

## **Theatre as public discourse: a dialogic project**

Submitted by Antony John Weir to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Drama, January 2016.

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## Abstract

### Theatre as public discourse: a dialogic project

This project aims to develop and explore questions of theatre as public discourse and the representation of England and Englishness in contemporary British theatre during the period 2000-2010. I present a dual focus in this practice-led research process, creating an original creative work, *Albion Unbound*, alongside an academic thesis. I describe the relationship between play and thesis as 'dialogic' with reference to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. His ideas on language, subjectivity and authorship offer an insightful perspective upon the theory and practice of theatre-making, but Bakhtin himself makes a concerted claim for drama's inherent monologism, generically incapable of developing genuine dialogic relations between its constituent voices. Chapter One explores the 'case against drama' and identifies the different senses of theatrical dialogism which emerge in critical response. Chapter Two considers Bakhtin's work around carnival, the grotesque and the history of laughter, framed within a debate about the 'politics of form' in the theatrical representation of madness and mental illness. A key division emerges between political, discursive theatre and experimental theatre, as I question the boundaries of Bakhtin's ideas. Chapter Three questions the nature of political theatre and its British traditions via Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt's claim that David Edgar represents the 'model' political playwright engaged in theatre as 'public discourse'. I focus upon three-thematically linked of Edgar's plays, *Destiny*, *Playing with Fire* and *Testing the Echo* to engage questions of the 'state-of-the-nation' play and Edgar's varied formal strategies employed in constructing his dramatic worlds and the political discourse he seeks with an audience. Chapter Four extends this debate to question the alleged 'return of the political' in new writing between 2000-2010 and specifically a body of plays which engage issues of nation and identity – those plays contemporaneous to *Albion Unbound*. Chapter Five provides a reflexive conclusion, elaborating upon the creative, collaborative process of making *Albion Unbound*, accounting for its successes and failures as a piece of contemporary theatre. I also reflect upon the relationship of theory and practice the project has developed, the dialogic relationship between thesis and play. Chapter Six is the play itself, as it was performed.

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## Accompanying material

A CD holding a digital copy of the script (pdf) and video recording of the performance  
The performance is also online at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFIYOO0A\\_pY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFIYOO0A_pY)

## **Introduction**

### **Theory and Practice: Albion Unbound**

This project originates in a timely first encounter with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin and immediate recognition that his inter-related questions about art, language and the social world spoke to my own concerns more directly than any other theorist in my academic experience to date. Perhaps most importantly, they offered me an immediate insight into how to bridge the previously irreconcilable gap between theory and practice and develop a 'dialogic' relationship that illuminated both. I had an idea for a play which seemed to fit the bill for nascent questions about theatre as a form of public communication, as a forum for public speech, and a ready champion of public discourse in Bakhtin. However, Bakhtin's argument about aesthetics was determined by the novel as the only truly dialogic form, made in contra-distinction to other 'monologic' forms, not least drama. The nature of this assertion, made in what seemed like direct contradiction to many of Bakhtin's own ideas, offered a specific and stimulating entry-point for a research question about theatre as public discourse. The issue of theatrical 'dialogism' – and, necessarily, monologism – would prove to be an organizing principle, identifying a small but significant body of existing research to review and build upon as I sought my own understanding.

The other crucial aspect to Bakhtin's work that influenced me was his emphasis upon the act of authorship, whether in everyday speech or, so closely related, in writing. Language is a social act in Bakhtin's view, material, historical relationships in which each speaker and every utterance is embedded; a theory of discourse that anticipated major strands of European critical thought, not least social linguistics and structuralism. His emphasis upon the act of speaking and his profound interest in the aesthetic activity of his literary heroes are different aspects of the same argument about language, discourse and inter-subjectivity. I found a crucial element in Bakhtin's work, a consciousness of the creative process as a social and aesthetic act, which I had not encountered before. It offered an opportunity to speak as a playwright engaged in a process of exploration, understanding and critique of my own work in relation to its wider context of ideas about theatre.

## Framing the research

My academic background thus far was in cultural studies, employing a broad group of theoretical disciplines (Marxism, feminism, linguistics and so on) to the social and cultural worlds we inhabit; within that, a recognition of the importance of popular forms of culture. I had harboured misgivings about the unequal relationship of the text, the cultural artefact, and theory applied to it; what amounted to academic monologism, it seemed, ~~in terms of the new critical perspective that freshly-armed with a new theoretical tool via Bakhtin, offered.~~ The academic essay subsumes all else in a unifying and authoritative theoretical voice; it is an intrinsically monologic form. I was soon to be disappointed, and my presumptions challenged, by Bakhtin's own comments on the 'human sciences' in one of his fragmented, posthumously published essays, *The Problem of the Text*:

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The event of the life of the text, that is, its true essence, always develops *on the boundary between two consciousnesses, two subjects*.

The transcription of thinking in the human sciences is always the transcription of a special kind of dialogue: the complex interrelations between the *text* (the object of study and reflection) and the created, framing *context* (questioning, refuting, and so forth) in which the scholar's cognizing and evaluating thought takes place. This is the meeting of two texts – of the ready-made and the reactive text being created – and, consequently, the meeting of two subjects and two authors.

The text is not a thing, and therefore the second consciousness, the consciousness of the perceiver, can in no way be eliminated or neutralized. (Bakhtin, 2004: 106-107)

The activity of the human sciences is not predicated upon objects as in the 'exact' sciences, but subjects, living consciousnesses and authors in their own right. A special dialogue between text and context, and thus between subjects, is at the heart of the 'transcription of thinking' – which surely sums up the aims of written research and the nature of the thesis (essay, dissertation) as its form. The process of engaging in dialogue with other texts, other authors, is integral to process of research and how that dialogue is then framed within the written research. A series of such dialogues have formed the basis for my own analysis and reflection, and are

made explicit in the following chapters. Others are not so directly represented but still crucial: those dialogues with various members of Exeter's Drama department, past and present – Prof. Graham Ley, Prof. Mick Mangan, Dr Anna Harpin, Dr Patrick Duggan and Dr Cathy Turner – that have shaped this project over its extended duration. Bakhtin's ideas have made the contribution of these other authors more significant and also, importantly, drew initial attention to the active construction of the academic text as a dialogic 'speech genre' – a continuum of linguistic forms that includes everyday speech and the novel.

The other key dialogue I proposed was between the research and the play as two 'reactive' texts, which Bakhtin's ideas and this kind of practice-led project enabled and invited. As well as analysing 'theatre as public discourse' as an academic, I could do it as a playwright, traversing what had seemed to me an irreconcilable divide between theory and practice. While this seemed clear in principle, there were fundamental issues to be determined about this relationship and the status of each in a research process as I first approached Exeter with the project, and began discussions with my first and longest-serving supervisor, Mick. I proposed to produce a full-length thesis which would satisfy the institutional and academic requirements of doctoral research, which could recognise the dual status with the play and reflect upon it alongside other playwrights' work. The other main option was a specifically practice-based process with more emphasis on the play and a shorter written exegesis – potentially more difficult to assess its credentials as doctoral research and more vulnerable to any shortcomings in the practical work. We found a broad agreement upon the longer format of thesis-length written academic research and a play, which would relate to each other in various ways which could be articulated and reflected upon. We also agreed that the play must be tried as a piece of theatre in its own right, i.e. must receive some form of production, and documentation, as part of the research process. Preferably a staged reading, this could take place in Exeter or Coventry, given the distance of my home city. The timing of this creative element in the span of whole project thus became significant – at what point would I write the first draft, stage the play and reflect upon it, where and how did the academic research sit around it, etc. We aimed for the production of the play to take place ideally in the middle of the process, giving time to develop the emerging thesis in light of it.

Within the broad parameters of what I was proposing, there were a variety of ways in which the research and play could be developed. One very early conversation with Graham Ley, for example, revolved around the assumption that I proposed to create a biographical 'play of ideas' based on Bakhtin's life and work, something akin perhaps to Terry Johnson's *Hysteria* or Nicholas Wright's *Mrs Klein*. Wright's play stages the difficult relationship between Austrian psychoanalyst Melanie Klein and her daughter Mellita Schmideberg – not just in biographical, narrative terms, but in the psychology it enacts and the theatrical forms it employs. Freud was well aware of theatre's potential to bring the unconscious to life, of course, and Wright's play captures this in a very potent mother and daughter relationship, so central to Klein's psychoanalytic theories, in form and in content. By contrast, Terry Johnson's *Hysteria* (1993) stages Freud's final day of life and the moment of his death, visited at his home in Hampstead by characters from his unconscious mind. Johnson weaves strong elements of knockabout farce – silly accents, playing roles and partially-clad women hiding in cupboards – with what is ultimately a reflective journey through Freud's own unconscious as he heads towards death, and has great moments of silence and sensitivity. And for its grand and surreal climax Johnson's stage directions explicitly issue a challenge to theatre makers to make of it what they will.

There is a rich vein of material for such a play about Bakhtin, with a ready-made mythology to draw upon. His life, 1895-1975, coincided with a particularly turbulent period of Russian history – revolution, Communism, Stalinism, world war, Cold War – and Bakhtin was there throughout, his fate tied to that of Russia and the Soviet Union. Exiled as a subversive intellectual, his friend Medvedev executed, Bakhtin became an itinerant, eccentric scholar working obsessively in obscurity for decades and thought to be dead. Such were the deprivations of war that Bakhtin reputedly smoked the only copy of a manuscript, and allegedly lost another major work in the flames of a German publishing-house in World War Two. Ken Hirschkop (1999), for one, cautions against the romance of the Bakhtin mythology and the factual inaccuracies that fuel it, which make Bakhtin the central character in his own fiction, one that he was conscious of and perhaps played up to. One cannot engage with Bakhtin's work and not recognise his presence and voice as an author, especially given the nature of his ideas; Bakhtin scholars may be counselled to resist creating a dramatic character of him but it stands as an obvious invitation to a

playwright. Again, *Hysteria* and *Mrs Klein* could be models for this Bakhtin play that never was. Both create dramatic personae of renowned intellectuals, weave their ideas into the fabric of the play beyond exposition in dialogue; both are as entertaining as they are informative. If I had not already had a clear idea of the play I proposed, and how it was 'theatre as public discourse', then this could well have been the research model employed, to different ends.

Another potential approach would be to explicitly construct the play according to dialogic principles having defined them via Bakhtin, where Paul Castagno's *New Playwriting Strategies: a language-based approach to playwriting* (2001) could serve as a template. Castagno effectively ignores the generic problems about drama raised by Bakhtin and instead presents a call for a 'language-based' theatre, in context of 'new' American playwriting such as that of Mac Wellman and Eric Overmeyer. Castagno explicitly frames this as a practical resource for all theatre-makers – not just playwrights – setting out the juxtapositions of orthodox (Aristotelean) approaches to character and speech, for example, with alternative strategies for disrupting the dramatic world. Initially I resented what I saw as Castagno's proscriptive and schematic manifesto which was at odds with my own practice (perhaps still too attached to those same conventions), and didn't address the key questions about Bakhtin's stance on drama in any concerted way. Castagno suggests that one can simply substitute 'dialogic play' for 'dialogic novel' (Castagno, 2001: 3) and proceed untroubled. Though a 'language-based' approach to the play – making the relationship between Bakhtin-as-research and Bakhtin-in-practice much more direct – was a distinct possibility, it was discounted at that early stage. As the research has progressed, however, the kind of issues that Castagno raises have returned in different contexts, an important thread through my own exploration of theatre and form via Bakhtin, as I will elaborate over subsequent chapters.

Other critics such as Max Harris (1993) and Marvin Carlson (1996) dismiss Bakhtin's dogmatic insistence on the monologic status of drama with reference to the innate dialogism of a collaborative, performative medium. Firstly, theatre is made through the various dialogues between its participants and takes the text – if there is one – as just one element among many in the shaping and crafting of a production. Secondly, it is performed in the presence of an audience who are – ideally – not simply spectators but also participants in a collective experience. While having a keen interest in the creation of the playtext, I always consider it as only one stage in



its development, a starting point. This project offered the capacity to document the dialogic relations between collaborators and how this play evolved beyond the text through a series of different dialogues right through to its audiences. In practice, my aspirations for this aspect of the project were necessarily curtailed and do not have the emphasis in the thesis they might otherwise have done. Despite this, the production of the play – a rehearsed reading before a live audience – was crucially important to the overall process as the written research developed and is reflected upon within.

### **Albion Unbound**

The performance of *Albion Unbound* took place on Friday July 30<sup>th</sup> 2010 to an invited audience in the Ellen Terry studio theatre at Coventry University. The play was directed by Dr Tom Gorman and its cast drawn from the M.A. in Theatre and Professional Practice:

Albion/ John	Robert Coletta
Stinkwit/ Simon	Michael Hunter
Smythe/ Martin	Dominic Watson
Miranda	Leah Alcock

A digital copy of the script and video recording of the performance can be found in Appendix 1.

The play was intended as an allegory, a dark satire about the unravelling fantasy of an English utopia. After a glorious revolution, self-styled ‘Emperor’ Albion installs himself as benevolent dictator of a nation and a people dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure and creativity. The bankers and bureaucrats are put to work in the fields while the rest of the nation parties at this the tenth anniversary of Albion’s reign. A triumph of ingenuity and imagination heralds a new era, the land set free from its earthly chains to sail the world’s oceans with Albion at its helm. But all is not well in this mobile paradise; the celebrations mask starvation and fear, orchestrated by Albion’s hulking henchman Smythe. There has been a terrorist incident at court, the Imperial image defaced and Smythe given free licence to act. Only Stinkwit, Albion’s repulsive fool, can speak the truth of Albion’s escalating madness and the ruin it has brought upon his people. Theirs is a violent, hateful relationship that

worsens with the crisis and a growing storm, out of which Albion finds unexpected calm in Miranda, an envoy from an imperial power disembarked from a vast warship. There is threat, romance and betrayal; Albion's madness is ended in a bedroom counter-revolution that Miranda, Stinkwit and Smythe are all party to. The fantasy is ended.

John awakes, an ordinary man clinging to his madness on his last day as a psychiatric patient. His marriage has ended, his ex-wife Miranda visiting one final time before a sad return to her native America. Her unexpected visit further embitters John to Martin, his case nurse, and Simon Whitam, the consultant psychiatrist. Witham's challenge is to convince John that he is capable of rebuilding his own life, with community support. Staying is not an option (the ward is closing); either he is discharged or re-admitted elsewhere. Martin is convinced that John won't cope and Witham's decision is either expedient or just plain wrong. In the midst of their escalating argument about his mental state John makes his own decision: he will leave, but on his own terms, without the deadening medication he hates. His fate is uncertain as the play ends, a lonely figure waiting for a taxi in a world that has grown strange to him.

The structure of the play seemed self-evident, the divide between the fantasy of Albion's madness and the reality of John's mental illness structured between two very distinct acts. Yet to think about form in any meaningful way, I wanted the first act to be unapologetically 'theatrical' even if written for a small stage and limited resources, entertaining and imaginative. The second act would be far more sober and naturalistic, the line between fantasy and reality still blurred for John but not for the audience – yet to think of the relationship between the two acts as dialogic per se, there was a definite sense of dialogue and contrast between them. The nature and characters of Albion's delusion would only be really understood via the reality of John's illness and his world – our world – transformed beyond all recognition, made new and strange. This form, this structure, became a key issue throughout the development of the play creatively and intellectually, and acquired further significance in later stages as the academic argument developed and a context of other playwrights' work was identified.

The themes that informed *Albion Unbound* also seemed evident. The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 were a defining moment in which one could sense acutely the turn of global politics and the revenge that America would seek, auguring a new

campaign of war in the Middle East. For a long time after, images in particular of the Twin Towers collapsing represented something deeply symbolic, and the challenge then stood as to how to respond, as a playwright, to a changed world. But closer to home, there were more immediate concerns – a ‘War on Terror’, a Labour government led by Tony Blair determined to stand ‘shoulder to shoulder’ with George Bush and prosecute military action on the flimsiest of pretexts. Justified by new acts of Islamic terrorism on the British mainland in 2005, the government rushed to extend its security powers in defence of wider liberties – all unfolding during the early stages of the play’s development. At a fictional remove, the first act sought to parody this in the story of Albion’s fall and his turn to despotism, and the second to portray John’s dismay at the new world he must face.

### **Framing the research questions**

I had an idea for a play which was quite clearly doing two things. It was a play ‘about’ madness and mental illness, and a play about ‘the state of the nation’. It was a continuation of previous Master’s research in which I had explored the historical association of madness and eccentricity with England and Englishness, via their representation in popular culture, in graphic novels (Neil Gaiman’s *The Sandman*) and television drama (*Dr Who* and Stephen Poliakoff’s *Shooting the Past*). *Albion Unbound* intended to consolidate and develop those themes, and to turn my critical attention to the process of creating a piece of ‘public discourse’. The thesis is structured according to the development of the research process, reflecting an emerging dialogue between theory and practice. My initial concern was to address Bakhtin’s assertion about the monologic status of drama; if it is generically, structurally incapable of being dialogic then that poses fundamental problems for an idea of theatre as public discourse derived this way. Chapter One sets out Bakhtin’s ‘case against drama’, his basis for assessing the relative status of dialogism and monologism in aesthetic form, and thus his claim for the generic, monologic limitations of drama and the dramatic world. I identify a body of existing research that engages and challenges this; counter-claims for the inherent dialogism of theatre and performance which, as they explore Bakhtin, offer different perspectives upon what theatrical dialogism is or can be. This, I will argue in conclusion, is crucial to our understanding of theatrical discourse, what that means, and what form it takes, as I orient my argument towards the specific context of British theatre. The

issue of what constitutes political theatre, its sense of dialogue or discourse with an audience, will emerge as a central concern.

Chapter Two develops this idea via Anna Harpin's argument about contrasting 'discursive' and 'experimental' strategies in the 'theatre of mental illness'. In addition to a shared identification of relevant work – as I sought a context for *Albion Unbound* – Anna articulated my emerging questions about politics, discourse and form succinctly. She equates discursive theatre and political theatre directly, via Joe Penhall and *Blue/Orange*, and contrasts it to the experimental work of Sarah Kane's *4:48 Psychosis*. *Blue/Orange* adeptly explores the web of discourses that frame mental illness and ensnare psychiatric patient Christopher, puts language and discourse at the centre of the performance dynamics; but *4:48 Psychosis*'s formal experimentation explores the interior, subjective experience of mental illness that Penhall's play cannot. The trajectory of my own argument is different however, returning to address Bakhtin's argument about carnival, about the transformations of the grotesque and of laughter in rationality. Bakhtin identifies two strands of the modern grotesque in Jarry and Brecht respectively, another indication of his awareness of theatre beyond the boundaries of 'pure', monologic drama. I explore the laughing, 'existentialist' grotesque madness of *Ubu Roi*, but for the 'realist' grotesque I focus upon Edward Bond rather than Brecht, and argue that *The Fool* closes the circle between Foucault and Bakhtin in its 'epic' presentation of John Clare's madness. I contrast this to David Edgar's intent in *Mary Barnes*, and Penhall's in *Blue/Orange*, to complicate the notion of political theatre and the forms it takes – Bond's work is alive to both discursive and experimental theatre. In conclusion, I use this debate to question the boundaries of Bakhtin's ideas and the challenges that *4:48 Psychosis* and postdramatic theatre present to a linguistic, discursive understanding of theatre as public discourse.

Chapter Three shifts the argument to the 'state-of-the-nation' play and proposes that here political theatre and theatre as public discourse are most closely aligned in plays that engage nation and identity. The state-of-the-nation play has become, Dan Rebellato argues, synonymous with British political theatre and its apparent decline; but instead we should recognise that the nature of the political in theatre is transformed with the transformations of post-industrial globalisation. With that in mind, I explore Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt's claim that David Edgar is a 'model' political playwright and that his work represents 'theatre as public discourse',

explicitly framing a political dialogue between playwright, play and audience. I give specific focus to three thematically-linked Edgar plays, *Destiny*, *Playing With Fire* and *Testing the Echo*, which serve as active political ‘interventions’ into British public discourses about nation, identity and race. Framing this argument via Bakhtin, however, I explore how Edgar, as chief representative of an apparently monologic mode of theatre, employs a range of dialogic formal strategies – he would call them disruptive or disjunctive – in and across these three plays that gauge the state of the nation.

Chapter Four returns to the question of staging the nation with a specific focus upon a body of plays which engage the notion of England and Englishness in the period 2000-2010. Here I question the apparent return of the political, newly transformed and freshly relevant in the national and global flux of the first decade of the new millennium. Roy Williams’s *Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads* explores the divisions of race and identity in a working-class South London community brought to focus in a disappointing England football performance on TV. His play is particularly important because Williams offers a credible voice to the bar-room racist Alan, who engages in a series of discursive encounters with different characters to promote his views. By contrast, Bola Agbaje’s *Gone Too Far!* explores the experience of post-colonial identity and the divided loyalties of young Nigerian Londoners; here the heteroglot, dialogic encounters that Carlson and Harris propose are crucial to understanding Agbaje’s dramatic world. Richard Bean’s *The English Game* and *England People Very Nice* present different comedic takes on the Englishness of the English. *The English Game* is a muted, character-driven comedy about an amateur cricket team, its cast of characters a microcosm of a diverse, contemporary England, united – temporarily – in an unlikely win. By contrast, *England People Very Nice* is a knockabout farce conducted as much in song and dance as it is in dialogue, taking the broadest stereotypes of English racism and seeking to explode them through ridicule and parody. I conclude with Jez Butterworth’s *Jerusalem* which takes a very different approach to its questions of England and Englishness – focusing upon a fictional semi-rural, south-western community and the iconic presence of Johnny, the anarchic semi-mythic gypsy who lives on its borders. These plays, though not necessarily directly comparable to *Albion Unbound*, represent the context of work which shared a similar impetus to engage in public discourses about nation and identity, about England and Englishness.

Chapter Five brings the project full circle, to return specifically to *Albion Unbound* and to consider, in conclusion, my play in light of the argument about theatre as public discourse developed thus far. This reflexive chapter enables me to discuss the production process and performance in more detail, recalling the 'inherent' dialogism of collaboration from Chapter One. I attempt to account for the play's successes and failures, and to gauge its dialogic credentials beyond the obvious influence of Bakhtin's carnival and its split structure, as I have done with the work of other playwrights in the preceding chapters. I identify Anthony Neilson's *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* as *Albion Unbound's* nearest relative, and to explore the particular challenge of moving beyond what Penhall had done in *Blue/Orange*, a substantial obstacle in the writing process. This emphasis also allows me to account for those plays, such as Berkoff's *East* and Barker's *Victory*, which did not 'fit' the emerging academic narrative of political theatre and public discourse but were notable influences in the project's early stages.

## Chapter 1

### Theatre as Public Discourse: Bakhtin and Theatre

Over the course of this chapter I will develop the idea of theatre as public discourse with reference to Mikhail Bakhtin's argument about the dialogism of language and aesthetics. I pay particular emphasis to Bakhtin's core concern with dialogue as an organising principle which leads Ken Hirschkop (1999) to describe his work as an 'aesthetic for democracy', despite the fact that Bakhtin never developed an explicit political context to his ideas let alone a critique of democracy and its constitution. As Hirschkop and many others have noted, however, Bakhtin's work constantly re-iterates and re-works anti-hierarchical tropes, celebrates the multiplicity of competing social voices, heteroglossia, within an apparently unitary language, and champions the public act of speaking. His philosophy of discourse, Hirschkop argues, offers a stimulating alternative to that of Jürgen Habermas; the concept of the public sphere, however, remains an important reference point when seeking to understand the arts' public role. Theatre, in particular, seems to represent a communal, public discursive space in which society is placed under a lens, in which our ideas and beliefs about the world are formed and tested, our opinions challenged. In the broadest terms, it functions as a public sphere, but I have opted to approach my question of theatre as public discourse via Bakhtin.

Anticipating contemporary socio-linguistics, Bakhtin's notion of discourse develops from a critical response to the limited model of language as a means of social interaction provided by Saussurean linguistics. Language is not an abstract system divorced from the social world but a complex, dynamic and ever-changing articulation of it; language becomes discourse in these real, context-specific acts of communication. The clash of discourses must also be understood alongside the correspondingly multitudinous 'speech genres' of everyday life. Importantly, Bakhtin insists that this extends from the 'primary' speech genres, with interpersonal dialogue as the social and philosophical ideal, to much more complex 'secondary' genres, such as 'novels, dramas, all kinds of scientific research, major genres of commentary and so forth' (Bakhtin, 1986: 62). The novel, Bakhtin argues, represents the true potential of language, discourse formed out of others' discourse, maximizing the dialogic potential of heteroglossia and able overcome the finalizing, centralizing forces of monologism which act against them. Like Habermas, Bakhtin

recognises the particular significance of the novel in articulating an emerging modern consciousness, but it is a cornerstone of Bakhtin's thought rather than a milestone.

In making his claim for the novel as the true artistic vessel of 'novelness', however, Bakhtin must necessarily demonstrate its dialogic superiority to other genres. The 'case against drama' that Bakhtin mounts in order to sustain his insistence upon the novel's unique status is crucial to understand because it goes to the core of what he believes dialogism to be and how it can (or cannot) manifest in artistic form. As I will demonstrate with reference to existing research from within performance studies, the case against drama is in fact unsustainable even within the terms of Bakhtin's own analysis. The various arguments with Bakhtin about dialogism in theatre – as opposed to monologism in drama – are productive and offer insights into theatre as a 'genre' so conceived. My intention here is to explore the sometimes radically different senses of theatrical dialogism that emerge from these arguments in order to form a basis for my own argument. The question of an aesthetic for democracy, via Bakhtin and dialogism, has led me to issues of political theatre and form and this is reflected in the trajectory of this research. The arguments about dialogism in theatre and politics in theatre have important points of intercept, both harmonious and dissonant. The key issue, I will suggest, is the extent we consider theatre to be a speech genre, an artistic expression of the 'verbal-ideological' world, or a 'language' beyond the spoken word and discourse understood in linguistic terms. These tensions have animated British theatre over generations and present themselves afresh in the alleged return of the political in contemporary work.

### **Dialogism and the 'case against drama'**

In theatre and performance studies one is most likely to encounter Bakhtin in relation to carnival and the carnivalesque. Bakhtin's evocation of medieval folk culture in *Rabelais and His World* is bound up with even older ritual and religious forms, raising interest from those concerned with theatre's anthropological origins (see Turner, 1982). Others recognise the social and political potential of Bakhtin's carnival, its link to the ordinary populace and the public spaces of everyday life. It is intrinsically performative and theatrical, experienced rather than witnessed, representing a (temporary) suspension of the normal social order in which the market-place, the public square and the streets become performance spaces. It is animated with a



kind of exuberant chaos that celebrates existence beyond the rational and the ordinary, full of laughter, parody, music, costume, masks, and clowning – it is visceral, exciting, often libidinous and sometimes dangerous. As such Bakhtin's carnival is a common reference point for those interested in drama and performance beyond the boundaries of theatres and their stages (see Schechner, 1998; McGrath, 2002).

As influential as it has been, there are limitations and flaws to be addressed. Bakhtin's idealized history of carnival is at odds with much twentieth century research which holds that these historical festivities were authorized and organized, a cultural safety-valve and not at all the anti-hierarchical, spontaneous 'second life' of the people. Stallybrass and White (1986) point to Bakhtin's wilfully utopian – and factually inaccurate – presentation of carnival and its transgressive potential. Simon Dentith agrees, drawing comparison to Olivia's dismissive observation in *Twelfth Night* that there is little consequence in the railing of an 'allow'd fool', also noting historical instances of authoritarian violence enacted under the cover of carnival, and of the laughter that often accompanied punishment in medieval Europe. (Dentith, 1995: 73-74). Despite these criticisms, Dentith believes that Bakhtin's wider analysis in *Rabelais and His World* retains its potency, especially in regard to his argument about 'grotesque realism', the carnivalized aesthetic of folk culture that imbues Rabelais' novels, captured even as it was disappearing.

Bakhtin recognizes the innate theatricality of folk culture, and the integral role that theatrical forms such as the Mysteries play within it, and this permeates into Bakhtin's own discourse upon carnival; *Rabelais and His World* is replete with theatrical metaphor and imagery. 'All the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of the laughing people. Without hearing this chorus we cannot understand the drama as a whole' he claims in his concluding remarks, citing the crowd scenes of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* in which 'the authentic meaning of the epoch and its events' are disclosed, as Pushkin 'lets the people have the last word' (Bakhtin, 1984: 474). But in typically absolute terms, Bakhtin opens the work by insisting upon an essential, generic division between theatre and carnival, the 'second life' of the people in which all are actors because: '[...] carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance' (Bakhtin, 1984: 7)

The divide is thus as problematic for Bakhtin as it is for Brecht in terms of the relationship it generates between stage and audience; Brecht of course wished to draw attention to the performance as a spectacle, make the fourth wall explicit and re-awaken the audience's critical faculties. Conversely, Artaud strived to break down that invisible barrier to immerse the audience in the spectacle of theatre, in all its physical and visual sensuousness, to mitigate against the increasing 'psychologism' of theatre. Robert Cunliffe argues that Bakhtin's differentiation of carnival and drama articulates both Brecht and Artaud's contrasting approaches to the issue of theatrical illusionism and, with reference to Bakhtin's lesser-known idea of architectonics, the relationships generated between stage and audience (Cunliffe, 1993). The issue of the performance space is key: the mysteries, the feasts and festivals of this period were conducted in the same public space as ordinary life, the market square. Footlights make theatre something other, a separate space with very different relationships between its participants, for all is communal, social aspect. I will return to this issue in Chapter Three via the disagreement between David Edgar and John McGrath about political theatre and its spaces; McGrath is also among those who cite Bakhtin's carnival principles as a significant influence. For now it is important as an overture to the case against drama, to recognize that *Rabelais and His World* is as much about the evolution of the novel as it is about folk culture and its carnival forms.

Rabelais' particular achievement, Bakhtin believes, lay in realizing the unique ability of this emerging form, the novel, to lay itself open to other forms, to languages, to ways of thinking and being. Rabelais captured the last vestiges of a folk culture rapidly disappearing as its social, material and philosophical foundations were transformed in the epochal shift to modernity; his novels are 'Janus-faced', looking to the past through a new genre. With a palpable sense of regret, Bakhtin holds that as carnival is effectively rationalized out of material existence it is sublimated into aesthetic form where it lives on, retaining enough of its vibrancy and potency to carnivalize – dialogize – those forms. I will go on to say more about the carnivalesque in relation to madness and laughter in the following chapter, but the point here again is that Bakhtin makes a case for the novel as representative of a new mode of thought, being and speech, made in firm distinction to other forms. As a result, and as the first of his works to be published in English, in 1968, *Rabelais*

*and His World* has helped establish Bakhtin's Anglophone reputation as a literary scholar, yet his sense of carnival, performativity and drama is thoroughly theatrical.

The most sustained critique of drama, however, comes in other work and in different contexts. Alongside *Rabelais and His World*, the extended essays selected for English publication as *The Dialogic Imagination* and the later *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* provide the basis for Bakhtin's own poetics, with the novel at its heart. Bakhtin's primary stance upon drama appears at first unrelentingly negative, accused of a generic monologism that even Shakespeare (one of Bakhtin's lesser literary idols) fails to overcome. The opening essay of *The Dialogic Imagination, Epic and Novel*, reflects Bakhtin's roots as a classical scholar and his abiding interest in the historical development of artistic form. Here he traces the emergence of 'novelistic discourse' among the classical genres of lyric, epic and tragedy, declaring in typically absolute terms:

[... ] the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted. The forces that define it as a genre are at work before our very eyes: the birth and development of the novel as a genre takes place in the full light of the historical day. The generic skeleton of the novel is still far from having hardened, and we cannot foresee all its plastic possibilities. (Bakhtin, 1981: 1)

His insistence that the artistic form (genre) that we call the novel is still in a process of 'becoming' is made here and in the other essays of *The Dialogic Imagination* in necessary distinction to other historical genres from which it emerged. Epic and lyric – from which poetry is derived – really are moribund forms in Bakhtin's analyses but when he continues this opening declaration to say that 'even tragedy' succumbs to generic hardening, he gives an early indication that he recognises drama has its own claim to novelistic discourse that he needs to mitigate against. Bakhtin's historical, philosophical argument is about language and its expression in aesthetic form in which 'novelness' is the key criterion, a form which continues to be fluid and permeable, adequate to the task of re-presenting the ever-changing social, linguistic world. The novel is the genre in which the full potential of language has and can be realised; and in doing so, exerts a powerful influence upon other genres beyond its own boundaries which Bakhtin describes as 'novelization'. 'In an era when the

novel reigns supreme,' Bakhtin claims in a brief but significant aside, 'almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent "novelized"'. Alongside epic (Byron) and lyric (Heinrich Heine) poetry, Bakhtin cites 'Ibsen, Hauptmann, [and] the whole of Naturalist drama' as subject to the influence of novelization (Bakhtin, 1981: 5). It is a recognition that Bakhtin was indeed aware of modern European theatre and its response to social and historical processes; it seems to invite further analyses but none, frustratingly, are forthcoming. We can only draw inference from more general comments when Bakhtin describes the effect of novelization on these other genres as they become:

[...] more free and flexible, their language renews itself [...] they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humour, elements of self-parody and finally – this is the most important thing – the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with the unfinished, still evolving contemporary reality (the openended present). (Bakhtin, 1981: 7)

Akin to Raymond Williams' 'structure of feeling', Bakhtin aims to account for the relationship between artistic form and lived social and historical conditions. The novel is the expression of a still-evolving contemporary reality, a new world, and novelized though other genres may have become, ultimately they cannot escape their ancient structures and achieve true dialogic status.

In *Discourse and the Novel*, the longest and most cohesive essay of *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin argues against drama's formal capacity to adequately represent language, that which makes the novel unique:

Pure drama strives towards a unitary language, one that is individualized merely through dramatic personae who speak it. Dramatic dialogue is determined by a collision between individuals who exist within the limits of a single world and a single unitary language. (Bakhtin, 1981: 405)

'Pure' drama is inherently insular, as Bakhtin would describe it, monologic. It does not present the clash of social voices, the heteroglossia that Bakhtin values above all else. It cannot, for the unitary language (of the playwright?) creates a complete and

finished dramatic world; dramatic dialogue is orchestrated within this closed world negating any claim to real heteroglossia. The novel can absorb and re-present 'images' of language(s) without reducing them to a single, unitary language as in drama because the novel's written form allows authorial discourse to exist alongside other languages and forms:

But the system of languages in drama is organized on completely different principles, and therefore its languages sound utterly different than do the languages of the novel. There is no all-encompassing language, dialogically oriented to separate languages, there is no second all-encompassing extra-plot (not dramatic) dialogue. (Bakhtin, 1981: 265-266)

His reference to dialogic orientation is crucial, a sense of inter-animation beyond ordinary dialogue or simple juxtaposition. Languages brought into proximity generate new points of contact and relationships, new meaning; they 'dialogize' each other. The presence and relative status of different languages as they enter artistic form are Bakhtin's measure of dialogic potential, ranged against the monologic authority of the author's own voice. Drama is generically incapable of re-presenting the dialogic relations between different languages by marking off authorial discourse from dialogue and so they collapse into each other, into a unitary dramatic language that destroys any true heteroglossia and, ultimately, presents a closed and finalized dramatic world. Bakhtin seems to reduce drama to its dialogue alone and yet, as the self-avowed champion of dialogue, finds drama wanting because there is nothing beyond it, no authorial discourse beyond characters' speech. It is as fundamental a limitation of drama as the footlights that divide theatrical performance from carnival; the case against drama seems complete.

By the time of writing in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, the dialogic potential of the novel reaches its zenith with the concept of polyphony, again closely related to the presence and status of heteroglossia in artistic form. It demonstrates again Bakhtin's insistence of the close relations between language, speech and consciousness, the 'verbal-ideological' world as he describes:

A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of

Dostoevsky's novels. What unfolds in his works is not a multitude of characters and fates in a single objective world, illuminated by a single authorial consciousness; rather a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world, combine but are not merged in the unity of the event. (Bakhtin, 1984: 6)

Bakhtin's sense of consciousness is pointed. As opposed to assembling a unified, finalised world as the vast majority of authors do, Bakhtin holds Dostoevsky's genius lies in his ability to subsume his own voice, his own consciousness, into the clamour of conflicting voices and consciousnesses of others:

A character's word about himself and his world is just as fully weighted as the author's word usually is; it is not subordinated to the character's objectified image as merely one of his characteristics, nor does it serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice. It possesses extraordinary independence in the structure of the work; it sounds, as it were, *alongside* the author's word and in a special way combines both with it and with the full and equally valid voices of other characters. (Bakhtin, 1984: 7)

If anything, Bakhtin's derivation of polyphony, the fullest realization of the novel's dialogic potential and the high water-mark of its historical development, seems to describe the status of dialogue in drama – where character and speech transcend authorial discourse, the playwrights' voice, and become fully realized consciousnesses in their own right, living, thinking, speaking subjects.

Bakhtin addresses this apparent equivalence between novelistic and dramatic polyphony directly, with reference to Shakespeare and the issue of Dostoevsky's dramatic qualities. First of all Bakhtin responds to Leonid Grossmann's proposition that Dostoevsky's novels be considered as mystery plays, and his dialogue as dramatic dialogue. Bakhtin closes this off in short order, returning to his by now familiar assertion of the monologic dramatic world (Bakhtin, 1963: 17). Later, he praises A.V. Lunacharsky for his elaboration of Dostoevsky's polyphonic qualities (in response to Bakhtin's own earlier work) but not in his identification of Shakespeare as 'polyphonic in the extreme' and, with Balzac, Dostoevsky's polyphonic predecessor. Bakhtin acknowledges the 'first buddings' of polyphony in

Shakespeare but explains why it was partial and never fully realized, citing three key reasons. The first is made in familiar terms, that drama is by its 'very nature alien to genuine polyphony; drama may be multi-leveled, but it cannot contain multiple worlds; it permits only one, and not several, systems of measurement.' Again Bakhtin insists that the dramatic world is unitary and isolated from the heteroglossia of the social world. The second count challenges the perception that Shakespeare presents a 'plurality of fully valid voices'; Bakhtin argues that this can only be so across the body of his work and not individual plays as 'each play contains only one fully valid voice, the voice of the hero, while polyphony presumes a plurality of fully valid voices within the limits of a single work – for only then may polyphonic principles be applied to the construction of the whole.' Finally, Bakhtin asserts that Shakespearean characters are not 'ideologists in the full sense of the word'; 'the voices in Shakespeare are not points of view on the world to the degree they are in Dostoevsky' (Bakhtin, 1963: 33-34).

The terms of this last criticism of Shakespeare are surprising, if nothing else. Consider Shylock, for example, an 'ideologist' in its fullest sense, entirely animated by his sense of self as a Jew in a Christian world and armed with some of Shakespeare's best rhetorical tools to tell the excoriating truth of it. Kenneth Gross (2008) holds Shylock cannot be contained within the dramatic world Shakespeare places him, imbued with such fierce vitality that he imbalances the play, both in his presence and sudden absence which augurs an abrupt shift from tragedy to courtship comedy. Alongside more conventional literary analysis, Gross makes a case that Shylock 'is' Shakespeare, imagining Shakespeare's own reflections upon the relationship between author and hero, a creative, openly fictional mode of critical inquiry:

*We are both opportunists of reading and speaking, making capital of human weakness, error and accident, trading in time and hazard. Within our inner ears even the words of abuse that others throw at us – the bestial Jew and the whorish player – can be turned to profit, made into the currency of inner lives.* (Gross, 2008: 15; original emphasis)

His reading of Shakespeare/Shylock is thoroughly dialogic, emphasizing the powerful ambiguity of a character that presents endless challenges to be negotiated

in dialogue with him, 'being a creature of antisemitic slander and one who transforms that slander [...] playing with its violence, making that abuse serve him as mask and mouthpiece' (Gross, 20086: xi). By these standards, Shylock is a carnivalesque and grotesque figure as Bakhtin would understand it. Gross's later description of Shylock as a 'grotesque relic [...] that must either be exorcised or go more deeply in disguise' testifies to the difficulties in re-presenting Shylock, and mirrors Bakhtin's argument about the changed nature of the grotesque in modernity that underpins *Rabelais and His World*. Gross claims he cannot identify a 'truly canonical reimagining' that remains true to the character and yet reinvents him, such as Pirandello's presentation of Hamlet, the 'pretend madman', in *Henry IV* (Gross, 20086: 10). Arnold Wesker's *Shylock*, by contrast, is 'well-intentioned but forced' (Gross, 20086: 81).

By the standards of Bakhtin's argument about drama and the novel, however, Shylock's singular bond to his author is more problematic, even if we recognize Antonio and Portia's importance to the play and their status as 'ideologists', articulating their own complex bonds of love, honour and social status. Shylock is the key dramatic fulcrum and is rewarded the best speeches pleading human communality of course, but is otherwise entirely reviled, abused, ruined and ultimately excised from the play – hardly an equal relationship between playwright and character, between author and hero. For Wesker, Shakespeare's text maintains a powerful monologism that cannot be overcome other than in radical re-interpretation. He is damning in his criticism of Shakespeare's relationship to Shylock, describing how he ceased to be a 'forgiver' for the play's 'irredeemable antisemitism' watching Olivier perform in Jonathan Miller's 1973 National Theatre production (Wesker, 1990: 178). *Shylock* (formerly *The Merchant*) was Wesker's eventual response, reformulating the bond between Shylock and Antonio and the basis of the claim to a pound of flesh. Perhaps Wesker's emphasis of Shylock's erudition as a bibliophile and scholar, his love for his daughter, his unwilling participation in the deal and the changed logic of the play's denouement is what Gross finds to be well-meaning but forced, but Wesker's is a moral response as a Jew and a playwright to present a 'true' Shylock beyond the racist stereotype and its history in performance.

Helene Keyssar also recognizes that the terms of Bakhtin's intriguing challenge to drama provide an important means to interrogate her own feminist



perspective on the generic limitations of Aristotelean drama, testing Bakhtin's ideas against them and finding broad agreement about their 'monology'. She gives particular emphasis to 'recognition scenes', those moments in which both character and spectator 'acknowledge the "truth", a stable, fixed form of meaning whose unveiling is the primary act of traditional theatre', the discovery of who a character 'really' is (Keyssar, 1996: 118). *King Lear* serves as one example among 'innumerable others'; as Emily Sun (2010) notes with reference to Stanley Cavell's classic essay *The Avoidance of Love*, the 'sight imagery' of the play is particularly important to understanding Lear's eventual self-recognition, his journey from ignorance (figuratively, blindness) to knowledge (seeing) that has its dramatic counterpoint in Lear's gruesome blinding. Keyssar instead points out the value of 'transformational' scenes – 'it is *becoming* other, not finding oneself, that is the crux of the drama', she argues; 'the performance of transformation of persons, not the revelation of a core identity, focuses the drama' (Keyssar: 1996: 119). She equates 'the dialogic imagination' directly to transformational dramatic strategies and identifies a body of plays which attempt to disrupt the monologism of the dramatic world, to 'bring together diverse discourses in such a way that they interanimate each other and avoid an overarching authorial point of view' (Keyssar, 1996: 121), including *Woyzeck* and *Ubu Roi*, to which I return in the following chapter. These plays' 'exceptional receptivity to dialogism' can be best understood by their social and political context, particularly relevant to her in black American and feminist drama. Keyssar's analysis is important firstly because it demonstrates how the anti-hierarchical, anti-authoritarian implications of Bakhtin's thought can be brought to bear upon the contemporary social and political world, in this case through feminist critique, illuminating both (see also Hohne and Wussow, 1994, for an equivalent feminist Bakhtinian reading of the same period). Secondly, she asserts that is indeed possible for theatre to be dialogic, and bases her notion of dialogism in exactly the terms that Bakhtin proposes, i.e. the genuine interanimation of discourses that defeat the monologic conventions of Aristotelean drama – but that, crucially, is not a given in feminist drama or elsewhere, as she illustrates between Wendy Wasserstein's *The Heidi Chronicles* and Maria Irena Fornes's *Fefu and her Friends*. Both present a diverse range of female characters and voices, but their interanimation, their 'dialogization' of each other, is only realized in *Fefu and her Friends*; by comparison *The Heidi Chronicles* is 'disturbing [...] precisely because it

is aggressively monologic, self-contained, a seemingly perfect picture without loopholes' (Keyssar, 1996: 125). She ends by pointing out that 'while drama may press always towards a single field of vision, it is also the cultural space that most readily locates the viewer/ reader outside, separate from an other' (Keyssar, 1996: 131); she would remind us that there are dialogic forms of theatre capable of disrupting the monologism of the dramatic world, that this is not the only option in making and thinking about theatre.

### **Caveats and qualifications**

In Bakhtin's view, even Shakespeare could not present fully realized heteroglossia and make drama truly polyphonic; it is a generic, structural limitation in drama – and yet, even as he is at his most damning in *Discourse and the Novel*, he provides a sizeable caveat in a footnote that throws his whole argument into sharp relief: 'We are speaking, to be sure, of pure classical drama as expressing the ideal extreme of the genre. Contemporary realistic social drama may, of course, be heteroglot and multi-linguaged' (Bakhtin, 1981: 405). Here we have the first and only direct acknowledgement from Bakhtin that drama *can* fully represent the heteroglossia of the social world in its own right; it is not quite as finished or insular as he would have us otherwise believe. The concession invites a fundamental reassessment of the core narrative about the novel that runs through these various related works. The novel is not in fact unique in its openness to heteroglossia; 'pure classical drama' is only a measure of monologic potential and an early stage in the genre's historical development. We can only assume, as he does not elaborate, that this realistic social drama contemporary to him is naturalist drama, recalling his comments in the chronologically earlier essay *Epic and Novel*. There it was only to account for the potent influence of the novel beyond its own boundaries but this later comment suggests that drama has its own history and relationship to language – and thus to those qualities of language that Bakhtin values so highly, heteroglossia and dialogism. If contemporary drama can be truly heteroglot, then it would seem that there must be dialogic relationships between its different voices, including that of the playwright. It must also be possible, therefore, to 'organize' those different voices – structurally, artistically – to allow for and maximize their presence. Finally, this would also allow for dramatic polyphony, the 'plurality of fully valid voices' that Bakhtin

prizes so highly in language and artistic form. We could, in short, make a claim for theatre's dialogic status after all.

Graham Pechey, however, is not so certain. He notes the 'lethal' significance of the footnote on drama in *Discourse and the Novel* has upon the generic absolutes that Bakhtin insists upon, but nevertheless they persist and do not trouble Bakhtin unduly. He may acknowledge the presence of heteroglot and multi-linguaged contemporary drama but Bakhtin 'does not say that 'realistic social drama' *dialogises* the heteroglossia it incorporates' (Pechey, 1989: 58); the essential generic problems with drama remain, as Keyssar would agree. Pechey speculates that Bakhtin deploys the idea of novelization and its influence on naturalist drama, borrowed from Lukács, as a necessary strategy to maintain the status of the novel as a supremely powerful de-centering force. The 'unnamed names' that Bakhtin alludes to then become the subject of Pechey's interest; I have identified them as Ibsen and Hauptmann, following Bakhtin's comments in *Epic and Novel*, but Pechey disagrees, proposing that it 'almost certainly' refers to Brecht. Pechey claims there is a 'close analogy between epic theatre and novelistic polyphony' in the disruption of the represented world which strips speech of its 'objectivisation' and frees it to enter into dialogic relations with everything else that can be 'made to signify' on stage, including gesture. Brecht sought a '(non-) dramatic dialogism', and considering the novelization of epic drama in these terms provides the basis for a reassessment of Bakhtin's history of drama. Furthermore, the dialogism of epic theatre connects us back to that other great challenge to Bakhtin's claim for monologic drama, its carnival history. Brecht employs typically carnivalesque roles of the rogue, clown and fool, but there is a deeper significance to his grotesque realism: another manifestation, a continuation, of dialogized heteroglossia finding aesthetic expression. Brecht is cited in passing by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and His World* as a key representative of 'the realist grotesque', understood in distinction to 'the modernist grotesque' represented by, among others, Alfred Jarry (Bakhtin, 1984: 46), which acquires further significance in the next chapter. In light of all this, Pechey is clear that beyond 'a local theoretical imperative to set up drama as the novel's antitype [...] it is difficult to see how any argument about drama's intrinsic monologism can be sustained' (Pechey, 1995: 60).

### **The case for a dialogic theatre**

With Pechey's argument about Brecht and epic theatre's dialogism in mind, I wish to conclude this section on Bakhtin and drama with further challenges that assert the intrinsic dialogism of theatre, moving beyond the text to engage questions of collaboration and performance. In a short essay, *Theater and Dialogism*, Marvin Carlson notes that Bakhtin's ideas seem of particular relevance to theatre and the absence of an extended consideration of drama is frustrating, always invited but never materializing. Epic and poetic forms, for example, are granted this respect, necessary and significant in Bakhtin's argument even if they ultimately succumb to the same fate at the hands of novel, but drama is dismissed in a few short paragraphs. In lieu of such an extended analysis, Carlson questions Bakhtin's awareness of what ~~constitutes~~ drama actually is, arguing that his conception of monologic drama is largely determined by classical tragedy, via Hegel and the German Romantic tradition. To begin with it is by no means certain that high tragedy is monologic; even if it were so, 'there is clearly a vast range of drama that falls outside this genre, much of it as disruptive of the represented world as anything in the novelistic tradition'. Like Pechey, Carlson points to the historical significance of comedy and parody within the dramatic tradition, ancient forms of dialogism according to Bakhtin's own argument. Renaissance drama, for example, is full of examples of dialogic parody which can 'subvert the dramatic world from within by direct challenge to the unity of its dominant voice', featuring stock figures such as clowns, whose 'central function is to provide just this sort of alternative voice within the structure of the drama' (Carlson, 1992: 315). When Bakhtin does comment on modern drama, the novelisation of naturalism, Carlson speculates it is the conscious shift of those late-nineteenth-century dramatists away from traditional (Romantic) dramatic structures and concerns that forces Bakhtin to acknowledge their importance. Citing Chekhov also, Carlson describes how these dramatists sought to depict a 'shifting, ambiguous, evanescent' reality, 'its values contradictory, with no obvious voice of authority to resolve these confusions' (Carlson, 1992: 316).

Carlson then turns to make a direct case for theatre's inherent dialogism, firstly with regard to the 'basic building block of Bakhtin's system', the utterance. Here, in the utterance, the 'restrictive and systematizing forces of canonization

[monologism] are placed in perpetual conflict with the unique and situation-oriented forces of heteroglossia.' (Carlson, 1992: 318). This is good summation of a key Bakhtinian tenet that held true over the many different contexts in which it was explored. Any and every utterance has these tensions of heteroglossia and monologism present, within and without, because it is always made in a social, historical context, not abstracted from the 'real' world. Also, each utterance is a unique and unrepeatable event, an act of communication, whereby used words (which already have their own history and tensions) are re-appropriated and re-inflected to create new meaning. The utterance, so conceived, can account for a single word, a sentence or a very complex construct like a novel, and for the complex, ever-present dialogic processes at work. Clearly we can think about a play in these terms, as a complex utterance (made out of others), made in a specific context, an act of communication. Even the most apparently monologic dramatic form, the monologue, takes on new dimensions when considered in this way; the strictures that Bakhtin would like to place upon drama to privilege the novel are again undone by his wider theory of language.

Carlson speculates that because written drama is phenomenologically similar to the novel this may explain Bakhtin's relatively few direct comments on it (Carlson, 1992: 318); certainly the experience of reading (or, arguably, writing) a play text and reading a novel are very similar, another aspect of the continuum of literature and drama. But theatre is more than a text individually authored and experienced; it is a collaborative and performance-oriented medium. Exploring the dialogism of 'enactment', Carlson points to the necessary participation of a whole range of people ('voices') in the creative process of realizing theatre – director, actors, set, lighting, costume designers, technicians etc. – a process which 'provides even richer possibilities for the elaboration of [Bakhtin's] theoretical concerns than does the direct relationship of reader and text' (Carlson, 1992: 318). This clearly qualifies the notion of the 'author-god', as Carlson puts it. Of course in drama there is the possibility of the monologic playwright being replaced by the monologic director, 'subordinating the entire production to their own voice and often accused of turning their actors into puppets' (Carlson, 1992: 319). He cites Edward Gordon Craig, Max Reinhardt and Vsevolod Meyerhold, but 'even these most monologic of directors were unable to repress totally the *dialogism built into the very nature of theatrical enactment.*' (Carlson, 1992: 320; my italics). Even if we could usefully argue over

the relative monologism of specific dramatic texts, the collaborative process of making a play and its performance is inevitably dialogic. Even such a monologic director must 'confront' a text, engage in dialogue with it and its performers; 'wrest new and personal meaning ... a new context provides an inevitable fresh perspective on an inherited expression, the play and its performance tradition.' (Carlson, 1992: 320).

Carlson's case for theatre's inherent dialogism is brief but cogent, and in many respects mirrors Max Harris's claim for a 'dialogical' theatre. Like Carlson, Harris challenges Bakhtin's derivation of drama and emphasizes the collaborative process of making theatre and the various dialogues that involves. The creation of the theatrical text may well be a solitary (monologic) process equivalent to writing but that the processes of rehearsal, staging and performance *cannot* be monologic:

The playwright's words (and those of her characters), by contrast [to the novel], are refracted through the interpretative medium of a company of actors and their director. Whatever dialogue may or may not be in the text itself, there is inherent in the theatrical process of transferring script to stage a series of dialogues between the many independent, living voices involved in writing and production. (Harris, 1993: 13)

Harris goes on to briefly explore challenges to the authority of the theatrical text via Artaud's manifesto for the Theatre of Cruelty and Derrida's counter-critique which suggests that Artaud ultimately seeks all the 'power' for himself, replacing the authority of the text with that of the 'tyrant' director (Harris, 1993: 59). His real interest, however, is understanding theatre as a site of cultural encounter, specifically in representation of the other in Mexican theatre. Here the dialogism he values most is located in the collision of languages and cultures of native and colonial (Spanish) people as he explores theatre's role in negotiating those boundaries. His terms of reference here correspond to Carlson's more recent work *Speaking in Tongues: Languages at Play in the Theatre* (2009), and which I return to as a vital aspect of the representation of post-colonial England and Englishness in later chapters, where such heteroglot encounters are crucial to understanding the dialogism of the dramatic world at hand.

### **Bakhtin: a dialogue with theatre**

Michael Holquist, editor of *The Dialogic Imagination and Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, points out that Bakhtin never himself describes dialogism as his defining concept or structuring methodology – he speaks of dialogic relations and of the dialogization of aesthetic forms, but dialogism is a construct of others and is constituted differently according to the context in which it is proposed. Holquist argues instead that dialogue is the ‘master-key’ to understanding ‘his varied activity as a unity, without losing sight of the dynamic heterogeneity of his achievement’ (Holquist, 2002: 15). The different theatrical dialogisms emerging out of the critical encounters with Bakhtin reflect the fluidity and dynamism of his thought – a testament to ‘unfinalizability’ which he valued so highly, but presenting a challenge to the ideal of claiming a definitive dialogism from which to proceed to my own questions about theatre and form.

Holquist also stresses the philosophical emphasis of Bakhtin’s thought, a neo-Kantian belief that dialogue is the meeting point between self and other which underpins all of his meditations upon the act of authorship in their different contexts. Bakhtin’s claims for the novel first interested me as a writer of prose fiction, where his thoughts upon verbal art and its intrinsic link to the social world sit most comfortably. What interested me more as a playwright, however, was why he would claim that drama was not an artistic form of people speaking publically in the same way as the novel. The theatrical responses challenge Bakhtin’s generic assertions within the terms of his own ideas and present various cases for dialogism in theatre. This process of understanding Bakhtin and theatre was undertaken in pursuit of a wider idea about theatre as public discourse in theory and in practice, to put my own play into a context of other work. Over the subsequent chapters I will explore this context, discussing the work of other playwrights which construct discourses around madness and mental illness, and nation and identity – those discourses I attempted to bring together in *Albion Unbound*. In one sense I am asking quite literal questions about authorship and a playwrights’ approach to their dramatic world that Bakhtin might recognise, familiar questions about the relationship between a playwright and their characters’ voices, based on textual analysis. This leads me, however, to begin to challenge my own ideas about what constitutes public discourse – forms of theatre

which strive to break the conventions, to move beyond dialogue and character, to develop a different theatrical language. This argument finds its parallel, as I have suggested, in debates within theatre about politics and form, most notably between one generation of playwrights and the next, between David Edgar and his contemporaries and Sarah Kane and hers, a revolution and a counter-revolution which throws the nature of the political into sharp relief. I will argue that a distinction between 'discursive' and 'experimental' theatre is particularly useful, and demonstrate that it corresponds to the conflicting senses of dialogism arising between the verbal and visual arts in Bakhtin's work.



## Chapter 2

### The politics of form: madness and mental illness

At the conclusion to the previous chapter, I began to question whether the idea of theatre as public discourse in effect equates to a particular kind of linguistic, discursive theatre, usefully understood in distinction to other 'experimental' forms which subvert the traditional dominance of character and speech. If this theatrical language offers true dialogic potential to rip apart the dramatic world, to escape the monologism of text and speech, then perhaps we are ill-advised to consider theatre as a speech genre as Bakhtin would understand it, and to derive our ideas of theatre as public discourse that way. In the next chapter I will go on to consider the issue of political theatre specifically via a number of plays which consciously engage the 'state of the nation' – of England and Englishness – and clearly represent an ideal of theatre as fulfilling a reflective, critical and active public role in society. Here, by contrast, I will approach the issues at hand via the 'politics of form' – in essence the same questions, but they arose first with this emphasis and from my own critical response to the representation of madness and mental illness I had constructed in *Albion Unbound*.

One of my primary tasks as a playwright and as an academic was to identify a body of work to place *Albion Unbound* in context with, plays and the debates about them. For example, Fintan Walsh (2013) offers a succinct overview of the reciprocal relationship between drama and therapy. He notes the influence of drama upon the pioneers of psychoanalysis, especially Freud, via the Aristotelean notion of catharsis and its therapeutic value, subsequently developed into therapeutic practices such as psychodrama and dramatherapy. Importantly, Walsh also accounts for 'drama as therapy' and gives particular emphasis to Boal's radical reformulation of catharsis, empathy and the relationship between actor and audience in the Theatre of the Oppressed. It is a radically alternative model of theatre as public discourse, one which puts the citizen actor at the heart of a popular political theatre, connecting the individual to the collective, to the community and society; again, issues which acquire further significance in the following chapters. Walsh also notes a tradition of 'theatre about therapy', for example, biographical plays such as *Hysteria*, *Mrs Klein* – to which I would add Patrick Marmion's 2015 play *The Divided Laing, or The Two Ronnies* – and Anthony Neilson's *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*, different in that it stages the subjective experience of therapy.

In this respect I owe a particular debt to Anna Harpin and her focus on theatre's therapeutic potential in *Theatre, Medical Identities, and Ethics: 1983-2008*, her doctoral research; then at Exeter, Anna kindly made her thesis available to me and offered valuable insights upon an early version of this chapter and my emerging questions about form and 'staging' madness. In a chapter 'Disordered Stages: the theatre of mental illness', Harpin argues that since the 1980s there has been a discernible shift in the theatrical representation of madness and mental illness reflecting its 'newly pathologized' status. She cites Foucault, R.D. Laing and Thomas Szasz as key proponents of a movement challenging psychiatric orthodoxies and power, one corollary of which is greatly increased awareness of patients' rights and a proliferation of avenues of support and information outside of the formal institutions of psychiatric medicine. She also examines the equally important context of legislation, politics and psychiatric provision, attesting to the continuing shift in the role of 'patient' to that of 'service-user' within market-oriented medical services, engaged in the relationships (and vocabulary) of business and transaction. Understanding this context is crucial to understand how plays and playwrights have engaged with madness and mental illness, arguing that:

[...] one can perceive the new manners in which these dramatists attempt to translate private experience into public art. Their multivalent responses to the burgeoning presence of mental health and illness collectively emphasise their shared impulse to create an ethical aesthetic practice in theatrical portraits of madness and marginality. This is not to imply a political or aesthetic homogeneity or unity across their respective works; rather it is to suggest that together they are involved in the modern ethics and staging of this ancient subject. (Harpin, 2009: 18)

Harpin then organizes much of her subsequent analysis around a dialogue between two traditionally – strategically, as she puts it – opposed theatrical poles, that of political and experimental theatre. Joe Penhall's *Some Voices* and *Blue/Orange*, representative of political theatre, is sharply aware of the social and political discourses in which mental illness is constituted; while Sarah Kane's *4:48 Psychosis* works the fractured experience of mental illness into the 'performance dynamic'. It was an argument about form that I recognised from my own emerging questions

about theatre via Bakhtin, and a body of plays I had already identified to put *Albion Unbound* in context. Furthermore, her comments about the shift away from staging madness as a metaphor to engaging mental illness 'aesthetically and thematically', and consequently her emphasis upon ethics brought my own concerns about *Albion Unbound* into sharp focus; I will explore these issues directly in the final chapter.

Here I first return to engage Bakhtin's argument about carnival and the grotesque to account for its significant influence upon my play. Again revealing his awareness of drama and dramatic forms beyond his argument about the novel, Bakhtin locates a modern revival of the grotesque, in different forms, between Alfred Jarry and Brecht (Bakhtin, 1984: 46). That argument, and his wider claim about the silenced history of laughter (as opposed to Foucault's equivalent history of unreason, as influential as that has been) provides my entry point to the discussion of representation of theatrical madness.

### **Madness and laughter: Foucault and Bakhtin**

Michel Foucault argues that the 'birth of the asylum', the medicalization and institutionalization of madness, is necessarily understood alongside a philosophical argument about the transformations of modernity and rationality upon western European cultures. Descartes' infamous assertion 'I think, therefore I am', the cornerstone of rationalism, is the only certainty of experience and existence derived through the application of systematic doubt. Crucially, for Foucault, Descartes claims the delusions of the mad, 'whose cerebella are so troubled' that they believe they have an 'earthenware head or are nothing but pumpkins or are made of glass' (Tweyman, 1993: 46), are evidence that the only certainty is, ultimately, that one can think, and from this basis build a reasoned, rational understanding of the world. Foucault thus argues that the enshrining of reason in the First Meditation necessitates a silencing of the history of unreason, and by extension, the history of madness. To counter this he seeks a 'zero point' of history in pre-rational Europe at which reason and unreason had not yet been divided (Foucault, 2002). Madness was part of the intellectual, iconographic and social order of the Middle Ages, not yet stigmatised, segregated and silenced in the epochal shift to modernity, and this philosophical argument underpins the historical analysis of the processes of confinement in western Europe. Jacques Derrida, Foucault's former pupil, went on to challenge Foucault's reading of the First Meditation, claiming it is he that

subsumes madness into rationality, not Descartes; Foucault presumes to speak for madness, claiming an authoritative history for it (Derrida, 2002) – perhaps a kind of monologism that Bakhtin would recognise.

Bakhtin shares an equivalent perspective to Foucault, proposing his own 'archaeology of silence' of folk culture and the grotesque in *Rabelais and His World*. He proposes that the history of laughter, not madness, is the primary lens through which we should scrutinize the epochal shift from the Middle Ages to modernity. Rabelais, alongside Cervantes and Shakespeare, represents an 'important turning point', a marker in this transition. He articulates a Renaissance conception of laughter's philosophical dimension as one of the 'essential forms of truth' in which 'the world is seen anew', just as capable (if not more so) of 'posing universal problems' as seriousness (Bakhtin, 1984: 66). By contrast, in the rational age of the seventeenth century and after, comic and serious genres become divided and with it the universality of laughter is lost, relegated to the private realm of the (socially inferior) individual and associated with the 'low' genres of literature. The forgotten history of laughter is thus an integral part of his wider argument about carnival and the grotesque, all aspects of an encompassing pre-rational philosophy subject to this same divorce. Madness has an integral place there in the grotesque, Bakhtin claims, because:

[...] the theme of madness is inherent to all grotesque forms, because madness makes men look at the world with different eyes, not dimmed by 'normal,' that is by commonplace ideas and judgements. In folk grotesque, madness is a gay parody of official reason, of the narrow seriousness of official 'truth.' It is a festive madness. In Romantic grotesque, on the other hand, madness acquires a somber, tragic aspect of individual isolation. (Bakhtin, 1984: 39)

There is an exuberant joy in Don Quixote's madness, for example, in tilting at windmills; he sees the entire world anew, lost in a romantic fantasy of chivalric heroism that turns a mundane, impoverished reality upon its head. The laughter comes not just from Don Quixote's mad antics, but Sancho Panza's presence as his companion, fully in charge of his reason, is equally important. Panza mitigates the worst of the carnival violence that his 'knight' brings upon himself, the repeated

accidents he suffers and thrashings he invites, but more importantly in being the 'straight man' he is the yard-stick for measuring Don Quixote's absurdity, which would otherwise be meaningless. Much of the humour comes through Panza's futile attempts to correct Don Quixote's misrecognition of the real world. However, while Bakhtin acknowledges Cervantes' openness to grotesque forms he believes the historical processes of schism in the grotesque are becoming evident with its attendant divisions in laughter and seriousness, between madness and reason. Bakhtin makes an important comment about a twentieth-century 'revival' of the grotesque that is relevant here. He identifies two 'strands' of modern grotesque, its 'modernist' and 'realist' forms – and crucially, both made in passing reference to modern dramatists. He namechecks Alfred Jarry as the key representative of the first strand, the modernist grotesque 'connected in various degrees with the Romantic tradition and evolved under the influence of existentialism'. The realist grotesque of 'Thomas Mann, Pablo Neruda and Bertold Brecht' is the second, 'related to the tradition of realism and folk culture' (Bakhtin, 1984: 46). Given that Bakhtin is notoriously reluctant to extend his analyses to the contemporary world this is especially significant; again he recognises the status of drama and dramatic forms.

If we can infer that when Bakhtin cites Jarry he has the Ubu plays in mind this gives us a vital insight into his sense of a modernist grotesque, the contemporary echoes of those ancient forms. *Ubu Roi* is not a play about madness, but it is pointedly grotesque, animated with a kind of laughing madness. Most obviously, Pa Ubu is a physical grotesque, the embodiment of the 'material bodily stratum' which ties the body to the earth and the cycles of life, with all its physical pleasures. He is physically revolting, obesely fat, has disgusting manners and loves to curse, all of which he (and Jarry) glories in. Theatrical legend has it that Ubu's first word to his scandalized public – *merdre* – a bowdlerised curse, stopped the performance in its tracks with the resulting storm of protest and counter-protest from the audience factions. But it was not just Pa Ubu's Rabelaisian excess that caused controversy; the play itself was an assault upon the conventions of serious drama. Deliberately styled according to its origins in Jarry's beloved puppet theatre, it was as deliberately crude as its eponymous anti-hero. Its characters were caricatures, devoid of psychological or intellectual depth, motivated only by greed, pride and fear; and the narrative they inhabit correspondingly limited. They were stylized, drawing attention to their artificiality, in speech, in gesture and in costume; the set consisting of nothing

more than a painted backdrop, with scene changes marked only by a written sign (Shattuck, 1969). It was surreal before Surrealism; a kind of anti-theatre before the Theatre of the Absurd. It was deliberately, pointedly rubbish, in form and in content, against all the conventions of the well-made play and the rationale of modern theatre like Ibsen and Chekhov. It was fun, a parody – of itself, of theatre and, tellingly, of various readily recognisable Shakespearean scenarios (Innes, 1993: 21). For example, Pa Ubu is set upon his turbulent path to the throne by Ma Ubu (a grotesque of equal proportion) in the opening scene, a faithful parody of Lady Macbeth's dark entreaties to her husband, an unfolding tragedy made comic. It is parodic, rather than satiric, an important distinction in the 'true' grotesque that is relevant here too, though we have to infer from comments elsewhere what he might make of *Ubu Roi*. He complains about the abiding scholarly reputation of Rabelais, 'no more a satirist than Shakespeare and less than Cervantes', and by extension the modern interpretation of satire as a 'negation of separate individual phenomena, not as a negation of the entire order of life (including the prevailing truth), a negation closely linked to the affirmation of that which is born anew' (Bakhtin, 1984: 306-307). Satire negates without renewing; it isolates, individuates and exaggerates for its grotesque. Parody negates and renews as it does so, because it is, again, one aspect of an all-encompassing pre-rational philosophy and aesthetic. The nature and status of parody and satire is thus a crucial component of Bakhtin's wider argument about the transformations of the grotesque and laughter in rational modernity. I will return to these issues in Chapter Four in respect to Richard Bean's *England People Very Nice* where he aims mocking laughter at the most reductive stereotypes of English racism, carnivalizing them into a celebration of Englishness and its historical diversity.

The second strand Bakhtin identifies is the 'realist grotesque' of Thomas Mann, Pablo Neruda and Bertold Brecht, 'related to the tradition of realism and folk culture' (Bakhtin, 1984: 46). Though Brecht himself considered the 'real folk tradition to be dead' (Willett, 1998: 166), he presents peasant life in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, for example, to explore the political, material conditions of society. Brecht adapts and utilizes popular forms of song and dance as an integral part of his dramaturgy, and presents his own carnival images and figures like, notably, Azdak, the rascal who becomes a Judge, reprieved from execution to sit on the Law (literally), where he arbitrates absurdly – but this allows him the licence to speak the

truth in the tradition of the wise fool. He is a comic figure who pokes fun at the official seriousness at the wisdom his office assumes, a parodic reflection upon justice.

If Bakhtin is correct in his identification of Brecht's realist grotesque, then it is reasonable to also consider Brecht's influence on British theatre in these terms. Jenny Spencer notes the 'grotesque realism' of Edward Bond's work, most notably in *Early Morning* (1968). Here Bond demonstrates a thoroughly Bakhtinian sense of the grotesque: 'the language of body and banquet' (Spencer, 1992: 162), libidinous sexuality, violence, a revelry in words and punning, all animated by parodic, levelling laughter – but unlike Jarry, Bond's intent in employing these forms is inherently political, exploring the contradictions of capitalism in which all the characters from different classes are trapped and exploited. It is a satire upon a corrupt British state, conducted with 'mad logic' as an increasingly bizarre and frantic farce – prefaced by the claim 'that the events of this play are true', earning the Lord Chamberlain's ire and Bond's publisher's alarm. Spencer's analysis is particularly interesting in that she seeks to explore the audience's position in the performance and their relationship to the play, the dialogue that Bond seeks to engage them in. She notes that 'although the play offers itself for elucidation, its "use value" for the audience is not limited to the decoding exercise of intellectual analysis it invites' – they need not understand Freud, or Shakespeare, or know Victorian history to 'get' *Early Morning* – 'The play's social effect depends simply on an experience of the "lived reality" of contemporary British life' (Spencer, 1992: 161). He employs popular forms of the burlesque, the music-hall and farce, animated by this grotesque humour. Spencer's engagement with Bakhtin and Bond is significant and sustained (for example, arguing that one must consider the role of working-class humour and jokes of *Saved* alongside its symbolic violence to understand Bond's intent fully), and she makes a cogent case for Bond's realist grotesque. In respect to my argument about madness and mental illness here, however, it is Bond's *The Fool: Scenes of Bread and Love* (1975) that is most relevant.

The character of poet John Clare presents the tragic isolation of Romantic madness that both Foucault and Bakhtin recognise in different contexts, embodying the trajectory from village fool to the asylum under changing historical conditions – a relationship that Bond makes explicit in 'epic' fashion. As Mick Mangan notes, Bond is often compared to Brecht in his attempts to disrupt the dramatic world and draw

the audience's critical attention to what it is presented, a shared political, socialist impulse. Bond's relationship to Brechtian ideas should be thought of as a dialectic rather than an unquestioning influence: Bond 'annexes' Brecht's epic and reformulates the alienation effect into his own 'aggro-effect', 'designed to commit an audience emotionally and thus to jolt it into questioning the realities which it might normally accept uncritically' (Mangan, 1998: 22). Furthermore, in the short essay which prefaces the playtext, Bond meditates upon the relationship between art and society through a stark critique of capitalism, which he believes imposes irreconcilable, 'schizophrenic' expectations upon people to be docile workers and yet aggressive consumers. Bond's thesis here echoes the tenets of anti-psychiatry but crucially, unlike Foucault, maintains a belief in rationality as a means to better society, not least through the rational exercise of imagination to the irrational world. It is clear why he finds such affinity with Clare as Bond also presents six of Clare's poems as a postscript to the play, a complementary 'narrative' of his internal life in which Clare reflects upon rural life, poverty and the boundaries between reason and madness. That poetry, that level of reflection, is deliberately absent in Bond's dramatic world. Here Clare is inarticulate and hesitant, apparently trapped within his 'verbal-ideological' world, within a simple Nottinghamshire dialect that positions him geographically and socially. His poems give him speech beyond speech, a creative means to understand his world and his unravelling sense of self:

If there were only rational ways  
To make the world rational  
Art would still be reason  
And so our race not left to rot in the madhouse

Reason is the mark of kin  
Poetry destroys illusions – it doesn't create them  
And hope is a passion that will not let men  
Rest in asylum's peace. (Bond, 1987: 73)

Bond is determined to explore the social, material and economic relationships of his characters, to make them explicit. Clare is at the start of the play just one member of an early seventeenth-century rural community facing starvation as the land is



physically transformed around them and with it the ancient social order of an agrarian culture. Bond establishes this hierarchy and its traditions in his opening scene with the peasants' presentation of a Christmas mummer's play to Lord Milton, the landowner, his family and notable guests. Bond's play-within-a-play pits the hero of English mythology, Saint George, against the villainous Colonel Bullslasher – a.k.a. Boney, a topical, satirical take on the Napoleonic wars – and ends in celebration, in a traditional folk song, *The Hunting of the Wren*. The festive bonhomie barely lasts past the end of the festive play and the peasants' fears for their material existence overcome the conventions of social deference, as Darkie dares to speak of famine, at Christmas, in the Lord's presence. All the Parson can offer them is prayer – neither bread nor love. Bond then stages the peasants' ill-fated revolt in which the old Parson is ritually disrobed, a carnival moment that Bakhtin would recognise. They marvel not just at his fine clothes but at the quality of his naked flesh, soft and copious, threatening a transubstantiation of their own:

DARKIE. Our flesh. That belongs t'us. Where you took that flesh from boy? You took that flesh off her baby. My ma. They on't got proper flesh on them now. (Bond, 1987: 24)

The fabric of that social world is destroyed in the revolt as the peasants face the inevitable consequences of their actions. While others' sentences are commuted to deportation, Darkie's transgression will see him hang – a spectacle of punishment enacted upon his body that Bond deliberately does not stage. Instead the pivotal moment of the play, I would argue, comes in the laughter of the prison (Scene Four). Clare first laughs nervously at Darkie's hopes of evading the noose, brief infectious laughter they share for a moment before the arrival of the Parson and the Governor bearing confirmation of Darkie's execution. At that point the laughter is picked up by all the other unseen prisoners – a great, uncanny laughter, 'screams, shouts, peals, groans', which develops as the backdrop to the sober, official truth of Darkie's sentence. There is nothing joyous in it, nothing parodic or regenerative about this laughter, grotesque in its modern sense, exaggerated, unworldly and disconcerting. It is the uncontrolled laughter of madness that draws a moment of equivalence between prison and asylum. Bond did not theorize the Theatre Event (TE) directly until much later in *The War Plays*, but it is worth considering as such – a moment of

dissonance in the stage image that draws attention to itself, and thus to the reality being presented, a sudden step beyond the broad naturalism that has preceded. The laughter dialogizes a tragedy, but does not make it comic. When they are alone again, the laughter from outside ends but returns to possess Clare, his only possible response to the death of his best friend and kinsman, to the ruin of his social and material world. It is the first sign of his madness.

Clare is also transformed into a poet in this prison scene, his 'scribblings' acknowledged for the first time, a potential escape from destitution via an activity previously incomprehensible to Darkie and the other peasants. Bond then presents Clare adrift in the London literary world, bound into a different social and economic relationship with the social elite, dependent on patronage. Unlike the two boxers, one black, one Irish, whose brutal contest structures a series of short, intense and interconnected scenes as they provide sport for the watching elite, Clare is unable to reconcile his new existence as an artist in this environment and under these material relationships. His patron, Admiral Lord Radstock, expresses admiration for Clare's evocation of rural life but he cannot conscience the criticism of the social order in 'Five Hangings at Ely', the threat of censorship implicit; furthermore, Radstock opines that these hangings were a necessary social corrective. Clare is presented with another impossible conflict between his material needs and the art which they say they value, the truth of Darkie's death. It is a turning point, heralding a return to Patty, rural life and a slow disintegration; he cannot write (though he scribbles copiously) nor labour and so contribute to their perilous subsistence. He becomes progressively lost in madness, visited by Bondian 'ghosts', a blinded, rope-burned Darkie, and Mary, the fetishized gypsy girl. Bond ends the play with Clare in an asylum – not a vision of Bedlam but somewhere 'sunny and pleasant'. Unlike his fellow inmate who quite benignly thinks he's Napoleon, Clare is so withdrawn that words have almost gone from him entirely, capable only of consonant-shaped noises. He now appears to be recognisably 'mentally ill'; the journey of the fool to the asylum is complete.

If theatrical dialogism is dependent upon disruptive or disjunctive use of form, upon a dramatic language beyond dialogue, character and narrative, then we can certainly describe *The Fool* and Bond's intent as dialogic. Beyond the uncanny, transformative laughter that I have described as a particularly significant moment of dialogism, Bond's fragmented, episodic structure allows him to both present Clare

within real historical processes and how Clare's madness, his inner world, is intelligible within them. Bond 'invites the audience to fill in with discursive analysis what these plays only structurally suggest, to actively "read" the gaps and contradictions exposed by the knots of epic narrative' (Spencer, 1992: 10). This gives us a specific sense in which Bond attempts to implicate the audience into the process of making meaning, in participating in a political 'dialogue' – as I will go on to argue, a crucial component of political theatre and its ideal function. *The Fool* is not animated by laughter to the extent of *Early Morning*, certainly, and his choice of 'epic' form presents these discursive gaps in the way the earlier farce does not; the dialogue with an audience in each cannot be assumed to be the same. In fact, one cannot assume that Bond actually achieves a dialogue with his audience at all; Mick Mangan points to the uneasy relationship between Bond and the British theatre-going public. He cites Bridget Turner's recollection of performing in *Saved* before Royal Court audiences that reacted strangely, gave no help or feedback, seemed to be in awe; though this may have been contingent to this particular production, it is 'particularly ironic in light of his stated aim of engaging the audience as active meaning-makers in the theatrical event' (Mangan, 1998: 38). It is a necessary counter to the assumption that political intent automatically translates to political engagement, or dialogic intent to dialogism; real audiences are complex and not neat theoretical constructs.

One can draw more similarities between *Lear* and *The Fool's* epic status, politicising the past; but *Lear's* canonical, classical madness is transformed into ruinous paranoia, physically manifested in the Wall, and his daughters' betrayal is a rational act to preserve the state (and their self-interest). The role of madness, its symbolic and structural significance, is diminished and Bond's primary focus upon reason and unreason comes instead in *The Fool*. Similarly, one could point to the Woman in *The Great Peace* (1985), but here too her madness is entirely sensible in that brutal, irradiated world; what echoes through them all, however, is Bond's own unique sense of the grotesque, of the physicality of being and the imprint of history upon the body, closing the circle between Bakhtin and Foucault. It is the particular figure of John Clare that enables Bond to make an historicized argument about art and rationality in capitalism.

By way of contrast, to draw attention to another play which also seeks to link madness to its real historical context, a kind of theatre which shares a broad political

impetus but is markedly different in form and intent. David Edgar, if anyone, fulfils the criteria of a 'discursive' playwright, consciously dramatizing society, its political processes and debates; the criticisms he garners in doing so amount to a charge of monologism. In *Mary Barnes* (1979), the potential monologism is complicated by the play's relationship to another text, and the two voices which construct it.

### ***Mary Barnes* and *Mary Barnes*: a dialogue through madness**

In 1971 *Mary Barnes: two accounts of a journey through madness* was published, recounting the experience of a woman's therapeutic journey through madness at the Kingsley Hall commune in East London in the latter years of the 1960s. Its two accounts are those of Mary herself, recounting her experiences autobiographically and experientially, interspersed with shorter, 'objective' and summary passages from the clinical perspective of Dr Joseph Berke, Mary's mentor and an integral participant in her journey. Berke was one of a number of practising psychiatrists working with R.D. Laing who sought to establish a therapeutic environment outside of what they saw as the restrictive and repressive institutions of psychiatric medicine. In her autobiographical account, Mary describes her troubled relationship to her family, to her faith and her sexuality, and her despairing experience of mental illness and psychiatry before she encountered R. D. Laing and his therapeutic methods. Her time at Kingsley Hall gave her the opportunity to undergo a long and difficult therapeutic journey 'through' madness, through regression and 'rebirth', through her religious faith in the process of dealing with her anger and guilt. *Mary Barnes: two accounts* simultaneously offers a powerful personal testimony about one woman's experience of madness, a unique insight into a social experiment, and a window on a controversial episode in British psychiatry. The book, and the story it presented, became the inspiration for David Edgar's 1979 play *Mary Barnes*, and naturally the two texts have a close, dialogic relationship. Recalling Bakhtin's argument about the dialogic relationships between author and hero from the first chapter, it is pertinent to raise them again in this dramatic dialogue between Barnes and Edgar.

*Mary Barnes: two accounts* also presents a dialogue, of course, two voices relating a different aspect of a shared experience. Mary's is experiential, fragmented and incomplete, a personal narrative. Berke's interjectory passages, significantly shorter than Mary's, are however more authoritative, recognisably the discourse of an expert framing Mary's experiences within a psychiatric and psychosexual context,

appending (and amending) her recollections as a more objective witness. This appears to be an unequal dialogue – Mary’s memories are subjective and fragmented, her madness requiring expert explanation and interpretation to be intelligible. This is exactly the monologic word that preoccupies Bakhtin, authoritative, finalising and closed; manifested in an expert discourse that defines and determines. Mary’s is the subjective experience; inherently emotional, irrational and unreliable. Berke’s is the objective voice; he gets to frame events, to explain and to analyse – and does literally get the last word, at least in terms of the central dialogue that structures the book.

Roy Porter, for one, is in no doubt about the resulting imbalance that Berke’s professional authority has upon Mary’s testimony in this book – and, far more importantly, in the ‘therapeutic’ relationship that it documents. However, more significantly, he also extends his criticism to Mary herself: that she conducted ‘a love affair with psychiatry’, scornful of her willingness to be ‘a Laingian doll’ and his prime exhibit when she emerged from the experience with missionary zeal. In case we were in any doubt that Porter’s view of this supposed flowering of anti-psychiatry and therapeutic practice is overwhelmingly negative, he concludes:

[...] it is rather chilling to read Barnes’s and Berke’s accounts juxtaposed, since Barnes ends up utterly the child of psychiatry, hooked on a ‘dialectics of liberation’ [Laing’s term], which can be astonishingly deaf to her own perceptions as a woman, without being unabashed about imposing upon her its ancient Freudian dogmas about what a woman truly wants. (Porter, 1987: 120-121)

It is an unequivocal criticism, uncharacteristically sharp for Porter. He believes the radical experiment failed and actually replicated the very orthodoxies it sought to usurp, objectified Mary Barnes’s madness, and rationalized her subjective experience. Elaine Showalter makes the same criticism, of Berke, Laing and Freudian theory, at least: ‘In fitting her into their model of the successful schizophrenic voyage, they have ceased to hear or see the woman herself’ (Showalter, 1981: 235). This is important. While Showalter clearly shares specific issues with Porter about the failings of Freudian dogma and the Kingsley Hall experiment, her pointed criticism does not extend to Mary. The psychiatrists were

steadfastly unable to engage with Mary's experience as woman, or at least outside of narrow, dogmatic notions of female sexuality. What she does not do, significantly, is deny Mary's own testimony as, by contrast, Porter seems to do. His annoyance with anti-psychiatry's failings and his willingness to see Mary Barnes as a 'Laingian doll' actually results in *his* deafness to Mary's experience, and thus he dismisses it. As a result it is Porter that gives the authority, the final word, to Berke and his expert discourse. But the presence of Joe's voice does not make Mary's account of her own madness any less evocative or illuminating. As personal testimony it has its own authority that goes beyond Berke's clinical perspective and it is the contrast and conflict between the two voices that offers meaning on a shared experience beyond each on its own.

In Mary's story David Edgar recognised the relationship between the personal and political, between Mary's madness and the therapeutic community at Kingsley Hall as one of the 'great emancipatory adventures' of the 1960s, 'addressing culture and politics in the widest sense' (Barnes, 1991: ix). Here in a preface to a later edition of *Mary Barnes: two accounts*, he describes his motivation for choosing to dramatise this story, and his research process. Firstly, and most importantly, Edgar talked extensively to Mary and Berke about their experiences and the book that followed – an ethical concern in understanding these real people as much as gaining accurate information or character studies of them. Secondly, he engaged in a process of systematic reading of texts from the anti-psychiatry movement, R.D. Laing in particular. He was particularly struck by the argument that madness is intelligible through the metaphors it is presented, rational in its own way, a 'language' that can be understood by an (anti)psychiatrist<sup>1</sup> or, of course, an artist, in this case Edgar as a dramatist.

I will go to focus on Edgar's ~~status~~ comments about his use of documentary forms in the following chapter, but they are of course relevant here too. One important choice is to retain Mary as the only 'real' person within his cast of characters, though the importance of the relationship with 'Eddie' is maintained. Laing gets a cameo, presented in somewhat ironic tableau as psychiatric 'guru' Hugo holds court in one of the commune's group meetings where they thrash out the quotidian concerns of broken plumbing alongside the principles of revolution. The

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Derek Davis's argument in *Scenes Of Madness: A Psychiatrist at the Theatre* (1995)

commune, its many occupants and its egalitarian social structure, the division of labour and so on are as important to Edgar to stage as Mary and Eddie's therapeutic journey.

Mary's 'going down' into madness, allowing herself to go through a nervous breakdown, to regress to childhood and infancy, presented enormous ethical and practical challenges to the therapeutic community. Mary's desire to return to an infant state manifested in a determination not to eat, to be fed like a baby – encouraged on the one hand because it was her way back to a functioning adulthood, but with its medical risks too. It also had a grotesque aspect. Her 'going down' and rebirth has a carnival symbolism and logic, but crucially, in that process Mary rediscovered the 'material bodily stratum', causing particular tension in the commune. Like many young children, Mary found delight and creativity in her own faeces, a fundamental connection with her body and the outside world, painting with it to understand that relationship.

With Porter's criticism of the objectification of Mary's madness within the discourses of psychiatry in mind, it is useful to question Edgar's authorial voice in his dramatic presentation of her story. He is clear in his view that Mary's story is a means to explore wider social and political issues, the commune and its ideals representative of profound change in British culture. He reduces the presence and significance of Mary's voice, much of her character and experiences that we get from the autobiography, as he does with Berke. At times his eagerness to present the '60s-ness' of the commune edges towards stereotype, and his determination to stage debate, to present a 'play of ideas' heavy-handed. Unlike much of his other work, there is no attempt at formal experimentation as Edgar opts for conventional naturalism and a three-act structure. Mary's experience of madness is framed within a set of social and political discourses, precisely what interests Edgar, and does not manifest at a formal level, does not disrupt the dramatic world unlike *The Fool* or, as I go on to consider, Sarah Kane's *4:48 Psychosis*. If this amounts to dramatic monologism then it must be so beyond the dialogic relationship with *Mary Barnes: two accounts* – a typically Bakhtinian contradiction.

### **Joe Penhall: *Some Voices* and *Blue/Orange***

Joe Penhall attributes his turn to theatre to a frustration with journalism as a form adequate to fully expressing the nature and experience of the social problems he saw living and working in south London, the alienation and isolation of metropolitan life (Penhall, 1998: x). *Some Voices* (1994), his first full-length play, links the personal and the political through the troubled relationship of two brothers living the reality of 'care in the community' and then Health Secretary Virginia Bottomley's mental health reforms. Ray is released from a psychiatric unit into the care of his elder brother Pete, resuming a cycle of illness and recovery that has become increasingly difficult for them both. Ray is acutely aware of his mental illness, his status as 'a schizophrenic', but spends most of the play trying to forget it, to live beyond it. The medication he is prescribed deadens the world so Ray chooses to avoid it, leading to a return of his symptoms and a moment of reckoning between the brothers, a crisis which brings the root of both their problems to the surface. Ray's act of arson at the play's dramatic climax, torching the trendy eatery that was once their abusive alcoholic father's café, is symbolic and ultimately cleansing, not just the irrational act of a madman out of control. There is meaning to it, intelligible to Penhall as a dramatist, and to the brothers. Following this incident, exploring its consequences, Penhall chooses to end the play with a tentative note of optimism. He sets the scene outside the psychiatric establishment, in a hostel *after* Ray's confinement as his life 'outside' begins again, as the brothers face a familiar situation but with a new understanding of each other.

Penhall's later play *Blue/Orange* (2000) represents a return to these issues, but is much more directly focused upon the institution of psychiatry and the complex discourses that construct it. The play is naturalistic, dialogue- and character driven, set over forty-eight hours in an unnamed London hospital – the NHS, with all its familiar problems and pressures: the duty of care and the business of medical management. Christopher is a black, working-class patient seeking release after a period of psychiatric confinement. The status of his mental health, his symptoms and diagnosis, are the crux of whether he can be released back into the community, and the focus for an escalating dispute between the two doctors responsible for making the decision. Bruce, the younger idealistic doctor who has been treating Christopher directly, is convinced that he is still really quite ill; but career- and budget-weary consultant Robert seems more inclined to see Christopher as a person



and to give him a chance to resume his life, with supervision. The orangeness of oranges – a basic sensory reality – becomes a crucial test of Christopher's reason:

BRUCE. What colour is it inside?

*Pause.*

Chris?

CHRISTOPHER. It's blue.

Bruce. So the skin is blue – and even underneath the skin it's the same – it's blue?

CHRISTOPHER. That's correct. Completely blue.

*Pause.*

It's bad. It's a bad orange. Don't eat it. (Penhall, 2001: 39)

It isn't a bad orange, it is a delusion – but not just some random idea that has taken hold in Christopher's imagination. In his madness there is meaning, as there was for Mary Barnes, a chain of signification. Christopher will go on to reluctantly explain the meaning of the blue oranges: his father is Idi Amin, the Ugandan dictator, who received a delivery of East African oranges every day when in exile. Thus the delusion of the blue oranges is connected to his infamous father – which for Bruce is a much more serious delusion, evidence of worsening schizophrenia and proof beyond doubt that Christopher should remain in hospital. Christopher is unwell; that is evident. But is he mad in believing Idi Amin is his father? Is it so impossible that Christopher could be an illegitimate son of a promiscuous ruler, perhaps took advantage of a young woman who fled when she fell pregnant? Or could Christopher not have grown up believing – perhaps told by his mother about his famous father, even if it wasn't true? But Robert takes this further – perhaps Bruce's willingness to attribute madness to Christopher's claim is testament to his own entrenched cultural assumptions as a white doctor treating a black patient. The basis for Robert's concern is the prevalence of mental illness among London's Africane-Caribbean population, more than any other ethnic grouping. He argues that medical diagnoses themselves are ethnocentric, subject to cultural (racial, colonial) criteria and assumptions – exactly the kind that Bruce is so keen to make.

BRUCE. I read your PhD. Cultural Antecedent And Cultural Specificity in connection with a delusional belief system. Enables us to understand the Origins of Delusion. African tribesmen develop delusions about Sorcerers; Westerners develop delusions about the Spice Girls and Extra-Terrestrials. The Specifics of Christopher's cultural background are that his mother once lived in Uganda: He's got a delusion about a Ugandan dictator she no doubt talked about. You're saying he's not sick, it's a cultural thing.

ROBERT. I'm saying he's not mad. There's a difference. (Penhall, 2001: 43)

When Bruce ridicules Robert's grandiose pretensions to A Cure For Black Psychosis ('R.D. Laing in a gorilla suit' he will eventually call it), he finally crosses the line and makes an enemy of his former patron who will use his status in 'the Authority' to destroy Bruce's career. Robert exploits Bruce's linguistic transgression in the opening scene as he tries to communicate with Christopher outside of the doctors' psychiatric language, i.e. in an informal, conversational manner, 'on his level', he says the unsayable:

BRUCE. Calm down. Now you are acting like a –

CHRISTOPHER. A what? A what. Go on, say it. An 'uppity nigga'.

*Christopher kisses his teeth and starts eyeballing Robert*

BRUCE. Well ... Ok, yes, frankly you are and that's not what we do, is it? Eh? And when you get out of here, if you start staring at people like that, what do you think they are they going to think?

[...]

CHRISTOPHER. I don't know.

BRUCE. They'll think you're a, a, an 'uppity nigga', that's what they'll think. Kissing your teeth. It's not you. It's silly. It's crazy. You're not a, a, a, some kind of 'Yardie' –

CHRISTOPHER. Now you're telling me who I am?

BRUCE. No, I'm –

CHRISTOPHER. You're telling me who I am?

BRUCE. I'm telling you ... to be You.

CHRISTOPHER. That's rum, that is. That's rich. Now I've got an identity crisis. You're a cheeky fucking monkey, you are, aren't you? (Penhall, 2001: 20)

At the time, the confrontation is smoothly defused by Robert and apparently ignored but after Bruce's insubordination Robert revives it, cynically manipulating Christopher's perception of Bruce's motives and instigating a formal complaint, alleging negligence, racial harassment and abuse. It utilises language and power to devastating effect, as Bruce finds it all but impossible to defend against 'the facts' stripped of their context and nuances, his words used against him:

*[Bruce] reads*

'He snatched away a cup of coffee given to the patient by the consultant . . . He used the pejorative epithet "nigger".'

*Silence.*

I did not, um, my God, I didn't use the epithet . . . nnn . . .

*He stares.*

I did not call you a . . . um, um, um, a . . . I didn't say that.

[...]

CHRISTOPHER. You said 'uppity nigga'. You did. Deny.

BRUCE. Only because *you* did. My God! It was a quote!

CHRISTOPHER. Yeah, but you shouldn'ta said it.

BRUCE. Oh, so only you can say it? (Penhall, 2001: 83)

Herein lies a microcosm of the politics of language and race; a reminder of the power of language and one's position as a speaker. Christopher is black and can say 'nigga'; Robert is white and can only say "nigger" in quotation, in parody or in irony – and again, when stripped of nuance and context, all that is left is the contentious word itself, a pejorative epithet. The report 'documents' the series of events, constructing an authoritative narrative in the voice of 'the Authority' – i.e. Robert's – that frames Bruce as an arrogant and impetuous racist all too willing to enact his prejudices upon a vulnerable patient, in spite of Robert's best efforts as a concerned mentor. Penhall's audience, of course, is an 'objective' witness to these events and the specific context in which these utterances were made, implicated in the process

of making meaning from it. What begins as a shifting balance of 'truth' about Christopher's madness between each character which an audience must gauge for themselves rapidly acquires a political dimension as we witness professional malpractice from both doctors, whether inadvertent or not, in an unfolding act of institutional racism that has very little to do with Christopher's well-being. He is, at the end of the play, worse than before, now claiming his father is Mohammed Ali.

Of all the plays I consider, *Blue/Orange* is most amenable to the idea of a 'linguistic-discursive' play, one which foregrounds language and discourse as the fundamental component of its drama, while still employing a naturalistic form. Penhall's particular success is in crystalizing and articulating public discourses about psychiatry, class and race through his characters and their dialogue – but therein perhaps lies a problem:

[...] the play does not attempt to engage with schizophrenia, only the dialogues and politics that surround it. This is a valid and politically charged approach to the subject of psychiatric practice. However, an audience member only encounters the discursive poles of a debate with scant recourse to Christopher's conceptions of his illness. In short, Christopher's experience is never worked into the performance dynamics. Nevertheless, *Blue/Orange* exploits the potential of theatre as a site of negotiation and dialogue to educative socio-political effect. (Harpin, 2009: 27)

It is true that Penhall gives only minor emphasis to how Christopher understands his inner world. The blue oranges speak to a chain of signification of course, and for a moment in the second act he speaks of his paranoia at the police (talking about him on their radios), the noises he hears in his head, and the 'zombies' (racist skinheads) who threaten him at work and at home, but other than that Christopher's experience is not only absent from the play but also, crucially, does not manifest at a formal level. Harpin acknowledges *Blue/Oranges'* importance in the representation of mental illness, its political dimension, but points to its limitations too. Importantly, she suggests an equivalence between discursive and political theatre, and as a 'site for negotiation and dialogue' – which corresponds closely to Janelle Reinelt and James Hewitt's analysis of David Edgar's work detailed in the following chapter. Amelia Howe Kritzer observes that *Some Voices* and *Blue/Orange* are political in

that they develop an argument for the 'necessity of community', a concept so degraded in Thatcherite political and economic discourse; *Blue/Orange* more pointedly questions the 'competence and disinterestedness of the institutions and structures of authority charged with responsibility for the mentally ill' (Kritzer, 2008: 50). There are arguably no better markers of a society than its will or ability to care for its most vulnerable members and Penhall's doctors comprehensively fail in their duty of care to Christopher. This is 'theatre as public discourse', clearly, a play and playwright consciously engaged in wider social and political processes. Penhall's emphasis upon language and dialogue, argument and debate are not just thematic but formal too, worked into the 'performance dynamics'. As Harpin reminds us, however, this mode of discursive theatre cannot engage the experiential dimension of mental illness, to represent its 'interior spaces', suggesting that more radical, 'experimental' theatrical form is needed to achieve this. This is another instance of an argument about the nature and form of political theatre and its boundaries, about discursive theatre and its formal limitations.

#### **4.48 *Psychosis* and 'postdramatic' theatre: beyond Bakhtin?**

Of all the plays considered here, *4.48 Psychosis* appears by its nature the most resistant to conventional literary analysis, and even if the provisional status of the play-text as template is invoked, considering the text alone gives an especially limited idea of the play in performance. There are no characters or dialogue in a conventional sense, nor indeed any stage directions beyond occasional indications of silence, shifting the emphasis to the form and space of staging. Kane's interest in and experiments with form across the body of her work find their most developed expression in *Crave* (1998), with its characters indicated only as C, M, B and A, and *4.48 Psychosis*. Graham Saunders points to the influence of *Woyzeck* here, which Kane admired and had directed in 1997, and *Attempts on Her Life* (1997) by Martin Crimp, whom she believed to be one of the few genuine formal innovators of the stage (Saunders, 2002: 111).

*4:48 Psychosis*, stripped of literary dramatic conventions, actually emphasizes language and voices in a thoroughly Bakhtinian manner. There is one main voice, which can be further differentiated into an inner voice, an internalised 'stream of consciousness', and a spoken voice in conversation with others and with itself. At other times the voice – I hesitate to use the term narrator – speaks to a silent other

(a sleeping lover?). There is a second – secondary – spoken voice, that of a psychiatric professional in a series of fragmented conversations in a clinical context, recognizably the discourse between patient and doctor. The central voice, in its internal aspect, is not a 'social' voice in that it can not be readily located by class, age, or perhaps even gender (one infers that it is female; even this is uncertain). It is the inner voice of someone in great pain, trying to live through the experience and craving the release that death would bring. Its external aspect is clearly the spoken voice of a person in conversation – a series of fragmented dialogues, with (her) doctor, a sleeping lover and itself. These voices and partial conversations sit alongside excerpts of self-help lists, psychiatric evaluation questionnaires and exercises ('counting sevens'), and of medical records: 'Sertaline, 50mg. Insomnia worsened, severe anxiety, anorexia, (weight loss 17kgs,) increase in suicidal thoughts, plans and intention. Discontinued following hospitalization' (Kane, 2001: 223). This is subsequently dialogized through irony and a grim humour, a carnivalesque precis of a failed suicide attempt: '100 aspirin and one bottle of Bulgarian Cabernet Sauvignon, 1986. Patient woke in a pool of vomit and said "Sleep with a dog and rise full of fleas." Severe stomach pain. No other reaction' (Kane, 2001: 225). This de-centred, heteroglossic multiplicity of voices and speech genres, the dialogism that develops between them, are alive to a Bakhtinian sense of language and form, and are integral to Kane's attempt to disrupt the dramatic world of *4:48 Psychosis*. That said, there are other passages which go beyond any notion of a speech genre that Bakhtin would recognise:

a consolidated consciousness resides in a darkened banqueting hall near the ceiling of a mind whose floor shifts as ten thousand cockroaches when a shaft of light enters as all thoughts unite in an instant of accord body no longer expellant as the cockroaches comprise a truth which no one ever utters (Kane, 2001: 205)

This is not a voice or fragment of recognisable discourse or a stage direction but something other, perhaps a further dimension of thought or imagination that reflects a state of mind beyond language. Bakhtin's theories of language and discourse break down here; the fragmented voices that we can identify are components of a physical, spatial world of light and sound. Even his sense of carnival and the

grotesque, which celebrates the physicality of existence, cannot engage the sensory spaces that Kane seeks to evoke; it is theatre beyond drama as Bakhtin could understand it. Furthermore, it is not recognizably political or discursive in contrast to *Blue/Orange* but aims instead to communicate the interior experience of mental illness in performance, before an audience. The relationship between the play and its audience should perhaps be conceived as something other or more than a dialogue, and so too their role in the process of making meaning from it.

Sarah Kane's dramaturgy represents a challenge to what we consider as politics and discourse in British theatre, her acute consciousness of theatrical form and space often presented as a challenge to the existing order of political theatre – as in the theatre of Edgar, Hare, Churchill and their contemporaries – and its discursive rationale. For example Aleks Sierz argues that *4:48 Psychosis* is a 'pivotal work' which 'attempts to redefine what British theatre should be' as he sought to assess theatre's role in 'rewriting the nation' in the first decade of the new millennium; Kane's play is a marker of experimentation beyond naturalism and realism that otherwise typifies the 'Britishness' of British theatre (Sierz, 2011: 58). In this respect Kane's work links to wider European disciplines and 'postdramatic' theatre. Crucially, in his original 'manifesto', Hans-Thies Lehmann recognizes that the nature of theatrical discourse, the relationships of audience to performance, is transformed in the 'estrangement of theatre and drama', the postdramatic condition that Lehmann traces through its 'prehistories', through Jarry, Artaud and Brecht. Of particular note is Andrejz Wirth's notion of the whole theatre as a 'speaking space' (*Sprechraum*) which transforms the model of dramatic discourse, of an 'address' between play/performance and audience, constituting a new model of epic theatre. Lehmann is broadly sympathetic to Wirth's perspective but argues that it is 'misleading to adhere to the concept of drama by talking about the "dramatic discourse" in opposition to dialogue. Instead, we have to comprehend a much more radical distancing of theatre from the dramatic-dialogic conception as such'. Postdramatic theatre, he emphasizes, is 'post-Brechtian theatre', taking the space that Brechtian concern with the process of representation had opened up but 'leaves behind the political style, the tendency towards dogmatization, and the emphasis on the rational' (Lehman, 2006: 32-33). But, as Lehmann emphasizes in his epilogue, that is not to say that postdramatic theatre is apolitical; rather, he calls for a redefinition of the politics of theatre appropriate to the transformed conditions of a

mediatized society, a 'politics of perception'. He shares a similar impetus to Bakhtin in describing the genealogy of an emerging aesthetic, a 'novelness' beyond the inherited conventions of drama; postdramatic theatre however, in its multiplicity of forms, also challenges the orthodoxies of language and discourse, the relationship between audience and stage, between actors and spectators – all of those aspects that define political, discursive theatre. *Blue/Orange* and *4:48 Psychosis* are perfectly positioned between the poles of dramatic and postdramatic theatre; each is as valid a dramatic strategy and each can engage in the reality of mental illness, its public and private aspects, in a way that the other cannot. Bond's *The Fool* seems to occupy a unique space somewhere between, an early staging-point in his own quest for a post-dramatic theatre.

In tandem with questions about the theatrical representation of madness and mental illness, I was also concerned with the representation of England and Englishness, those I sought to bring together in my own play. The following chapter picks up these issues in light of Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt's claim that David Edgar represents the 'model' political playwright and thus a model of theatre as public discourse. His intent to 'stage the nation' in three thematically-linked plays, *Destiny*, *Playing With Fire* and *Testing the Echo* demonstrate a lifelong commitment to an interventionist theatre that actively seeks to engage its audience in political dialogue. Edgar is thus often held to account for what amounts to dramatic monologism, invoked as the antithesis to experimental work – a criticism that is understandable, but ultimately unsustainable.



## Chapter 3

### Staging the Nation

*Albion Unbound* was intended as a dramatic response to real events, a commentary upon the state of the nation; the extent to which it could be considered a 'state of the nation' play was thus a primary question as I sought an appropriate context for my own work. It was, again, a question of politics and form in theatre. The 'state of the nation' play became synonymous with British political theatre, emerging out of the political and aesthetic experiments of agit-prop theatre in the early 1970s. According to this perceived equivalence, the decline of the state of the nation play is held to be the decline of political theatre. Dan Rebellato challenges this assumption and 'outdated dramaturgical models [...] looking for political theatre in all the wrong places' (Rebellato, 2008: 245).

Rebellato begins his counter by observing that a formal definition of the state-of-the-nation play had yet to be established despite its 'critical currency' and a readily identifiable body of work. They typically employ a large cast of characters, a wide range of predominantly public settings and across 'epic' time-spans and 'usually performed in large theatres, preferably theatres with a national profile'; they aim to show processes of social change in action 'in which not only individuals but whole classes of people were the protagonists, and the entire nation was the stage.' (Rebellato, 2008: 246). However, the core of Rebellato's argument lies in the relationship between nation and state, as in the geo-political formation of the nation-state, and its radical transformation with ever-increasing globalization. In its ability to 'hold together the public and the private in its grand visions of Britain and Britishness,' Rebellato begins, 'the state-of-the-nation play reflects the structure of the nation-state', before elaborating:

Two things are brought together in the nation-state. The state is the unit of public political organization and bears responsibility for justice, reason and law; the nation on the other hand binds people together through shared temperament, language, history, culture, landscape and so on. These two aspects roughly correspond to the two forces at work in the state-of-the-nation play; the conceptual structures of agit-prop have an affinity with the judicial generality of the state, while the experimental immediacy of realism finds its equivalent in the

sensuous particularity of the nation. This helps us see more clearly what is politically and dramatically distinctive about the state-of-the-nation play. The personal is the means of experiencing the conceptual, while the conceptual structure is a way of understanding the personal. (Rebellato, 2008: 248-249)

He cites David Hare's *Plenty* and the trajectory of its central character Susan Traherne, a British intelligence operative, through key landmarks of post-war British history, from peacetime to the Festival of Britain to the Suez crisis and, ultimately to 'something like madness' in the early nineteen-sixties. By engagement with Susan as a character, as a person, audiences understand her growing alienation and the turn of British social and political history that has defined her life, linking the personal and conceptual as the agit-prop form could not. He goes on to argue that 'this coordination of private and public, nation and state, operates at a thematic level, as these plays often diagnose an imbalance of nation and state as a primary ill' (Rebellato, 2008: 249). The transformations wrought through ever-increasing globalization have fundamentally changed the relationship between nation and state, decoupling them. The state-of-the-nation-play transforms accordingly to try and negotiate this decoupling: plays such as Hare's trilogy on the church, judiciary and government, are more akin to 'state-of-the-state' plays in which the nation is almost coincidental. Conversely, other playwrights turn to engage the landscape, as in Caryl Churchill's *Fen*, or a specific, local, urban context such as Jim Cartwright's *Road*, 'plays about nation, isolated from the state' (Rebellato, 2008: 253-254).

### **Edgar: plays of public life**

In their call for a reassessment of his contribution to British theatre, Janelle Reinelt and Gerald Hewitt propose that David Edgar represents the 'model' political playwright, and in doing so the clearest articulation of theatre as public discourse:

[...] extremely topical and specific socio-political problems are taken up to be embodied, imagined, and worked through in dramatic form. Edgar uses theatre as a powerful tool of public discourse, an aesthetic modality for engaging with and thinking/feeling through the most pressing social issues of the day.

In this, he is also unrepentantly rationalist: he deploys character, plot, language to explore ideas, make certain kinds of discursive cases, model hypothetical alternatives. He is, in this sense, a rhetorical playwright: he lives for engagement with spectators who will not necessarily agree with him, but who will use his theatrical figures to think through their own understandings of the dilemmas he stages. An audience deep in political argument on its way out of the theatre is his highest mark of a successful play. (Reinelt & Hewitt, 2011: 4-5)

He has demonstrated a lifelong commitment, they believe, in trying to make theatre which is actively involved in social and political processes, to present and scrutinize and thus, perhaps, to advocate change. Crucially, Edgar aims to engage in a political dialogue with his audience; a play in itself is not going to change society, but audiences can. Accordingly, Reinelt and Hewitt argue, one must also account for Edgar's role as a political and social activist, his extensive body of journalistic and scholarly work, which have established his status as a public intellectual, called upon to provide commentary on society beyond theatre. They share Susan Painter's view in her 1996 biography of Edgar as a 'secretary for the times' – a designation that Edgar himself recognises and welcomes. They also note, with some disappointment, the criticisms of Edgar and the kind of theatre he attempts, seen as earnest, didactic and even dull. They describe Edgar's rational approach to making theatre, his deliberately discursive treatment of narrative and dramatic elements to frame an argument, entirely positively.

Trying to understand Edgar's work and what it tries to achieve requires some sense of (his) theatre's public function, and what can be a nebulous concept of 'the people' to be in discourse with. Reinelt and Hewitt address this via the concepts of *ethnos* and *dēmos* proposed by Etienne Balibar: '*ethnos*, 'the "people" as an imagined community of membership and filiations, and *dēmos*, the "people" as the collective subject of representation, decision-making, and rights.' (Balibar, 2003: 8). This distinction helps us conceive of the link between how individuals constitute themselves within a network of relationships of shared identity, a community, and how they are constituted and represented as citizens, with collective rights and responsibilities. This distinction, this emphasis, underpins the whole of Reinelt and

Hewitt's study, an important aid in understanding the nature and the role that Edgar seeks in his theatre – but, they argue, have particular significance in relation to the three thematically-linked plays that engage with the politics of identity, race and multiculturalism in British society, *Destiny*, *Playing With Fire* and *Testing the Echo*.

Maggie Inchley offers a vital counter-argument about 'articulating the demos' published so late into this research process that I can do no more than acknowledge its significance in closing. Inchley presents the notion of voice as a critical mode of enquiry to interrogate questions of theatre's role in a representative, participative democracy, in the specific context of Britain under New Labour government, 1997-2007, and its ideological commitment to democratising the national 'voicescape'. '[T]he practices associated with "finding" and "giving" voices in theatre', she argues, 'made audible the negotiations made by individuals under New Labour's including and devolving regime, as well as the practices and ethics of political and artistic representative processes' (Inchley, 2015: 4). Inchley urges a consciousness of voice, polyvocality and 'cultural audibility', a political awareness of how this manifests in theatrical practice. One particularly important aspect of her ideas for me is the critique of 'new writing' which, as in Aleks Sierz's summation of the period, invokes the primacy of the solo playwright's voice as the bearer of artistic, reflective wisdom and insight, giving voice to society and its heteroglotic diversity. Like Bakhtin, however, Inchley values finding voices, listening, and collaborative practice, and would remind us – remind me – of reproducing this theatrical 'monologism'. It is not a monologism justly levelled at Edgar though – especially not in *Testing the Echo*, as I will go on to discuss, which is a linguistic, polyvocal 'vision' of citizenship in New Labour's multicultural, multi-faith Britain.

### ***Destiny*: a crisis of nationalism**

*People of Taddley. This is Nation Forward, the party which puts Britain first. Our nation is under threat. The scourge of inflation still ravages. Independent businessmen are being squeezed out by punitive taxation while social security scroungers live off the fat of the land. Most of all, treacherous politicians have conspired to flood our country with the refuse of the slums of Africa and Asia.*

*Vote for a change. Vote Nation Forward. Vote Dennis Turner.* (Edgar, 1987: 359)

*Destiny* revolves around a contested by-election in a constituency where race has become the key issue. Taddley is a 'fictional town to the west of Birmingham', in 'Enoch country', as one of the characters (Platt) once describes it; Enoch Powell's constituency was in Wolverhampton, where local tensions had spurred his infamous speech so readily adapted to wider, national discourses about immigration and social cohesion. It is a deliberate strategy to seek a specific and familiar (if imagined) local context outside of London and metropolitan life. A large cast of characters enables Edgar to present public scenes and processes believably, and to each character has an identifiable social position and a trajectory through their personal history to pivotal political moments. It is not merely the story of Dennis Turner, ~~'s story, for example,~~ the downtrodden small businessman manipulated into being the bland public face of a fascist organisation, Nation Forward, but understanding that process is crucial to Edgar. Neither is it Khera's story, the Sikh immigrant now spokesman for his fellow Asian workers in an escalating industrial dispute at the local foundry, where white colleagues receive better pay and conditions for the same work. That dispute becomes the dramatic focus of contemporary events, but they are presented as social actors within wider processes – the disintegration of Empire, mass immigration, global economic transformations. Edgar does not explore the inner worlds of these characters or their personal lives but for one exception, which in retrospect Edgar believed to be a mistake and wrote out of the subsequent television adaptation made in 1978 (Painter, 1996: 45). A closing scene shows Labour candidate Clifton in a domestic setting, at home with his wife, which Edgar believed alone had set him up as a 'better character', inviting greater identification of Clifton and his motives.

Just as *Destiny* avoids 'psychological' characters it also dispenses with a single, linear narrative – a form entirely inadequate to what Edgar was trying to achieve. Instead he develops a structure and form via 'thematic linking' as he called it in 1978 – a 'disjunctive technique' of jumping forwards and backwards in time at key moments:

not because I was flashing back, in the conventional sense, but because the answer to the question Scene C has posed took place seven years before and that was Scene D, and the answer to the question Scene D posed came two years before that, and the answer to the question Scene E posed requires us return to the present tense. What I wanted the audience to do was actually view the play in terms of its theme, in terms of the social forces involved, not necessarily to be bothered with strict chronology. (Trussler, 1978: 166)

This allows Edgar to interweave disparate themes, contexts and events and to explore the relationships between them over time. For instance, the final scene of act one jumps back in time to 1968 to show Nation Forward in an earlier and much more explicitly fascist incarnation. Its leaders Maxwell and Cleaver hold a meeting to celebrate Hitler's birthday, unveiling a photograph in order to toast him before their guests, who add little flashes and insignia to their clothes to turn themselves into a rag-tag army; a collective, non-verbal gesture, small but significant. Their Canadian financier Drumont arrives late, literally bearing news of Enoch Powell's speech made that same day. It is the validation of their principles, suddenly and publicly made. Drumont berates them for their 'fancy dress', Maxwell's crude anti-Semitism and covers up Hitler's photograph, making a calculated call to arms. His message is clear: the discourses of the far-right have gained mainstream credibility and real political power can be achieved. This is the basis for Nation Forward to work towards political legitimacy and election to local government – from there they will have a national platform. This flashback, this same function room, gives context to the Taddley Patriotic League's voluntary incorporation into Nation Forward some years later, the play's symbolic heart which tries to understand how 'the English began to hate'. To end this naturalistic scene of back-room fascism, Edgar jumps to another formal device, one of a number of short, poetic monologues delivered to the audience, here as foundry worker Khera tells of his physical and symbolic journey to Taddley:

KHERA In '58. Came on home.  
Gurjeet Singh Khera. To a Midlands town.  
Another England, another nation,  
Not the England of imagination.

The labour market forces have an international will,  
So the peasants of the Punjab people factory and mill,  
The scared kess and kanga, kachka, kara and kirpan  
The Sikh rejects so he can be a proper Englishman;  
Keep faith in human virtue, while attempting to condone  
The mother country's horror at her children coming home.  
Gurjeet Singh Khera,  
Once a slave,  
Returns to haunt the Empire's grave. (Edgar, 1987: 346)

The opening scene of *Destiny*, set on India's Independence Day, 14<sup>th</sup> August 1947, unambiguously frames everything that follows. The end of Empire sets a chain of consequences in motion for each of the four characters present entering a new world, Colonel Chandler, Major Rolfe, Sergeant Dennis Turner and their former servant Khera. Each of these characters gives one of these poetic monologues at four key moments through the first act. Each describes their journey 'home' and their sense of themselves in a radically changed world, a radically changed England. These monologues (given in the third person) allow him simultaneously to provide biographic information, narrative continuity across the disjunctions – and poetic licence to express deeper sentiments than the naturalistic speech and realistic settings that mark the rest of the play. Chandler's poem is first and sets events in Taddley in motion – he returns to become a Tory M.P., and it is his death that triggers the bye-election. Rolfe's is second – 'the Major looks at England and bemoans her tragic fate' (Edgar, 1987: 331); he returns as a captain of industry and to advocate class war. The third is Turner's. It is his overall trajectory that is most important to Edgar, a lowly N.C.O. who returns from the army to set up an antique shop (symbolically treasuring the past) in Taddley:

TURNER. In 47'. Came on home.  
Sergeant Turner, to a Midlands town.  
Another England, brash and bold,  
A new world, brave and bright and cold.  
The Sergeant looks at England, and it's changed before his eyes;  
Old virtues, thrift and prudence, are increasingly despised;

Old certainties are scoffed at by the new sophisticates:  
And big capital and labour wield an ever-bigger clout,  
And it's him that's in the middle that's losing out –  
Sergeant Turner, NCO.  
Where's he going? Doesn't know. (Edgar, 1987: 336)

When Turner subsequently loses the business, his premises sold by the landlord to a developer (big capital), his journey towards the far right of politics is set in motion. He is the 'squeezed middle' that still occupies the discourses of contemporary politics, working hard but getting nowhere, the kind of people that swing elections.

The heart of the play structurally and emotionally is the transformation of the affably shambolic and parochial Taddley Patriotic League into an affiliate of Nation Forward. Key representative members stand to voice their justification which crosses conventional social and political boundaries. One elderly woman expresses her dismay at the 'gangrenous' state of the Conservative party and the attitude of Young Conservatives to traditional values; Liz, the wife of a disenchanting Polytechnic lecturer, fears for their financial security with looming cuts, unable to sell their home as a result of the area's growing immigrant population suppressing prices – 'people get desperate. Really desperate'. Last is Attwood, a union steward at the foundry and staunch Labour voter who worries about the expediencies of global capital and cheap labour. He of all of them is the only one who is unequivocal about his racism and the appeal of Nation Forward:

ATTWOOD. And I'll be quite frank about the blacks. I hate 'em. And no-one's doing bugger all about it. That's what bothers me. Not the erosion of your bleeding middle-class values. (*He sits.*) Sooner or later, summat's got to be done. (*Angry, to MRS HOWARD.*) So don't you talk to me. (Edgar, 1987: 354)

Only Attwood hesitates, and only momentarily, when the vote is cast, and the Taddley Patriotic League is subsumed into Nation Forward. It is a thoroughly democratic process of course, collective politics at its smallest scale, documenting an apparently innocuous moment in the shift from patriotism to nationalism. Having witnessed the true face of Nation Forward in that earlier disjunctive flashback, of



course, it is deeply significant. So too is Maxwell's final flourish to his victory speech, a surprise proposal that Turner, as their Chairman, should stand as their representative in the coming bye-election. The party has found its political man of the moment. Edgar ends the scene with music and song, a setting of Rudyard Kipling's *The Beginnings* (1914):

[...] It was not preached to the crowd  
It was not taught by the state  
No man spoke it aloud  
When the English began to hate

It was not swiftly bred  
It will not swiftly abate  
Through the chill years ahead  
When time shall count from the date  
That the English began to hate. (Edgar, 1987: 356)

Edgar's own comments about *Destiny* in retrospect are pertinent. He was pleased with the impact of the play, but not the subsequent television adaptation, despite the vast difference in their respective audiences and a truly national platform that the medium afforded. He quickly acknowledged its limitations of the hybrid form of agit-prop and realism, its schematic characters and the complexity of language 'imposed [...] on a skeletal, slightly too meccano-like' structure (Trussler, 1978: 169), criticisms he would maintain a decade later in *The Second Time As Farce*.

### ***Playing With Fire* (2005)**

The first published version of the play is prefaced by two quotes from governmental policy documents, the first from 1998 *Leading The Way: A New Vision for Central Government*, authored by the then recently-elected Prime Minister, Tony Blair, and the second an excerpt from *Government Engagement with Poorly Performing Councils* issued by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in November 2003. Edgar's thesis in *Playing With Fire* is clear from the outset, proposing to explore the complex relationship between national and local politics that had acquired a radical new spin under the New Labour government elected in 1997. This relationship is put

into a critical focus around the issue of multiculturalism, which New Labour embraced within its wider vision of a modern Britain. In 2001 the northern British towns of Oldham, Burnley and Bradford experienced riots precipitated by growing racial tensions between ethnic minority communities and those of the white working class. The riots brought into question the success of multiculturalism, of immigration, integration and assimilation, and with it the 'inclusiveness' and equality that supposedly defined New Labour's politics. Once again, as in the mid-1970s, the political right recognised an opportunity to garner popular support and influence public debates about nation and nationalism. *Playing With Fire* was Edgar's response, anatomising the fractured relationship between government and community, first produced at the National Theatre in October 2005, and later adapted into a BBC radio play in 2011.

As in *Destiny*, Edgar seeks to portray a realistic community at a fictional remove. Wyverdale is 'a town in West Yorkshire', part of a larger conurbation of some quarter-million people. Wyverdale is markedly segregated between the Morrison estate of largely white residents and Broughton Moor, home to the Asian population and the '37<sup>th</sup> poorest ward in Britain'. The Labour Council, led by George Aldred, has been designated a Poorly Performing Council in an Audit Commission report. The Government cannot allow a local authority, a Labour-led authority, to fail in this way and threatens to utilize powers to take direct control, sending a Whitehall fixer, Alex Clifton, to ensure that wide-ranging reforms are enacted.

Interestingly, Reinelt and Hewitt suggest that the play could accurately be subtitled 'the education of Alex Clifton' (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2009: 132) and played as a *Bildungsroman*, a 'novel of education' – a form of some interest to Bakhtin in the history of the novel. In *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, for example, Bakhtin claims the *Bildungsroman* and its antecedents – the travel novel, the novel of ordeal and the (auto)biographical novel – are crucial stages in the development of the novel and, therefore, in the history of realism. More importantly, he argues that we must understand how the main figure of the hero and their world, their place in time and space, is constituted; he seeks an 'image of *man in the process of becoming*' (Bakhtin, 2004: 19; original emphasis). *Playing With Fire* presents the image of a woman in the 'process of becoming', Alex Clifton's political education. Her geographical journey from London to the provinces corresponds to her intellectual and ethical journey, and the series of ordeals – a 'series of Brechtian episodes'

(Kritzer, 2008: 223) – she faces in the local community of Wyverdale transform her sense of the world and her position in it. Initially her outsider status is an advantage, anonymity affording her an immediate insight into the latent racism of Wyverdale's white working-class as Clifton gets her nails done, the first of the 'Brechtian episodes' that Edgar places her in. The next is a late-night encounter in the red-light district of Broughton Moor where Clifton demonstrates she is much more than a government functionary, making a direct intervention between a prostitute and a kerb-crawler, earning the respect of Wyverdale's community leaders as she offers solutions and strategies to what had otherwise been intractable problems. Again, Edgar jumps ahead in time to show Clifton in a more typical context, in council chambers trying to marshal Councillors into the necessary reforms, intent on showing the processes of local government, its actors and their relationships.

When this fails, Clifton threatens the 'Czechoslovak option' more forcefully, inviting Leena Harvey to a public meeting in Wyverdale. Harvey is 'the fate worse than Alex', head of *Habitus* (a quango that provides advice and training to local government, at extortionate expense) with a track record in turning round an unspecified Midlands council and who could be parachuted in as the council's new Chief Executive. Her worldview, her view of their world to be, is entirely couched in terms of policy and delivery, management and measurement, replete with management jargon and reference to performance indicators. It is a key scene for Edgar – one in which Clifton is an observer – bringing his emphasis on public spaces and processes to the fore as key representatives of the local community come together to face the reality of reform. Edgar seeks to humanize a long, discursive scene with some gentle comedy that emphasizes the parochialism of Wyverdale in Harvey's presence. They can't organize a room, or means for the inevitable PowerPoint slideshow, and a series of ringtones disturb proceedings, each an incidental musical joke (e.g. the Liberal Democrats' leader's is 'Tomorrow' from *Annie*). Most pointed of these is 'There'll Always Be An England' from two members representing 'Britannia', the Nation Forward of *Playing With Fire*, a right-wing organisation looking to win a council seat and trading on the Wyverdale's racial tensions. Their presence is legitimate but unwanted, a reminder of the difficulties of democratic principles in practice; one cannot simply ignore them or like George Aldred, dismiss them as 'the Munsters'. None of what has preceded marks Clifton's political 'becoming', however, but Edgar brings the question of political epiphany to

the fore in a moment of plain speaking between Clifton and Aldred, as he finally accepts the scale of reform he must commit to. The difference in their respective political awakenings is generational and indicative of the changing nature of politics and the political. Aldred's political awakening was born out of the miners' strike of 1974 that brought down the Heath government; Clifton's is *Live Aid*, different models of political activism that have brought them to this same juncture of a failing Labour council. The reforms are radical, will result in real and profound changes in Wyverdale, the consequences of 'playing with fire' that the play's title suggests.

Events move quickly from thereon as Edgar jumps forward again. Riaz accesses European grant money for Broughton Moor, match-funded by the council who must close a children's home to meet this and other reforms; he and Clifton develop an unlikely (and unsustainable) relationship, an important element of Edgar's intent to show Clifton's connection and commitment to Wyverdale taking on a personal dimension, which is then put to the test in the coming crisis. A young white man is killed defending his girlfriend – formerly in the care of the local authority – from Asian assailants in Broughton Moor, further escalating racial tensions. The news interrupts a rare (and public, though remote) moment of privacy in their snatched romance, but its full consequences will not be realised for some months. Again Edgar accelerates time and gathers the community to focus these tensions upon a 'multi-faith' ceremony to commemorate Holocaust Day which deteriorates into conflict. Britannia members attempt to hijack the ceremony, to lay a wreath for the dead youth 'murdered by Islamic fundamentalists' in a symbolic gesture – at which disenchanted Labour councillor Frank Wilkins snaps, smashes the wreath and condemns them all, but his most vehement condemnation is for his fellow councillors and a 'body so concerned with its own political survival that it will discriminate in the name of non-discrimination' (Edgar, 2005: 77-78). His disgust at Britannia's actions is evident, but so too is the diversion of resources from one deprived community to another in the name of multiculturalism. It is he, not the representatives of Britannia, who becomes Clifton's political nemesis; the fault-lines of centre-ground politics are Edgar's primary concerns here. At the play's denouement, as Wyverdale's riot unfolds outside, all the public players are gathered and Clifton in particular must attempt to reconcile the evident social and political failure it represents and her role within it. Beyond the riot, the Mayoral election is well underway, with Wilkins in contention as an independent candidate. Clifton's official role has ended, and she is booked to

return to London on the symbolic 16:20 via Wakefield but has a precipitous change of heart in a final political, discursive encounter with Wilkins.

ALEX. And you're right. I can hear me in you. And I can't have that. So if you stand, I'll stay. In fact, I'll stay as long as you do. Way beyond a week next Tuesday. Yes. That's what I have to do.' (Edgar, 2005: 139)

This, finally, is the culmination of Clifton's political education – politics not for politics' sake but for principle, a personal commitment to a real community.

Reinelt and Hewitt conclude their discussion of *Playing With Fire* with some telling observations. They had attended the final reading of the play during its workshop period and a discussion afterwards, where they were struck by the actors' engagement with the process through debate, discussion and sharing their own experiences. They also attended two performances during its run, one of which had a public discussion afterwards. They note an awkward transition to performance, disappointed with how slick and fast-paced it was, that Emma Fielding's Alex 'seemed harsh and unsympathetic, even as she grew in self-knowledge as the play progressed' (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2009: 137). Audiences and critics were correspondingly sceptical, forcing Reinelt and Hewitt to account for the disparity between what they had seen early in rehearsal and the play in production. They argue the various newspaper reviews followed recurring themes, firstly a familiar response to Edgar's work alienating 'spectators who do not want to get (and stay) involved in complex intellectual discussions at the theatre' (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2009: 135); his characters are 'sketchy' or 'bland', there is 'too much detail', and so on. Secondly, many reviewers found the play confusing and difficult to follow, especially the second act. More significant for Reinelt and Hewitt is the frustration expressed by Georgina Brown in the *Mail on Sunday* at Edgar's refusal to attribute blame – 'I wanted fingers pointed but Edgar remains scrupulously – maddeningly – non-committal' – and also to offer any sense of resolution, any sense of how future conflicts could be avoided. For all the criticisms they can accept, Reinelt and Hewitt insist upon the importance of Edgar's 'unfinalizability', his reluctance to offer Answers, as an integral aspect of the political discourse he seeks to develop with an audience:

[...] for some theatregoers the absence of diagnosis and remedy may be disappointing, or even disturbing, since the unresolved dilemmas confront us all. It is not possible to walk out of the theatre with a light heart after this play unless one is very, very obtuse or thick-skinned. And that does seem to part of Edgar's point (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2009: 136).

### ***Testing the Echo* (2008)**

The final of the three thematically-linked plays I consider is *Testing the Echo*, first produced at the Salisbury Playhouse in early 2008. Like *Playing with Fire*, it is concerned with multiculturalism and the politics of New Labour in the first decade of the twenty-first century. It takes as its critical focus the attempt by New Labour, and Gordon Brown especially (he a Scot, it should be remembered), to reformulate the idea of Britishness and British citizenship adequate to the multi-ethnic diversity of modern Britain and the challenges of mass immigration, latterly from new members of the European Union. As I have already discussed via the previous two plays, the threat of nationalism and racism are never far from ideas and discourses about national identity, and those two plays sought to explore how the politics of identity and belonging are played out and fought over in real, local situations, the fault lines by which local communities are divided; *Destiny* and *Playing With Fire* share a narrative impetus to explore cause and effect via the specific fictional communities they present. *Testing the Echo* is markedly different in this respect; Edgar's familiar disjunctive techniques are employed and brought to prominence as an appropriate dramatic form to engage the clash of languages, cultures and faiths arising from the idea of British identity and citizenship – and its formal, legal manifestation in the Citizenship Test. Commissioned by Max Stafford-Clark for the Out Of Joint Theatre Company, the play was 'based on interviews conducted with people who were studying to take their citizenship test or enrolled in citizenship classes' (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2009: 140) – an obvious strategy to understand the lived experience of doing so, and again providing a familiar basis of fact for Edgar to work with in dramatic form.

*Testing the Echo* is written for four male and four female characters, and in this respect it is immediately obvious that it is set on a different scale to either *Destiny* or *Playing With Fire*, and accordingly it is not concerned with believably presenting a cast of characters in the public life of a specific fictional community as

the other two plays are. The first scene is set 'near Bradford', for example, but that local context is not necessary to understanding the politics this play engages, only a passing reference point for this particular character; other scenes are set in Birmingham and London, again, only referenced in passing. *Testing the Echo* instead presents the complexities and challenges of language, culture and faith that a global community presents to a cohesive notion of 'Britishness', shared values and a common identity. Within the cast of eight actors, extensive use of doubling and many short, intercut scenes Edgar is explore the many different facets of citizenship, how this is conceived and constituted, and the experience of it. There is no Alex here, no central character whose education and political enlightenment drives a narrative; but there is the organising figure of Emma, the teacher of the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) class taken as one key route to the Citizenship Test, and her classes an important formal device to unite a necessary disparate cast of characters and their experience. Her character might not be constituted in the same way as Alex but that is not to say that Emma does not undergo her own education via a fundamental challenge to her core values arising out of her own actions, and which provides dramatic impetus to the play. One might also argue that she serves to provide a link of identification to the play's white middle-class audiences, Edgar's own ethnos. Yet for all this, neither she nor *Testing the Echo* qualifies for Bildungsroman status.

What marks *Testing the Echo* from the outset is the importance of language – or, more correctly, languages –to the issues at hand and how Edgar addresses them. Recalling Marvin Carlson's sense of heteroglotic theatre, following Bakhtin, it is significant that the play's first line is in Arabic as a young Muslim man, Mahmood, is bundled into a room to begin the process of cold turkey, protesting in Yorkshire-accented English:

JAMAL. (*Arabic*). *Hena, hena, escot*. [In here. In here, keep quiet.]

MAHMOOD. Hey, man.

JAMAL. (*Arabic*). *Escot la tataharak fe al-ghorfa*. [Keep quiet and don't move about the room.]

MAHMOOD. Man, what's happening?

JAMAL. (*Arabic*). *Sawfa-tazal hona hata yantahy alámal*. [This is where you stay until the job's done.]

MAHMOOD. What's going off, for Christ's sake?' (Edgar, 2008: 8)

Mahmood doesn't speak Arabic and doesn't understand what is going on until Jamal speaks to him in English; 'they' (he won't say who) have asked him to make this intervention before Mahmood kills himself. Here he will stay, for about a week, only allowed a short visit from his 'kufr girlfriend' Bernie, and on condition that he pray. He gives Mahmood a copy of the Qur'an, but he is desperate for a different 'special book' which we subsequently learn is *Life in the UK*, the official handbook for the Citizenship Test. Mahmood has told his father he already has British citizenship – and being a British citizen would stop his cousins throwing him in prison when he arrives in Pakistan to intervene in a family dispute.

Following this scene Edgar introduces the Citizenship ceremony itself, out of a tumult of voices, the actors speaking as themselves, arriving on stage to fire questions at the audience, questions taken from citizenship tests across the world, as *Jerusalem* plays in the background. Here the actors speak in character, in the language of their character – Somali, Korean, Albanian, Greek, Arabic etc. – an intentionally confusing and conflicting clamour of competing voices, languages and worldview. For readers of the playtext Edgar provides an English translation – but of course in performance this would not exist and it would take a particularly polyglot audience to understand everything. The languages dialogize each other, and the fragments of English they contain too, a device that Edgar uses to comic effect to begin with, a means of engaging his audience in this polyglot world and its complex network of kinship and identity:

CHONG. (Korean). *Ah-tchik-too mah-nen han-gook kyo-poh-tul-nn New Malden-eh tsan-ni-tah. Ee-tchon-ee-nyon World Cup ter-nn semis eh-tson oo-ri-ka took-il tan-teh cho-sim-ni-tahj one nil-yo-lo. Yong-koo-too men-nal koo-ro-tcho. Citizenship test ta techuk-gu-eh kwan-han kou-ra-myon nah-tchi-kum-tjim Duke of Edinburgh in-deh.* [For many of us, home is still New Malden. In the 2002 World Cup, we lose to Germany in the semis one-nil, but you're used to that. If the citizenship test is all on football I am now the Duke of Edinburgh. (Edgar, 2008: 14)



It is a speech that Chong will give in English, with slight variation, much later in the play and in a different context, as will the two other main speakers here, Halima, a Somali woman, and Jasminka, a Kosovan woman. They speak as the recognizable scenario of a public ceremony emerges out of the clamour of languages, the characters assembling in council chambers to swear their oaths of allegiance to the Queen (her picture on the wall, a Union flag, and *Jerusalem* playing) in the presence of the Mayor, speechifying appropriately, and the Registrar, who leads the assembly in their oaths, line by line. They will not be completed – a middle-aged Pakistani man, Aziz, bursts in shouting and tears the veil off another of the women, Fatima, causing pandemonium. Edgar leaves this scene at this dramatic moment to pick it up and resolve this situation in the penultimate scene of the play, but for the moment he employs a familiar disjunctive technique in shifting to another time and another public context which will, eventually, explain how events at the ceremony came to be and why.

The ESOL classes enacted over many scenes throughout the play are a key component of *Testing The Echo* and Edgar's strategy in staging the complexities of constituting citizenship, and again language is the focus. At first Edgar introduces the activity of learning English via Emma and her students – syntax, grammar, vocabulary and meaning, the practicalities and irrationalities of the English language and how it is experienced by the students. Yet because this course is an integral component of acquiring British Citizenship test (for these students) their learning is also conducted through discussion of British public life, history and values. For example, Scene Fourteen opens with Emma writing on a computerised whiteboard '1) Speaking, 2) The Past, 3) Electoral System, 4) Talking to the Visitors' and she then speaks to the class:

EMMA. Good morning. Did everybody have a good weekend?

But it rained. How might we say the same thing with the word 'although'?

That's right. But rained, and had. *Although* it rained, we *had* a good weekend. What did we talk about on Friday?

Winston Churchill. When did he die?

In relation to today.

Not today. Before.

*Thumb over shoulder.*

In the past. So our action words, like die, mostly end in 'd'. Like 'died.'  
(Edgar, 2008: 22)

These classes, and the activity of learning about British life and British values, will provide conflict as they students grown in confidence in their ability to speak English to protest about the position that doing so puts them. As the first scene with Mahmood indicates, the tensions between the Muslim faith and British society are of key interest to Edgar given the events of recent years, and he explores them further here. A key confrontation arises between Halima, Nasim and Emma as she hands out picture-cards to facilitate a discussion of 'what makes Britain British'. One appears to be of an English breakfast, and Halima protests against it, to Emma's initial bafflement. But the picture of the English breakfast contains sausage and bacon – pigs are viewed as unclean in the Muslim faith and therefore it is *haram*, forbidden, to even discuss them. Halima and Nasim feel that Emma is putting them in impossible position, forcing them to go against their religion, and so become angry. An apparently innocuous discussion about the peculiarities of British life turns into an angry confrontation, and Emma's solution is to invite them to leave if they do not want to take further part (Edgar, 2008: 75). In a later classroom scene a discussion of human rights and how it relates to the wearing of the *jilbab*, Emma sets an activity whereby the students must debate the issue; giving a red card to those who must do so according to their own view, and a black card for those who must pose the opposing view to their own beliefs. Again, Nasim believes that she is being discriminated against in being given a black card and asked to say things that go against her beliefs. It will result in her making an official complaint about Emma, one that she will have to formally defend herself against to her boss, Martin, and others in a tribunal (his later account of the confrontation from Halima and Nasim's perspective plays against dialogically against the scene as the audience saw it, in a similar way to the testimony at the Inquiry in *Playing With Fire*.) This confrontation, the resulting complaint and subsequent formal censure, leaves Emma dismayed and disenchanted. With all the best intentions and no obvious fault on her part, she finds herself at the sharp end of very complex and contentious issues of British society and religion.

As a counterpoint to the ESOL classes, Edgar chooses to stage a dinner-party as a device to introduce the views and experiences of Emma and her white,

British, middle-class peers as they debate them over a meal. At first the conversation spread out over a number of the fragmented scenes is less contentious (they discuss their disdain for social profiling, that identity can be determined by location and consumption) but later, as events in the ESOL class become more confrontational, the subject turns to the subject of Sharia law, and the 'problems' of conflicting demands of society and religion. Emma will at first defend the Muslim faith, pointing out the equivalence of a committed Christian wanting to live under God's law and, assisted by Martin, the intolerances of the Christian faith around other religions and sexualities. This reaches a dramatic climax in Scene Thirty-Five as the debate between the guests becomes more heated, and Edgar intercuts with an increasingly fractious conversation between Emma and Nasim as she (Nasim) again voices her discomfort at being taught by another tutor, Toby, who has a 'streak in his hair' – i.e. alluding to his homosexuality. Emma cannot countenance this intolerance, against her own values and the clear guidelines of the college (and wider British society) against any discrimination 'on the grounds of race, religion, gender, ablement or sexuality.' (Edgar, 2008: 57) – yet at the same time, simultaneously under Edgar's cross-cutting, held to account for the various intolerances of the Muslim faith by the dinner guests. Again, Emma finds herself in an impossible position.

Having mentioned the different strands that Edgar employs to explore these issues, one other of these relates to Edgar's awareness and use of new media. As already indicated in the discussion of the ESOL classes, Edgar uses a computer and screen(s) onstage to believably represent the presence of technology in modern life and their use as it relates to the issues at hand. Emma uses an electronic whiteboard to teach with; other characters use the internet to explore the questions of *Life in the UK* in preparation for the Citizenship Test; various contributors to a 'citizenship blog' comment on their lived experiences and opinions. This last is part of an explicit 'documentary line' that Edgar presents in the play, providing information, overview and elaboration, made most apparent in the fragmented excerpts of a Home Office video, a 'talking heads' documentary featuring two expert analysts. *Testing the Echo* is the most conscious of technology and its uses of all the plays discussed here, another facet of Edgar's intention to portray real social worlds and experience. They are integral to the documentary line of the play, serving an equivalent function to the poetic monologues of *Destiny* or the political

arguments and soliloquies of *Playing With Fire* in providing an avenue for a wider perspective, a sense of wider discourses (national, political) which are being worked through in the characters' immediate experience.

Unlike the other two plays, however, *Testing The Echo* ends on a positive note as Edgar returns to the interrupted Citizenship ceremony. The man who bursts in, Aziz, is there looking for Tetyana, his wife. Theirs is a sham marriage, and one in which she believed that she was trapped, Aziz having told her that she will be deported if she leaves him and his young daughter, Muna; as a British citizen, holding a British passport, this will not happen and Tetyana would be able to leave. Their situation is further complicated by the gulf of culture and religion between them, and the lies he has told about her to his extended family about her conversion – reversion – to Islam; she is Ukrainian Orthodox. With Muna's help she has learnt the questions necessary for the citizenship test off the internet and has travelled here to London in disguise to take part in the ceremony – the veil allowing her freedom, in contrast to its usual associations. After Aziz bursts in and rips the veil from the wrong woman, he is tackled to the floor and silenced by Jamal, Mahmood's 'minder', there as a guest, and Mahmood himself will urge the Registrar to complete the ceremony, which he does. Here, at this moment, the sense of shared identity between the characters from such disparate and often conflicting cultures and faiths, is never stronger and allows Edgar to suggest that citizenship, British citizenship, can be positive and inclusive. All of the characters taking part in the ceremony will have their lives changed for the better as a result of gaining British citizenship, and their varied situations and intentions happily complicating simplistic notions of the 'problems of immigration' propagated in national discourses about multiculturalism and identity.

In *Testing The Echo* Edgar has obviously shifted his critical focus away from the politics of the right and his narrative, 'epic' form developed across *Destiny* and *Playing With Fire*, but the consistency of intention is clear, and he employs familiar techniques to different ends. The extremely fragmented structure allows Edgar to explore the complexities of language and culture arising from a multicultural society, the disjunctions providing an ideal form for staging the complex relations of ethnoscapes and diasporas. Like the other plays, and his wider work, *Testing the Echo* represents a conscious intervention from Edgar in current and pressing national discourses about the Britain we live in, and the kind of Britain we want to be. Edgar offers no simple

answers for all that he takes pains to explore the complexities and extreme challenges posed by multiculturalism to the question of British identity. Instead he seeks to stage them, before an audience of fellow citizens, as a means of engaging them in dialogue – with the play, and as participants in the wider political debates the play engages. Edgar's role as a playwright, public intellectual and political activist has remained consistent for all that his work has developed over forty years, but there is an obvious continuity of experimentation with form to best engage the nature and complexity of ever-changing society and politics. His plays are not perfect, as the public and critical response to *Playing with Fire* and *Testing the Echo* seem to indicate, but Reinelt and Hewitt are right to claim that Edgar's work does not get the recognition it deserves. The same applies to his developing notion of political theatre, and what it tries to achieve. His work is 'serious' but is not lacking in comedy, romance and drama, all the necessary components for 'good' theatre.

In terms of our wider questions about Bakhtin's ideas and how they relate to theatre, it has been clear that Marvin Carlson for one finds an acute awareness and desire to represent heteroglossia, and thus dialogism, in Edgar's work. Carlson's own reference to Edgar is via *Pentecost*, to recall the previous chapter, but had he been able to consider *Testing the Echo* in his analysis it would surely represent an extension of the linguistic strategies of the earlier play. As we have already discussed, a tumult of languages and a clash of cultures is intrinsic to the play, its form and the discourses it stages; as such it would seem the debate with Bakhtin about theatre's monologic status is settled. Yet there remain issues about Edgar's authorial voice, and his dramatic world. One fundamental criticism of political theatre, and Edgar, is that it is akin to being on the receiving end of a lecture about what the playwright thinks you should think – i.e. that a play amounts to a thesis or manifesto delivered to an audience for their betterment. It is a reductive view of theatre and the relationship of play, playwright and audience as hopefully should be clear by now, but bears some weight nonetheless. Edgar's own critical response to *Destiny* has remained consistent over the intervening years in respect to its 'meccano-like' structure and characterisation that owed much to its agit-prop origins, and the thesis it presents (the end of Empire / contemporary English nationalism) is fairly schematic. Taken negatively, *Playing with Fire* could be read in the same way, as Edgar's critique of New Labour is measured and developed in a similar way. The presence of other voices, other perspectives on the world – the fascist manipulator

Maxwell, the disenchanting Frank Wilkins – are not tokenistic but nonetheless subsidiary to Edgar's own political and moral position. And in *Testing the Echo* we get what seems very much like Edgar's own voice, a direct and personal account of his own political epiphany via Martin's soliloquy at the dinner-party:

MARTIN 2. I was nineteen when the events in Paris happened. In fact, yes, I had driven over, in a Morris Minor Thousand, the estate, with wood framing on the rear bodywork. In that kind of situation, it takes a while to find out where it's at. I spent the first night on the streets and the second in the Odeon, which had been occupied, and where we were addressed by Goddard, Sartre and maybe Jean Genet. Someone painted graffiti on the Morris: '*La revolution est incroyable parce que vraie.*' I didn't ever wash it off. Feeling in England the most lunatic of fringes. Seeing how many of us there actually were.

*Slight pause.* And you know what? If you asked me, what would this – thing we wanted, this utopia, this 'socialism', what would it actually feel like? Equality, emancipation, liberation? The unlocking of the great infinity of human possibility? I'd say: that day.

*Martin turns to Pauline.*

Of course, I realise it wouldn't look that way to you.' (Edgar, 2008: 44)

These issues are clearly relevant to the argument presented in the previous chapter, and here too. *Destiny* earns its place in theatrical history as one of the key state-of-the-nation plays, but by the terms of Rebellato's argument raises further questions about *Playing with Fire* and *Testing the Echo*. *Playing With Fire* seems to maintain the state-of-the-nation tradition and one in which the traditional nation-state relationship lies at its heart, mapping the personal and the political via Alex Clifton and the troubles of Wyverdale. Edgar clearly didn't think the usefulness of the form had passed, or of the relationship between nation and state – transformed by globalization, undoubtedly, one of the key factors in the 'problems' of multiculturalism, but far from redundant as Edgar shows. By contrast, the formal experimentation of *Testing the Echo* might sit better with Rebellato, its fragmented form (and use of technology) a means adequate to exploring the complexities of global migration and 'Britishness'; yet here too is a crucial coincidence of the values of nation and state that legal citizenship represents. Perhaps it is as unfair to

suggest that Rebellato is too hasty to throw the proverbial baby out with the bathwater as it is to suggest that Edgar's dramaturgy is a remnant of a past moment; but there is no question that the world contemporary British playwrights must respond to has changed dramatically since the 'state-of-the-nation' play first developed. Issues of nation are crucial to the five plays considered here, but not the state as we shall see, perhaps reinforcing Rebellato's argument in a wider sense.

Reinelt and Hewitt share a common interest in the state-of-the-nation play and the state of political theatre, as described in the previous chapter, but they raise two main challenges to Rebellato's argument. The first relates to the state-nation distinction that he develops which, they say, are versions of *demos* and *ethnos*, but the sense in which he employs *state* (*demos*) is too narrow, and the 'rhetorical turn' from state-of-the-nation to nation-state 'produces a more rigid geometry' than applied to state-of-the-nation plays, then or now. (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011:12). Furthermore, the 'SON' label, as they abbreviate it, 'can describe new plays with different dramaturgies; different dramaturgies approach the current SON differentially' (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011:14). In effect they are suggesting that Rebellato is too rigid and prescriptive in his view of the state-of-the-nation play and the relationship between nation and state that he insists defines it – whereas Reinelt and Hewitt believe that the 'state-of-the-nation' play (a limited and limiting term in itself) has and continues to find form appropriate to the world it responds to. The second key point that they wish to make about Rebellato is that the 'defining imperative of political theatre' continues to be a concern with 'linking the individual to the larger body politic', whether to *demos* or *ethnos* (Reinelt and Hewitt, 2011:15); i.e. a concern to develop a collective, social dimension to character and characters beyond atomised individuals and internal psychological states. This imperative remains regardless of the form that is used to achieve it, and in this respect they cite the 'in-*yer-face*' playwrights of the 1990s whose work, defined in its broadest strokes, is often described as a conscious rejection of the theatre of the 'political' playwrights of the previous generation. Now, in the ~~second~~ second ~~first~~ decade of the twenty-first century, the narrative has turned again and critics talk of the alleged return of the political in new British playwriting. The following chapter examines the case for this in light of a body of contemporary plays which engage the (always) changing nature of England and Englishness, 're-writing the nation', as Aleks Sierz would put it.

## Chapter 4

### Staging the nation: England and Englishness

The plays considered here present an alternative trajectory through familiar issues and ideas to the Edgar plays; though they consciously seek to 'stage the nation', the form they employ is markedly different from Edgar and a narrow conception of political theatre and the conventions of the 'state of the nation' play. Of particular significance in these other plays, as in Edgar's, is the issue of racism in England and what it means to be English, given fresh impetus and unexpected new dimensions of conflict resulting from a decade of a global 'war on terror'. Having said that, neither racism nor religious intolerance necessarily define these plays which engage markedly different subjects and social worlds – but all engage, to some degree, with the vexed question of England and Englishness and so have been selected for analysis here. I begin with two works by black playwrights. Roy Williams' *Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads* is a powerful exploration of English racism as manifested around football. Like Edgar, Williams recognises the necessity of tackling the politics of racism directly and, in doing so, giving credence and authority to a racist viewpoint which he finds abhorrent. Bola Agbaje's *Gone Too Far!* explores the tensions of postcolonial identities from a different perspective as two estranged Nigerian brothers negotiate the complex cultural and linguistic territory of their south London estate; of all the plays considered in this project the most 'heteroglossic', recalling Marvin Carlson again. It is also the play in which issues of nation and Englishness are most distant, in contrast to the final three plays I will discuss. *The English Game* and *England People Very Nice*, both by Richard Bean, share an impetus and a desire to explore questions about England and Englishness but beyond that are markedly different. *The English Game* is a muted and nuanced comedy about a mixed male world of amateur cricket, set during a single game played out off-stage. This archetypally English sport unites a disparate and sometimes divided group of men, white, black, Asian, gay, old and young, and by class. By contrast *England People Very Nice* takes the broadest strokes of English history and stereotypes of English racism and parodies them – seeking carnivalesque means to expose the myth of a homogenous England and a 'proper' English people that lay claim to it. But what for some is exuberant parody, others find to be deliberately offensive and ultimately serving to reinforce the stereotypes and racism the play purports to be



aimed at. I will argue that the controversy that Bean's play generated ensured its presence and participation in national public discourses and its status as political theatre. I end with Jez Butterworth's *Jerusalem* (2009), layering English myth, history and theatrical tradition to develop a conscious, dialogic tension between the England of past and present, between Johnny 'Rooster' Bryon and the small community of Flintock. He is carnival personified, a conduit and a focus for the play's energy, comedy and also violence; even here, though not actually enacted in the cause of English nationalism, we witness the blunt expression of a community's prejudice against an outsider, against the 'wrong' kind of Englishman.

### ***Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (2002)**

Roy Williams's 2002 play *Sing Yer Heart Out For The Lads* confronts racism head on. As a black football fan, an ardent Queen's Park Rangers fan, he was already acutely conscious of the racial tensions focused around the sport and the national team in particular. An experience in a Birmingham watching an England game led him to write *Sing Yer Heart Out*, set against the backdrop of that same game – a European qualifier against old rivals Germany on October 7<sup>th</sup> 2000, given extra symbolic status by virtue of being England's last match at the iconic Wembley stadium. Williams sets the play in a pub, the King George, somewhere in south-west London as a group of male friends and acquaintances gather to watch the match. The George is run by a white family; Gina the landlord, Jimmy her father and Glen, Gina's fourteen-year-old son. Glen speaks and acts as if he were black like the new friends from the estate he's made; signalling his defiance and allegiances in language, dress and attitude. Gina has already had to answer for Glen's bullying of an Asian pupil at school, in company of these new friends, and she fears for what will come next. Williams introduces these new friends, Bad T and Duane, and immediately establishes their unequal dynamic. Bad T holds himself as the leader of their embryonic gang, and will exploit Glen's desire to be accepted, bullying him and then laughing it off, exploring the limits of what Glen will take. This relationship between these minor characters drives the narrative and the escalating tensions, and will lead to an unexpected climax.

At the heart of the play are two sets of brothers, one black, and one white. Mark is the elder of the two black brothers, recently arrived back on the estate after leaving some years before to enter the armed forces. A racist commanding officer

and the conflicts of being a black soldier loyal to the flag have left him cynical and acutely sensitive to the inherent racism of his old community upon his return. He is only in the pub because of a domestic crisis which Barry, his younger brother, is steadfastly avoiding and Mark hopes to catch him here. He reluctantly reminisces with Gina, with whom he had a relationship years before, and Jimmy, who proudly remembers him as a hero of a previous incarnation of the pub football team; memories of a past Mark thought he had left behind. Barry is younger, more naïve. He makes his first entrance as the triumphant hero of the current pub team, having scored the winning goal, revelling in the adoration from the team. With the flag of St George painted on his face, he performs John Barnes's rap from 'World in Motion' by New Order, released ahead of the 1990 World Cup. It is the only moment of collective harmony in the whole play, presenting the shared passion, camaraderie and a common identity of fans articulated around the national team that transcends club affiliations and rivalries – the ideal of sport and its role in expressing national identity, uniting people across gender, age, race and class. Williams's choice of the 'World in Motion' rap is pointed. Barnes, for many years England's most-capped black player, grew up in Jamaica and came to Britain aged thirteen. He quickly became one of English football's most iconic black players, for club (most notably with Liverpool) and for country. Like many other black players in the 1980s he experienced the open racism accompanying English football at the time, and often from his team's own fans; his status as an England icon was hard-won. Barnes's rap has acquired something of a legendary status, a natural choice for Barry in his moment of glory – but, as the sole black player on the pub team and performing it to the white crowd of onlookers, Mark finds it distasteful and looks on in disgust. This apparent unity is a mask, a temporary diversion from the deep-seated racial tensions that will emerge again as soon as the arduous task of actually watching England play begins.

The second pair of brothers is white. Lawrie, the elder brother, is a racist and makes no secret of it. He also enjoys the opportunities for violence that football offers, especially in support of England, proudly recounts his hooliganism in the bars and on the streets of Europe as part of the 'barmy army'. He is at odds with his younger brother Lee, a policeman, who finds the conflict of protecting his younger brother and upholding the law increasingly difficult to negotiate. He does not share Lawrie's racist beliefs but as a police officer is well aware of the racial tensions the

law must mediate and the position that puts him in. Lawrie was stabbed by a man, a black man, in the line of duty in the recent past, and beyond the physical trauma the mental scars, the doubts and the whispering prejudices still linger. The attitude and activities of Lawrie put him in an impossible position – especially when he appears to be developing a close association with Alan, who becomes an important figure later in the play. Like Mark, with whom he used to be good friends, he knows Alan for what he is, and the danger that the man poses to his brother.

Alan is older than most of the other men, a local painter and decorator, a Villa fan. He is also a racist – not of the smash and fight variety like Lawrie, who he is trying to school, but of a kind that Williams clearly perceives as a much greater threat and accords significant stage-time to accordingly. What his wider political affiliations might be – to the British National Party or to the English Defence League, for example – Williams deliberately does not elaborate upon; Alan only says ‘you’re in’ to Lawrie, the briefest aside to indicate some wider political context and Lawrie’s deepening involvement in racist activity. Alan is a spokesman figure, a careful and intelligent propagandist who actively eschews violence and finds the worst of Lawrie’s extremes as frustrating as his brother Lee. He urges Lawrie to educate himself, to *read*, ‘[b]ecause knowledge is power. You want to hide something from the black man, you put it in a book’ (Williams, 2004: 198).

Outside, events have precipitated a crisis. Bad T took Glen’s new jacket and mobile phone forcibly, and his shamed return to the bar is magnified by being held to account for it in front of the gathered crowd; Jimmy in particular urges him to man-up and fight back. Gina is scared and furious; when Duane returns shortly after with the stolen items she throws him out unceremoniously – prompting Duane’s mother Sharon to enter and a physical altercation ensues. Lee intervenes to subdue and remove her, and as the first act closes the situation is worsening as a group of angry black residents gather outside, a petty teenage conflict is escalating into a full-blown racial confrontation, with the football crowd trapped inside. The situation ratchets up the existing tensions in the bar, between Mark and Lawrie, who has set his sights on Barry; between Lee and Lawrie, who is spoiling for a fight regardless of Lee’s duty to prevent it; and between Mark and Lee, the estranged friends at odds over Lawrie but who both act to mediate the situation outside. The latent racism aimed at the television, at the Germans and at Andy Cole, the sole black player in the starting team, which has been increasingly vocal as the match slips away from England, 1-0

down, is now palpable in the bar between the characters. As the stand-off outside continues during the second act, Alan has time and opportunity to strategically and methodically engage all of the key characters, intuitively adapting his approach to the fears and sensitivities of each. From an opening gambit of a partial aside 'rivers of blood' (another invocation of Enoch Powell) he holds forth with Gina and Jimmy as his intended audience, despite the fact that Gina tells him from the outset to 'leave that England for whites bollocks outside' (Williams, 2004:183) and swears she isn't racist; Jimmy, as part of an older generation, finds more truth in what Alan says in his analysis of 'what the black man has done for the world', which is in fact about Britain's diminished post-imperial, post-colonial status:

ALAN. I'll tell you. When the British and European powers colonised Africa, the colonies had a high standard of civilisation, when the decolonisation came round, we left those countries economically sound with good administrative government. As soon as the whites left, those blacks are killing each other. Now they've got some of the poorest countries in the world. That's how capable the blacks are of running their own countries and looking after themselves. You look at the rest of the black hemisphere, the Caribbean, rotten with poverty, half of them, now we gave them the means to run their countries efficiently, but we're still pumping aid into these countries to keep them afloat. They can't run themselves; if they can't even live with each other, why should we be expected to live with them as well? We gave them everything they had to carry on, look at us, we won the war militarily, but we lost it in real terms; see the Germans, Japanese, the two strongest economies in the world, because their countries had been so completely destroyed, that money had to be pumped in to rebuild the industries that support these countries. They've managed it, why couldn't the blacks whose countries weren't even destroyed? Why do we always have to give in to their begging bowls? Money which we could do with ourselves, never mind how the poor blacks are suffering round the world. (Williams, 2004: 189)

Here again we encounter a familiar narrative of decline following the fragmentation of empire and the Second World War, an attempt to consolidate a collective identity around a notion of racial and cultural homogeneity, 'the whites'. As already

mentioned, Alan's wider political allegiances are never discussed – there is no Nation Forward or its contemporary equivalent in Williams' dramatic world, no desire to make links between Alan's personal or social history that explores his shift to the far right as Edgar does with Turner in *Destiny*, by comparison. Alan is much more assured, his prejudices fully formed and justified, honed through research and rehearsal. As with Lawrie, when he engages Barry over a game of pool, with Mark safely away outside, it is as something of a father figure. He compliments Barry on the goals he scored that morning and his obvious talent, then changes tack subtly to talk about loyalty – that Barry, born in Shepherd's Bush, should follow his local team (Queen's Park Rangers) and not Manchester United, his team of choice, making a link between football and the bonds of family and blood. It is an opening to discuss race and racism – Alan purports to 'understand where you're coming from, I really do', but really it is an opportunity to articulate racial prejudices and stereotypes shrewdly:

ALAN. Right on liberals, stupid lefties, all lining up, wanting to do you all a favour, they're just scared you'll lose your tempers, mug them after work, how equal is that? All that talk, understanding, deep down they know, they believe, blacks are inferior, whites are superior. You must feel really small when you meet people like that...

BARRY. ... Look, juss fuck off, awright! (Williams, 2004: 205)

Barry leaves, thoroughly confused, to re-join the others watching the game, and when Lawrie questions Alan about his tactics, he responds cynically: 'Reeling them in, throwing them back. The boy's got no idea who his friends are.' (206). Barry, who has been studiously disinterested in the confrontation outside thus far, becomes agitated and vents his frustration at the television – but shortly afterwards he tells Mark about their discussion, who is frustrated that it has taken Barry this long to realize the true situation of black and white relations. Alan also engages Lee, again fatherly and sympathetic, attempting to get him to admit that he recognizes the irreconcilable problems of race relations, as a police officer, playing upon Lee's experience of being stabbed.

The final discursive encounter is the one that has been coming throughout the play, that between Alan and Mark, again conducted over a game of pool. Alan wants

Mark to admit that they share more in common than he would like to admit – namely that he recognises that England is a white country and that black people are not wanted here, which is exactly what Mark told Barry in an earlier conversation in the gents which Alan overheard from the stalls. This is the conversation he says that needs to be had – ‘If you want to stop people from being like me, then you had better start listening to people like me’ (Williams, 2004: 214) – for Mark to ‘push us back’ in a frank exchange of views without the shackles of political correctness which he senses Mark is itching to have too. Alan describes his frustration at the ‘thick as shit’ white working class filling daytime TV with their noisy ignorance, wanting Mark to admit to his own frustrations at blacks ‘letting the side down’, which he does. But the core of their discussion is about white Britain and white British culture, and to which Mark is able to respond in kind, having done his own reading. He points out the immigrant origins of the English from Europe and Scandinavia, and a long history of a black British community, but Alan absorbs and rejects these challenges implacably, though he relishes the exchange. As their tense exchange over the game concludes, the debate acquires more confrontational tones as the brass tacks are reached between the two men:

ALAN. If you’re so smart, how come you still haven’t caught up with us?

MARK. Cos you love pushing us down.

ALAN. Well, push us back. You’ve had thousands of years. What are you waiting for you, you useless bastards. Always some excuse. Can’t you people take account for what you are doing to yourselves, instead of blaming us every five seconds.

MARK. You are to blame.

ALAN. If you cannot hold your own to account for what they are doing, then we will be left to take drastic measures.

MARK. Is that right?

ALAN. Lack of accountability creates anger, Mark, look at all the hate in the world, and it will twist some people’s logic, just like Lawrie’s, and flavour thought. Bad things are motivated purely by anger. You lot need to feel we will be held to account for what we’ve done, well, we need to feel it from you first.

MARK. You don’t have the right.

ALAN. Why's that?

MARK. Because yer white.

ALAN. Who's the bigot now?

MARK. Go fuck yourself.

ALAN. Face it son, you're nothing but a ticked box. You will never be equal to us, and you know it.

MARK. You won't win. Thass wat I know.

ALAN. We already have. (Williams, 2004: 219-220)

There is no more to be said; the *détente* between them is over, and with it the reasoned exchange of ideas and opinions. Mark begins defiantly chanting a familiar refrain over and over, 'We shall not be moved', and is joined by Barry; they then start chanting 'England!' and clapping, the black brothers finally united in a show of resistance. This infuriates Lawrie who rejects both Lee and Alan – he wants a fight to sort it out once and for all. But it is not Lawrie that will precipitate the act of violence that provides the play's bleak climax as Mark is stabbed and killed in the gents' toilets. It is Glen, angry and confused, who has armed himself with a large knife and is about to go out and get his own revenge. When Mark tries to counsel him against this – 'they're juss boys. Not black boys, but juss boys. Stupid boys' (Williams, 2004: 232) – but Glen is beyond rational thought and when Mark tries to disarm him, stabs him repeatedly in a sudden frenzy. He is instantly appalled at what he has done and flees, leaving others to discover Mark's body. Suspicion immediately falls upon Lawrie and he is duly arrested by Lee – finally breaking the sibling bond between them – before the real culprit, Glen, is dragged down to the bar with the murder weapon. It is a powerful moment as the gathered crowd assimilate what has happened, and what will happen – a racial murder, white on black:

In *Sing Yer Heart Out*, then, Williams has created a powerfully direct play exploring the realities of racism in a direct manner. As a football fan himself, Williams understands the world he portrays intuitively, and his skill as a dramatist enables him to transcend the sport and the game that the play is nominally 'about'; ultimately the football is an entry point to wider issues in British society. It is also testament to Williams as a playwright that he recognises the necessity of Alan being a credible character with a voice of his own, though he necessarily articulates a racist worldview which is abhorrent to him. Recalling my on-going discussion about

Bakhtin, this clearly puts the idea of the 'unified worldview', the monologism of theatre into sharp contrast; Alan's character represents a key Bakhtinian ideal of a fully realized consciousness speaking for himself, not merely a white racist orchestrated by a black playwright. Though he only really emerges in the later scenes, Alan is the central character, at least in terms of the discursive dimension of the play; leading the series of debates he conducts, he of all the characters has the most consistent focus on stage. Williams does not explore his wider political affiliations, does not state the organisation that he represents; instead he focuses attention on what Alan himself says and what that means to black and white characters alike. There is some truth in some of what Alan says, and which Mark recognises, that frank discussions need to be had about racism, that black Britons must take account of themselves and act to resist what Alan represents – which again is testament to Williams as a playwright. There can be no doubt that *Sing Yer Heart Out* is political theatre, given the terms of our wider discussion. It is set in a public space, the public house, and requires a large cast. It is necessarily realist, i.e. in staging, in character and their speech, across the various inflections of English across the white and black characters. These characters, individually and collectively, represent different positions in Williams's sharp analysis of English racism; the black ex-soldier and the white racists; the off-duty policeman a reluctant and conflicted intermediary; a white family in a changing community, the teenage son negotiating the complex conflicts of identity and culture; and Barry, who just wants to be one of the lads, white or black, all football and England fans together. One might argue the backdrop of an actual England match that the characters are watching provides a specific and recognisable context, an extra level of realism and identification for an audience, but claiming this constitutes a documentary dimension, following Edgar, is perhaps a step too far. However, the England game immediately establishes the wider context of national identity, and of specific and familiar discourses about England (as in the national team and the nation) and Englishness that polarize the black and white characters. Furthermore, Alan's series of dialogues with all the key characters are deliberately political and explicitly discursive, engaging each in conscious debate in a manner which one might expect of a political play and playwright.

Yet, for all of this, *Sing Yer Heart Out* does not feel like a 'play of ideas', abstracted and intellectual; it is vibrant and visceral in what it says about the state of



the nation. Williams offers no solutions, no sense of how England and English society could be recast to overcome the problems of racism he engages; if that is a fundamental prerequisite for *Sing Yer Heart Out's* status as political theatre, as Patterson suggested in the previous chapter, then it is lacking. Amelia Howe Kritzer observes the play 'offers little hope for race relations', describing the imminent threat of violence in the expression of identity and the polarization of white and black characters across the play that seems inescapable. She is entirely correct, but that does **not** prevent the play from being an important contribution to national debates about race and racism, of playing its own vital role in wider processes of public discourse and social change. And in this respect, the role of the National Theatre in the play's history must be acknowledged. First produced there, it was twice revived and toured by the National in short order – a recognition of the play's importance in crucial national debates about race and racism, and of the National's aspirations towards being the nation's stage, playing an active role in vital public discourses. It would achieve this via *Sing Yer Heart Out*, a play that deserves its status as one of the best new works of the decade. Ten years on, it has lost none of its power or topicality. At the time of writing this chapter, the former England captain John Terry faces prosecution for racially abusing a black player, Anton Ferdinand, a Queen's Park Rangers player. Football, again, is the focus for wider social problems.

### ***Gone Too Far!***

Bola Agbaje's debut play *Gone Too Far!* (2007) explores the world of two teenage brothers living on a South London estate. It is a play explicitly conscious of the relationship between language and identity, thrown into sharp focus as Oluyemi (Yemi), who grew up in London, and Ikudayisi (Dayisi), recently arrived from Nigeria to live, face the challenges of living as brothers and not as strangers from different cultures. The one thing they do share is a common fear of their ferocious mother (though she never appears on stage) and from the outset Agbaje introduces the cultural and linguistic worlds the family inhabit:

MUM. (*off*) You these children, you are trying to kill me but I won't let you. Before I go from this earth I will show you pepper. People are always telling me I am lucky to have big boys like you. They don't know-oh, they don't

know. You don't do nothing for me. You can't cook, you don't clean. All you do is give me problems. If I have to come up that stairs today ...

*The phone rings and she answers in a very English voice.*

Hello. Oh, yes, yes. Don't worry, I will be bringing it tomorrow... (Agbaje, 2007: 4)

This is a precursor to main body of the play as the brothers are sent out to get milk, the beginning of a series of important encounters of a reluctant odyssey across the estate together. The first of these sets a general context of their environment, the vexed issues of race, religion and identity, and the play's topicality. A local Bangladeshi shopkeeper refuses entry to Yemi because of his hood, which he refuses to remove; quick to sense injustice Yemi tries to argue it's his right to wear his hood, just as it is the Muslim man's right to wear his headscarf. When this fails Yemi gets angry, and a stupid comment about hiding a bomb factory prompts an intense response:

SHOPKEEPER. I NEVER SAY NO BAD THING ABOUT ENGLAND.

YEMI. Calm down, man, I was just making a point. Just cos I got a hood on my head doesn't mean I'm tryna rob nobody. Same ways I knows just cos you're Indian don't mean you're a BOMBER!

SHOPKEEPER. I TELL YOU ALREADY I NO BOMBER! I PROUD TO BE ENGLISH. NO TROUBLE, NO TROUBLE. SHOP CLOSE, SHOP CLOSE.  
(Agbaje, 2007: 11)

He retreats into the shop and locks the door; the Islamic music that has been playing is replaced by *Three Lions* blasting out, another England football song, the shop festooned with England flags. This and a reference to the terrorist bombings of 'last year' set the context, the play set in 2006, a World Cup, and the bombings are those of '7-7', i.e. in London on the 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005. Agbaje does not pursue this issue further in the play, but it forms an important backdrop and one which audiences during its first production would have been sensitive to. For the moment though the encounter is over, leaving the brothers alone again. Dayisi is critical of Yemi's behaviour, of 'acting like a baboon' (Agbaje, 2007: 13) which further enrages Yemi who tries, unsuccessfully, to punch him. It is an impasse: the brothers face the prospect of a

much longer trip across the estate to find another open shop from which to get milk (it is a Bank Holiday) – or return empty-handed to their mother.

The following scene brings the focus of attention to race, culture and language, Agbaje's key interests in the play. The brothers' next encounter is with Paris and Armani, two local girls of roughly the same age, two key characters. They have not met Dayisi before and his status as an African is of keen interest, in contrast to Yemi's determination to underplay his heritage in the way he speaks and dresses. Dayisi, for his part, is as keen as any teenage boy to meet girls, and plays up to their curiosity, further embarrassing Yemi when he effects an American accent. An apparent history of tension between Yemi and Armani, who is just as angry and volatile, is reignited. Yemi unexpectedly takes exception to Armani's observation that Dayisi doesn't 'look like an African', which she intends as a back-handed compliment, 'you should be grateful you don't look like dem. Be grateful you don't have big lips and big nose' (Agbaje, 2007: 18), insisting that she's not from Africa but from 'yard', i.e. the estate. Dayisi isn't offended (though he doesn't see what's wrong with big lips, feeling his own), finds what Armani says ridiculous and starts laughing at her, mocking her in Yoruba which enrages Armani further:

ARMANI. Are you taking the piss?

IKUDAYISI. *Omo girl omo jaku jaku.* [This silly girl.] *Oti so ro so ro ju* [She talks too much.] *Werre.* [Crazy.]

ARMANI. Listen Abebabatunde, or whatever your name is, yeah, we are in England so tell ya people to speak fucking English if they got something to say.

YEMI. IS THE WORDS EVEN COMING OUT OF MY MOUTH? I TOLD YOU I DON'T SPEAK THAT LANGUAGE. GET OUT OF MY FACE.

ARMANI. AND WHAT YOU GONNA DO, YOU AFRICAN BUBU? (Agbaje, 2007: 19)

This argument will set in motion the chain of events that provides the dramatic impetus of the play, and one which will develop. In a key scene, one of the longest and perhaps serving as its discursive heart, Armani demands of her boyfriend Razer that he 'do something' about Yemi who attacked her – and when Paris questions her accounts of events Armani's anger, and her willingness to see racism, turns upon

her best friend. Armani is 'light-skinned', has a white mum; Paris is 'dark-skinned', and this difference becomes significant, leading to mutual allegations of racism as they fall out. Armani's anger peaks when she is ridiculed for saying she hates Africans because she believes they were responsible for slavery – 'they sold us off to da white man, and den stayed as kings and queens' (Agbaje, 2007: 36) – and then accuses Paris of racism because she 'loves' Africans and hates white people. Paris points out how ridiculous this is, that if she's a racist then Armani is too because she hates Africans, prompting the argument to get personal. '... all dark-skinned girls are like dat, they are forever hating', declares Armani (39), causing Paris to finally lose her temper and respond in kind, 'cos *all* mixed-raced girls are confused', elaborating:

ARMANI. Nah, later. Not me.

PARIS. Especially you! You don't know what side to identify yourself with. Should you be on the white side, should you be on the black side – *you don't know*. You try and act like you're blacker dan anybody else, but then you contradict yourself cos you go on like it's a bad thing for me to look black, or anyone else at that. I've always been cool with myself and even cooler wid you. When other *light-skinned* girls have chatted shit bout you, I've always been the one to defend your ass. But I'm the hater – cos I'm dark-skinned! You just don't get it. You are so confused! (Agbaje, 2007: 40)

The complexities and conflicts of identity are apparent, a sensitivity to colour and culture that simplistic notions of race and racism cannot engage. The latent racism of the wider culture and society is a fact, but it is the tensions between black teenagers of different heritage that animates their concerns and fuels their conflicts. Via Armani and Paris Agbaje is able to discuss these issues in a wider context while the brothers come to terms with their Nigerian heritage and what that means in inner-city London; England and Englishness are less relevant, as is black and white racism. When they are alone together Yemi especially feels the cultural and linguistic gulf between him and Dayisi. At first he will refuse to admit his Nigerian heritage is or should be important to him; like Armani, his allegiances and his culture are the yard first. But when they are insulted or physically threatened, Yemi's instinctive reaction is to come to his brother's defence. The confrontation that Armani has desired finally comes about at the end of the play. When Dayisi is

mugged at the end of the play Yemi wrests the knife from his attacker and in that moment is faced with a potentially life-changing decision – but Dayisi makes a desperate plea, which stands as Agbaje’s wider message in the play:

IKUDAYISI. I didn’t come from Nigeria to be a part of this. We are all BLACK! WE ARE ALL BLACK AND YOU ARE ACTING LIKE WE ARE ALL DIVIDED! It needs to stop now. We need to stop this nonsense. Why are we always fighting each other? Why can’t we just get along? I just want everyone to get along. Yemi, you tell me you are free, be free to make the right choice. Don’t go down the wrong road. It’s your choice, make the right choice. GIVE ME THE KNIFE. (Agbaje, 2007: 79)

Dayisi is then injured and Agbaje ends the scene with an abrupt blackout – but there is a happy ending for the final scene. After all they have been through, by the end of the play the brothers’ relationship has developed such that they can mock their mother together, and laugh about it (safely out of earshot, of course); and, if Yemi cannot bring himself to tell Dayisi that he loves him, the two brothers can at least exchange an awkward hug. When he’s out of the room and Yemi is getting ready to go out, he decides to ‘borrow’ one of Dayisi’s African hats instead of a baseball cap, admiring himself in the mirror and ending the play with a welcome affirmation of his Nigerian heritage:

YEMI. Yeah, I look heavy, man.  
*He begins singing and dancing round the room.*  
Green white green on my chest,  
I’m proud to be a Nigerian!  
Green white green on my chest!  
Proud to be a Ni-ge-ri-an!  
Proud to be a Ni-ge-ri-an! (Agbaje, 2007: 82)

### ***The English Game***

*The English Game* (2008) presents an understated microcosm of (male) metropolitan England played out over the duration of an amateur cricket match in

South London. Like much of Bean's work, it presents an interesting scenario, engaging characters and sharp, often openly comedic dialogue which compliment more subtle and significant moments that make the play. Its politics, the issues of the day, emerge in the minutiae of the men's relationships around the business of the game, and are brought to prominence without being deliberately and explicitly discursive. Like his earlier *Up on Roof* (2006), the staging is important, here indicating that the audience should be seated as though they were on the pitch, and that the game is going on around them, with appropriate sound design. There are the remains of a burnt-out pavilion, of which the steps are still intact, a wire fence with holes in upstage, and a dog turd centre stage – the wicket itself is offstage, and thus all of the actual play but for what we hear. The play takes place over three acts, the first two in real time, and for the third, lapses in time 'can be indicated by an accelerated scoreboard'.

Bean introduces most of the fourteen characters in an establishing opening scene as the various team members arrive at the pitch and prepare to play. The backbone of the Nightwatchmen team is three generations of the same family – Len, the aging grandfather, a hero of the team in a previous era; Will, chief organizing force in the team, and Reuben, his thirteen-year-old son, an apprentice at the wicket. There is Thiz, the aging rock star, still trading off former glories and the self-appointed joker of the pack; Clive, a sassy and intellectual actor; Theo, a G.P. and a committed Christian; two friends, Olly and Nick (who are black and Asian respectively; the only non-white characters), in addition to others further down the batting order. Most significant of these is Reg, in his late fifties, who arrives slightly after the main characters, a substitute for a regular player who can't make the game. It is an exclusively male world, with a significant generational spread of characters, as well as differences in class, race and sexuality, a group of men united by a shared passion for their sport of choice, cricket, and their commitment to the team. There are those who are closer friends and socialise away from the team, those that are friends within the team but not outside, and some more distant yet – and there are tensions and conflicts that are articulated and resolved in typically male fashion. Bean uses a disagreement over Alan's painstakingly constructed but ultimately useless new scoreboard to sum up their common bond as captain Sean struggles to keep the team from falling apart at a crucial late stage of the game.

*The English Game* is not explicitly discursive in the ways I have described this far, there is no doubt that the driving impetus of the play is to explore England and Englishness. Cricket is of course closely associated to an ideal of England and Englishness, the land and the national character: invoking the village green, lazy summer days and a gentleman's sport predicated upon fair play, 'the' English game (everything that football is not). There is symbolism and metaphor in Bean's cricket world – shabby, urban London, a turd on the pitch, the burnt-out pavilion and the captain's insistence on entering the field of play via its remaining steps in defiant honour of tradition. One could elaborate upon the 'Englishness' of the characters as they are portrayed and their status as 'social types' (in this respect Reg's character is particularly significant, as we shall see), but a more pertinent question is how the play engages the wider context of more immediate events and tensions in British society. These are questions of the play's topicality and how the 'real world' permeates the game and the characters' world. Bean's emphasis upon characters and their dialogue is paramount, as is the gently comedic note that underpins the play as a whole. Bean is not interested in staging debate or in framing a dialogue in the same way that Edgar does – what Bean 'says', what the characters say about their world and their experience of it, is framed differently. There is a lot of banter and general conversation that the group dynamic of the team allows, with its large cast of characters. The pace of cricket, the ebb and flow of the game, the hiatuses and the sudden explosion of adrenaline as a wicket is taken or a run is made off-stage allow Bean a multitude of opportunities for interruption and continuation of different threads of conversation that run through the play – rather than the series of discursive encounters that structures Edgar's *Playing With Fire* or Williams' *Sing Yer Heart Out*, by contrast. The wider context of politics and religion appears to arise spontaneously amidst the banter and conversation, and then is gone again as quickly as other characters or the game intercede. A sudden and surprisingly bitter disagreement between good friends Will and Theo is sparked by an off-hand comment about the 7/7 bombers. Will was in London that day and the experience has destroyed his faith in the principles of tolerance, which he ridicules angrily in his three-point plan to 'make this country completely safe from sexually frustrated Yorkshiremen of a Wahabi Sunni persuasion' (Bean, 2009: 220-221) – execute all gay men, women have to go shopping in tents, and all infidels (i.e. everybody) killed – the intellectual equivalent of Reg's tabloid-informed prejudice. Theo, a principled

Christian, is genuinely shocked by this outburst from someone who knows better, Will's attack on Islam. They have much in common; age, class, education and profession, and Theo is dismayed at the recognition of a more fundamental change in Will's view of the world. Earlier in the play ~~there~~ Bean makes an apparently tangential reference to Will's youthful radicalism and public persona, a 'Johnny Depp lookalike [...] pain in the arse psychologist', author of 'Motivation, Madness and the Molotov Cocktail' in 1972 (perhaps an R.D. Laing figure) – and whose latest book is 'In Defence of England', indicating a creeping conservatism. It also has a personal dimension, as Bean makes clear – Will causes the argument, hurt that Theo is retiring to France, a symbolic abandonment of both Will and England; the schism it causes between the two friends appears irreconcilable.

It is here, immediately after the argument, that Len dies – unnoticeably as far as the audience is concerned, but Bean chooses this moment, with a big shout of *Owzat!* from offstage as the Nightwatchmen lose a wicket. Len is the elder statesman, in his eighties, clearly on his last legs from the opening of the play, spending most of the time asleep in the sun. There is an obvious symbolism in his presence and his death at the game, the passing of a generation, but Bean deliberately understates it, here and when his death is eventually discovered at the end of the play.

The other key context is developed by Bean through Reg's character. As an outsider and a late arrival, Bean invites a measure of identification with Reg as he tries to break the ice and work out the dynamics of the group and of the team. This quickly changes as he visibly blanches at Nick's comment about getting an early night with Cameron, clearly uncomfortable with the idea of a gay relationship, the first overtures of his status as a 'little Englander'. His wife is 'the enemy', the world is a worse place because the children's party game of pass the parcel isn't competitive any more (every child gets a prize each time the music stops) and he's clearly trying very hard to hide his wider prejudices for the sake of getting a regular game. He avoids Nick, and tries too hard with Olly, falling back upon the only thing he can think to ask a black man, where he comes from 'originally' (Bury St. Edmunds). The team quickly recognize Reg for what he is and that he stands at odds with many of them; outside of the game his views, his attitudes would not be tolerated for long and his presence over the course of the game causes some hostility as he is discussed by the others when out of earshot. Clive, the sassy intellectual, is the first to challenge



him openly – but becomes inspired by his unremitting blandness and tabloid conservatism:

NICK. Do you like Reg?

ALAN. No.

CLIVE. He's brilliant, I love him!

NICK. That's cos you're an actor, man, you can see it as a part you could play.

CLIVE. Most actors would play Reg ironically, and that would be a disgrace. I'd do it with beauty, commitment, emphasise the heroic. I would deliver a celebration of England. (Bean, 2009: 227)

Bean is obviously having a moment of self-reflective fun, but Clive's view of Reg's prosaic nobility (whether sincere or not) invites the same reflection upon how Reg is being played by the current actor and, by extension, our own perception of him. He is not a likeable person, not a likeable character, and though the team does not unite to confront him, they unite in silence against him. Bean develops some measure of understanding of Reg, an insight that takes him beyond a simple caricature or straw man. Towards the end of the play Theo catches Reg being sick in nearby trees and counsels him to act upon this and his dramatic weight-loss; his political views are irrelevant as Theo doctors to Reg just as he does for the whole team. Reg then makes a vital contribution and helps turn the game from almost certain defeat to a narrow victory. The team's attitude to Reg – now 'Reggie', as Nick notes with some dismay – changes notably; winning makes a world of difference.

In contrast to any of the plays considered in these two chapters thus far, *The English Game* is much less readily identifiable as a 'political' play. Bean is operating in a broadly comedic mode and the play's politics arise almost incidentally out of the banter between the team members – that is, out of character and dialogue, out of the relationships between the different men. To a large extent the cricket world is at a safe remove from the problems of everyday life and wider society, and within the loose narrative of the game and its progress, not much actually happens, at least in comparison to all the other plays considered thus far. There are no discursive or narrative set pieces which the characters must negotiate and which will change their worlds; and the extent to which they are representative of social types or positions is limited – by the standards of the other plays. Bean's intention, his strategy, is

different. Using comedy, employing sharply observed, highly naturalistic dialogue, Bean develops characters and ideas lightly, through repetition. He aims for a heightened sense of realism (not forgetting the staging), a dramatic world that is distinctly ordinary. It is not the kind of documentary fiction as Edgar understands it, yet Bean finds a form which links the private and the public, to explore wider questions of contemporary England and English society via his cricket world. The key issue that makes it on to the pitch, into the game, as we have seen, is that of radical Islam and the aftermath of terrorist attacks. The disagreement between Theo and Will is all the more significant because of the comedic tone, suddenly emerging out of the banter – and even this is bitterly funny, as the former radical expresses his impotent anger at the threat that Islam poses to his sense of the world, to England and Englishness, just as it does for Reg the ‘little Englander’.

### **England People Very Nice**

In contrast to the nuances and gentle comedy of *The English Game*, Richard Bean's subsequent play *England People Very Nice*, first produced at the National Theatre amidst considerable controversy, takes the broadest stereotypes and deepest prejudices of English xenophobia and seeks to consciously satirize and ridicule them. It is a musical, with as much of its theatre conducted in song as in dialogue, driving the play narratively and structurally – and it is a play within a play, the musical devised and staged by a group of modern-day immigrants detained in the Pocklington Immigration Centre as they await decisions on their applications for asylum, under the direction of English, middle-class Philippa. The prologue introduces the large, ethnically and culturally diverse cast and the sharp, satirical tone for what is to come as Philippa prepares her actors for the impending production:

PHILIPPA. Yes. OK notes! Sanya?! Problem. I can hear the swearing. Ida is white working class Bethnal Green. To her ‘facking’, is not swearing – it’s punctuation.

SANYA. FUCKING frogs!

PHILIPPA. No! Pong ‘Frogs’. Pong, theatrical term, emphasise Frogs.

SANYA. Fucking FROGS! Fucking MICKS! Fucking YIDS! Fucking PAKIS!

PHILIPPA. Perfect! (Bean, 2009: 10)

In this short prologue Bean spares no opportunity to find some humour in or through the characters, jokes arising out of the clash of cultures, ethnicity and religion, about the play they are to perform and even its audience. It sets the scene for the main play in tone and pace, deliberately aiming to be an exuberant, whirlwind tour through four hundred years of immigration into London's Bethnal Green area. Its 'thesis' is clear, exposing the racism aimed at successive waves of immigrants – French, Irish, Jewish and south-east Asian – from the (newly) indigenous community showing that England is and always has been a 'mongrel' nation. Furthermore, it is a recurring love story, presenting a pair of 'star-crossed lovers' for each time period; over time love – and desire – will overcome all racial and cultural divisions.

The staging of the play reflects its frenetic nature, Bean specifying a large stage and the ability for large flats to be flown in, 'a playful and non-naturalistic' process to establish the various locations in Bethnal Green, in tandem with projected images. The only consistent locations across all four acts and historical periods are the local pub, which remains unchanged throughout, and a place of worship which is transformed in each act, from church to synagogue and finally to mosque reflecting the different waves of immigration. This is a reference to Brick Lane Mosque, now place of worship for the local Bengali community, established as a Protestant chapel in 1743 the building became a Jewish refuge and a Methodist church before its current incarnation. Bean's play revolves around these fixed points, pub and worship, through the musical tour of the history of English immigration and Bethnal Green's singular status within it.

There is at least one song for each four acts, each historical period and subsequent wave of immigration, responding to the changes it brings to the local community in kind. In the first act French Protestants escaping Catholic repression into seventeenth century Spitalfields, bringing their faith and new working practices which threaten the status quo. The 'Frog song' describes the hostility aimed at them, a take on a traditional anti-French song of the time according to Bean's stage directions, and Norfolk Danny's death by hanging is placed in counter-point to 'Pleasant and delightful', another traditional folk song influence documenting the demise. Act 2 is set in the late seventeenth/ eighteenth century with the arrival of the Irish; here 'Aargh Pat' describes their unwilling escape from poverty and starvation in

Ireland. The third act is set in 1888 with the arrival of the Jews into Spitalfields; here the Jewish diaspora is elaborated first by the street-singer's song, and later 'Oy Vey', the song of the Jewish sweatshop workers. The fourth and final act straddles key eras of modern English history, across the Second World War and concluding in the present day. Four 'songs' describe this history. Gracie Fields' 'Thingummybob' invokes a familiar scenario of beleaguered London and the East End in the Blitz of 1941, the domestic travails of a global war against fascism. 'Babi He Write Me Come!' describes post-war immigration from south-east Asia and the arrival of Islam; 'Brick Lane Boys', the song of the local gang of Muslim youths, and Labiba's 'resistance rhyme' bring the focus to the current day. Music, song and dance are thus an integral part of Bean's dramaturgy, providing a carnival spirit to the racism, xenophobia and religious intolerance that the play engages. They are comedic, intended to be funny and satirical, to find the ridiculous in the most divisive issues in British society. They provide context, information, entertainment and a device to drive the narrative over the course of the many historical moments in Bethnal Green's history the play presents.

Within this musical framework, and as a counterpoint to the hostility that each wave of immigrants face, is a recurring theme of love and desire. In a deliberate invocation of Shakespeare's most famous lovers, each of Bean's four acts features a pair of 'star-crossed' lovers that defy the gulf of culture, language and religion that divide all around them. The first lovers of Act 1 are divided by death before their romance can begin, setting history in motion. Norfolk Danny, a journeyman weaver, breaks Guild rules for having the French 'whore' Camille on the premises – as he is about to be hung he swears he will not die 'knowing nothing of love. I will be born again to find her' (Bean, 2009: 30). French Camille becomes Irish Mary, heavily pregnant, as the first historical era segues into the second, and Bean's Romeo here is Father Carlo, himself a new arrival in Bethnal Green – and who will die defending Mary's one-eyed baby from the anti-Catholic mob, declaring he will see her in paradise. The lovers of the next period have a different fate: the failed revolution that Libertarian 'Black Ruth' (daughter of an English Lord) tries to incite via the Jewish Anarchist League sweeps her 'dull and cerebral' but beloved Aaron off to America, leaving her alone and distraught. But it is the lovers of the fourth period, Mushi and Deborah that are the most important to Bean, given three encounters over the years in this final act which brings the play's focus to the modern day. They

first share a night of passion as curious strangers in an Anderson shelter in the Blitz shortly after Mushi, a Bangladeshi Muslim, has jumped ship (literally) to arrive in Bethnal Green. They next time they meet as she walks into his restaurant in the early 1970s; each has married for duty over love (Mushi to his cousin, following tradition, and Deborah to Hugo, a member of the National Front). The frisson between them is still there, but they do not share another night together until the later in the decade – as her husband Hugo kills a Muslim man in a racist attack on the streets outside. In the modern day as they meet again, declare their love and kiss, once and then twice, their world shakes around them again – as a first and then second airplane strikes the Twin Towers of the World Trade Centre. Elsewhere onstage, pockets of people are watching the events on television, reacting with a collective gasp at each impact. (This is the only direct reference to 9/11 in any of the plays considered in this project, the significance of which I shall return to). Their love, divided as it is, is inextricably bound to these key moments of crisis in contemporary British history and the racial/ religious tensions of British society that have defined it.

As a backdrop to the love stories, representing the ‘indigenous English’ are Ida and Laurie, two common characters across all four acts and time periods. White and working-class, they serve to articulate the prejudices of each generation of white ‘locals’ towards each wave of immigrants. In the modern day Ida is Deborah’s mum, sounding forth in the place where she has spent four hundred years, the pub:

IDA. Fucking Pakis!

DEBORAH. Mum?!

IDA. They come here, but they don’t want to be English!

LAURIE. And what is it that defines the English Ida?

IDA. I believe in certain fings.

RENNIE. Yes, like what?!

IDA. Tolerance!

DEBORAH. You been slagging them all day!

IDA. O’ course I slag ‘em, that’s free speech, innit!

RENNIE. Integration boy! Integration!

LAURIE. How’s a Muslim woman gonna integrate round here?

IDA. Get your arse tattooed, a crack habit and seven kids by seven dads!

*They laugh. Enter Mushi with West Ham scarf. It goes quiet.* (Bean, 2009: 93-94)

Their casual prejudices are, in their eyes, justified. Ida is shown in another scene butting her head against council housing policy that prioritises immigrants while her own daughter, born and raised in the area, is left homeless; her dismay at the discrimination this represents is acute, fuelling her prejudices. Ida and Laurie represent 'ordinary' white English racism, functioning as something of a chorus commenting upon wider events; their invective is limited to the pub and lampoons their own sense of what it is to be English. A much more direct threat to the immigrants of each age is the presence of an intolerant mob. The cutter's mob of the first act engineer Norfolk Danny's demise, using anti-Catholic sentiment to fuel their anger; similarly the mob of the second act that go for Mary and her baby. In Act 3 there are the British Brothers League (a real historical organization that claimed 'England for the English in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the face of a perceived Jewish invasion) that incite the anti-Jewish sentiment of a more generalized mob. In the final act, in the modern day, we find the National Front and later the British National Party, represented by a single figure, Barry, present among the punters in the pub hearing a series of bomb blasts (those of July 2005; again the only play to stage them directly). Black Rennie, another of the pub's consistent characters, is literally dancing with joy that England's prophesized race war has found a different focus:

RENNIE. – Rivers of blood! Ha, ha, ha! Enoch Powell was right boy! He only got one thing wrong! It's not us boy! It's not us! Ha, ha!

LAURIE. I'm not BNP Barry, but these tube bombings gotta be good for you.

BARRY. We're absolutely fucking flying mate. Little things help. Today Tower Hamlets banned Christmas decorations in the offices. Health and Safety.

[...]

LAURIE. I would consider voting BNP, if you had some black candidates.

BARRY. It won't be long before my party has a black candidate. After 9/11, and today, skin colour is irrelevant. Culture. That's where the battle is. Take Rennie, he's black, but he's as British as hot tea in a flask.

RENNIE. We came here to work!

BARRY. But to Islamists he's a kaffur.

RENNIE. What's that boy?

BARRY. Kaffur. It means nigger. You're a nigger again Rennie, how's that make you feel? The good news is, I'm a kaffur an' all. We're brothers. (Bean, 2009: 107)

Following the murder of the Muslim man by skinheads in the 1970s the local Muslim youth, the Brick Lane Boys, train and arm themselves to fight back; at the end of the play, the current day, they have been politicised and seek resistance through a return to faith. It causes tensions with the older Muslim generation, Mushi in particular dismayed at 'losing' his three beautiful daughters to a house 'full of Arabs' as they take up the veil – one of whom is Labiba, whose 'resistance rhyme' articulates the young Muslims' anger and disenchantment at British society and secular values. Deborah and Mushi are finally together at the end of the play – finally leaving Bethnal Green and its problems for a quiet life in suburbia.

It is deliberately frantic and irreverent to its subject matter which is, in comparison to the other plays we have discussed, an entirely different dramatic strategy. There are varying tones and individual moments of humour in the other plays considered so far but *England People Very Nice* puts comedy at its core – but more than comedy, it is a satire. The sense of parody is explicit and necessary, irony too; it is at once playful and pointed, by Bakhtin's standards, 'carnavalesque', animated with a sense of gleeful anarchy, parodying deep-seated prejudices and exposing them to ridicule. The play does not seek to establish documentary truths through realism or the kind of measured analysis that Edgar presents, and thus seeks a different kind of relationship, a different dialogue with its audience – one based on laughter. But there is an edge to the humour, deliberately, a dimension of offense and offensiveness that is necessary to the satire and what Bean is trying to achieve. The laughter he seeks is 'double-voiced' – finding humour in stereotypes and prejudices, and laughing *at* them, not *with* them. The 'native' English characters, Ida especially, represent this most clearly – but in making jokes about race and religion, *England People Very Nice* was almost guaranteed to cause offense and controversy. Bean clearly anticipated this, prefacing the original playtext with the Orwellian maxim 'Freedom is the right to say two and two is four'. The freedom here is to write about these issues in this way, to laugh at them, to cause offense, for the purpose of a wider debate, a wider dialogue about the central role

that immigration has played in shaping English history and a sense of national identity. This has particular significance given the play's first production at the National Theatre under Nicholas Hytner's direction. Bean and Hytner sought a popular form, a wider audience than traditional middle-class theatre-goers (with subsidised tickets to facilitate that), to create a topical, relevant play about immigration and national identity on the 'nation's stage'. It is clearly 'theatre as public discourse', but an entirely different strategy and form to any of the other plays considered as such; and its status as 'political' theatre was ensured in the controversy that greeted that first production.

Not everybody was laughing, though. For the play to work an audience must recognise the satire and find it funny – if not the play fails, and all that are left are caricatures, stereotypes and tasteless jokes, set to music. Lone voices like Charles Spencer in the *Telegraph* applauded its bravery and irreverence, but most found the play ill-conceived and lacking; the joke, if funny at all, quickly wore thin and the satire, ultimately, failed. It was 'childish', 'didactic', a retrograde step in crucial debates about British multiculturalism from a playwright credited with being much better than this – with his previous play, *The English Game*, seen by contrast as a nuanced, intelligent and funny analysis of contemporary England and Englishness. Furthermore, critics found an extra dimension of offence and a more pointed significance in the shortcomings of the play because of its production at the National Theatre, the nation's stage, and its clear intent to be a theatrical intervention, a corrective. Its fiercest critics took issue with the stereotypes and racism that the play perpetuated and legitimated on the national stage; particular offence was found in its portrayal of the Irish and Muslims. An East End playwright, Hussain Ismail, led a campaign against the production, demanding a public forum in which Bean and Hytner could be held to account; causing some further controversy when he 'stormed' the stage at a pre-performance talk to lobby the audience. Inevitably, perhaps, the controversy became the story, ensuring the play's – and the National's – moment in the spotlight of national public debate.

If the public dialogue the play generated is the most significant criterion for 'theatre as public discourse' via Bakhtin then such an assessment of *England People* is unproblematic. The same applies to its principles as political theatre, staging the nation, engaged in dialogue with its audiences, the theatre-going public. As such, it represents an ideal of what theatre, and England's National Theatre specifically,



should and can achieve. It was popular in form, a musical, as Bean and the National strived to garner a popular audience – at affordable prices. Again, from a Bakhtinian perspective, it is alive to carnival and carnival forms, to comedy and laughter as a philosophical principle, presenting a laughing spectacle in which entertainment is important as ‘message’, seeking a popular audience. All of this is straightforward if we don’t need to account for the apparent problems of *England People Very Nice* and, also, with Bakhtin. The principle of ‘free’ speech and diversity in and of itself, which Bakhtin enshrines in his sense of heteroglossia and – in some contexts – dialogism could perversely lead us to downplay or even ignore its imbalances, failings and abuses. The critical response to Bean’s play made me question how Bakhtin’s principles could stand in relation to racist discourse – intentional or not – even though his work is often invoked as championing marginalized voices.

Anecdotally, these issues were the hot topic among a significant contingent of attendees at the All Together Now?: British Theatre after Multiculturalism conference at Warwick University in 2009, just a few months after *England People’s* run. Bean was scheduled to speak and would, I was reliably informed, be held to account by delegates from black and South-East Asian arts organizations. This anticipated encounter never came to be, as writer Kenan Malik preceded Bean with a pointed argument about diversity and the right to offend as a vital principle of free speech – we have an according right to be offended, but not to silence. The conflicts and clashes that multicultural diversity produces stimulate ‘political and cultural engagement’, he argued, forcing us into encounters beyond our ‘narrow cultural boxes’. These conflicts are what we also fear about diversity, and that takes two forms: the fear that England is being taken over by immigrants, eroding the social fabric and national identity; or, conversely, that although diversity is good, it must be policed – including imposition of ‘moral and legal restrictions on the giving of offence’. Malik’s argument, rather than Bean’s own defence of offence, successfully re-oriented subsequent discussion away from the heat of the controversy to the wider conference question about British theatre ‘after’ multiculturalism, i.e. looking back retrospectively over the course of the now-closing decade and raising an implicit question about its future. This was the topical debate, the urgent debate about British theatre, about multiculturalism, in a conference which seemed especially relevant, necessary and politically engaged.

### ***Jerusalem* (2009)**

The last play I consider is *Jerusalem* by Jez Butterworth, first staged at the Royal Court in 2009. It is a political play about community and identity, consciously invoking a dialogic tension between a mythical, spiritual sense of England and its contemporary reality in the small fictional community of Flintock, a small town in rural south-west England. Butterworth's intentions are unambiguous: his choice of title and the play's prologue in which Phaedra sings two verses of *Jerusalem* orient us directly to a core mythology of England and its identity as a land, a nation and its people. William Blake's poem, of course, invokes a wistful tension between a mythical past of a 'green and pleasant land' (perhaps) trod by the holiest of feet and the 'dark Satanic mills' of industrial England. By extension, Hubert Parry's early twentieth-century musical setting has accrued the status of an unofficial national anthem; *Jerusalem* celebrates England, not the person of the Queen or the institution of monarchy. Butterworth further accentuates the self-conscious 'Englishness' of the play by setting events on April 23<sup>rd</sup>, on which England's two patron saints – Shakespeare and St. George – are celebrated. Completing the symbolic circle, Flintock (or, more accurately, Rooster Woods) is held to be situated on an ancient ley-line which connects to not-too distant Stonehenge; we are firmly within the land of Jerusalem. The play embraces this mythology and its rich literary tradition, expressing it in a theatrical form which never fully steps beyond realism but somehow seems, at times, to hearken towards 'magic'. Its central character Johnny Rooster Byron, who claims the blood of an ancient Englishman, is the lynch-pin for the dialogic tension between the myth and the reality of this English 'Jerusalem'. What begins as comedy mutates into something much darker, the unfolding disintegration of the always-troubled relationship between Byron, a gypsy, and the wider Flintock community. The fermenting xenophobia that is eventually unleashed upon Byron as a gypsy is perhaps comparable only to that of Shylock as a Jew; the history of their peoples' persecution runs parallel. Unlike Shylock, Byron fights to the end, calling up the spirits of his ancestors and their allies, the giants of ancient England to rally in the fight against Kennet and Avon Council. Butterworth ends with magic, suggesting the myth can endure the assaults of the racism enacted in its name, even if Byron the man seems doomed. *Jerusalem's* commercial and critical success is testament to Butterworth and the Royal Court in finding their mark, a theatrical event transcending its generic boundaries to become 'public discourse'

itself, as I will go on to consider. Having begun to speak of a dialogic tension between myth and reality, however, I begin by focusing upon the play's fundamental carnival aspect, orchestrated in and around Byron, giving Butterworth licence to blur the lines between physical, theatrical spectacle and realism. Mark Rylance's work in founding the role, in collaboration with Butterworth and director Ian Rickson, should be noted; so too his bravado performances, fully inhabiting a remarkable theatrical persona alive beyond his fictional or generic confines.

Byron is carnival personified. He is a gypsy of Romany blood, a veteran stunt rider at the Wiltshire fairs and festivals of yesteryear. He is squat and strong, innately physical even now in his advancing years, a seasoned and willing fighter. He lives in a perpetual moment of excess that Gargantua, Falstaff and the Ubus would welcome. He is a braggart, a bullshitter. His thirst for drink and drugs is matched only by his desire for women and his love of chaos. He holds any and all authority in contempt, because the rules and social mores of normal life are irrelevant to a man who claims to be more than mortal. The Byrons claim an ancient ancestry, a blood and spiritual tie to the land, to a dimension of existence beyond the ordinary and the rational. His origin story, told afresh to an uninitiated teenager, is typically and wildly fantastic, Rabelaisian: Byron claims the tip of a bullet shot through his philandering father's testicles lodged, via a series of gloriously implausible ricochets, in his unsuspecting mother's womb. 'Eight months, three weeks, six days later. Out pops him. Smiling. With a bullet clenched between his teeth.' (Butterworth, 2009: 48). Butterworth invites the audience, like some of Byron's younger entourage, to believe that Byron might indeed have a touch of magic, that he could actually call on ancient English giants in his fight against eviction and, in a wider sense, the creeping urbanisation of Flintock.

For all that Byron claims to be something Other, he can only be understood in terms of the local community, and the same holds for the play. As Edgar does with Taddley and Wyverdale, Flintock is a real if imagined community firmly situated in a specific and identifiable regional context. Much of the play's early comedy originates in its characters' 'localism' and their awareness of life in a small town in rural south-west England, in Wiltshire and its regional hierarchy. This is focused around Lee's imminent departure for Australia, striking out into the unknown – as Davey observes in response, 'I leave Wiltshire, my ears pop. Seriously.' (Butterworth, 2009: 24), expressing contented resignation with his place in a small, intimately familiar world.

He is 'a local', part of a settled community with roots established over successive generations. Others, particularly the teenagers, experience the negative aspects of small-town, semi-rural life more acutely, the cloying boredom of limited horizons; like their parents before them, Byron's encampment offers a physical and spiritual refuge, a safe place where they can indulge in cathartic hedonism. Byron's temporary resting place has for thirty years served as an alternate public space for the Flintock community but although he has provided numerous services – entertainer, baby-sitter, labourer, decorator, seducer, dealer – and represents an essential aspect of Flintock's identity, he will always be something Other. His true nature – gypsy, gyppo, shaman, Englishman – is a source of endless fascination and revulsion, constantly invoked and held to account. The crux of *Jerusalem's* drama is the end of the relationship between Flintock and Byron, the moment at which the community finally acts collectively against him, empowering the authorities – the local Council and the police – to physically evict him.

The third act depicts the rapidly escalating events of Byron's demise, sharpened in deliberate counterpoint to his purported heroic and mythic status. We see Byron as a man, fallible and failing. Butterworth offers a first insight into Byron's personal relationships, as his estranged son is brought to visit by his ex-partner; he is clearly a terrible father, destructively selfish and neglectful. This is the first aspect of what amounts to a symbolic uncrowning. The second is more significant, the humiliating revelation of his coterie's true attitude towards him. Byron learns that the previous summer he had been found collapsed in a pool of his own urine; it was deemed high drunken comedy to complete the job and piss upon Byron's sleeping form – an act filmed on a mobile phone and shared among all in the wider social circle. They all knew about it but said nothing, for all that time. We see him as they see him, witness their underlying contempt, a deeply wounding betrayal which marks the inevitability of his downfall. The third and final element of the uncrowning is physical, brutal; he is savagely beaten and then branded in an overtly racist attack, what amounts to punishment for being a gypsy, the wrong kind of Englishman. The unravelling of the myth of Johnny Rooster Byron is apparently complete and so, by extension, the myth of England as Jerusalem. Unlike Shylock, however, Byron is allowed to end on his own terms, rallying and summoning more 'magic' for the final battle against the authorities; perhaps only a final encore for Byron, but whether the fantasy can endure beyond the play is left for the audience to imagine.

David Rabey frames *Jerusalem* in what I would describe in Bakhtinian terms as an act of authorship, an active intervention into critical public discourses about nation and identity. He describes the 'urgently necessary initiative [...] to reawaken considerations and visions of English society and culture' (Rabey, 2015: 108-109), the need to mitigate against 'English self-denial' and its consequences. *Jerusalem* is Butterworth's response to this political imperative. To begin with, Rabey considers *Jerusalem* as a contemporary state-of-the-nation play, noting the challenge the challenge it presents to Rebellato's earlier argument about the dual uncoupling of state and nation, theatre and politics. The stage backdrop of prologue denoting the English Stage Company, he observes, is a direct reference to the Royal Court and the genesis of modern English political theatre. It is more than just a nod to the past, however; it is the first instance of a dialogic strategy to bring past traditions alive and into tension with the reality of contemporary England. Phaedra's partial rendition of *Jerusalem*, against this backdrop, is interrupted by Byron's woodland rave in full swing, with all its noise and hedonistic chaos. Later, the 'resonances' of Shakespeare and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* specifically are subtle but pervasive, as Rabey notes, more than just the echoes in certain characters' names and the woodland setting. Butterworth and Shakespeare, argues Rabey, share a dramatic trope, 'a tendency to evoke, subvert and re-vision earlier forms, notions and dramatizations of myth, ritual and community' (Rabey, 2015: 136). This seems to me to describe a dialogic strategy, one that draws upon and renews ancient bonds between theatre, carnival and folk culture. Byron, the carnivalized, self-dramatizing English 'man-myth' is the embodiment of this, a kind of theatrical dialogism that does not disrupt or distance *Jerusalem's* dramatic world but rather brings it to life, gives it form and meaning.

Accounting for the 'footprints and repercussions' of *Jerusalem*, Rabey's first priority is to remind us of the immediate impact of the play and Rylance in performance. It was an event that no recording can adequately reproduce – just as dialogue is an event for Bakhtin. It was exciting as a piece of theatre, and meaningful in a way that transcended its generic boundaries. It has successfully become public discourse itself, a theatrical reference point beyond academic research such as this project. Rabey notes, for example, the BBC's Paul Mason's considered socio-economic reading of the play, and environmentalist George Monbiot's argument that *Jerusalem* stages a vital 're-wilding' of the English

landscape. Accordingly Rabey suggests that Butterworth has achieved an equivalent re-wilding of the state-of-the-nation form,

I cannot end without mention of the New Jerusalem project which presented the play across to local communities across the south-west in 2014, framing each performance within a mini-festival, a summer celebration. There were no footlights, and the physical immediacy of the performance, in that environment – in the open air, there in the landscape of *Jerusalem* – would have brought the play closer still to a sense of carnival and spectacle that Bakhtin would recognise. It represents a different form of theatre and audience engagement, site-specific, collaborative and participatory in principle; recalling, to my mind, the work of 7:84 and John McGrath in seeking an alternate model of political theatre, its performance spaces and relationship to local audiences.

All of the plays presented in this chapter share this urgent political imperative to bring England and Englishness to a dramatic focus, to stage the nation. Each playwright responded in their own terms to the social, material and imaginative tensions in flux during that first decade of the twenty-first century. *Sing Yer Heart Out's* dialogism lies in the irreconcilable tension between the values of multicultural England and a fascist minority, manifesting in a series of explicitly discursive encounters, the deeper drama of the play beyond the football. There can be no 'synthesis' between fascism and principles of equality, no resolution; it is a living, dynamic fault-line of English society and its sense of national identity that Williams urges his audiences to acknowledge. Bola Agbaje explores the complex 'dialogic' identities of multicultural England, simultaneously belonging and not belonging, being English and not being English, being Nigerian and not Nigerian. There is no resolution of this either; the lesson of his London odyssey is for Yemi to find pride in all of his identities. Neither playwright employs formal strategies to disrupt the dramatic world they present. Richard Bean's *The English Game* presents a (male) cricketing microcosm of England, its politics emerging in the everyday discourse of normal conversation, banter and jokes around the unseen game. England and Englishness are under fresh tension following Islamic terrorist bombings in London, and Bean cleverly and subtly shows how this manifests in the relationships between the team. That subtly is entirely inverted in *England People Very Nice*, as Bean employs carnival, musical satire to address the broadest strokes of English national identity, a history in song of

immigrant England. It invites its audiences to laugh at racist stereotypes and celebrates the history of immigration, the multi-cultural, multi-faith diversity of England then and now. Even though the play struggled to sustain the carnival over two acts – or, for some, failed entirely, effectively celebrating racism and racist stereotypes – there is no doubt of Bean's intent to make a very pointed, political intervention into public discourses about contemporary England and Englishness. His use of carnival, itself a dialogizing 'force' beyond language as Bakhtin asserts, and popular theatrical form (musical), presents a different sense of theatrical dialogism again, and of what contemporary political theatre can be. Finally, *Jerusalem*; carnival and comedy to bring the myth of England into dialogic, theatrical collision with *now* – the England of 2009, the first decade of the new millennium drawing to a close.

## Chapter Five

### Theory and Practice: Albion Unbound

#### The key challenges

What defined *Albion Unbound* was a very distinct structure that split the fantasy and the reality between two acts; of all the plays from any theatrical generation that I encountered, only one came close as an equivalent, Anthony Neilson's *The Wonderful World of Dissocia*. My own response to seeing the play in performance was in stark contrast to my anticipation of it; perhaps an object lesson for *Albion Unbound*, I didn't like the fantasy of the first act. It was neither as dark or surreal as its publicity purported, a shadow of *Alice in Wonderland* which it stood in obvious reference to. It seemed tame, deliberate; I didn't 'buy' the fantasy and, as a result, didn't enjoy it. What did stand out, however, was the stark contrast of the second act, the reality of central character Lisa's treatment in a psychiatric ward and how this was achieved in its remarkable staging. Here was an object lesson in how a powerful realism can be achieved in experimental, largely non-verbal form. As the first act had been played out within a traditional theatrical space with its fourth 'invisible wall' between it and the audience, and in traditional narrative mode of dialogue and character (fantasy notwithstanding), the second act presented a radical transformation. The fourth 'wall' was very consciously established, a physical barrier encapsulating the stage in a large construction fronted with plastic, filtering the sparse dialogue through microphones and relayed to the auditorium, muted and tinny. It all consciously invoked a sense of looking in, of observing; and simultaneously, of the dislocation that Lisa experiences in her illness through the slow process of recovery. The contrast between the two acts was fascinating, but beyond the similarity of its structure *Dissocia* was not seen as a significant influence or a major challenge to *Albion Unbound*, though it was something that Mick and I discussed as it arose. Later, as I actively sought plays which engaged madness and mental illness, Caryl Churchill's *The Skriker* provided a significant contrast, much darker and more imaginative, tapping ancient British myths and legends.

But the play that posed the most significant problems to my own work came later, as I was rewriting the first draft of *Albion Unbound* ahead of the staged reading, and subsequently when I began to bring the play into sharper critical focus writing what became known as the 'madness chapter'. Joe Penhall's play *Blue/Orange*



presented a similar scenario and dynamics, the two doctors arguing about Christopher's mental health and the impact his imminent discharge will have. John shared Christopher's ambivalence about his own mental health and a reluctance to take medication. Yet for all that I intended the reality of John's world to be the here and now, and his madness or otherwise the issue at hand, Penhall's play is much more realistically grounded in the identifiable context of the National Health Service and the medical discourses of psychiatric treatment, couched in the sharply observed battles between a junior and senior doctor. Whereas I sought shift the emphasis away from a particular psychiatric disorder as a means to understand John's madness, Penhall consciously puts this at the heart of the doctors' disagreement about what is real or not for Christopher, signified by the blue oranges. My own attempt to navigate this territory seemed clumsy in comparison as I rewrote the second act, and it became very hard to negotiate what Penhall had already done. It was the subject of a number of subsequent discussions over this period; Mick's advice was to accept the similarities and move beyond them, to recognise the differences and write the idea as I had conceived it; I did so, though my reservations remained. However, a further and more substantial challenge arose out of the same developing argument via a late encounter with Anna Harpin's research. Her argument about the shift from the staging of madness as a metaphor to the staging of mental illness posed a fresh dimension to my own critique of *Albion Unbound* and what it tried to achieve. From the start of the project I had been concerned with the ethics of using madness as a narrative device, as an allegory, and in retrospect it seemed that was exactly what I had done with the play, despite the second act's attempts to portray the realities of the impact of mental illness upon John and his estranged wife. Even as I was trying to work beyond the perception that Penhall had already nailed what I was attempting in the second act of *Albion Unbound*, Harpin's argument that *Blue/Orange* effectively silences Christopher's own experience of his illness further complicated the developing critique of my own work. Penhall did not use madness as a metaphor – as I did – but powerfully articulated the web of conflicting discourses that Christopher is framed within – as I did not. Yet in recognising this, Harpin goes on to contrast Penhall's linguistic, discursive theatre with the experimental and experiential form of Kane's *4:48 Psychosis*. This play, recalling the earlier chapter, eschews conventional theatrical form – an emphasis on dialogue, character and narrative – for one in which light, sound and space convey

the experience of 'mental illness' and its discourses, fragmented and non-linear. The distinctions that Harpin draws between these two plays are indicative of a wider distinction between experimental theatre and political theatre; providing me with the first concrete context by which to reference my own play and, via Penhall, other playwrights' work. I had recognised the linguistic, discursive nature of *Blue/Orange*, and was already familiar with the broad terms and history of political theatre, but it was not until I worked through Harpin's argument in the period immediately after the staged reading of *Albion Unbound* that I fully began to appreciate the argument about what actually constitutes contemporary political theatre. The encounter with Harpin's work was thus doubly significant – posing serious ethical and formal challenges to the play, and the focus for arguments already developing in my own research. The debate about 'staging the nation' frames questions of political theatre much more explicitly and is given more weight in the thesis accordingly, but without what might appear as secondary concerns of madness and mental illness would not have developed as it did – the dialogue between them a significant one.

### **The collaborative process: production and performance**

As I stated in the introduction, a crucial component of this practice-led process was to test *Albion Unbound* as a piece of theatre in its own right, to assess its credentials as a play in performance beyond the intellectual argument of the research. The timing of the writing and production in the overall research process was an important factor, allowing time for research to feed in to the writing process, but also time to reflect back on that within the thesis. Mick and I had made an agreement that the production, preferably a staged reading, would happen in the middle of the project. The practical difficulties of organizing the production proved significant, and only possible with the great dedication of Tom and the actors to find time beyond their existing commitments in a busy teaching schedule; a proposed 2009 production was delayed until the following summer. Most significantly, we had to take the pragmatic decision to scale back from a staged reading, script-in-hand, to a rehearsed reading, developed over a week. As I indicated earlier, for some like Max Harris and Marvin Carlson, the collaborative process of making theatre is inherently dialogic, and there was thus this avenue of enquiry in making *Albion Unbound*. The reduction in scale and scope of rehearsal limited this accordingly, made the process much more monologic than I would have liked through the simple expediency of getting it made

at all, actors new to the script on Monday and due to perform on Friday. There were dialogues between us, of course, focused upon understanding the characters, finding a suitable difference in tone between the fantasy and reality of the first and second acts.

In truth, the rehearsal process quickly revealed the limitations of the play and its script, fresh from a rewrite – something of an uncomfortable revelation at the time, especially as one crucial component of this proposed dialogic project. The actors' struggles with the script were struggles with the characters and characterization, in the overblown fantasy of the first act especially. It was particularly uncomfortable to recognise in Leah's presence how underwritten Miranda's character was, and that she served to facilitate John's story and nothing more. The storm scene was a dramatic indulgence too far, a direct transposition of Lear's madness on the heath; that again only really became evident as I saw my own play coming back at me, and with no potential to feed back into the script before performance, we went with what we had.

The other consequence of this shift in emphasis to a rehearsed reading was the elimination of the physical dimension of the play. It became, in effect, a radio play with narrated stage directions without which the dialogue alone would have made little sense. The physical, carnivalized relationship of Albion and Stinkwit was a core component of the first act and its intended comedy, which I had hoped would intensify in physical performance – similarly, Albion's moment of rage in which he savagely beats a suspected terrorist was intended as a precipitous moment beyond language and inevitably diminished in consequence.

The culmination of the rehearsal process was a performance before an invited audience, the next stage in assessing the play's credentials as a piece of theatre – to actually put the show on. My reservations about my writing and the radio-style reading aside, the performance went well. It was a home crowd, granted, aware of the context it was being presented in, the practical element of a research project, but still an audience attending the theatre on a Friday night and expecting to be entertained, with the attendant pressures. Thanks to the efforts of all involved, the actors, Tom and the technical team, we achieved our goal; the applause seemed genuine. In retrospect I wish that I had implemented some qualitative audience feedback process – again with a view to developing the notion of an audience held to be in discourse with and accounting for all the dialogic relations of the play in

performance. I can say anecdotally that audience members, numbering about twenty, were a mix of gender, age, class and the majority not 'theatre people'. I spoke to everyone informally about the performance, most immediately afterwards – the general consensus was that they understood what *Albion Unbound* was trying to achieve as a topical response to recent events, and sparked wider discussions about the state of the nation. In those terms, I felt the process and the play was a success – it had, in a limited sense, proved to be 'theatre as public discourse'.

The influence of Bakhtin is on *Albion Unbound* is perhaps limited to carnival and the grotesque and fixed at the point of that initial encounter with his work, in contrast to the argument developing later about theatrical dialogism and the form that takes. Firstly, *Albion Unbound* does not present any particular sense of heteroglossia, of a variety of social voices which dialogize each other, though social difference was a factor in early thoughts on characterization. Relatedly, my primary – only – conscious 'dialogic' strategy was in the split between fantasy and reality between the first and second acts; I hesitate to describe this as a disruptive strategy in the same terms as I have for Kane or Edgar because, in retrospect, I question how informed a choice that was. Mick and I had talked at one point, for example, about blurring the lines between the fantasy and reality, to transition from one to the other within a scene – but I chose to maintain the structure as it was and this more experimental approach was not pursued. There is then perhaps an imbalance between the emphasis on dialogism that emerges from the research and what could be described as, essentially, a monologic play. Despite this, there is still an important relationship between play and thesis that has allowed me to frame this exploration of theatre as public discourse in ways that either alone could not – the opportunities afforded by such practice-led, dialogic project.

#### Postscript

At the moment of writing these closing comments, late into the corrections process, the England football team have just exited the 2016 European Championships, deservedly beaten by rank outsiders Iceland. A football shirt with the red cross of St George is thrown onto the pitch in disgust by a disgruntled England fan; in itself a small gesture, but emblematic of something much greater. Four days ago the British

public voted to leave the European Union, precipitating an immediate financial, constitutional and political crisis. Many – a majority – welcome this opportunity to reassert British sovereignty but in this period immediately following the decision, there is a palpable collective sense of ‘what have we done’ as the consequences unfold. This decision threatens to fracture all the active fault-lines of Britain and British society. The Scots voted overwhelmingly to remain, and insist they will not be dragged out of Europe; a second referendum for independence is a distinct possibility. Wales voted to exit, tranches of traditional Labour voters turning to the UK Independence Party. Northern Ireland voted to remain, perhaps wary of dividing Ireland again with militarized borders and reigniting the troubles.

I began this research as a playwright who proposed to stage the nation, to put England and Englishness into context of global events. The Europe of *Albion Unbound* is shrouded in darkness, in foreignness, irrelevant in a despot's insular fantasy of dividing the union and sailing England off to warmer climes. Albion's madness would be sharper now, angrier, more directed at outward forces that would bring him down. John could well be more like Thomas Mair, who murdered Labour MP Jo Cox at her constituency surgery less than two weeks ago, allegedly shouting ‘Britain First’ as he attacked, driven, it seems, both by mental illness and extreme nationalist beliefs. It is a personal tragedy first and foremost, but it was Cox's principles, her commitment to humanitarian aid for migrants, that made her a target. Her death prompted a pause in the bitter rhetoric of the battling political campaigns, a stark reminder of the extreme political margins galvanised and emboldened by the referendum. Since the result there has been a wave of racist abuse reported, demands for anyone who isn't demonstrably English to ‘go home’; it feels as if nationalistic extremes have been legitimized, prejudices made normal. It feels much like that historical moment which prompted *Destiny*; I hope I will be able to reflect in hindsight with relief, as Edgar did, that a political crisis didn't play out to its worst potential. The nationalistic discourses of the modern day, given focus in the Leave campaign, speak less specifically about the loss of Empire than a sense of powerless frustration with globalization, but the vilification of immigrants as the source of ‘the problem’ remains the staple of the political right and plays to a willing audience. England seems ‘bound in with shame’, divided and failing. Despite this,

because of it, playwrights and theatre-makers must respond, again, must intervene, imagine and invent this new England.

## 6 Albion Unbound

### SCENE ONE

SEASIDE. WHITE CLIFFS. GULLS CRY.  
PODIUM AND MICROPHONE. NEARBY IS A SHIP'S WHEEL, A SPEAKING TUBE AND A BOTTLE OF CHAMPAGNE  
ENTER ALBION, NAKED UNDER A HEAVY CEREMONIAL ROBE AND WEARING A CAPTAIN'S HAT AND BEACH SHOES, CLOSELY FOLLOWED BY THE HULKING FIGURE OF SMYTHE IN BLACK DRESS UNIFORM DRAGGING A REVOLTINGLY DISHEVELLED STINKWIT BEHIND HIM ON A LEASH, TAKING POSITION IN THE BACKGROUND. DURING ALBION'S SPEECH SMYTHE STARES IMPASSIVELY OUT AT THE AUDIENCE, OCCASIONALLY YANKING THE CHAIN AS STINKWIT FIDGETS AND SCRATCHES, SCOWLING THROUGHOUT.  
ALBION MOUNTS THE PODIUM AND LIFTS HIS HEAD TO GAZE ADORINGLY OUT INTO THE AUDIENCE.

ALBION:

Beloved compatriots. Welcome.  
It is ten years since we last came together like this, ten years since our Glorious revolution made us the envy of the watching world. It is ten glorious years since we rose up together under the banner of the Forever Party; cast out the tyranny of capital and threw off the shackles of labour. We freed the people of this great land from a life of slavery and ennui, set about establishing an earthly paradise. Imagine an entire nation founded upon the principles of excess and beauty, with art and music enshrined as its religions, excelling in the science of the impossible and the philosophy of the absurd. In this corporate, rational world – who would imagine? We could! Who could *dare* imagine? We did! And the fruits of our endeavours have ripened beyond our wildest expectations. You are testament to that. What a riot of colour. Such costumes! What a parade! I am breathless with excitement, giddy with emotion. Thank you. In truth it is yourselves you honour. I am just one man among many.  
But let me ask you something, my sequined friends. How can we possibly improve upon perfection? What possible flaw there can be in this idyll – surely our journey to utopia is ended? No, it is not. We need to free our land as we have freed our minds – and I do not employ metaphor or hyperbole to declare it so, for ten years ago our Engineers were set their most daring, their most impossible challenge. They have split mountains and dug chasms to set our nation free from its earthy chains, built mighty

engines to set our island free to roam upon the wide oceans.

The wheel of history comes full circle. We lead the world into the modern age through the industry of our people and the highways of the sea; let us now lead the world into a new age of wonder. Today we set sail!

HE THRUSTS THE CHAMPAGNE BOTTLE UP IN SALUTE, DRINKS HEAVILY AND THROWS THE BOTTLE TO SMASH. WITH A FLURRY HE ARRANGES HIS CAPTAIN'S HAT AND WHIRLS TO BEND TO THE SPEAKING TUBE.

Engine-room!

ENGINE-ROOM:

Aye Cap'n!

ALBION:

Engines full ahead!

ENGINE-ROOM:

Full ahead aye Cap'n!

ALBION SEIZES THE HELM AND STRIKES AN EPIC POSE. THERE ARE TWO MIGHTY BLASTS OF A SHIP'S HORN AND THE LIGHTS CUT TO BLACK.



## SCENE TWO

IN THE DARKNESS WE HEAR THE DISTANT SOUND OF A NOISY CROWD AND THE THUMP OF DRUMS.

SLOWLY THE LIGHTS GO UP ON ALBION'S THRONE, SURROUNDED BY THE DEBRIS OF A CELEBRATION. BEHIND THE THRONE A LARGE BANNER HANGS HIDDEN IN SHADOW IN FRONT OF THE THRONE, TO ONE SIDE, LIES AN OVERTURNED TABLE SURROUNDED BY EMPTY BOTTLES AND TANKARDS, FROM BEHIND WHICH A BRIGHTLY COLOURED BOOT PROTRUDES WHERE STINKWIT SLUMBERS IN A FITFUL DRUNKEN STUPOR.

OFFSTAGE WE HEAR ALBION APPROACHING DRUNKENLY SINGING THE TUNE OF JERUSALEM, BARELY RECOGNIZABLE AND MINUS WORDS WHICH HE CAN'T REMEMBER.

ENTER ALBION, STILL DRAPED IN HIS IMPERIAL ROBES, HIS FACE COVERED IN LIPSTICK KISSES AND WEARING A PINK FEATHER BOA ROUND HIS NECK. HE CARRIES A HALF-EMPTY BOTTLE AND AN ENORMOUS CIGAR WHICH HE CHUGS ON ALTERNATELY, PUNCTUATING HIS DRUNKEN SONG AS HE LURCHES ON

ALBION: ... in Albion's warm and sun-kissed land!

HE RAISES THE BOTTLE IN SALUTE, LOSING HIS BALANCE IN THE PROCESS

ALBION: Not got my sea-legs yet. Steady as she goes.

HE RIGHTS HIMSELF AND SURVEYS THE CHAOS BEFORE HIM WITH SOME SATISFACTION

ALBION: Where is everyone? Why this silence? It's early yet. Music! Girls!

THERE IS NO RESPONSE. ALBION LOOKS NON-PLUSSED AND BEGINS TO PICK HIS WAY TOWARDS THE THRONE. AFTER A FEW STEPS HIS NOSE WRINKLES AND HE STOPS. HE SNIFFS THE AIR AGAIN AND RECOILS, THEN FOLLOWS HIS NOSE WHICH LEADS HIM TO STINKWIT'S PROTRUDING BOOT

ALBION: I should have known. Stinkwit!  
(NO RESPONSE)  
Foul wretch! Wake up! Entertain me! Your Emperor commands it!

WHEN THERE IS AGAIN NO RESPONSE ALBION LOSES HIS TEMPER AND AIMS SAVAGE KICKS BEHIND THE TABLE. WITH A ROAR OF PAIN AND SURPRISE STINKWIT EXPLODES OUT FROM BEHIND THE TABLE, SCATTERING DEBRIS IN HIS ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE. HE SCRAMBLES FAR ENOUGH TO SAFETY AND SITS ON HIS HAUNCHES, PULLING HIS BEARD AND GROWLING AT ALBION, WHO TURNS AWAY.

ALBION: Let us not quarrel, Stinkwit. Not today.

STINKWIT MASSAGES HIMSELF, STILL EYEING ALBION VENOMOUSLY.

STINKWIT: Why not today.

ALBION: Miserable creature. Where have you been hiding? I haven't seen you since the ceremony.

STINKWIT:

I gave my jailor the slip and sought refuge here in a bottle, gladly oblivious to all until your regal foot found my swollen balls. Why did you rouse me? Is your day of decadence not complete without its quota of misery heaped upon my bowed shoulders? Are you so bored of whores and sycophants you seek solace with lowly Stinkwit? Where are they, your preening flock? Spent already? Leaving mighty Albion all alone. What a glorious day it has turned out to be. What a triumph!

ALBION IS UNSURE WHETHER TO TAKE FURTHER OFFENCE, STUMBLES TO SPRAWL ON HIS THRONE, EXHAUSTED

ALBION:

Ah, Stinkwit. Ugly, malodorous and sour. I salute you too.

STINKWIT:

You flatter me, Sire.

ALBION:

Indubitably, indubitably...  
(HE SIGHS CONTENTEDLY)  
What a night. What a day. What a miracle I have achieved.

STINKWIT HARRUMPHS AND TURNS HIS ATTENTION TO FINDING A BOTTLE WITH SOMETHING TO DRINK IN.

ALBION:

Imagine what lies ahead of us. The entire world at our disposal. Sail with the weather as we see fit. A long summer holiday along the Equator. Endless blue skies. Sunshine and dark-skinned lovelies on tap. Bliss. Then a winter break at the poles, while there's still some ice to ski on. Then a Grand Tour, passing through the colonies – remind them what they missed out on, the ingrates...  
(STINKWIT HARRUMPHS EVEN MORE LOUDLY) This is the final phase of our glorious revolution. We freed our minds, now we free our land. It will change us all for the better, Stinkwit, even you.

STINKWIT:

Sun, ha! Free, bah!

ALBION:

Yes! It will be paradise. Our six-months-of-the-year-shivering inward-looking people will blossom into new life, as will the land.

STINKWIT FINALLY FINDS A BOTTLE AND DRAINS IT NOISILY

STINKWIT:

There will be no grapes for wine if the vine has no drink. Make merry while you can, and pray that in the last moments of your costly

pleasure your heart seizes in your chest, or that you choke on your own bile, or your blood boils, or some such sudden, to save you from the truth of what you have done to your country. Paradise indeed. Freedom, I ask you. Folly! Folly and ruin.

ALBION: You really are a running sewer of misery and despair. Even after ten years it still surprises me. Ruin? What nonsense. Here we are at the epicenter of the greatest social and cultural revolution the globe has ever seen, the heart of the longest and most debauched carnival known to history, not to mention the technological marvel of the age that has set us free to enjoy it fully – and still you wallow in gloom. Stinkwit to the last.

STINKWIT: Yes, Stinkwit till the last rattling gasp of his parched throat. A drink, find me a drink! For I'll drown in excess before we all die of thirst, in your paradise.

ALBION: I think drink has already taken your wits, if not your stink, old fool. You're not making sense.

STINKWIT: We have no water!

ALBION: Eh?

STINKWIT: No Celtic mountains to feed our rivers, our reservoirs! You saw to that when you ripped us from our sister lands. There'll be no floating paradise without water. Come! A toast to this carnival of death, slake the thirst to come.

HE HAS FOUND ANOTHER BOTTLE, DRINKS FROM IT HEAVILY, HANDS IT TO ALBION WHO LOOKS FROM IT TO STINKWIT SUSPICIOUSLY. HE SNIFFS THE BOTTLE BEFORE FASTIDIOUSLY WIPING IT AND DRINKING.

ALBION: So we lost a few mountains. We'll just plot a course round a tropical storm or two and top right up, all the water we could ever want. We choose our own seasons now. You worry for nothing.

STINKWIT: I worry I'll live just long enough to see my own corpse's face staring back at me from the mirror. Give me the bottle. I feel my liver drying out at the very thought.

ALBION: (LAUGHS) Stinkwit at his mirror. Bravo!  
(STINKWIT GRIMACES AND SPITS)

Ah, Stinkwit. One day you'll have to give in and crack a smile. Even you will succumb eventually.

STINKWIT: I await that day with baited breath, regal Sire. Until then, leave me to drown my sorrows.

STINKWIT RESUMES HIS GLOOMY HUNT FOR ANOTHER FRUITFUL BOTTLE.

ALBION: Your sorrows.

STINKWIT: Aye, my sorrows. Trapped by a feckless tyrant and his moronic lapdogs while the country falls to rack and ruin. The land becomes desert. The people starve. Let them eat cake! We know how that ended. They won't dance to the crack of your whip much longer, and when the baying mob comes to Court they won't care to distinguish between the mad king and his sorry fool -

ALBION: Careful now. There are only so many liberties I will allow.

STINKWIT: Ain't that a fact.

ALBION: Stinkwit -

STINKWIT: Stinkwit, Stinkwit. Always Stinkwit. Leave me be. Pursue your madness to its tragic end, what does it matter -

ALBION'S PATIENCE SNAPS AND HE LUNGES FOR STINKWIT, GRABBING HIM BY THE THROAT

ALBION: How sick I am of your endless bile, you disgusting, tedious malcontent. I should have thrown you to the dogs years ago.

STINKWIT: (CHOKING) I - wish - you - had.

A LONG MOMENT OF PURE HATRED BETWEEN THE TWO, BEFORE ALBION SLOWLY RELEASES STINKWIT, ALLOWING HIM TO SUBSIDE. THERE IS A LONG, UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE - UNTIL STINKWIT SUDDENLY STARTS TO LAUGH, STARTLING ALBION. STINKWIT RAISES HIS ARM TO POINT OVER ALBION'S SHOULDER, STILL LAUGHING UPROARIOUSLY. ALBION TURNS.

LIGHTS UP ON THE BANNER BEHIND THE THRONE. IT HAS ALBION'S FACE AND THE WORDS 'TEN GLORIOUS YEARS' EMBLAZONED ON IT - ONLY SOMEONE HAS SPRAYPAINTED A BLOOD-RED 'UNHAPPY FACE' - ☹ - OVER ALBION'S FACE. STINKWIT'S LAUGHTER ABATES INTO RASPING COUGHS AS ALBION STARES UP AT THE BANNER, CONFUSED AND DISBELIEVING.

ALBION: Is this a joke?

STINKWIT: I think not.

BOTH MEN REGARD THE GRAFFITI FOR ANOTHER MOMENT

ALBION: This is your doing.

STINKWIT: Not I. And all the better for it.

ALBION: I will not stand for this. My good nature abused so. The Emperor's likeness, defaced. It's treason. Treason! I will not have it! Smythe! Where's my General?

STINKWIT: How should I know?

ALBION: Find him! Fetch him! We will have this traitor!

STINKWIT TURNS TO MAKE GOOD AN ESCAPE, BUT ALBION POUNCES, SHEPHERDING HIM WITH KICKS

ALBION: With me, fool. I want you where I can see you. Awake! Awake all! Bring me the General!

THEY EXIT. LIGHTS TO BLACK

### SCENE THREE

LIGHTS UP TO REVEAL ALBION BATHED IN WARM SUN AND RECLINING IN A DECKCHAIR, AN ICEPACK ON HIS HEAD, SIPPING ON A LARGE COCKTAIL GINGERLY, DRESSED IN GARISH HAWAIIAN SHIRT AND BERMUDA SHORTS. HE IS CONSIDERABLY HUNGOVER. STINKWIT SQUATS NEARBY, CHAINED TO THE LEG OF THE DECKCHAIR, SCOWLING AND FISHING FOR FLEAS IN HIS BEARD – BUT HE CANNOT CONCENTRATE FOR LONGER BEFORE HE BECOMES IMPATIENT AND LOOKS TO ALBION

STINKWIT:  
(ALBION IGNORES HIM)

The sun is no place for a hangover, Majesty.

It is well known that the worst effects of a hangover are induced by dehydration; to sit and sweat in the sun is folly.

ALBION:

You will stay where you are. Now be silent.

STINKWIT:

But Sire, I'm cooking!

ALBION:

That's quite evident from your stench. But I won't have you sulking off into darkness.

STINKWIT:

But Sire –

ALBION:

Silence!

ENTER SMYTHE

SMYTHE:

Your Imperial Majesty.

ALBION:

Ah, General Smythe. What news?

SMYTHE:

A suspect is in custody, Majesty

ALBION:

Excellent. Is it one of those infernal Conformists?

SMYTHE:

It is too early to say, Majesty. Questioning has only just begun.

STINKWIT:

Questioning?

ALBION AND SMYTHE IGNORE HIM POINTEDLY

SMYTHE:

However, the evidence is incontrovertible. It will not take long to ascertain the suspect's political allegiances.

STINKWIT:

No, of course it won't. A few hours in the hands of your 'truth technicians' and the poor wretch will admit to anything.

ALBION:

Silence, fool! The General will execute his duty in a just and appropriate manner.

SMYTHE: Of course, Majesty.

STINKWIT: Execute, how appropriate. Just for a piece of graffiti. Surely the Imperial sense of humour has not become so atrophied that his Majesty cannot appreciate a harmless joke made upon His person – on carnival day, of all days.

ALBION TURNS TO GLARE AT STINKWIT UNTIL THE PAIN IN HIS HEAD FORCES HIM TO SUBSIDE BACK INTO THE DECKCHAIR, MINISTERING TO HIS TEMPLES WITH THE ICEPACK ONCE MORE

ALBION: Maybe he's right. Don't be over zealous, General. It is probably just a prank.

OUT OF ALBION'S SIGHT STINKWIT MOCKS SMYTHE SILENTLY

SMYTHE: That may well be so, Majesty – but we cannot let our guard down. If the terrorists grow bold enough to strike us here, at Court, we must act -

ALBION WAVES HIM AWAY WITHOUT OPENING HIS EYES

ALBION: Then away, General. Do what you must, but no more. Understand?

STINKWIT SHOOS HIM AWAY, GLOATING

SMYTHE: (GLARING) Yes, Majesty.

ALBION: Good.

ALBION SETTLES BACK INTO THE DECKCHAIR AS THOUGH SMYTHE IS DISMISSED, BUT THE GENERAL REMAINS

SMYTHE: There is another matter, Majesty. It appears there have been mass desertions.

ALBION: Desertions?

STINKWIT: Desertions?

SMYTHE: Yes, Majesty. Intelligence reports towns across both former borders empty, and a flotilla of small ships, heavily laden, making for the old kingdoms.

ALBION: What?!

STINKWIT: Ha!

SMYTHE: It appears that in the climax to celebrations

prior to Separation, carnival processions left towns and traveled from place to place absorbing the general population before crossing the borders... the flotilla left later from ports right across the country, under cover of darkness. It speaks of organization, Majesty, planning.

ALBION:

Them.

SMYTHE:

It can be no coincidence.

STINKWIT:

Voted with their feet. On the Day of Days.  
Albion's Glory –

ALBION RISES IN A RAGE AND KICKS AT STINKWIT VICIOUSLY.

ALBION:

Silence! How many?

SMYTHE:

Many tens of thousands.

ALBION: (STUNNED)

And how is it your men failed to prevent this?

SMYTHE:

They hid in plain sight, Majesty. Our focus was upon the Ceremony, the Royal Person –

STINKWIT:

So you failed to prevent a terrorist attack at the heart of Court and failed to notice entire towns emptying of their people? A comprehensive failure, General. The Triumph has been subverted, the Emperor made a laughing stock. You must hold yourself personally responsible.

ALBION KICKS STINKWIT AGAIN

ALBION:

I told you, silence! Ingrates! And so many, duped by a few fanatics. I despair.

SMYTHE:

Yes Majesty.

ALBION:

I won't be humiliated like this. Redouble your efforts, General. I want these damn Conformists rooted out. Spare nothing and no-one. Report when there is progress.

SMYTHE:

Majesty!

HE EXITS SMARTLY. ALBION MASSAGES HIS TEMPLES

ALBION:

I did not expect to feel like this.

STINKWIT GRUNTS AND WORRIES AT THE CHAIN AROUND HIS NECK



ALBION: A few malcontents I can understand, the once privileged few bemoaning their loss. Politicians, bankers, businessmen, faceless bureaucrats, all the petty narrow-minded bores without the imagination to enjoy paradise. But so many ordinary people. I freed them – and this is how they repay me. Come, Stinkwit, mock! You must be overjoyed at this new insult to me.

STINKWIT: Joy? The bastards went without me.

ALBION: Would you really be that keen to go?

STINKWIT: (YANKS CHAIN) I don't wear this because it matches my eyes.

ALBION: I don't understand it.

STINKWIT: I saw them, sneaking away with their rubber rings and sou'westers... I thought they were off to enjoy some new continental perversion –

ALBION: The greatest party the world has ever seen, and they want to what – leave for a life of drudgery in some cold, wet, Celtic backwater? They must have been brainwashed!

STINKWIT: I know they despised me but they could have extended the hand of sympathy to a fellow

–

ALBION: Who?

STINKWIT: Who? Your inner circle, Majesty. Why do you think it's so quiet at Court?! Where are your merry band of sycophants? Not in dark corners nursing sore heads – gone! They left behind your back. And they left poor Stinkwit to his fate.

ALBION: You lie.

STINKWIT: Never! You name me Stinkwit and bind me to the truth, for the all good it does me. They are gone! Your humiliation is complete.

ALBION'S TEMPER RISES AND HE COILS THE CHAIN AROUND HIS WRIST, DRAGGING STINKWIT TO HIM

ALBION: You will only goad me so far, fool.

STINKWIT: You're the fool. Go see for yourself.

They're gone. Not just some malcontents at the borders but the chosen few.

ALBION:

No!

STINKWIT:

They all dream of the ordinary lives you stole. They go hungry to feed your excess. You ruin their land and then steal that from underneath them too. That's your paradise, and you wonder why they leave?

ALBION LIFTS STINKWIT BY THE CHAIN UNTIL THEY ARE FACE TO FACE, COLDLY WATCHING THE LIFE DRAIN OUT OF HIM UNTIL, ABRUPTLY, HE RELEASES HIM AND STORMS OFFSTAGE.

STINKWIT RECOVERS ENOUGH TO CRAWL OFF IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION, DRAGGING THE DECKCHAIR ON THE CHAIN BEHIND HIM.

LIGHTS TO BLACK

#### SCENE FOUR

ALBION'S BEDCHAMBER. LIGHTS UP SLOWLY, TIGHT ON ALBION AS HE SLEEPS FITFULLY, TROUBLED BY VIOLENT NIGHTMARES THAT SUDDENLY LAUNCH HIM AWAKE AND OUT OF BED, STAGGERING AND GASPING, COVERED IN SWEAT. IT TAKES HIM LONG MOMENTS TO COME TO SOME SEMBLANCE OF SELF, STANDS SWAYING SLIGHTLY, DISTRACTED AND STARING ABSENTLY UNTIL PURPOSE SLOWLY ANIMATES HIM.

ALBION MAKES HIS WAY TO THE DUNGEONS, DISTURBED BY FLEETING ECHOES OF LAUGHTER. WHEN HE REACHES A DOORWAY, HE PAUSES, SUDDENLY TENTATIVE.

ALBION: Smythe?

HE ENTERS. LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK, THEN A SPOT COMES UP SLOWLY ON A BOUND FIGURE SUSPENDED FROM ABOVE, ITS FACE HOODED AND HIDDEN.

ALBION APPEARS AT THE EDGE OF THE LIGHT, CAUGHT BETWEEN HORROR AND FASCINATION. HE APPROACHES SLOWLY UNTIL HE IS FACE TO FACE WITH THE FIGURE.

ALBION: (WHISPER) Why?

THERE IS NO RESPONSE, BUT ALBION IS LOST IN A BUILDING FRENZY REPEATING THE QUESTION AND RAINING WILD BLOWS ON THE FIGURE.

ALBION: Why? Why? Why?! (etc)

SUDDENLY, HE IS SPENT, LEFT SHAKING AND APPALLED AT WHAT HE HAS DONE. HE TURNS AND FLEES INTO THE DARKNESS.

AS THE SPOT REMAINS ON THE SUSPENDED FIGURE, BLOOD COLLECTS AND DRIPS DOWN.

FADE TO BLACK

## SCENE FIVE

ALBION'S BEDCHAMBER. SOUNDS OF A GREAT KERFUFFLE OFFSTAGE, PEOPLE SHOUTING, RUNNING, ALARMS RINGING.  
ALBION STARTS UPRIGHT, BEDCLOTHES KNOTTED AROUND HIM. ENTER SMYTHE SMARTLY.

SMYTHE: Your royal Majesty is unharmed?

ALBION JUST STARES BACK

SMYTHE: Sabotage, Majesty. The terrorists strike again. Our navigation system. We sail blind, and into a building storm. Shall I call full-stop?

ALBION: Blind?

SMYTHE: Yes, Majesty. The engineers are working hard to repair the damage, but for the time being we are blind.

ALBION: Then we steer by the compass. Steady as she goes.

SMYTHE: Majesty, the storm –

ALBION: We are an island under steam, not a fucking pedallo. Let the heavens rage, we'll not capsize. They will not stop me now, Smythe.

SMYTHE: Majesty.

THERE IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE

SMYTHE: There is another matter.

ALBION: Yes?

SMYTHE: The prisoner is dead, Majesty. Not by my hands, or my officers –

ALBION: Dead?

SMYTHE: Yes. A violent attack, a crime of passion –

ALBION: Passion? No, revenge.

SMYTHE: Majesty?

ALBION: They strike against me...

ALBION DISPLAYS HIS BLOODIED HANDS LIKE A PRIZE BOXER

SMYTHE: Majesty!

ALBION: Not just pomp and circumstance.

SMYTHE IS DISCONCERTED BY ALBION'S BEHAVIOUR

SMYTHE: (SOFTER, APPROACHING) I will call the doctor.

ALBION: Doctors be damned. I am glad for the pain.

SMYTHE: I regret that His Majesty saw it necessary to take the matter upon himself.

ALBION: I did not mean to undermine you, Smythe. We must hold fast. We are the iron and the grit, you and I.

SMYTHE: Yes, Majesty.

ALBION: They grow bolder in spite of us, Smythe. Sabotage.

SMYTHE: A clumsy act of desperation. The terrorists have played their hand and lost. They did not stop us, and now we close in upon them.

ALBION: I want an end to this, General. Be ruthless. Swift.

SMYTHE: (STIFFENS) Yes, Majesty!

ALBION: Let the night's storm rage all the harder for knowing when morning comes, peace.

SMYTHE: His Majesty can rely on me.

ALBION: Good, then go

HE SITS ON THE EDGE OF THE BED, STARING BLANKLY – UNTIL HE IS ROUSED BY A DISTINCT SNEEZE FROM UNDERNEATH HIM.

ALBION: You!

STINKWIT: (UNSEEN) Hell's teeth.

ALBION SCRAMBLES TO REACH UNDER TO DRAG STINKWIT OUT

ALBION: Traitor. What's your part in this?

STINKWIT: None, Majesty –

ALBION: Sabotage my ship. You'll hang. General!

STINKWIT: I did not. I could not!

ALBION: I'll not listen to one word more of your

poison. All those years at my side. General!

STINKWIT: Accuse Stinkwit of murder and mayhem, then of magic too?

ALBION IS CONFUSED, STINKWIT DISGUSTED

STINKWIT: Because I would need the dark arts to escape the shackles thrown upon me! Or had his Majesty forgotten?!

STINKWIT YANKS HIS CHAIN FURIOUSLY

STINKWIT: Maybe I found the key or picked the lock while you slept, went about my nefarious deeds to return and bind myself again – but I did not! chained to lie here in dust and filth – or had you forgotten?! Guards! If am to be accused, let us not draw it out any further. I'll gladly swap this chain for a rope. General!

ALBION: You'd deny you hate me? After all these long years of torment?

STINKWIT: Not for a moment. But I am not your saboteur, nor even a traitor. Can you imagine the countless times I could have cut the Royal throat over these past ten years, his person senseless to the world from debauched excess. Loyal Stinkwit, cursed and kicked, chained and tricked! I could have ended this before it started, more fool me.

ALBION HESITATES. STINKWIT GRABS HIS WOUNDED HANDS

STINKWIT: But I do not have it in me. Majesty. Albion. What have you done?

ALBION: I did what was necessary.

STINKWIT: Murder. Your tyranny is complete, your madness total.

ALBION: I am no tyrant.

STINKWIT: You have killed a man. Where is the joy in that?

ALBION CANNOT REPLY

STINKWIT: Well, what of it. Between one nobody and the glory of a nation, who cares? And he was hardly the first.

ALBION: Stinkwit –

STINKWIT: By your hand, at your command, what's the difference? You've kept your General busy since the Glorious Revolution..

ALBION: I did what was necessary, for the love of my country, to keep the dream alive –

STINKWIT: The dream is dead, Albion – stillborn, if truth be told. End the bloodshed, the suffering, if you really do love the land and its people, end it now. Stop the ship. Signal for aid. Lay your crown aside.

ALBION COILS A LOOP OF STINKWIT'S CHAIN AROUND HIS NECK AND CHOKES HIM

ALBION: I'll make you wish you had breath to regret. No rope for you, old friend, no public stage. This is it.

STINKWIT: So be it.

STINKWIT DEFTLY WRAPS A LOOP OF CHAIN AROUND ALBION'S NECK AND THEY RELENTLESSLY CHOKE EACH OTHER, FACES PRESSED TOGETHER

MIRANDA: (ENTERING) Hallo? Maybe they're all already dead – oh!

SHE IS CONFRONTED BY ALBION AND STINKWIT'S VIOLENT STRUGGLE

MIRANDA: Pardon me, but can either of you two gentlemen tell me where to find Emperor Albion? I'm rather late for the party.

ALBION IS TRANSFIXED, AS THOUGH HE HAS SEEN A GHOST. MIRANDA PEELS OFF HER SOUTHWESTER TO REVEAL A RESPLENDENT EVENING DRESS

MIRANDA: That's better. Disgusting weather. Now. Miranda Burlington, special envoy to the World Nations. To whom do I have the pleasure –

ALBION: Miranda...

STINKWIT: Albion. Don't.

MIRANDA: Albion! Well, hello –

ALBION: Miranda... oh my god Miranda.

HE SEIZES HER IN A DESPERATE EMBRACE

MIRANDA: Well, that's... nice. Beats being shot at, for sure.

SHE EXTRACTS HERSELF EXPERTLY

MIRANDA: So, Emperor Albion. I've come a long way to see you.

ALBION: I haven't seen you for so long.

MIRANDA: No dear, we've never met. Remember? Now. I've clearly missed the party, but do you reckon we could rustle up a coffee and a sandwich? I'm sure I saw the kitchens back there. Come with me.

SHE TAKES HIM BY THE ARM LIKE A SMALL CHILD AND LEADS HIM OFF

STINKWIT: Albion! This is your chance. Albion!

LIGHTS TO BLACK

## SCENE SIX

ALBION'S THRONE ROOM.  
ALBION AND MIRANDA SIT AT OPPOSITE ENDS OF AN EMPTY BANQUETING TABLE.  
ALBION STARES AT MIRANDA, HAUNTED

MIRANDA: A new era of international relations, and I miss the damn party – and this party, too. Quite aside from it being a major diplomatic faux pas, I was looking forward to it. Instead I was stuck on the *Liberty* in the worst storm on record with a thousand grim marines. I'll never live it down. (JOHN DOES NOT REPLY)  
But just to be here, that's amazing enough in itself. We've all watched in wonder these past ten years – your Forever Party, the revolution, and now your crowning glory. A mobile nation! The world is in uproar. What happens now? What about shipping lanes? Fishing? Territorial waters? The impact on ocean currents – the issues are many and complex. We need debate. We need dialogue –

ENTER SMYTHE, AT PACE, HALTS WHEN HE SEES MIRANDA

MIRANDA: Ah, this must your Head of Security. Come to tell you there's a warship parked in the bay. We had been signaling for some time, General. You're a little off the pace.

SMYTHE: You know me?

MIRANDA: I know of you.

SMYTHE: You have me at a disadvantage, madam.



MIRANDA: Clearly. One of a number of security concerns we need to discuss, your Excellency.

SMYTHE: Majesty –

ALBION: We will discuss this further. Leave us.

DISCONCERTED, SMYTHE EXITS

MIRANDA: Perhaps we should continue in the morning. It's late. His Excellency seems tired, distracted –

ALBION: I thought you were here for me.

MIRANDA: I beg your pardon?

ALBION: I thought you were here for me. To save me.

MIRANDA: Save you? Good god no. Frankly, from what I've seen here tonight, there's no chance of that. Look at you. Stinking drunk and fighting while the nation falls around your ears.

ALBION: Falls around my ears –

MIRANDA: Your economy, destroyed. Government and civil infrastructure, dismantled. People starving. Refugees in their thousands. The country a hotbed of criminals, anarchists, radicals, terrorists, deviants – anyone can join the party.

ALBION: Yes, anyone. Isn't it marvelous. And we're just about to go global.

MIRANDA: It can't be allowed. Sovereign rights are all very well, but when it comes to security, the international community will intervene –

ALBION: Is that a threat?

MIRANDA: It is a fact.

ALBION: So that's why you're here. With your warship and your thousand grim marines. To intervene.

MIRANDA: If we must –

ALBION: Just you try.

THEY STARE EACH OTHER DOWN

MIRANDA: Then there is nothing left to say. If you will

excuse me. Good night, Your Excellency.

SHE STANDS, BOWS FORMALLY AND EXITS, LEAVING ALBION

ALBION: This is my vision. My land. You will not  
take it from me! Miranda!

LIGHTS CUT TO BLACK

## SCENE SEVEN

ALBION'S BEDCHAMBER.

ALBION SITS IN BED, STARING BLANKLY INTO SPACE. ENTER MIRANDA IN HER BEDCLOTHES

MIRANDA: Albion?

ALBION: (STARTLED) Miranda.

MIRANDA: Shhhh.

SHE SITS DOWN ON THE BED, EMBRACES HIM

ALBION: I've been so empty without you – lost –

STINKWIT STEPS OUT OF SHADOWS

STINKWIT: It's time you were going, John.

ALBION: What - get out!

MIRANDA RESTRAINS HIM FROM GETTING UP, HER GRIP ON HIM BECOMING MORE SECURE

MIRANDA: Calm down. You're only making this worse.

ALBION: Let me go –

MIRANDA: No. It's time for this to end.

ALBION: Miranda please -

SMYTHE STEPS OUT OF SHADOWS, CARRYING AN OVERSIZED SYRINGE

SMYTHE: I'm not going to hurt you. Just a little scratch, and it's over.

ALBION STARTS TO FIGHT DESPERATELY, BUT IS RESTRAINED BY MIRANDA AS SMYTHE ADVANCES UPON HIM.

ALBION: No! No! Please ! (etc)

AS SMYTHE BEARS DOWN ON ALBION, STINKWIT BEGINS TO LAUGH, PULLING HIS BEARD AND DOING A GROTESQUE JIG.

LIGHTS FADE TO BLACK.

END OF ACT ONE

## ACT TWO

THE PSYCHIATRIC WARD, THREE INTER-LINKED AREAS: JOHN'S ROOM, THE COMMUNAL ROOM AND SIMON'S OFFICE, ALL IN A STATE OF CHAOS OF BOXES AND DISPLACED ITEMS TICKETED FOR REMOVAL

### SCENE ONE

JOHN'S ROOM. BARE, INSTITUTIONAL. BED. SUITCASE.  
JOHN LIES IN BED, COVERS WRAPPED ROUND HIM, UNSEEN. AS THE LIGHTS GO UP MARTIN HOVERS OVER THE BED ANXIOUSLY.

MARTIN: I know you're awake, John. It's time to get a wash and a shave now. I'll help you if I have to.  
John, really. Please. Just get out of bed and we'll take it from there. But it's late already, you should have been up an hour ago. Come on.  
(NO RESPONSE)  
Five minutes, and if you're not up then I'll get you up. Understand?

JOHN: Fuck off! Traitor!

MARTIN: Good. Up, please. Simon will be here shortly, and there's something we need to discuss with you. OK?

HE STANDS BACK, 'OUTSIDE', REGARDING JOHN'S MOTIONLESS FORM WITH FRUSTRATION.  
ENTER SIMON

SIMON: Good morning, Martin. All set for the big day?

MARTIN: I would be... (MOTIONS TOWARDS JOHN)

SIMON: No better?

MARTIN: No. He's refusing to get out of bed. Had a bad night, according to the agency nurse –

SIMON: Oh dear –

JOHN: I can hear you talking about me. Wanker!

SIMON: Morning, John. I'll be with you in a moment.

MARTIN DRAWS SIMON AWAY

MARTIN: He's hostile. Delusional. Openly paranoid. Still refusing to take his meds, ever since Board of Review recommended Section be lifted.

We've got grounds on that alone. I've been ringing round this morning, no luck so far, the same old story –

SIMON: What are you saying? You want to reinstate his Section?

MARTIN: Of course! If you hadn't taken so bloody long to make your mind up, this would have been a lot easier –

SIMON: I took so bloody long to make my mind up because thirty years of clinical experience –

MARTIN: I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude –

SIMON: – because thirty years of clinical experience suggests to me that John will be better off under community supervision, as difficult a transition as it will be, which is why I have I've allowed him until the very last minute to come to terms with it all –

MARTIN: He can't come to terms with it, Simon! He's not capable. He's off his meds and his condition is clearly deteriorating. I can't believe you'd even consider releasing him to the community in that state. He'd be back as an emergency referral within forty-eight hours.

SIMON: I'm not so sure. The meds are a problem, no doubt. We'll certainly address that. The rest – well, I wonder.

MARTIN: I'm sorry, Simon. I think we've failed John. The moment he started refusing treatment we should have intervened. Instead he's right back to square one, and now he's going to have to be shipped out of here on an emergency anyway, to God knows where, with all the stress that entails. I hope you can find the words to explain that to him, because I sure as hell can't.

MIRANDA: (OFF) Hallo?

SIMON: You may not like it. You may think the last day of your psychiatric career warrants a heroic last stand for a patient's rights, and very laudable too – but I don't have to justify myself to you, not today or any –

MIRANDA ENTERS

MIRANDA: Excuse me? Hello?

SIMON: Hello. You must be Ms. Burlington.

MIRANDA: Miranda.

SIMON: Of course. I'm Simon Witham. Simon. And this is Martin, part of John's clinical team.

MARTIN: How did you get in? This is a closed ward.

MIRANDA: Not when the doors are propped open with boxes. I was invited.

MARTIN: You were?

SIMON: She was.

MARTIN: And you didn't think I needed to know?

SIMON: I'm sorry, it slipped my mind with everything -

MARTIN: Please tell me she's not here to see John.

MIRANDA: I beg your pardon? (To SIMON) Why? Is there a problem?

SIMON: No, of course not. We're just at sixes and sevens with the move. Why don't we go to my office for a cup of tea and a chat?

MIRANDA: I'm on a tight schedule -

SIMON: Of course. Martin will come and tell us as soon as John's ready. This way, please.

SIMON USHERS MIRANDA OFF, CASTS MARTIN A POINTED LOOK BEFORE EXITING AFTER HER. MARTIN APPROACHES JOHN'S ROOM AGAIN

LIGHTS TO BLACK

## SCENE TWO

SIMON'S OFFICE. MORE CHAOS, WHICH SIMON AND MIRANDA HAVE TO NAVIGATE.

SIMON: Forgive the mess.

MIRANDA: You said the hospital is being closed?

SIMON: Yes, we're being rationalized, haha.

MIRANDA: I'm sorry?

SIMON: Cuts. The rhetoric of our political masters is one thing, the reality quite another. (HE GESTURES AROUND HIM). I'd say this was a 'front-line service', yet...

MIRANDA: I don't have time to mull over the problems of NHS funding. I have a plane to catch, Dr Whitham.

SIMON: Simon, please –

MIRANDA: Simon, please. Where does all this leave John?

SIMON SIGHS DEEPLY, THINKS

SIMON: Yes, indeed.

MIRANDA: Because I'm surprised I'm even here. When we first spoke, he'd been to the whatever, Parole Board –

SIMON: Board of Review.

MIRANDA: Right. And that everyone was happy with his progress and happy for him to go back to community supervision. You told me he'd be in a hostel by now, getting back on his feet. And then you ring me again, saying John's having a crisis, begging me to come –

SIMON: I hardly begged –

MIRANDA: Begging me to come – and do what? I can't deal with his crises any more. That's why I divorced him, Jesus fucking Christ!

SIMON: Yes, I appreciate it's difficult –

MIRANDA: I can't help you. I can't help him.

SIMON: Yet you still came.

MIRANDA: I have documents for him. Details of the settlement from the house. Other stuff.

SIMON: Which could have been forwarded through a lawyer. Or some other intermediary. Yet here you are.

MIRANDA: Despite my better judgement.  
(SIMON SAYS NOTHING)  
Look, I'm leaving. OK? Giving up on this tinpot backward country, giving it all up, the dull job, the suburban box and the memory of a disastrous marriage that left me a basketcase. Running home to mom and pop. I'm in no position to help anyone.  
(SIMON STILL SAYS NOTHING)  
Don't you think seeing me's just gonna make him worse? Your colleague made it pretty clear he thought I would. We haven't seen each other since before the divorce. Don't you think we're just going to hurt each other all over again? How can you imagine that would do either of us any good?

SIMON: Because you are the only person outside of psychiatric services that has any chance of getting through to him. If you could have seen him just two weeks ago, you would have been amazed, Miranda. He was responding so well to treatment this time, better than I've seen him in years. He was looking forward to living on his own again. With some anxiety, granted, but that was only to be expected.

MIRANDA: But not any more.

SIMON: No. He's off his meds. Quite openly, a deliberate challenge to the terms of his Section. As if he was daring us to keep him under Section.

MIRANDA: Well maybe that's what he wants. Did you think of that?

SIMON: No. What he wants is to stay here. Because it has been a safe place for him in dark times. But he can't stay, obviously, and he won't go. And if he won't go, I'll have to find him somewhere to go by the end of the day – determined by necessity and not John's best interests.

MIRANDA: Somewhere worse.

SIMON: Somewhere different. A new team, a



different clinical approach. Having to start from scratch. But for John, more months and more obstacles to getting his life back. I know the community team well, they're good people. They'll look after him well, if they only get a chance. He needs to hear it from someone other than me.

MIRANDA:

From me.

SIMON:

You know the routine better than anyone.  
(MIRANDA SIGHS DEEPLY)  
Please. Do this one last thing for him before you head off to start your new life. Give him a chance to do the same.

MIRANDA:

That's emotional blackmail.

SIMON:

It's all I have left. You'll see him?  
(MIRANDA NODS)  
Thank you. Let me go and sort things out, give you a few minutes to prepare. OK?

MIRANDA:

I guess.

SIMON EXITS, LEAVING MIRANDA TO HAVE A PRIVATE MOMENT OF ANXIETY BEFORE THE LIGHTS SLOWLY FADE TO BLACK

### SCENE THREE

JOHN'S ROOM. WE SEE HIM PROPERLY FOR THE FIRST TIME, BEING TENDERLY DRESSED BY MARTIN.

MARTIN: Come on, old son. Let's get you sorted.

JOHN: Sausage and mash, please.

MARTIN: Eh?

JOHN: Last meal.

MARTIN: Oh, I see. Nothing like that. There. Feel better?  
(JOHN SHRUGS)  
Much better. Now, come and sit down. We need to talk.

JOHN: I don't want to talk to you any more.

MARTIN: There are things we need to discuss that won't go away if you ignore them.

JOHN: I've told you you can stick your meds up your arse. And your hostel. Unless you've got something new to say, I'm not listening.

MARTIN: Your ex-wife is here.

JOHN: (ELECTRIFIED) Miranda?!

MARTIN: Yes.

JOHN: Oh thank god, thank god – she's here? Now? Really?

MARTIN: Did you know she was coming?

JOHN: Oh yes. Stinkwit told me. But I thought it was another of his lies.

MARTIN: Who?

JOHN: Simon.

MARTIN: You never mentioned it.

JOHN: Some things are private. Mine. Even in here.

MARTIN: That's fine – but how do you feel about seeing her?

JOHN: Now?

MARTIN: Later. How does it make you feel?  
JOHN: Excited. And scared.  
MARTIN: Because you don't have to see her.  
JOHN: I want to see her. She's my wife –  
MARTIN: Your ex-wife, John. And that's the problem.  
I think you're having a tough enough time  
without stirring all those feelings up again.  
JOHN: I have to see her.  
MARTIN: No, John, you don't – in fact, I have to  
advise against it –  
JOHN: (SMILES BROADLY) I have to see her. She's here to rescue me.

MARTIN IS DISMAYED, STANDS BACK REGARDING JOHN WITH CONCERN  
ENTER SIMON

SIMON: Good morning, John.  
JOHN: Morning, Stinkwit!  
MARTIN: I was just asking John how he felt about  
seeing his ex-wife.  
SIMON: Oh yes?  
JOHN: Excited. And scared.  
SIMON: Of course. Because you've had a very  
testing couple of weeks, and there's no way  
seeing Miranda is going to be easy for you,  
John. It might be better if we ask her to leave,  
what do you think.  
JOHN: No, please. I have to see her.  
MARTIN: Why do you think she's here, John? What  
did you just say she was here for?  
JOHN: (SEAMLESSLY) She's here to discuss the divorce  
settlement, the sale of the house and stuff.  
SIMON: Very good. Well, if you're sure –  
MARTIN: Simon, a word.  
JOHN: Have the balls to talk about me to my face.

Go on, say it. He doesn't want me to see her. Thinks it'll make me crack up again.

MARTIN: I think it's evident why it's a bad idea. John should never have been put in this situation to begin with. We get to walk away from the shambles of this man's life at five o'clock and it need never trouble us again – but this poor bastard, he has to live it. He's in no state to see her, and if you can't see that then it makes me wonder what your vaunted thirty years of clinical experience actually amounts to –

SIMON: Martin, that's quite enough.

MARTIN: Fine. I've said my piece. Excuse me.

HE EXITS ANGRILY

JOHN: He's been very angry recently.

SIMON: Yes, these are stressful times. But he has a point. You're clearly not very well at the moment.

JOHN: I'm fine. Just – stressed.

SIMON: You have to be honest with yourself, and with me, John, haven't we said? You're not very well at the moment because you've not been taking your medication. That's a fact, isn't it. John.

JOHN: It might be.

SIMON: It is. And given that, as your doctor, I have to make difficult decisions about what's in your best interest –

JOHN: Simon, please. I need to see her. Not to beg her to come back to me, if that's what you think. No crazy business. I just – need to see her. One last time.

SIMON: Do you want me to be there with you?

JOHN: ... No.

SIMON: But if Miranda wants me to stay, that would have to be okay.

JOHN: Okay.

SIMON: Okay, then. Ready now?

JOHN: (NERVOUS)

Yes.

SIMON:

You'll be fine. Come on.

THEY EXIT. LIGHTS TO BLACK

#### SCENE FOUR

THE COMMUNAL ROOM. MIRANDA IS ALREADY WAITING THERE NERVOUSLY.  
SIMON ENTERS FOLLOWED BY JOHN

JOHN: Thank god. You're real.

HE MOVES TO EMBRACE HER, BUT SHE WITHDRAWS QUICKLY.

MIRANDA: John, don't. That's not... appropriate any more.

SIMON: John.

JOHN: Sorry. It's just – I'm so pleased to see you. It's been a long time.

SIMON: Maybe I better had stay.

MIRANDA: ... No, it's fine. Really.

SIMON: I won't be far. Will you be OK?

JOHN: Yes.

SIMON EXITS. THERE IS AN UNCOMFORTABLE SILENCE

JOHN: Are you well?

MIRANDA: I'm OK.

JOHN: Good. You look well. That's good.

MIRANDA: I wish I could say the same. Simon says you're off your meds again.

JOHN: Simon says, Simon says. I suppose he asked you to talk me round.

MIRANDA: Yes, of course.

JOHN: Well, I won't. Not while I have a choice. I hate them. You know what they do to me.

MIRANDA: But they keep you well –

JOHN: Not even for you. Not this time.

MIRANDA: And what's this got to do refusing to leave for the hostel?

JOHN: I'm not well enough.

MIRANDA: Because you won't take your meds – fine.

Whatever. I said I'd try. I tried. I don't have time to play games. I'm sorry this is hard for you, but I have to give you these.

JOHN:

Oh.

MIRANDA:

Details of the house sale and the settlement of our financial affairs, all checked over and agreed by our solicitors. The money's already in your account – quite a decent amount, we made a good investment there, should give you a nice base to start from when you're ready. Oh, and that's a phone – I don't know if you've got one, but I've programmed some numbers in, old friends, work contacts – everyone was so pleased to hear you were doing better –

JOHN:

Is your number in it?

MIRANDA:

No.

JOHN:

Oh. (TURNS AWAY)

MIRANDA:

I'm leaving the country. Going home. That's why I came today. I wanted to tell you myself.

JOHN:

You came to say goodbye.

MIRANDA:

Yes.

JOHN:

I thought you'd come to rescue me.

MIRANDA:

I can't be that person any more. The anxious wife. Watching the man I loved withdraw into himself, day by day, in silence, or in tears you couldn't explain. Thinking it was my fault. Why you were drinking and missing work. Disappearing. Dreading the phone call at work, or in the middle of the night – is this your husband – so sick to the stomach with worry so much of the time that when you were normal I felt even worse, knowing it wouldn't last, constantly lying to friends and family that everything was fine, we were a regular couple – when really you were desperately sick and all my best efforts, all my energy, all my love were never, ever going to be enough. I can't do it any more, John.

JOHN: (SHAKILY)

I know.

MIRANDA:

So I'm sorry but I had to accept that I couldn't help you any more and ask for a divorce.

(JOHN NODS, CAN'T SPEAK)

And I don't want you to think that was easy, knowing where it would leave you – in fact it was the hardest thing I've ever done, but now there's nothing for me here and my folks are getting old and I just want to go home – I'm sorry – I can't –

SHE FLEES, UPSET. JOHN REMAINS, HEAD BOWED.  
LIGHTS FADE SLOWLY TO BLACK



## SCENE FIVE

JOHN'S ROOM

JOHN SITS ON HIS BED, THE SUITCASE FORGOTTEN AT HIS FEET. HE STARES AT A PHOTOGRAPH.

ENTER MARTIN

MARTIN:

John?

JOHN:

She's gone. For good.

MARTIN:

And how are you?  
(JOHN SHRUGS)  
Can I see? You look happy.

JOHN:

Yes. When we first met. I'm trying to teach her to do a glottal stop. So she could understand the natives. But she was so bad at it, it was hilarious.

MARTIN:

I can imagine –

JOHN:

No. You can't. You weren't there.

MARTIN:

I see you've been packing. That's good.

JOHN:

Got to go somewhere. Hospital's closing, remember?

MARTIN:

And have you decided where you want to go?

JOHN:

Yes.

MARTIN:

OK? Are you going to tell me?

JOHN:

What do you care? It's your last day. You quit.

MARTIN:

Is that why you've become hostile towards me? We're all leaving today, one way or another. I need to know what you've decided because we need to make arrangements –

JOHN:

No arrangements. I'm just leaving.

MARTIN:

'Just leaving' isn't an option. Either you take the bed in the hostel, or we extend your Section and find you a bed at another hospital.

JOHN:

Fine. I'm leaving to go to the hostel. Ring them and tell them I'm coming.

MARTIN: I don't think you have any intention of going.

JOHN: Then do something about it.

ENTER SIMON

SIMON: How are you feeling?

JOHN: How do you think? Can't you both just fuck off and leave me alone.

SIMON: That's not possible –

JOHN: You set me up for that, you bastard. Did you know?

SIMON: Know what?

JOHN: That she was leaving.

SIMON: No.

JOHN: Yes. Not enough to divorce me, but she has to run a thousand miles. That's what I did to her.

MARTIN: It's not your fault –

JOHN: She still loves me, you know. I could see it. But when she looked at me, her eyes were full of panic. I could've died.

SIMON: Martin was right. I should never have put either of you in that position.

JOHN: But if you hadn't, she would have gone and I would never have known. Always living in hope... (BEAT) I don't want to be this person any more.

SIMON: What are you saying, John? Where do we go from here?

JOHN: I'll try the hostel.

SIMON: And your medication?

JOHN: If that's what it takes.

SIMON: Very well. Martin?

MARTIN: I guess so. If John starts right now.

JOHN: Fine. Jesus, I won't miss you hassling me

about meds.

SIMON: Good. Then do the necessary would you, ring the hostel, and make sure the Community team have an update before you leave. We'll finish up the paperwork.

MARTIN: Be right back.

HE EXITS. SIMON EXTRACTS PAPERWORK AND PEN FROM HIS JACKET

SIMON: So, read this carefully –

JOHN SIGNS WITHOUT READING

SIMON: - and sign. You really should read these documents first, they're important –

JOHN: Is that it? Am I a free man?

SIMON: You are now officially under community supervision. Well done. It's taken considerable work on your part to get this far.

JOHN IS A WHIRL OF ACTIVITY, GRABBING LAST-SECOND ITEMS AND CRAMMING THEM INTO THE SUITCASE, CLOSING IT. HE FINDS HIS COAT AND PULLS IT ON HURRIEDLY

SIMON: Steady on, old chap. There's no rush.

JOHN IGNORES HIM AND PICKS UP THE SUITCASE AND MAKES TO MOVE AWAY. SIMON REALIZES WHAT HE'S DOING AND BLOCKS HIS PATH INSTINCTIVELY, BUT JOHN PUSHES PAST HIM EASILY

SIMON: John, please. Don't do this. Your meds. What've we just said?!

JOHN IGNORES HIM, ALMOST EXITS, THEN STOPS

JOHN: When I was ill, at my worst – did I ever hurt anyone? I mean, like, violent?

SIMON: No.

JOHN NODS, GREATLY RELIEVED – AND WITH A LONG LAST LOOK AT SIMON, EXITS

JOHN:(OFF) So long, Stinkwit! See you in paradise!

SIMON: John! Please! Come back!

HE SITS ON JOHN'S BED, DEFLATED

SIMON: Shit!

ENTER MARTIN CARRYING PACKETS OF TABLETS, STOPS WHEN HE SEES SIMON

MARTIN: He's gone, hasn't he?

SIMON: I couldn't stop him –

MARTIN: I knew it. He's played you for a fool.

HE THROWS THE PACKETS AT SIMON IN DISGUST AND EXITS

LIGHTS NARROW TO A SPOT ON SIMON, THEN CUT TO BLACK

## **SCENE SIX**

OUTSIDE. EVENING. NOISE OF A BUSY ROAD, TRAFFIC PASSING.  
JOHN STANDS IN SHADOWS, STILL AND SILENT AS THOUGH HE'S BEEN THERE FOR SOME TIME  
ENTER SIMON, CARRYING BOX OF PERSONAL EFFECTS, STOPS, LOOKS BACK, DOES A LITTLE JIG AND WALKS OFF.  
ENTER MARTIN, WHO WALKS FAST ACROSS STAGE TO EXIT ON THE OTHER SIDE WITHOUT LOOKING BACK.  
JOHN EMERGES FROM THE SHADOWS, UNCERTAIN, TAKES A LONG LOOK BACK IN THE SAME DIRECTION AT THE OTHERS, THEN STRAIGHTENS AND SALUTES BEFORE MARCHING ACROSS STAGE – BUT IS STARTLED BY THE NOISE OF A PASSING SIREN. STOPS, UNCERTAIN AGAIN, CLUTCHING THE SUITCASE.  
LIGHTS DOWN TO A SPOT ON HIM, THEN CUT TO BLACK

END

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