they can’t escape their fate, that
they must endure with the knowledge that their role in the cosmos, like ours, is ultimately inconsequential.” Apart from the ubiquitous observations on Walsh’s linguistic bravado, further interpretative comments were scarce and fragmented.

None of the commentators has thus tackled the climactic scene of the play, where Burns delivers a monologue in which it is raining love and positive values for Penelope (“love is saved” 51) and the corrupt suitors are saying goodbye to the world. What may look on the page like a hippie ending verging on kitsch is nevertheless qualified by the fact that Burns and his accomplices are all covered in blood, since they have just stabbed Quinn to death. Moreover, at the moment when he is murdered, Quinn is wearing the costume of Eros, god of love. The costume comes complete with wings, and Quinn thus also bears a striking resemblance to an angel. This all resonates with ambiguity: does love, or worse, an angel, need to be murdered in order to save love – or is it merely that villains dressed as such need to be removed? And more generally, does Walsh indicate in the final scene that universal values and authentic positive emotions require bloody violence these days, not only by having Burns and Co. cleansed in a bloodbath but also by turning Odysseus into a Terminator figure? Or are we asking ludicrous questions since the play is so wildly grotesque that it is to be treated as bizarre fiction and merely enjoyed as an emotional rollercoaster?

While Walsh’s Penelope comes across as the most vibrant and accomplished of the three plays discussed in this essay, what Marble, The Reluctant Tyrant, and Penelope share is an ample breadth of scope that accommodates the current concerns of audiences in a global sense. It will be fascinating to see these plays receive the critical attention that they deserve, together with hopefully many new productions in different interpretive contexts.
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Primary Literature


Secondary Literature

Ondrej Pilný


----. Rev. of *The Last Days of a Reluctant Tyrant*, by Tom Murphy. Abbey Theatre, Dublin. *Irish Independent*, 5 June 2009. #html? date of access?#


Suzan-Lori Parks’s plays are often described as following a postmodernist agenda of deconstructing the narrative discourse of official history. Indeed, the structure of Parks’s historical plays eschews the narrow confines of traditional dramatic forms. Defying the often facile binaristic oppositions governing the genres of comedy, tragedy, or melodrama, Parks’s work explores the possibility of the stage as a medium, thus underlining the theatrical nature of history itself. As a playwright who has turned to the history of African Americans in *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom* (1986-89), her first major play, Parks has indeed underlined the importance of remembering the traumatic history of slavery and racial violence as constitutive for the present. In her essay “Possession,” Parks claims that theater not only repeats or reenacts a scripted series of historical events. As Parks observes, the theatrical production of time and space on the stage provides for the creation of new historical realities:

I’m working theatre like an incubator to create “new” historical events. I’m remembering and staging historical events which, through their happening on stage, are ripe for inclusion in the canon of history. Theatre is an incubator for the creation of historical events – and, as in the case of artificial insemination, the baby is no less human. (“Possession” 4-5)

Commenting on Parks’s self-reflexive dramaturgy in her early historical plays, Harry J. Elam and Alice Rayner identify a powerful ethical concern at the core of Park’s archaeological excavations of the past. For Elam and Rayner, “[t]he problem for Parks is how to write and
rewrite history in a postmodern culture that has dismantled the idea of history" (179). In addition to this reconstructive effort, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. has located an ethical sensibility in the metatheatrical aspects of Parks’s plays that, on the one hand, emphasize “the performative nature of African American culture” (102) while they simultaneously underline “the culpability of the audience in the creation not only of theatre but of historical situations”(104). Building on such critical assessments, this essay will show that Parks’s work does not stop at a postmodernist revision of the traditional history play. Her later works rather demonstrate a turn to the ethical that includes meditations on a sense of commitment and responsibility.

As I will argue, this facet of Parks’s work can be illustrated by an analysis of Parks’s sequel of plays featuring Lincoln’s assassination by John Wilkes Booth at Ford’s Theatre in Washington on April 14, 1865. A comparison of _The America Play_ (1994) and _Topdog/Underdog_ (2001) illustrates an important shift in Parks’s dramatic style and in her sense of artistic responsibility. In _The America Play_, which premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1994, Parks is often seen as using a postmodern dramaturgy in order to affirm and validate African American history and experience despite the fragmented and traumatic character of this past (Elam, “Remembering” 40). In two programmatic essays written during the time between the production of the two plays, Parks prepares the revision of her treatment of the Lincoln myth in _Topdog/Underdog_, her 2001 sequel to _The America Play_. In “An Equation for Black People Onstage,” Parks begins to move beyond a postmodern and multicultural celebration of racial difference as a source for an African American identity and advocates abandoning the “trap” of “insidious essentialism” that reduces African American identity to “only one way of being” (21-22). Calling for a depiction of the “infinite variety” of African American experience, Parks expresses her skepticism about the usefulness of racial categories in depicting collective identities and develops a sensibility that could be described as “postmulticultural” (cf. Elam, “The Postmulticultural”). In a second essay, “ Tradition and the Individual Talent,” Parks provides an even more radical definition of artistic, social, and ultimately
ethical commitment. Emphasizing the dramatist’s responsibility to create new dramatic forms for future generations, Parks observes that our greatest responsibility may be to the future, the Tradition of the Next New Thing. Our work conceives it. We are who they will know. They will turn to us for solace, humor, guidance, and grace. A great piece of writing is a revolutionary act. Do your best work and the rest will follow. (“Tradition” 31)

Parks thus foregrounds futurity as a central feature in literary production that exceeds the dramatist’s obligation to adhere to particular literary traditions (the “Great Tradition”) or to give expression to a playwright’s personal experience of an individual playwright (the “Personal Tradition”). Revising her earlier dictum that “history is time that won’t quit,” Parks’s emphasis on temporality now introduces futurity as an inescapable and universal category (“Elements” 15). Developing a more coherent plot structure and creating more realistic characters in Topdog/Underdog, Parks’s more recent Lincoln play moves beyond her earlier postmodern critique of narrative history. Instead of merely deconstructing the historical Lincoln myth (cf. Bas-seler 2009), Topdog/Underdog shows the eruption of violent and destructive forces as equally flowing from the legacy of past events as well as the manipulative power of theatrical performances. In a Lacanian sense, the historical violence of Lincoln’s assassination as well as its performative repetitions identifies a moment of negativity in the symbolic order of American history that escapes narrative as well as performative attempts of symbolization. In brandishing Booth’s killing of his older brother Lincoln, I will argue, Parks moves not only to unmask identitarian thought as a kind of ethical violence, but also depicts a theatrical event that disrupts the audience’s identification with a symbolic biracial father figure. Before a contrastive reading of The America Play and Topdog/Underdog is possible, however, it will first be necessary to assess Suzan-Lori Parks’s early postmodernist treatment of Lincoln’s assassination in The America Play.

Instead of restaging the actual event of Lincoln’s assassination, the two acts of The America Play underline the performative and theatrical character of all history and build the tension between official historiography and African American counter-memory into the very structure of the play. In the first part of the play, “The Lincoln Act,” a
character identified as “Foundling Father” orally recounts the life story of the “Lesser-Known,” a former gravedigger and Lincoln-look-alike who became famous for reenacting the president’s assassination. Combining an oral and a performative representation of a historical figure of whom there is no official historical record, the Foundling Father’s dramatic monologue is continuously interrupted by replays of the Lesser Known’s popular routine of having paying customers play the assassin’s role. The self-reflexive, metatheatrical elements of the play’s first act thus signal the play’s postmodern production of simulacra that undermine the notion that an authentic reappropriation of the past is possible. In addition, the conflation of the “Foundling Father” and the “Lesser Known” in one role also gestures at the play’s second argument that the construction of consistent personal identities from past historical events is critically limited.

While highlighting the cleavage between a character’s “authentic” identity and his/her impersonation, the reenactment of history in the form of several rehearsals or plays-within-the-play invests the play with an almost absurd quality (cf. Holder 19-20). As a metatheatrical device, the repetitions of the same historical event not only underline the instability of the historical record, as indicated by the random inclusion of historical quotes from Lincoln’s contemporaries and of famous last words of historical figures, but also actively involve the audience in the performance. As the appearance of different shooters indicates, the performative reconstruction of the same historical event with different actors creates a new sense of historical immediacy since everyone can relive the historical event from the perspective of John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln’s assassin. By showing how random visitors of a fictional amusement park exultingly assume the position of the shooter, Parks criticizes the historical amnesia pervading American popular culture. As a new form of historical reenactment, the first part of the play, the “Lincoln Act,” not only invents a new form of audience involvement, but also offers an ironical and self-reflexive commentary on Parks’s project of rendering visible historical perspectives that have largely been excluded from official history. In showing how various characters can and do assume the role of the assassin, Parks undermines an allegorical understanding of history that associates white-
ness with agency and that reduces blackness to passivity and victimization. By underlining the complicity of everyone in the violence that is a constitutive part of the Lincoln myth, the structural openness of the interaction between actors and audience in the play’s first part rather contests the usefulness of racial categories.

In her sequel of plays featuring Abraham Lincoln as an iconic historical figure, Parks not merely celebrates the dead president for his role in the Civil War and as the Great Emancipator who has mandated the liberation of the slaves in the United States. Referring to Lincoln as “faux father,” The America Play also intervenes in a symbolic order that calls for an identification of Lincoln as one of the nation’s father figures. This agenda of inverting the code of America’s historical fantasy is prominently introduced at the beginning of the play when the Foundling Father – speaking as Abraham Lincoln – recites a series of chiasmi:

THE FOUNDLING FATHER AS ABRAHAM LINCOLN: "To stop too fearful and too faint to go."
(Rest)
"He digged the hole and the whole held him.”
(Rest)
"I cannot dig, to beg I am ashamed."
(Rest)
"He went to the theatre but home went she." (AP 159)

As the footnotes to the script indicate, the first, third, and fourth chiasm present examples of this rhetorical device taken from regular dictionaries of American English. The first instance illustrates the rhetorical structure of the chiasm, whereas the others begin to adopt the tropological device to the play’s reconfiguration of history. Drawing on the homophony of “hole” and “whole,” Parks’s second chiasm puns on the duplicitous nature of history as a site of lack and absence as well as an all-inclusive and constricting totality.

As several critics have noted, the play’s combination of a repetitive structure and the tropological principle of chiasmic inversion corresponds to Henry Louis Gates’ “theory of Signifyin(g)” (xxi) as a characteristic feature of African American artistic expression (cf. Solomon and Frank). In his definition of literary criticism as a reconstructive effort to remedy the fragmented, diasporic existence of African Amer-
icans, Gates also relies on the trope of the chiasm when he argues that “[t]o rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify” (Gates xxiii). Whereas Gates promotes the vernacular tradition as the authentic site for African American cultural expression, Parks develops a similar notion in her principle of “Rep & Rev” (repetition and revision), which she adopts from the aesthetic tradition of blues and jazz music. Placing Parks's work in the context of a postmodern “memory industry,” Jeanette Malkin reads *The America Play* as informed by “Rep & Rev” which she sees not merely as an idiosyncratic dramatic form but as a “a recuperative maneuver” that is “aimed at overcoming fixity, or stereotyping, through the returns of memory” (156). For Malkin, Parks's strategy of “Rep & Rev” not only attests to “a well-integrated postmodern sensibility,” but also to a reconstructive and revisionist ethical impulse that seeks to privilege a multicultural notion of difference over identitarian sameness (156). Malkin's critical reading not only underlines the importance of the relationship between content and form in Parks's work, but also illustrates one of the strongly normative presuppositions of such multicultural readings – namely to arrive at an authentic form of representing African American identity and experience on stage.

While the origins for this quest for authenticating the precarious cultural category of “blackness” can be located in the first flowering of African American theater during the Harlem Renaissance, Kimberly Dixon's assessment of Parks's dramatic work illustrates the persistence of this problematic in African American theory and criticism.

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1 In the same interview, Parks claims that “traditional dramatic forms” are “more interesting when they are informed by music” (Parks and Pearce).

2 Charles Taylor diagnosed such a quest for authentic cultural expression at the heart of most multicultural theory and practice in his essay “The Politics of Recognition.”

3 In the twentieth century, the critical question about the conditions of African American theatre have been connected to what could be called the “problem of authenticity.” This problem was first addressed by W.E.B. Du Bois, the African American sociologist, historian, and philosopher, who was one of the leading critical voices of the Harlem Renaissance. While Du Bois mostly spoke favourably about African American music, poetry, and narrative as African Americans cul-
As an integral element of Parks’s postmodern theatrical style, Dixon considers “Rep & Rev” a crucial feature in Parks’s attempt to combine the “liberating hybridity” of African American diasporic existence and its nomadic subjectivity with an expressly postmodern form of dramatic representation (Dixon 215). As Harry J. Elam has persuasively shown, however, *The America Play* can also very well be understood as moving from the multicultural celebration of racial difference of the 1990s to a “postmulticultural” sensibility. As Elam suggests, Parks’s plays respond to recent social developments in the United States that require a revision of conventional postcolonial theory and the concept of hybridity. The critical reevaluation advocated by Elam calls for a greater awareness of the “history of unequal power relationships, as well as the invention of survival strategies” that neither prescribe an assimilationist position nor “the free oscillation of identity positions” (“Postmulticultural” 116). This “postmulticultural” vision is not only indicated by the metatheatrical quality of the play’s first act, but also by Parks’s idea of having an African American actor perform as the white Abraham Lincoln, thus reversing the traditional dramatic form of “blackface” characteristic of the nineteenth-century minstrel show. That the actor freely chooses among different beards – one of them with blonde hair – illustrates the instability of the historical Lincoln as a cultural icon. The same move also undermines the connection between a character’s outward appearance and his authentic identity – a tural means of artistic expression, he upheld a more normative notion of African American theatre. To the chagrin of many of his contemporaries like Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston, Du Bois insisted on the educative function of African American Drama in providing interracial audiences with positive representations of African American characters in order to revise the pervasive racist stereotypes of people of color popularized by the nineteenth-century tradition of minstrel plays. Therefore, Du Bois insisted that “[t]he plays of a real Negro theatre must be: 1. About us. That is, they must have plots which reveal Negro life as it is. 2. By us. That is, they must be written by Negro authors who understand from birth and continual association just what it means to be a Negro today. 3. For us. That is, the theatre must cater primarily to Negro audiences and be supported and sustained by their entertainment and approval. 4. Near us. The theatre must be in a Negro neighborhood near the mass of ordinary Negro people” (134).
theme that Parks further elaborates in Topdog/Underdog (see Larson). As Elam’s view on Parks’s works suggests, the self-reflexive and meta-dramatic style of Parks’s plays does not stop at a postmodernist interest in problematizing the narrative representation of official, national history but expresses a more radical agenda to use theatrical performance as a means of disrupting and intervening into the continuous and uniform repetition of the same racial categories.

Especially the play’s second act can be seen as arguing for moving beyond conflating history and identity. Showing how the Lesser Known’s wife Lucy and his son Brazil dig for the bones of their lost husband and father, “The Hall of Wonders,” is also set in a “great hole” which is described as being located “[i]n the middle of nowhere” and as being “an exact replica of The Great Hole of History” (cf. AP 159 and 174). Similar to the first act, where the Foundling Father performed in the same “great hole,” the setting moves beyond the conventional metaphor of history as a stage by claiming the theatrical space as a site for remaking history. Parks’s pun on the distinction between “hole” and “whole,” however, also serves as a device to signify on the notion of black holes, thereby suggestively pointing out the possibility of alternative orders of time and history. In this sense, she also adopts Houston A. Baker’s description of the “black hole” as a site of negativity “where the trickster has his ludic, deconstructive being, as a subcultural (underground, marginal, or liminal) region in which a dominant, white culture’s representations are squeezed to zero volume, producing a new expressive order” (151-52). For Baker, the notion of the black hole thus leads to the creation of a new “black whole,” “a new order of discourse,” and a new (w)holesome cultural identity (155).

In Parks’s play, however, the achievement of such a new expressive universe is complicated by the duplicitous process of “digging” up the past. By depicting the Lesser Known as a digger of graves and as Lin-
coln impersonator, the second act illustrates the simultaneous operation of forgetting and preservation in the construction of historical memory. In the second act, the Lesser Known’s wife Lucy and his son Brazil begin digging for his bones in order to provide for an appropriate burial although the Lesser Known abandoned his family when he went west to pursue his career as Lincoln impersonator. As becomes clear, the initial chiasm of “He digged the hole and the whole held him” now describes the Lesser Known’s status in and for history while Lucy and Brazil significantly differ in their motivation for digging up the past. For Lucy, work in the stage’s “exact replica of The Great Hole of History” is a search for historical truth. Convinced that a distinction between historical truth and its simulation is possible, Lucy observes

It’s always been important in my line to distinguish. Tuh know thuh difference. Not like your Fathuh. Your Fathuh became confused. His lonely death and lack of proper burial is our embarrassment. Go on: dig. Now me I need tuh know thuh real thing from thuh echo. Thuh truth from thuh hearsay. (AP 175)

While Brazil willingly follows his mother’s wishes, he later distances himself from his mother’s denigration of the Lesser Known as trickster and falsifier of truth. Instead, Brazil more openly embraces his father’s legacy of not only performatively appropriating the past but also of revising it imaginatively. As Brazil observes about his father:

Diggin was his livelihood but fakin was his callin. Soonly natural heud come out here and combine thuh 2. Back East he was always diggin. He was uh natural. Could dig uh hole for uh body that passed like no one else. Diggedem quick and they looked good too. This Hole here – this large one – sshis biggest venture to date. So says hearsay.

(Rest)
Uh exact replica of thuh Great Hole of History! (AP 179)

In the process of revising narrative history and the “subgenre” of the history play (cf. Holder 28), *The America Play* features a series of resemblances between the “replica of the Great Hole of History” as the seminal anthology *The New Negro*, Schomburg opens his essay by claiming that “[t]he American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future” (23).
play’s setting, its “original” which is located somewhere “back East,” and a further copy that resembles a popular amusement park where sensational pageants simulate historical figures and events. In their search for history, Lucy and Brazil turn up historical artifacts and trivia that are collected in the “Hall of Wonders.” Whereas the collection of different historical items, such as George Washington’s “wooden teeth” as well as historical documents and medals (AP 185-86), marks the shallow sensationalism of popular appropriations of the past, the sequence of paradigmatic correspondences between the different holes of history is further extended in the play, by semantically connecting the “Great Hole of History” to the actual hole left in Lincoln’s head by Booth’s bullet (AP 190). As a trace of history’s violence, the wound in Abraham Lincoln’s head can thus also be seen as another “black hole” that pierces the “whole” of history. In both acts, the actual deed of Lincoln’s murder is only indirectly presented on stage. In the first act, the historical event only appears as the simulation of a routine that reenacts the last moments of the historical Lincoln. In the second act, the presence of the president’s assassination is even fainter. Digging in the “Great Hole of History,” Lucy and Brazil listen to the constant echoes of gunshots. These repetitive references to the actual violent deed gesture at a kernel of negativity that, similar to the Lacanian sense of the real, resists its definite symbolization in the symbolic order of America’s historical memory. As can be seen in Topdog/Underdog, Lincoln’s assassination can also be seen to capture the negativity at the core of linguistic and performative reconstructions of the past.

Although the main characters are named Lincoln and Booth, Topdog/Underdog neither directly references the actual historical event of Lincoln’s assassination, nor is it set in “an exact replica of the Great Hole of History” (AP 174). Modeled on the Lesser Known in The Amer-

6 My reading here differs from Heidi Holder’s claim that Parks’s plays underline the processual nature of history and its performative representation (cf. Holder 19). Instead, I suggest that Parks does not stop at showing a never-ending process of signification, but that her dramatic performances seek to identify such elements of the past that elude conventional attempts of meaning making.
ica Play, Lincoln earns his living as an impersonator of the historical Lincoln mimicking the president’s assassination in an unspecified theme park. In the course of the play, however, Lincoln loses his job and returns to his former career as a confidence man and three-card monte player. At the same time, Booth, who adores his older brother, strives to emulate Lincoln’s dexterity and success with cards. His particular interest in the three-card monte – Booth even changes his name to “3-Card” (T/U 17) – is fueled by the potential financial rewards and by a yearning to end his emotional and financial dependence on his older brother. Again gesturing at a conflation of national and family history, the brothers’ constant obsession with money underlines that Parks now portrays the postmodern condition as “rooted first and foremost in the economic and political reality” (Tucker-Abramson 80). For Myka Tucker-Abramson, the self-reflexive style of The America Play gives way to a postmodernity that “is a result of the very real material, economic conditions” (80) in which the characters live. This materialistic critique is also accentuated when Booth, a notorious shoplifter, shows his opposition to the capitalistic economic order by adamantly refusing to work a steady job. According to his sexist views, money and goods are only temporary items to be traded in the emotional and sexual conquest of women. His disregard and negligence of money is also illustrated by his refusal to untie the stocking in which he keeps $500 that he inherited from his mother.

While Tucker-Abramson is certainly right in suggesting that the play’s social realism indicates a revision of Parks’s earlier postmodernist style, her more recent reprise of the Lincoln theme also suggests an ethical turn in Parks’s work. Instead of aimlessly repeating various echoes of “The Lincoln Act,” mere simulations of Lincoln’s assassination, the six scenes of Topdog/Underdog are thematically connected by different variations of the three-card monte scam. Again using her principle of “Rep & Rev,” the card game is crucial to the growing antagonism between the brothers which ends in Booth shooting his older brother in the play’s climactic scene. Within the play’s story-world, this actual shooting is no longer depicted as a reenactment of an authentic historical event, but is clearly motivated by Booth’s rage against his brother who defrauds him of his inheritance. Reducing the
number of characters on stage to the two brothers, Parks’s play not only offers an exploration into the ethical quality of the relationship between the two brothers, but also introduces questions about the ethical character of theatrical performances. With its repetitions of the three-card monte, Parks’s second treatment of the Lincoln assassination now casts “Lincoln” not as a symbolic and absent father figure, but as an exploitative manipulator who abuses the illusionary and fantastical dimension of performative practices in order to harm others.

The repetition of the game is clearly part of Lincoln’s scheme to defraud Booth of the money he inherited from their parents. The final repetition of the three-card monte can thus be seen as a decisive revision to the routine of the three-card monte that reveals how Lincoln unscrupulously exploits his younger brother’s needs and desires. As it becomes clear in the end, Lincoln has intentionally duped Booth by letting him believe that he can beat his older brother in playing cards. By first letting him win several rounds of the game, Lincoln finally bets money against the $500 Booth inherited from their mother claiming that “[m]oney makes it real” (T/U 98). At this point, the play reveals how the theatrical creation of reality involves the psychological disposition of the spectator and also draws on the greed and will to humiliate others. In setting up his brother for his final act of deception, Lincoln not only entices Booth to bet money, but he also goes through various motions, for instance telling Booth that he does not want to play him. This only increases Booth’s eagerness to engage Lincoln in a final match since he is sure of winning. Before making the final call, however, Lincoln distracts Booth by questioning the nature of their family relationship: “I know we brothers, but is we really brothers, you know, blood brothers or not, you and me, whatduhyathink?” (T/U 102). Here, Parks not only shows the deftness with which Lincoln manipulates his brother, but also puns on the significance of “brother” as a designator of kinship, as a fellow African American, or in more universal ethical terms, as a fellow human being who can command another person’s respect and responsibility. Since Parks does not opt for a simplistic melodramatic or sensationalist
formula, however, the play cannot be reduced to a superficial ethical allegory on fratricide as a universal normative taboo.

Nevertheless, the play’s reenactment of the historical shooting also reveals a certain tragic quality by featuring two protagonists who are deeply flawed because they fail to see how their lives are driven by a theatrical struggle for dominion and control. Lincoln’s hustling in *Topdog/Underdog* not only underlines his violation of his ethical responsibility for his brother, but is premised on his recognition of Booth’s intellectual and emotional limitations. As Lincoln observes,

[i]ts like thuh cards. And ooooh you certainly was persistent. But you was in such a hurry to learn thuh last move that you didn’t bother learning thuh first one. That was yr mistake. Cause its thuh first move that separates thuh Player from the Played. And thuh first move is to know that there aint no winning. It may look like you got a chance but the only time you pick right is when thuh man lets you. And when its thuh real deal, when its thuh real fucking deal, bro, and thuh money on thuh line, thats when thuh man wont want you picking right. He will want you picking wrong so he will make you pick wrong. Wrong wrong wrong. Ooooh, you thought you was finally happening, didn’t you? You thought yr ship had come in or some shit, huh? Thought you was uh Player. But I played you, bro. (T/U 106)

Earlier in the play, however, Booth identifies a blind spot in Lincoln’s assessment of his role as Lincoln impersonator. Telling Booth how he sees the fictional shooters as in an inverted mirror image, Lincoln notices how the illusory quality of the reenactment is suspended by the materiality of his living body in the brief moment before the shots are fired when the gun touches his head:

[...] when the gun touches me he can feel that Im warm and he knows Im alive. And if Im alive then he can shoot me dead. And for a minute, with him hanging back there behind me, its real. Me looking at him upside down and him looking at me looking like Lincoln. Then he shoots. (T/U 48)

Seeking to assure himself about his professional future as a mimic of the historical Abraham Lincoln, Parks’s Lincoln here refers to an instance when reality enters into the space of a commercial theatrical performance. The instant in which two characters recognize each other as human beings is always followed by a simulated rendition of the historical act of political violence. Previously in the play, however,
Lincoln has expressly denied the possibility that actual violence may intrude into his routine at the arcade.

**BOOTH:** You ever wonder if someones gonna come in there with a real gun? A real gun with real slugs? Someone with an axe to grind?

**LINCOLN:** No.

**BOOTH:** Someone who hates you come in there and guns you down and gets gone before anybody finds out.

**LINCOLN:** I dont got no enemies. (T/U 46)

Although Lincoln is clearly aware of the hatred his white paying customers exhibit when they fictitiously repeat the assassination of the historical Lincoln, this dialogue suggests that Lincoln does not believe that he is threatened by an actual act of racially motivated violence. At the end of the play, however, Booth’s actual shooting of his older brother not only serves as an act of revenge, but also introduces a moment of negativity in the scripted reality that can be explained in light of Slavoj Žižek’s proposal of a psychoanalytic account of ethical responsibility to the other. Drawing on Lacan’s distinction between the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real, Žižek claims that the ethical encounter with otherness not only calls for responsibility and respect, but also contains a negative element (see “Neighbors” 143). According to such a Lacanian notion of the ethical relationship, the “neighbor” is not only the result of an individual projection. The fantastic “invention” of the other is supplemented and influenced by the norms and regulations of the symbolic order in which the individual psyche is embedded. Lastly, the other can also ultimately be turned into an “inhuman” being that is located outside the precinct of interpersonal responsibility and moral value.

In the context of *Topdog/Underdog*, Booth’s character certainly embodies this imbrication of three crucial elements in interpersonal relationships. From the beginning, Booth fantasizes about the nature of his relationship with Grace, his former girlfriend, and his brother. His invention of an imaginary romance with Grace and his dreams of cooperating with his brother show his proclivity of seeing others as the extension of his own desires and wants. His relationship with Lincoln, on the other hand, is mediated through the symbolic matrix of the three-card monte whose rules and intricacies are only partially
accessible to Booth, despite his attempts to seamlessly integrate him- 
self into its logical structure. When Lincoln questions that they are 
actually brothers and defrauds him of his money, Booth experiences 
how he is turned into “the impossible Thing, the ‘inhuman partner,’ 
the Other with whom no symmetrical dialogue, mediated by the sym-

bo lic Order, is possible” (Žižek, “Neighbors” 143).

When he sees himself degraded and defrauded by his brother at 
the end of the play, Booth thus arrives at the “negativity of freedom” 
and “the zero-level from which every positive content” of the symbolic 
order can be challenged through the “suicidal gesture of a radical act” 
(Žižek, “Neighbors” 140) that destroys the horizon of symbolization in 
which the individual has previously existed. Cutting through the web 
of performative significations represented by the three-card monte 
and by Lincoln’s historical charade, Booth’s radical, revolutionary act 
of killing his brother, whom he also considered the semblance of a 
father-figure, can also be considered an “authentic act” in the Lacani-
an sense. For a brief moment, the roles of the contemporary Booth 
and the historical Booth are conflated and overlap, thus signaling a 
temporary sublation of Booth in a larger symbolic order. As Žižek 
explains in The Ticklish Subject, such an “authentic act” temporarily 
bridges the gap between the subject and the symbolic order trans-
cending the “fundamental divisions and displacements” characteristic 
for the decentered subject in Lacan’s theory (374-375). Against the 
background of Žižek’s renewal of Lacanian theory, the ending of 
Parks’s Topdog/Underdog achieves a moment of identification with 
the symbolic order of narrated history while simultaneously shatter-
ing this order in a revolutionary gesture.

Following her own definition of a dramatist’s responsibility to “The 
Tradition of the New Next Thing” and to create plays that present a 
“revolutionary act” (Parks, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” 31), 
Suzan-Lori Parks’s two plays on Lincoln’s assassination present a 
treatment of history that needs to be understood not only in retro-
spective terms, but also as following an ethical responsibility for fu-
ture generations. As her essay “Tradition and the Individual Talent” 
shows, Parks arrives at this insight by reflecting on the playwright’s 
responsibility – either to the material represented on stage or the Af-
frican American literary tradition. In this sense, Parks cannot only be understood as the classic postmodernist African American playwright that critics have continually discovered in her works (cf. Schmidt). As she embraces more traditional dramatic forms, Parks’s revisionist notion of African American theatre leads her to a more radical experiment in breaking the spell of history. As a result, Parks gestures at the possibility that her own formula of “Rep & Rev” not only stands for “repetition and revision” but could also read “repetition and revolution.”
Works Cited


Paula Vogel's plays constitute a corpus that probes the moral underbelly of American society. The underbelly is the part the animal conceals, its vulnerability, where its vital organs are left unprotected by quills or scales. Over three decades, Vogel has brought to the public space of the stage these hidden aspects of society, where it is most vulnerable and also most immediately reveals its inner functioning, or malfunctioning. This bard of the American underbelly has dramatized dilemmas between the personal and the social ranging from ageing and neoliberalism in *The Oldest Profession* (1981), to sexual orientation and parenting in *The Baby Makes Seven* (1984), AIDS and mourning in *The Baltimore Waltz* (1989) and *The Long Christmas Ride Home* (2004), and domestic violence and the porn industry in *Hot 'n' Throbbing* (1993). In this perspective, her Pulitzer-winning play *How I Learned to Drive* (1997), exposes yet another hidden conflict: between desire as a driving human force and the social vacuum that allows for pedophilia to flourish. Yet there is another level, beyond the subject matter, where this play suggests a more general question about the possibilities and limitations of ethics in postmodern times, after the collapse of modernity's aspirations to moral foundation and codification. The protagonist of the play, in fact, manages to piece together an ethics of self-care, though by revaluing the broken moral lessons she receives through her broken relationships. In the performance of the play, this questioning and revaluing of the moral detritus of modernity is awakened in the audience, and this performative disjointing of
Barbara Antoniazzi

fixed thought becomes a performance of ethics. In what follows, I will examine *How I Learned to Drive* as a form of ethics which questions dogmatic understandings of morality and the value of individual "regulative ideals." As Drucilla Cornell puts it, regulative ideals allow us to see differently the history and social relations in which we are immersed and to orient our practice to the possibility of change. Commitment easily dissolves under the weight of the world. A regulative ideal helps us to see what we might yet become, and this different way of seeing can itself take on a force that encourages critique and commitment. In this sense, it concretizes the invitation to remake the world, as well as providing a guide for our own reflection and judgment. (379)

Projected against Zygmunt Bauman’s idea that, in postmodernity, the individual is ethically “Alone Again,” this conception of the regulative ideal will guide my analysis of the play.

As its title suggests, *How I Learned to Drive* tells a story about a learning I, an individual subject who learns, grows and empowers herself, and tells a story about this process to the audience. But of course learning and telling never happen completely alone or on one’s own. Since in the theater characters are revealed in their interactions (with each other as well as with the audience), and thus in their confrontation with society and its structures and symbols, a play about learning and telling is an exploration of these activities in their social aspects on multiple levels. As the play makes plainly clear, the cognate disjunctions of family life, teaching, telling, and learning, like all social relationships, are in need of a new footing in a fluid world in which modernity’s promise of self-founding social institutions and morality has melted into air. Following Bauman’s view of ethicalaloneness in this “liquid modernity,” my analysis will look at the narrative of the learning I as a quest for an ethical foothold for the individual in a world without stable moral foundations.

Furthermore, the “liquidation” of the institutional structures and moral codes of modernity does not, of course, mean the disappearance of social structures and symbols. In an interview in 2004, Vogel claimed that every play she has written “is a discourse about gender, relationship and power” (Raymond); as a story about learning, *How I Learned to Drive* is also a play about the gendered power relationships of telling (secrets) and teaching (lessons). Hence, I will unpack the
constellation teaching-telling-learning as the methodological motor that sustains the quest for an ethical dimension in a quasi-amoral world. Involved in this triple activity, the audience is co-opted into an exploration that touches the issues of sexuality, self-control and self-destruction. Treading this difficult terrain, the protagonist reconstructs her personal ethos while challenging the audience’s capacity for empathy and yet avoiding the mystifications of nostalgia and the temptation of nihilism.

I. Postmodern Moral Landscapes

Zygmunt Bauman’s Postmodern Ethics and his booklet Alone Again both discuss the demise of what he calls “the modern ambitions towards a non-ambivalent, non-aporetic morality” (Postmodern Ethics 9). Casting the postmodern as the moment in which these utopian ambitions lose sway, Bauman lists the main conceptual consequences of this shift intersecting the intellectual wave which, starting in the late nineties, has been called “the turn to ethics” (cf. Garber et al.). If, as worded in the introduction to the collection The Turn to Ethics, “the decentering of the subject has brought about a recentering of the ethical”(x), then Bauman’s configuration of ethics draws on the “tension between the poststructuralist critique of ethics and the ethical critique of poststructuralism” (Garber et al. ix-x). In Bauman’s rendition: because in postmodernity humans must live without the stability of coherent moral codes, they are ethically ambivalent, their choices enmeshed in cross-pressures of contradictory impulses. Yet, although the idea of a universal morality is rejected, so is moral relativism, in that “moral responsibility” remains the first reality of the self, “a starting point rather than a product of society” (Postmodern Ethics, 13). The individual who finds herself “alone again, after the end of certainty” (cf. Alone Again) is called to demystify “power-assisted ethical codes based on the pretense that society is the guardian of morality”
(Postmodern Ethics 14) while bravely facing the incurable ambivalence in which this responsibility casts the individual subject.¹

Vogel, in her embodied ethics of the theatre, performs this demystification by challenging her audience’s certainties, pressuring the boundaries of their moral comfort zones. In staging the opposition between institutionalized moral codifications and elemental ethical ambiguities, her plays strike a difficult balance that keeps them equally far from relativist escapism and denunciative moralism. Like many intellectuals, Vogel seems to perceive a danger in the fact that “the ethical is too easily and even usually reabsorbed into the moral” (Guil- lory 41). Yet, unlike a theorist, she elects to make the distinction sensible in performance. How I Learned to Drive structures a situation that, on the surface, common-sensibly, calls for moral contempt and denunciation from the audience. Yet the characters, entangled in conflict and contradictory valences, demand an ethical reading; the empathic reader in the audience is set in the same entanglement: she must make choices and express judgments, while being constantly questioned about their validity. The play, dark yet humorous, pivots on only two “real characters”: the female protagonist, Li’l Bit, and her uncle-by-marriage, Peck. The two are intensely involved over the course of seven years in a disturbing romantic relationship, subtly inspired by Nabokov’s Lolita, that teeters on the brink of tragedy. The narrative commutes between past, present and future so that Li’l Bit is simultaneously a vulnerable child, a willful adolescent, and a jaded woman. As a consequence, her story of love and disillusion with Peck is parcelled through chronological and emotional shifts that make it impossible for the viewer to comfortably isolate guilt and responsibil-

¹ In Bauman’s vocabulary, the usage of the adjectives “ethical” and “moral” lends itself to significant intersections which can only be clarified in the specific context of his argument. While I refer the reader to the introduction of Postmodern Ethics for the author’s nuanced deployment of the terms, I will, throughout this article, try to maintain, for clarity, to the more general distinction between morality as the realm of objective views and conduct or institutional codes (mores) and ethics as the problem of “good,” or of the “choice between goods.” For an effectively-phrased discussion of such distinction in terms that I tend to second see John Guillory in the article cited.
ity, leaving as the only imperative the necessity of piercing down through the irreducible duplicity of human relationships to the secrets of self-preservation, and maybe, finally, to the discovery that, to quote Judith Butler, “there is no becoming ethical if not through a certain violence” (26).

How I Learned to Drive has been a popular choice for performance in high schools. It seems that the play’s ethical ambiguity has struck a cord with adolescents’ special sensitivity to conflicts between the personal and the social. What the moral superficiality of the (too-)well adjusted would quickly classify as a simple victim/perpetrator interaction may have a more complex resonance with adolescents’ urgent experience of ambivalence and contradiction. Is Li’l Bit prey to her rapacious uncle? Or is this mutual attraction among adults? Or is it rather the case of a temptress manipulating a weak and wounded man? Precisely because the play does not exclude any of these implications, it undermines all attempts at endorsing straightforward judgment. Consequently, Vogel’s ethics can be defined as performative rather than speculative, assertive or polemic. Performative ethics cannot be theorized and presented as a separate and coherent whole, or even argued as a contest of right and wrong; they can only be made sense of through an empathetic reading of a character, a living nexus of contradictions with little to unify it but a name, a pronoun, or – as Vogel’s character names bring to the surface – a symbol. Likewise, performative ethics cannot be implemented through a systematic “practice;” they can only be actualized in performance, which means within specific, contingent situations, amongst and between their ambiguities. As David Savran has well observed, in her fealty to the complexity of the real, Vogel even renounces the construction of an exemplary feminist hero; quite to the contrary, she “unleashes confusion in the hope that this will lead towards an understanding of the confusion, towards making sense of a society gone awry” (Savran xii).

Borrowing Ulrich Beck’s term, we may define even the small-town context of the story as a “risk society.” Li’l Bit’s opening monologue is a lyrical description of a disheveled suburban Maryland in which the waste of modernity clutters a forlorn rural landscape.
Less than a mile away, the crumbling concrete of the U.S. One wends its way past one-room revival churches, the porno drive-in, and boarded up motels with For Sale signs tumbling down. [...] Here on the land the Department of Agriculture owns, the smell of sleeping animals is thick on the air. The smell of clover and hay mix in with the smells of the leather dashboard. (7)

The pastoral marrow has thinned to a ghostly aura that gives broken men the illusion of being the American Adams of their barefoot youth, “before the malls took over.” The processes of privatization and individualization have reached beyond the landscape to the heart of the community. Mirroring the “crumbling concrete of the U.S.” that defines the surroundings, communal and familial support has been reduced to debris by all-consuming, unbridled and over-stimulated desires. Thus, the risk that in Beck’s framework is industrially produced also pollutes the familial environment; divides family members from one another and sets them against each other; and threatens each member individually, isolated and alone. Risk – which is not a “fact” but a “potential event,” a “hazard” rather than an accident – is produced as personal threat, in each individual’s gaze. Always pierced by prying eyes, Li’l Bit grows up in an atmosphere of incumbent sexual danger that she laments without full awareness, immersed as she is in a world whose coordinates are confused. Like the proverbial Mary Jane with which she identifies, her body, her perception of her own value, and her perception of danger are all in the same disarray:

Li’l Bit: You haven’t heard the Mary Jane jokes? Okay. “Little Mary Jane is walking through the woods. When all of a sudden this man ... jumps out, rips open Mary Jane’s blouse, and plunges his hands on her breasts. And Little Mary Jane just laughed and laughed because she knew her money was in her shoes” (Li’l Bit laughs; the female Greek Chorus does not) ... don’t you ever feel self-conscious? Like you are being looked at all the time? (55)

For a protagonist who, with hindsight, drops the word “pedophilia” at the beginning of the play, such confusion could quickly be ascribed to a repressed sexual trauma that re-emerges under the guise of jokes and obsessions; but the author also chooses to obscure this part of the story from the public, and instead deploys many other clues, figures, and schemata. Prominent among them is the pervasive violation of intimacy by prying gazes and objectifying language. Since her birth, Li’l Bit has been the object of constant scrutiny within and outside the
family circle: the devouring eyes of excitable boys, envious girlfriends, and intrusive relatives have symbolically “bit her off” in virtue of her imposing chest. In a household in which all nicknames refer to the peculiarities of the family members’ genitalia, Li'l Bit is addressed by her lack of a penis. Yet, defining her as a fragment – a “bit” – suggests that she is the only character who can find her place in a different mosaic, and aspire to be part of a better whole. In contrast, the other characters are branded by the violence of constant exposure in ways that reinforce the grotesqueness of villains, and deaden weaker elements. So, while the hypervirile grandpa (Big Papa) is a caricature of patriarchal bestiality whose marriage to fourteen-year-old grandma is remembered as the rape of the Sabine women, Li'l Bit’s desexualized and unnurturing mother (Titless Wonder) is annihilated by her personal delusions and juvenile mistakes. Except for the couple of protagonists, all other characters are subsumed under three actors collectively named the “Chorus.” The Chorus provides a narrative frame for the characters by offering impersonal reflection in addition to personal memories. Taken as a character on its own, specifically as an antagonist, the Chorus gives voice to the conventional wisdom against which Li'l Bit and Peck pursue their individual quest to reconstruct their personal worlds, sometimes avoiding and sometimes suffering the pitfalls of the emotional wasteland which envelops them.

II. Can You Tell the Teacher From the Lesson?

As if to mask the surrounding moral paucity, the Chorus propounds the normative protocols of obsolete moral codes as well as the dysfunctional pedagogy inherent in impoverished familial relations. Since the capacity for empathy has been lost with the degeneration of the social fabric, all communication is structured through lessons that revolve around arbitrary principles and mainly absolve the adults

I would like to thank Conor Mc Nally for reminding me of the “toothiness” of the name Li'l Bit and suggesting other insightful metaphorical implications that were too bountiful to be all included in this article.
from the obligation to look out for – and imaginatively look out from or attempt to empathically understand – the young. Li’l Bit, the main pupil, is thus administered derivatives of a largely preposterous defensive ethos: for example, Grandma’s impositions on sexual etiquette function on the basis of fear: “Let her be good and scared! It hurts! You bleed like a stuck pig! And you lay there and say, ‘Why, O Lord, have you forsaken me?!’”(43). Li’l Bit’s mother’s educational strategy instead involves more radical dislocations of responsibility. First, she transfers to eleven-year-old Li’l Bit the responsibility for her uncle’s conduct: “I will feel terrible if something happens ... but I warn you: if anything happens I hold you responsible” (88). A couple of years later, when the girl is on the verge of sexual initiation, the mother does away with the idea of risk completely to give in to saccharine expressions of closeness. Judging contingencies from her desolate solitude, she almost pushes the girl overboard: “Don’t be scared, it won’t hurt you – if the man you go to bed with really loves you ... I believe in telling my daughter the truth! We have a very close relationship” (43). The mother-daughter conflict, organized around a shifting perception of risk and lack, becomes a multigenerational site in which imperfect warnings reveal the impossibility of women taking care of each other, even in the presence of an acknowledged common predator.

Uncle Peck, who has meekly accepted familial authority for too long, has instead learned to use lessons as instruments of seduction in the only dominant relationship he can entertain: those with children. On the one hand Peck is a textbook pedophile, a soft-mannered voyeur, versed in children’s psychology and out of place among the adults. On the other hand, he is the product of his own unspoken “traumas” – such as shell-shock from World War II (67) and, ostensibly, sexual abuse at an early age (see 89). Anytime he is around children, his attentions become increasingly both empathic and threatening. To his young cousin Bob, Peck is the man who teaches him how to fish but who also understands his weeping at the fish’s sorrows and lets the child’s tears flow in the exclusive secrecy of their company. Could Bob ever refuse the invitation to drink beer with him in the tree house (see 35)? To barely pubescent Li’l Bit, Peck is her “chance at having a father”(87) and someone who “knows an
awful lot” (ibid.). Even in retrospect, he is less an ogre than a Flying Dutchman, a lost soul desperate to find the maiden who will put an end to his wandering (86). As the only source of sympathy that children thrown into such a world can find, Peck represents the sense of belonging they pursue at the cost of their innocence. The price they willingly pay is to keep the secret that Peck asks them not to share. In this way the house in the tree, and the driver seat in the car – topoi of autonomy coveted by children – become microcosms of misrepresented love and potential soul damage.

Despite these bleak premises, Vogel resists a connotation of postmodern familial interaction as automatic and destructive deception. First, obviously "lessons" per se fail to exhaust the rational and emotional interchange within the fragmented community. There is more to learning how to drive, as well as to even the most fragmented family life, than lessons. But even some of the broken lessons can be integrated into actual learning and even growth: on her own, Li’l Bit manages to glean some learning from amongst the lesson-husks scattered by her family, gathering bit by bit from the mowed-over moral wasteland seeds of her own self-preserving ethos. The lessons in defensive driving and deceptive drinking – taught respectively by her uncle Peck and by her mother – fall into the domain of moral conventions that regulate gendered conduct. Yet, because they are learned under an inverted gender sign – she is taught to drink and to drive “like a man” – they are abstracted from their contingent meaning and anchored to a deeper human dimension, unmistakable in the simplicity of the wording. Peck, for example, shifts to father-mode and elucidates the gender dynamics of the road:

This is serious business. I will never touch you when you are driving a car. Understand? (49)

When you are driving your life is in your own two hands. Understand? [...] You’re the nearest to a son I’ll ever have [...]. I want to teach you to drive like a man [...]. Men are taught to drive with confidence – with aggression. The road belongs to them. They drive defensively – always looking out for the other guy. Women tend to be polite – to hesitate. And that can be fatal. (50)

The mother instead delivers a three-page lecture on social drinking:
Sip your drink slowly [...] step away from ladies’ drinks ... avoid anything with sugar, or anything with an umbrella: believe me, they are lethal [...] I think you were conceived after one of those. Drink, instead, like a man: straight up or on the rocks with plenty of water in between (24)

In both cases, engagement in an activity that is equal parts elating and dangerous needs to be performed in masculine terms, while the feminine connotation of passivity – “someone who performs just for you and gives you what you ask for” (51) – is reserved, humorously, for the car and the straight-up drink. Learning to disobey the behavioral conventions of her gender, Li’l Bit avoids becoming an expendable subject. The masculine protocol of survival is to be secured with unflagging repetitions of disciplined mechanical acts as if the body would become the primary learner of spiritual and intellectual control. In this perspective, acquired rituals of behavior have the power to keep consciousness afloat when the risk threshold gets higher – as in the event of date-rapes or car accidents. Ironically, in a State in which road regulations oblige the driver to abide by “Implied Consent” (66), Li’l Bit acquires man-like autonomy in governing bodily, technological and environmental boundaries, exerting her volition only after precise calculation. In the economy of the story, Li’l Bit is the learner and the disciple; yet, in the economy of the play, she becomes, quite to the contrary, “the translator, the teacher, the epicure, the already jaded” (41), and addresses the audience as such.

III. Teaching-Telling-Learning

Li’l Bit opens the play in her late-thirties-incarnation, announcing that “sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson” (7). As a pupil, she has been provided with purportedly infallible moral codes of behavior; as a teacher, on stage, she does the opposite: instead of codes and precepts, the audience is given questions, doubts and dilemmas that instigate unrelenting speculation and a constant

3 “As an individual operating a motor vehicle in the state of Maryland, you must abide by ‘Implied Consent.’ If you do not consent the blood alcohol content test, there may be severe penalties.” (Vogel 66)
reassessment of events. The play’s title and inception immediately foreground the constellation of teaching-telling-learning as a deep structure that is not only a major theme of the play, but which becomes particularly significant when we consider the relationship that the theatre entertains with the audience. Li’l Bit, as the teacher on stage, presents her audience with an ethical challenge: how will they bear witness to disturbing scenes without dismissing their human roots and implications?

Vogel’s choice is to present the human implications first. Being an omniscient but disjunctive narrator, Li’l Bit refuses to reproduce the content of memory with the clarity that hindsight should provide, because abiding to a linear (if reversed) chronology would undermine her lesson. Only after the lesson has been assimilated, does she trust the audience with her secret. Thus, all the facets of the story of her passion for and denial of Peck are delicately laid out with troubling pathos: Li’l Bit’s adolescent desire for her uncle is honest, her dismissal of the man is ruthless, and his premature self-destruction after she exits his life is as cliché as heart-rending. Only after receiving the account of a romance between a man and a woman are we shown the abusive scene between the man and the child. This is the only scene in which Peck and Li’l Bit touch sexually, the woman sitting on the man’s lap, the man slipping his hands under her blouse with a moan. As this happens, Li’l Bit’s dialogue is spoken by the youngest girl in the Chorus, as if the body were already dissociated from its owner. The adult Li’l Bit, in fact, recalls the event as the last day which she lived in her body: “I retreated above the neck, and I’ve lived inside the fire in my head ever since” (90). The viewer’s capacity for empathy, first weakened by the developments of the story, is suddenly co-opted again, now shorn of all sentimentalism in virtue of this disembodying, a Brechtian “alienation effect” which points at the critical core of the play, a core extending beyond the materiality of abuse. As Ann Pellegrini has brilliantly argued in an essay that situates the play in a discourse on feminism and sexual trauma, “How I learned to Drive does not shrink from showing Li’l Bit’s woundedness, but, no less significantly, it neither assigns her wounding to any one event nor makes injury the whole of her story, the hole in her self” (416).
As the audience is called to disentangle the empathetic understanding of the story from the shocking scene of the crime and violation – to keep separate and intact their own head and heart – they can be assisted in the most difficult step in this effort, most difficult but necessary for an empathetic understanding of this forbidden story – the overcoming of the shame-inducing taboos guarding the moral codes of age and sex – by the doubling of theatrical performance in actor and character, in play-acting. This is why, for the part of Li'l Bit, Vogel recommends the casting of “a young woman who is of ‘legal age’ [but] who can look as close to eleven as possible.” (Source) If the actor is too young, she adds, “the audience may feel uncomfortable” (4), or may, as I argue, recast the whole play as a story of sexual violence.

The temporal ordering of the narrative also serves to enable the audience to understand the characters as wholes distinct from — though nonetheless effected by — the bodies at the scene of the crime. If placed at the beginning, the shocking scene of violation would have condemned Li'l Bit to be defined only by her violation and violability. Instead, in the play's non-linear psychic time, in which women’s bodies and children’s voices coexist and secrets are revealed when the audience is ready to (re)witness them, we can witness Li'l Bit's life as a “whole” and endowed with agency, in spite of her vulnerability. After all, as Adriana Cavarero reminds us, “the human being is vulnerable as a singular body exposed to wounding. There is not, however, anything necessary about [a particular] vulnus (wound), [but] only [about] the potential for a wound to occur at any time in contingent circumstances” (30). Thus the audience of How I Learned to Drive must at first be sheltered from the shock of the real, to prevent this shock from petrifying critical thinking and empathetic understanding. In other words, to sum up: with the techniques of “alienation effects” – the dissociation of the (adult) actor from the (immature, vulnerable) character as well as the dissociation of the young voice (spoken from the Chorus) from the adult body of the actor – and the ordering of the narrative according to the psychic progress of memory and understanding (backwards to the event) rather than linear time, the audience is sheltered from the tendency of moral shock to reify and oversimplify the nuanced ethical exploration that constitutes Li'l Bit’s “lesson.”
Li’l Bit’s wound has, in fact, remained largely “potential,” rather than bringing about the complete devastation of the girl’s psyche. The fragmented temporality of the story told mimics two neuropsychological dynamics: the workings of memory in the wake of psychic injury – for example, as investigated by Pellegrini – but also the non-linear mechanisms of apprehension and embodied cognition that continue, in spite of trauma. Telling is remembering, but the remembrance is not – as adult Li’l Bit wants us to think – only in the fire of the brain. It is not by chance that How I Learned to Drive is part of a dyptich called “The Mammary Plays,” a title whose phonetic double, “the Memory plays,” is directly addressed in the text. Like the names in the dysfunctional family, memory (mammary) is spelled on the body, not as a disfiguring mark though, but as a bodily metaphor of the risks – but also the “credentials” (Vogel 17) and the possibilities – of gender, of “the messy ambiguities of lived embodiment.” (Pellegrini 427) Whereas we are told that body and head have been sealed off from each other forever, we are also shown, on the contrary, that Li’l Bit’s body has (also) learned.

But what exactly has the body learned? Early in the play Li’l Bit confesses that, because of a drinking problem, she was kicked out of college in 1970, that is, right after she stops seeing her uncle. She does not go back home and does her best to get through a “Nixon recession:”

What I did, most nights, was cruise the Beltway and the back roads of Maryland. Racing in a 1965 Mustang – and as long as I had gasoline for my car and whiskey for me, the night would pass. Fully tanked, I would speed past the churches and the trees on the bend, thinking just one notch of the steering wheel would be all it would take, and yet some ... reflex took over. My hands on the wheel in the nine and three o’clock position – I never so much as got a ticket. He taught me well. (21)

The embodied knowledge of the moral encoding achieved through her practice of her mother’s and her uncle’s inflexible protocols anchor her in a “reflex” that guarantees survival. At the intersection of self-control and self-destruction, when the mind slips into darkness, the body remembers the lesson and does not surrender either to alcoholic unconsciousness or willful disaster. Even with her mind on the brink, Li’l Bit’s body drinks like a man and drives like one too; and as
Peck foretold, she does not die in the driver’s seat. In the reintegration of intellectual and corporeal cognition, the subject behaves according to a regulative ideal that supersedes institutional permissions – to marry at fourteen, to drink at sixteen, to love at eighteen. An ideal is born surreptitiously out of the interdependence of lesson and threat.

At the outset, I called on Zygmunt Bauman in an attempt to portray the postmodern as the territory where the wrecks of modernity’s grand ambitions coexist with the awareness of the moral vacuum which threatens individual ethical life – and thus the necessary return of the ethical to the individual. In my analysis, I have tried to portray How I Learned to Drive as a dramatization of the interaction between the residual ghosts of modernity’s failed codes and the attempt to develop, despite circumstances, ethics as a care of the self. Adapting John Guillory’s proposition that “reading belongs to the field of the ethical because it is a practice of the self” (39), it can be argued that, in this case particularly, the stage provides a communal version of such reading which is amplified, multiplied and complicated by the social and psychic resonances that the assembly of a multitude of living bodies in shared space creates. For the characters as well as for the audience – as a social group and as individual spectators and readers – the play of bodies on the public stage corresponds to a play in the ethical mind that sifts out hollow prescriptions to re-discover, unexpectedly, ethical value. For example, the value of mercy: Vogel’s invocation of Shakespeare frames the play with a passing reference to The Merchant of Venice – “the quality of mercy,” like the quality of responsible consent, “is not strained” (18). Because it is voluntary, mercy mitigates the compulsions of revenge and self-righteousness. Thus the lessons of memory, instead of overwhelming Li’l Bit, provide her with the license, motor, and gas pedal of true maturity: the psy-

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4 Finding college superfluous for a girl’s education, Li’l Bit’s relatives ridicule the utility of Shakespeare in real life. In this context, the girl retorts against her grandfather’s bantering with an angry deployment of The Merchant of Venice. (cf. Vogel 18, 91)
chic independence as well as the bodily ability to navigate society and its risks with individual agency, a reflexive ethical footing of her own.
Barbara Antoniazzi

Works Cited

Primary Literature


Secondary Literature

Autobiographical Performance and the Ethics of Memory in Ronnie Burkett’s Theatre of Marionettes

I. Unintended Performance and Acts of Memory

Billy Twinkle has just lost his job. A cruise ship puppeteer in the middle of a midlife crisis, he shushed a woman in the audience who kept talking during his “Stars in Miniature” show, a cabaret-style marionette performance with “Bumblebear,” a roller-skating animal act, and a stripper routine involving a puppet called “Miss Rusty Knockers.” Now, Twinkle is about to commit suicide when suddenly the ghost of his dead mentor and puppetry teacher, Sid Diamond, appears in the form of a hand puppet which quotes extensively from Shakespeare, appropriately beginning with Hamlet’s famous soliloquy “To be or not to be, that is the question –” (3.1.55-89). Nevertheless jumping off ship, Twinkle is surprised to find that the deep blue sea actually is a theatre stage painted in blue. “There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy,” the ghost puppet quotes Hamlet again (1.5.66-67), explaining to the amazed Twinkle that they indeed are in a theatre with a new production about to begin, the reenactment of Twinkle’s life as a marionette theatre: “The Billy Twinkle Show. Your life, condensed and in miniature!” (Burkett 20).
Thus begins *Billy Twinkle: Requiem for a Golden Boy* by the Canadian puppeteer, set designer, actor, director and playwright Ronnie Burkett. The production premiered at the Citadel Theatre, Edmonton, Alberta, in 2008 and extensively toured throughout Canada, Australia, and Great Britain. After his dead mentor, Sid, shows him the “most beautiful marionette theatre in the world” (21), Twinkle – played by Burkett himself – re-stages scenes from his life with that theatre’s marionettes. In this way, a complex theatre of memory is set into motion which, more than any biographical similarity between the author/puppeteer and his protagonist, allows *Billy Twinkle* to be read as an autobiographical performance. As Sidonie Smith has argued, autobiography in general, even if its “scene of writing” is not a literal stage, must be understood as a “performative” rather than “self-expressive” act:

There is no essential, original, coherent, autobiographical self before the moment of self-narrating. Nor is the autobiographical self expressive in the sense that it is the manifestation of an interiority that is somehow ontologically whole, seamless, and ‘true.’ [...] In each instance, then, narrative performativity constitutes interiority. That is, the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an effect of autobiographical storytelling. (108-109)

Regarding *Billy Twinkle*, however, an autobiographical performance is at work not only because of the performative production of “self” as described by Smith, nor merely due to the fact that this production takes place “in front of precise audiences,” which – according to Smith – is yet another aspect of autobiography’s performative quality (108). Since she bases her readings on prose texts such as Gertrude Stein’s 1933 *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Smith’s use of terms such as “stage,” “audience” and the “mise en scène” of autobiographical performativity (110) remains, to a large extent, metaphorical. In contrast, the *Billy Twinkle* production literally employs a stage, an audience and a concrete *mise en scène* to frame its autobiographical

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1 My discussion of *Billy Twinkle* is based on the published text as well as on the performance seen at the Factory Theatre, Toronto, on September 25, 2010, shortly before the production was retired.
performance. It is only due to a certain doubleness of these instances, however, that the play becomes visible as a materialization of “autobiographical performativity.” In Billy Twinkle, the audience and the stage are not only there as concrete elements of an extra-diegetic reality (i.e., the real theatre and the real people who paid for their tickets), they are – – in this concrete physical presence – – at the same time part of the fiction.

This becomes especially clear in the scene of the attempted suicide near the beginning of the play (Burkett 13-20). When Burkett as Twinkle jumps from the part of the stage which, at that moment, represents the cruise ship, onto another part of the stage which Twinkle, along with the audience, at that moment believes would represent the sea, neither Burkett nor Twinkle drown. The former does not drown (in reality) because he is an actor on a theatre stage. The latter does not drown (within the fiction) because reality enters the fiction through three simple words, spoken by Sid: “It’s a stage” (19). Then Sid shouts: “Turn up the lights!” (20). The house lights come up in the theatre, exposing the “real” audience just like Sid’s words have exposed the “real” stage. “[Who] are those people?” Twinkle wants to know, “Is this heaven?” (20). “Like hell,” Sid answers, “They’re punters, The Great Unwashed, spectators, subscribers, devotees of Thespus, whatever you want to call them. They’re your audience, kid!” (20). While Twinkle’s mistaken interpretation that he might be in heaven would introduce an – – albeit fuzzy – – disjunction between signifier (the theatre audience) and signified (the angels, perhaps), Sid’s clarification has the theatregoers play, as it were, the same role twice: during the Billy Twinkle performance, they both constitute an audience in reality and within the fiction. Likewise, the stage, which – – as will be explained further – – is multiplied according to the metatheatrical model of the stage-upon-a-stage, represents various fictional stages and, of course, “is” a stage. A similar doubleness applies to the mise en scène, insofar as Burkett openly manipulates his marionettes throughout the performance, i.e. the puppeteer and thus the actual process of staging is visible. Although Burkett uses open manipulation
in all of his shows, *Billy Twinkle* marks the first time that he – – while being a puppeteer – – also plays the role of a puppeteer. The actual mise en scène (Burkett’s puppet show) thus doubles as the metaphorically laden puppet show staged by Twinkle as a reenactment of his life and a mise en scène of his (or, as will become clear, maybe others’) memories. This doubleness is one of the reasons why *Billy Twinkle* is usually read as an autobiographical show in spite of Burkett’s insistence to the contrary (cf. MacLean).

If I consider Burkett’s play as an autobiographical performance, it is not because of the similarities between the author/puppeteer and his protagonist Billy Twinkle that make it “hard for anyone familiar with [Burkett’s] work [...] not to find echoes of his life,” as Colin MacLean alleges in a review for the *Edmonton Sun*. Like other protagonists in plays by Burkett – – *Street of Blood*’s Eden Urbane, for instance – – Twinkle shares with the author that he grew up on the Canadian prairies and identifies as gay (cf. Cleveland 69). Even though the audience might be aware of these similarities and might be influenced by this knowledge, it is the metatheatrical doubleness of mise en scène, stage, and audience that I have just described, which makes *Billy Twinkle* perceivable as an autobiographical performance, regardless of the question if and to which extent Burkett and Twinkle are related. By combining an autobiographical and a metatheatrical model, *Billy Twinkle* leaves questions such as these behind and puts its focus on what literary critic Sherrill Grace argues auto/biographical plays “at their best” would be doing: “to make us rethink the concept of self and the relationship of self to other” by “staging processes of identity formation” (15). Grace bases her claim on Jill Dolan’s assertion that “the

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2 Nevertheless, Burkett has combined open manipulation and acting in earlier productions. In *Street of Blood* (1998), he was both present as puppeteer and playing the role of Jesus Christ.

3 Writing about an (auto-)biographical performance adapted from Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2005), and drawing on the work of film theorist Vivian Sobchak, theatre scholar Janelle Reinelt rightly claims that whether spectators regard something as “fictional” or “documentary” is co-dependent on the “multiple experiential relationships to performance based on individual cultural itineraries” (10).
liveness of theater performance reveal[s] performativity” in society and culture at large – Sidonie Smith’s “autobiographical performativity,” for instance – and thus offers, “literally, a place to investigate some of the questions posed only metaphorically elsewhere” (Dolan 78-79).

In this sense, *Billy Twinkle* “literalizes” autobiographical performance, thus constituting – as I will argue – a place to reflect upon what has been called, by Paul Ricoeur, for instance, the “ethics of memory.” According to Ricoeur, to speak of such an ethics is only possible because memory is not just about “knowing” things from the past, but also “a way of doing things [….] with our minds; in remembering or recollecting, we are exercising our memory, which is a kind of action” (5). Mieke Bal, in a similar stance, uses the term “acts of memory” to emphasize that remembering is “not merely something [of] which you happen to be a bearer but something that you actually perform, even if, in many instances, such acts are not consciously and willfully contrived” (vii).

It is this understanding of the “act of memory” as a largely unintended performance that is, in my reading of *Billy Twinkle,* at the heart of the ethical questions posed by the play. Among the puppets that Burkett as Twinkle uses to re-stage scenes from Twinkle’s past are younger versions of Sid and Twinkle, the latter’s parents, and a businessman who seduced him at age fifteen. While performing the scene of that seduction, Twinkle is suddenly interrupted by Sid: “Okay, okay, okay! That’s enough of that!” (45). Alluding to the fact that Twinkle’s mentor is now only a handpuppet which he, as a puppeteer, has to wear like a glove, Twinkle remarks: “Yeah, I could feel your sphincter getting tight. […] Straight men always clench their assholes whenever things start getting a bit gay” (45-46). He reminds Sid that he is “not the one who built the puppets […]. Why did you make me remember him anyway?” (46). As in this short exchange, Burkett’s play repeatedly stages a tension between Sid and Twinkle, the two figures that are present not only within the scenes from the past but also on the narrative level that represents Twinkle’s present. Especially because Sid – in contrast to Twinkle – is a puppet on both levels, this tension inaugurates a constant shift between who is re-
membered and who remembers, between who is acting and who is being acted upon. This shift is “literalized,” as it were, in the very form of open manipulation marionette theatre, in which the puppet player, and by extension, the strings, are visible; a constellation emphasizing what according to Steve Tillis is the “ontological paradox of the puppet,” namely that it “challenges the audience’s understanding of object and life” (“The Actor” 115), since even though “the puppet replaces the actor as the site of signification,” it “does not act” but is “an object that is acted upon” (“The Actor” 111). As I will argue, *Billy Twinkle* thus stages the “act of memory” as an ongoing negotiation of how to perform memory without suppressing the subject position of either the remembered other or the remembering self, whoever that other or that self, if discernible at all, might be.

II. Puppetry and the Ghosts of Shakespeare

Burkett’s work often deals with questions of memory and remembrance, as is already suggested by the title he chose for a series of plays that premiered between 1994 and 2000. Together, *Tinka’s New Dress*, *Street of Blood* and *Happy* constitute “The Memory Dress Trilogy.” These productions, respectively dealing with the Holocaust, HIV and the loss of a loved person, have rightly been analyzed as “plays that commemorate the past in ways that signal both the personal and collective dimensions of memory [and demonstrate] the importance

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4 As has often been criticized, the presuppositions underlying Tillis’ argument are highly problematic. Even though he dedicates his study *Toward an Aesthetics of the Puppet* to “cross-cultural observation and analysis of theatrical puppet performance” (6), his attempt – already questionable in itself – to isolate “the fundamental constants and variables of the puppet as it exists in all of its theatrical manifestations” (9), is informed throughout by Western ontological and psychological concepts (cf. Wagner 53-54). In contrast to Tillis, I neither presuppose a “psychological desire to imagine life” (Toward an Aesthetics 56), nor do I understand the “aesthetic nature of the puppet as perceived object and imagined life” (28) as an “ontological paradox” (28) that would be valid across all cultures and historical periods. However, Tillis’ observations on puppetry are useful as long as they are restricted to specific forms of puppetry and particular performances, as in this case – Burkett’s *Billy Twinkle* production.
of recovering our overlapping cultural and personal histories” (Cleveland 20). There are many similarities between “The Memory Dress Trilogy” and Billy Twinkle, both stylistically – e.g., the use of open manipulation – and thematically. The topic of growing up as a gay teenager in rural Canada is continued from Street of Blood, for instance, and the preoccupation with mourning reflects the subject matter of Happy. After all, Billy Twinkle, as its subtitle suggests, is a “requiem,” i.e., an act of publicly mourning the dead. The “Golden Boy” for whom this requiem, still according to the subtitle, is performed, is Twinkle’s former self: “A real live boy who dreamed of being a puppeteer” (Burkett 21). At the same time, it is a requiem for Sid, Twinkle’s dead mentor, with whom the latter never made peace after a terrible fight about whether puppetry should aspire to be “high art” or not (see Burkett 58-64). In the end, it becomes clear that these two acts of mourning were related from the beginning. The “ghosts” of Twinkle’s memories and of Sid can only be put to rest after Twinkle learns that Sid regarded him, even through their estrangement, as “his son” (81), and he himself accepts a “Golden Boy” as his protégé (85-89). The handpuppet vanishes from stage, suggesting that Sid is now at peace, and Twinkle regains his lust for life: “Land, ho!” (91) are the last words of the play, signaling towards an unknown future.

The importance of (non-biological) father-son-relationships, ghosts, and acts of mourning in Burkett’s play suggests that the quotations from Hamlet at the very beginning of Billy Twinkle were more than just a reference to the puppeteer’s attempted suicide. Taking up Marvin Carlson’s metaphor of the “haunted stage,” which itself draws on a rich tradition of describing theatre as a site of ghostliness (see Carlson 1-8), one might argue that Billy Twinkle, through its intertextual relationship to Shakespeare and Hamlet, is haunted by “that most haunted of all Western dramas” (Carlson 4). It even explicitly frames its intertextuality as something spectral by introducing Shakespeare through a ghost quoting Hamlet and being itself a quote from Shakespeare’s play. Similar to Hamlet’s “undead” father, Twinkle’s former mentor Sid dwells between the living and the dead because his death is not properly remembered by the living. In contrast to Hamlet’s father who is “doomed [...] to walk the night” due to the “foul crimes
done in [his] days of nature” (1.5.10-13), Sid remains a ghost because Twinkle – instead of eulogizing his former mentor – has integrated him into a comic routine. In one of the latter’s variety acts, a Sid puppet plays an old man with pink bunny ears – which the ghost Sid also has to wear (see Burkett 15) – and is equipped with an inflatable balloon instead of genitalia (see Burkett 77-80).

Throughout Burkett’s play, Hamlet and Shakespeare in general serve as the site of a cultural struggle between, in the words of Sid, “showbiz” and “theatre” (32). For Sid, in his youth – the “golden age of American puppetry” (63) – it was important to prove that “puppets were serious business” (63) without any inherent link to the entertainment industry:

It was hard going. I drove endless dirt roads just to take Shakespeare in miniature to people who had never seen a marionette or heard such words before. Othello in the deep South. Farmers witnessing their first Midsummer Night’s Dream. The Merchant of Venice in churches and factory canteens, The Tempest in schools along the Atlantic and Pacific, Twelfth Night for months on end, coast to coast and back again. And always, always Hamlet and The Taming of the Shrew, for in those uncertain times we needed to wonder at life and laugh, too. Me and my puppets on those endless dirt roads. (63)

There is only one scene in which Twinkle performs Shakespeare, but much to the dismay of Sid, it is a “word perfect” (58) version of The Taming of the Shrew with Petruchio as an anthropomorphized rooster and Kate turned into Cowtrina the Cow; a production that Twinkle calls “The Taming of the Moo” (58). Angrily, Sid interrupts the performance, claiming that puppets “are supposed to be reinventions of self,” and asking his student whether he “want[s] to be seen [as] livestock” (59). Twinkle, in response, rejects Sid’s assertion that marionettes are “reinventions” of the puppet player: “They’re characters, that’s all” (59). This dialogue continues a passage from earlier in the play in which Sid reminded Twinkle of the time when the latter, as a child, was sanding Sid’s puppets: “[All] you felt were limbs,” the ghost Sid objects, “when in fact I had given you pieces of characters. Shylock! Iago! Titania and Prospero and Ophelia and Lear!” (35). Due to his alleged disrespect for Shakespeare, Twinkle produces marionettes that are – in the eyes of Sid – no “characters” at all, but “[strippers] and juggling clowns and cabaret singers” (35-36).
In this way, the dichotomy that Sid, in line with traditional views of art, establishes between “high” and “popular” culture, is connected to questions of autobiography. “True art,” as Sid would have it, faithfully represents the “life” of its creator, albeit not in a literal way, but as “reinvention of self,” thus turning marionettes into full-fledged psychological characters. For Sid, this would be “theatre,” while “showbiz” is something he regards as having lost its relation to reality, portraying “livestock” instead of “life,” “limbs” instead of “characters.” What must be even worse, from this point of view, is that Twinkle’s entertainment routines – despite their alleged remoteness from reality – alter the way in which that reality is understood. Not only is such an alteration alluded to in Sid’s question whether Twinkle wants to be seen “[as] livestock” (59), it materializes itself through the return of Sid as a ghostly handpuppet with pink bunny ears, or so Sid claims:

[You] were not trained to make a marionette of me wearing bunny ears for a comedy routine in your act, which is what you did after I died. And keeps me from being truly dead […]. I’m here to see that you retire that old man with the bunny ears routine and make things right so I can cross into the light. (17)

Through its very form, Burkett’s play resists the rather conservative cultural politics put forth by its character Sid. In performance, Burkett as Twinkle skilfully executes the comic routines alluded to in the dialogue, and many more. However, this “resistance” does not impair the ethical implication of Sid’s argument, i.e., that Twinkle is responsible for (in the double sense of being both the cause and the guardian of) the ghost of his mentor. Rather, the tension between Twinkle and Sid emphasizes that such a responsibility is subject to ongoing negotiation and cannot be deduced from a normative set of rules.

As philosopher Avishai Margalit argues, “remembering and forgetting” cannot be “subjects of moral praise or blame” (7). For Margalit, the whole question of memory has to be disentangled from “moralism: the disposition to cast judgments of a moral kind on what is unsuitable to be so judged” (13). Instead, the philosopher calls for an “ethics of memory,” since ethics, according to Margalit, is “concerned with loyalty and betrayal, manifested among those who have thick relations” (8), i.e. relations that are “anchored in a shared past or moored in shared memory” (7). Thus, the question of how Twinkle
remembers Sid or his own life, for that matter, is an ethical, not a moral one: The memories performed are therefore neither inherently good nor bad, but they have to become "responsible," as it were, for the ones remembered (including one's former selves) as well as for the ones who remember.

This act of becoming ethically responsible through negotiating "shared memory" can be read into Billy Twinkle's recurring concern with filiation, in this case, the question of how to follow one's father – another subject the play has in common with Hamlet. While neither Sid nor Twinkle have "biological" sons, both struggle to become "spiritual" fathers. In one of the first scenes re-staged from the puppeteer's life, a 12-year old Billy Twinkle approaches Sid at a puppet festival and begs the latter to teach him everything about the art of puppetry (31-34). "That was puppetry's blackest day," the ghostly Sid remarks right after the flashback: "It haunts me still" (35). The adult/human version of Twinkle, in contrast, admits to having "forgotten that" (35). Even though Burkett as Twinkle is the operator literally pulling the strings during this re-staging of Twinkle's past, once again it seems to be Sid who makes his student remember. The "act of memory," of remembering the wish to follow in the other's footsteps is only concluded, when – at the end of the play – a similar scene takes place in the puppeteer's present: Now Twinkle is to become the teacher/father of an androgynous-looking boy who calls himself Rocket (85-89). Thus, the re-staging of what had been forgotten leads to an ethically "responsible" act in the present. As mentioned above, this is the precise moment in which the adult Twinkle realizes that Sid's ghost has disappeared: "My god, Sid... can you believe that kid? [...] BILLY looks around for SID, but instead finds a pair of pink fabric bunny ears on a headband, identical to those worn by the SID handpuppet" (90).

Considering the trajectory of the ghost and his memory, the reference to Hamlet seems to underscore that every play, according to Marvin Carlson, may be considered a "memory play," because "something [is] coming back in the theatre" that has been performed before – in reality or on stage – and because that memory is "subject to continual adjustment and modification as the memory is recalled in new circumstances and contexts" (2). Theatre scholar Freddie Rokem reads
the ghost scene in *Hamlet* as a metatheatrical comment on this specific quality of theatre. While the question “What, has this thing appeared again tonight?” (1.1.21), within the fictional framework of Shakespeare’s play, refers to the appearance of the ghost, it also implies, “[o]n the metatheatrical level […] that the repressed ghostly figures and events from that (‘real’) historical past can (re)appear on the stage in theatrical performances” (Rokem 6). By letting itself be haunted by *Hamlet*, Burkett’s *Billy Twinkle* emphasizes its own metatheatricality due to which the play not only presents theatre as a site haunted by memories, figures and events from the past but insists – as in the final scene between Rocket and Twinkle – on the positive outcome of this haunt.

III. Ventriloquism and Fragments of Self

From the very beginning of “The Billy Twinkle Show,” i.e. the restaging of Twinkle’s life, “condensed and in miniature” (Burkett 20), Burkett’s play destabilizes any notion of who is responsible for the memories performed. While Burkett never attempts to hide the fact that he, as the actor/puppeteer, is speaking for all of the marionettes, albeit with distinct voices, this act of speaking is made explicit only with regard to the ghostly Sid. When, for instance, Burkett is lending his voice to a younger version of Twinkle (as represented by one of eight Twinkle marionettes), even though the act of speaking is not hidden as such, it is subject to what Tillis calls “‘figurative’ occlusion” (“The Actor” 113) because the audience’s attention, during the flashbacks, is directed towards the scene, not the puppeteer:

> [Even when] the operator works the puppet in full view of the audience, with the words clearly coming from his mouth in a more or less natural voice, […] the puppet is the site of signification. […] Puppet operators are comfortable in the knowledge that, despite their physical presence, they will remain in the shadow, as it were, of the puppets on which they site their performance. (“The Actor” 113-14)

This is different for the relation between the adult Twinkle, for whom not a puppet but the puppeteer himself is the site of signification, and the ghost of Sid.
First, as a ghost, Sid is a handpuppet on the level of operation as well as within the fictional world of the play: “Sid, why are you a handpuppet wearing bunny ears?” (Burkett 17), Twinkle asks after the ghost’s appearance. As a handpuppet, Sid entertains a different relation to Burkett and the adult Twinkle than the marionettes. Not being controlled by strings, he becomes a part of the puppeteer’s own body, effectively introducing a split perception of who Burkett as Twinkle is. According to Tillis, in handpuppety, “the audience perceives the operating hand as divorced from the human operator” (Toward an Aesthetics 107). If Burkett as Twinkle is, in this sense, partly becoming puppet (cf. Tillis, “The Actor” 114), Twinkle is as much being haunted by Sid as Burkett is Sid’s operator.

Second, due to being part of the puppeteer’s body, the Sid handpuppet is not restricted to specific stages upon the stage, as are the other puppets. The *Billy Twinkle* set consists of four distinct areas, two of which are exclusive to Sid and Burkett as Twinkle. These are areas that exhibit a metatheatrical doubleness, namely the main stage, painted ocean-blue, and the raised stand from which Burkett, during most of *Billy Twinkle*, operates the marionettes. In an ambiguity similar to that of the ocean/stage, the stand both represents the ship’s bridge and is a bridge: As a “standard puppetry term,” according to Burkett, “bridge” refers to “the elevated platform in a traditional marionette theatre on which the puppeteer stands” (1). Below the bridge are two stages used for the marionette scenes. While one represents the wooden-plank deck of a ship (and is where variety scenes such as “Bumblebear” or “Miss Rusty Knockers” play), the other is built as a miniature theatre, complete with a functioning red curtain. This is the stage upon which the scenes from Twinkle’s life are re-staged. Both the ghost Sid and Burkett as Twinkle are on the bridge during these flashbacks. Thus, they both become the operators as well as the inner-scenic spectators of their memories.

Third, while the puppeteer is speaking for the other puppets, he is not speaking with them. Thus, apart from the conversations between the adult Twinkle and the ghost Sid, all dialogue – albeit spoken by (one) human – is taking place between puppets. The only two exceptions to this rule mark the transition I have described above: the tra-
jectory of Sid’s memory, from the stage-upon-a-stage that is the scene of the flashbacks, into the puppeteer’s present. The female marionette Doreen Gray tells the adult/human Twinkle that Sid regarded him as “his son” (81), and, one scene later, the marionette Rocket asks the puppeteer for his help figuring out puppetry (89). In a sense, both these scenes leave the realm of memory, and hence cannot come from within the puppeteer.

Fourth, when speaking with and for the ghost Sid, Burkett as Twinkle is also being spoken through. As a handpuppet which is physically connected to the puppeteer, Sid does not direct the audience’s attention far away from Burkett’s/Twinkle’s mouth. In order for “figurative” occlusion not to set in, the play has the puppeteer expressively, and in vain, try “literal” occlusion: When Sid is speaking during his first appearance – i.e. Burkett as Twinkle is speaking as Sid – , “BILLY clasps his hands over his mouth to stifle the voice [...] He covers his mouth again, then quickly moves his hands as if to trick himself” (14-15). However, neither this nor Twinkle’s announcement that his “mouth is closed for business” (18) can stop Sid from talking.

In a famous text on Japanese puppet theatre, Roland Barthes claims that the basis of Western theatrical art is “much less the illusion of reality than the illusion of totality” (59). According to Barthes, in the Western model, gesture and speech (not to mention song) form a single tissue, conglomerated and lubrified like a single muscle which makes expression function but never divides it up: the unity of movement and voice produces the one who acts; in other words, it is in this unity that the “person” of the character is constituted, i.e., the actor. (59)

Barthes cites the Japanese theatrical form of Bunraku as a counterexample to this illusion of the unified self, since it practices what Barthes calls “three separate writings” (49). Puppeteers, puppets, narrators and musicians are all visible at the same time, thus dividing the “character” into “three sites of the spectacle: the puppet, the manipulator, the vociferant” (49). According to Barthes, this visibility works against the “theological” model of Western theatre and thinking in general: “[I]f the manipulator is not hidden, why – and how – would you make him into a God?” (62)
It would be possible to read traces of Barthes’ text into Burkett’s play, for instance with regard to the *Taming of the Moo* performance. This act is performed by a marionette Twinkle who seems to be operating the smaller marionettes of Petruchio and Cowtrina all by himself while he is operated by Burkett as the adult Twinkle. During this scene which uncannily doubles the instances of open manipulation, it is also a marionette Sid interrupting the performance, as I have described above. After expressing his concerns with the way in which Twinkle treats Shakespeare, Sid claims that Twinkle, through the technique of open manipulation, would try to play God: “We don’t need you to be God. There’s already a God on stage, and it’s not you, it’s the puppet!” (Burkett 59). To which Twinkle, also a puppet, replies that Sid is more arrogant precisely due to his use of metaphors: “You tell me I’m not God, but I’m supposed to manipulate Him” (59).

Regarding the ethics of memory, it is less important whether Twinkle, in this scene, takes up a standpoint similar to Barthes, or not. Rather, Barthes’ critique of the Western model of the actor as unified self is echoed in *Billy Twinkle* on a formal level, epitomized in the doubling of open manipulation and a specific use of ventriloquism: Burkett as Twinkle is, at the same time, speaking for the puppets that belong to the realm of memories, speaking for and with the ghost who forces him to remember; and being spoken through, since, when the ghost is speaking, Burkett as Twinkle has to use his mouth. Taking up the “theological” metaphor from the discussion between Twinkle and Sid, in *Billy Twinkle*’s theater of memory, the puppeteer is God to the puppet, and the puppet God to the puppeteer. Once again, the boundaries between self and other are destabilized in this intricate embrace. If the question “How shall I act?” is, as Nicholas Ridout argues, an ethical as well as a theatrical one (5-6), then *Billy Twinkle* – through its very form – can be understood as pointing towards shared “acts of memory” as the foundation for responsible acts in the present without presupposing an “actor” at the origin of this responsibility.
Works Cited

Primary Literature

Secondary Literature


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JULIA PASCAL has worked as an actor for several years at the Traverse Theatre, the Royal Court, Nottingham Playhouse, the Apollo Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue as well as acting in TV, film and radio. Realising she wished to move from acting to directing she decided to read English at London University (Bedford College) and after her graduation she became the first woman to direct at the National Theatre with her adaptation of Dorothy Parker’s writings, Men Seldom Make Passes (1978). Following this debut she became Associate Director at the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond before forming Pascal Theatre Company. She has run this company since 1983, focusing on writers on the margins of society. At the same time she worked as a freelance writer for The Guardian, The Times, The Financial Times and as a broadcaster for BBC Arts programmes. Her research and interviewing techniques married with her stage work inspired her to write her own stage plays. By the 1990s she was embarking on new texts and productions which were later to culminate in The Holocaust Trilogy (1990-92). Moving from Europe to the US, she wrote The Yiddish Queen Lear (1999) and Woman In The Moon (2000). Back in London in the new
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