## STAGE BUSINESS: BRITAIN'S NEOLIBERAL THEATRE, 1976–2016

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### ABSTRACT

Stage Business examines contemporary British drama vis-à-vis the neoliberal economic reforms that have dominated British policy for the last forty years, attending to the material conditions of theatre production amid a thoroughgoing transformation of the arts' relationship to government, business, and consumer culture. The concretization of neoliberal policy in Britain's recent political history produced a logical parallel in the country's theatre history, which has effectively accepted a mixed economy of arts funding and the necessity of cooperation with the worlds of finance and corporate sponsorship. The British stage has, throughout this fraught history, indexed its own complex entanglement with neoliberal consensus politics: on the one hand, playwrights have denounced the rapacious, acquisitive values encouraged by global capitalism and monetarism's uncontested dominance across the political spectrum; on the other hand, plays have more readily revealed themselves as products of the very market economy they critique, their production histories and formal innovations uncomfortably reproducing the strategies and practices of neoliberal labour markets.

In their form and content, the plays discussed in *Stage Business* account for two trends in contemporary British drama. The first involves an explicit engagement not only with corporate finance and business culture but also with the ways in which neoliberal economics have revised cultural life. Connected to this thematic preoccupation is a structural trend some have called "postdramatic," involving a rejection of traditional narrative and characterization. This formal fragmentation requires theatre practitioners to make sense of radically open-ended theatre texts, inviting considerable creative collaboration, but it too resembles the outsourcing of labour central to global capitalism. *Stage Business* thus tells the story of forty years in the British theatre by zooming in on a selection of plays and productions that function as nodes in Britain's recent

political, economic, and theatrical history. In so doing, it demonstrates the theatre's immeasurable value not only in reflecting the cultural and political contexts from which it emerges but also in resisting a neoliberal hegemony that rides roughshod over social democratic values – even when the theatre itself dangerously straddles the line of capitulating to the capitalist marketization of our cultural life.

### DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to two families. The first is the family that raised me and gave me the opportunity to pursue my ambitions. My parents, Antonietta and Oreste, have at every turn sacrificed their comfort and happiness so that I might have a better chance of securing my own. Even trying to express my gratitude reveals the limits of language, but I feel it acutely every day. My sister, Anna – apart from being my best friend and the funniest person I know – is a grounding force during every turbulence. I've been so heartened by her earnest interest not just in my work but also in my getting it done.

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### INTRODUCTION

## "SAME BUILD, SAME SUITS, SAME HAIR": BRITISH DRAMA AND THE NEOLIBERAL CONSENSUS

In the final moments of *The Power of Yes*, David Hare's verbatim play about the 2007-8 global financial crisis, Labour MP Jon Cruddas remarks, "It's a shame we didn't have Blair, Cameron and Clegg all at the same time, then we would have had not just the same politics, but the same politician – same build, same suits, same hair" (69), a gibe that signals broad dissatisfaction with the homogeneity of British politics: here is an image of three party leaders – Labour's Tony Blair, the Conservatives' David Cameron, and the Liberal Democrats' Nick Clegg – as Stepford politicians, alike in both appearance and policy. In an era of what Tim Bale calls "valence' rather than 'position' politics [...] in which voters value leadership competence and credibility over commitment to a cause or class" (365), all three parties have become virtually indistinguishable. (David Edgar's If Only, about the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition that deposed Labour in the 2010 election, makes the case on the cover of its first published edition: Cameron is painted Tory blue; Clegg, Lib-Dem yellow. If not for the party colours, the cover suggests, we might fail to tell them apart.) Cruddas's disenchantment points to a contemporary realignment of Britain's major political parties in a way that differs markedly from the political consensus that emerged after World War II, once the "sacred cow' of British politics" (Collette and Laybourn 28). This previous accord, informed by the theories of British economist John Maynard Keynes, saw Left and Right agree on the high priority of full employment, collaboration with trade unions, and government regulation of the private sector. But a new consensus, effectively concretized across the mainstream political spectrum by the turn of the twenty-first century, has heralded neoliberalism – characterized by free markets,

deregulation, privatization, and minimal state intervention (in theory, though rarely in practice) – as the ideal approach to economic policy. Since its advent in the 1970s, the jewel in the neoliberal crown (that is, the promise of financial freedom and acquisition) has lustred with assurances of unfettered entrepreneurialism, private property ownership, and limitless consumer choice. And neoliberal advocates have strategically yoked this emancipatory promise to bleak imagery of a socialist Britain in which the individual is stymied at every turn by collectivist directives. As Stuart Hall synthesizes, supporters of the neoliberal monetarist movement, dubbed the New Right, "seized on the notion of freedom" and "contrasted it to a dim and dingy statism which they chained to the idea of social democracy in power" (*Hard* 190).

*Stage Business* examines contemporary British drama in relation to the neoliberal reforms that have dominated the country's policy for the last forty years, attending to the material conditions of theatre production amid a thoroughgoing transformation of the arts' relationship to government, business, and consumer culture. The British stage has, throughout this fraught history, indexed its own complex entanglement with neoliberal consensus politics – for, as Michael McKinnie reminds us, "[m]any of the characteristics of the theatre that we now take for granted are the result of its deep and extensive institutionalization, not only in and of itself but in relation to the dominant institutions of the modern age: the market and the state" (33). On the one hand, playwrights have denounced the rapacious, acquisitive values encouraged by global capitalism and monetarism's uncontested dominance across the political spectrum. On the other hand, plays have more readily revealed themselves as products of the very market economy they critique, their production histories and formal innovations uncomfortably reproducing the strategies and practices of neoliberal labour markets.

Of course, the story of neoliberal Britain does not begin with Cameron, Clegg, or Blair;

Cruddas's allusion in The Power of Yes to the uniform builds, suits, and hair of the neoliberal consensus accounts only for twenty-first-century politics. Neoliberalism owes its genesis to an equally if not far more crucial player, albeit one with a rather different build and wardrobe, to say nothing of her distinctive mane. Margaret Thatcher, the longest-serving British prime minister of the twentieth century, oversaw a suite of economic reforms over three electoral terms that effectively reconfigured Britain's political-economic landscape in a way that has never been undone. Her implementation of monetarist policies and adherence to neoliberal principles resulted in the drastic reduction of public spending, the wholesale privatization of formerly nationalized industries, and unprecedented tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. Moreover, her capitalist championing of the free market brought about a fundamental rearrangement of government priorities: the chief aim of the state, according to neoliberal ideology, is not to provide for the needs and welfare of its citizens but rather to facilitate an attractive business climate conducive to corporate investment. In this respect, neoliberalism has - "all along," per David Harvey's pointed formulation – "primarily functioned as a mask for practices that are all about the maintenance, reconstitution, and restoration of elite class power" (Brief History 188).

Perhaps the most insidious element of this installation of neoliberal values was its success in revising the cultural ethos, producing what Mark Fisher terms "capitalist realism": that is, "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (2; emphasis in original). This reality was summed up in the oft-repeated Thatcherite slogan handily abbreviated as TINA: There Is No Alternative. The staying power of this uncompromising stance was clear even before Thatcher took office. Writing in *Marxism Today* in January 1979, four months before Thatcher's election, Hall warned that the "'swing to the Right' [...] no longer looks like a temporary swing in the political fortunes, a short-term shift in the balance of forces. It has been well installed – a going concern – since the latter part of the 1960s. And, though it has developed through a series of different stages, its dynamic and momentum appears to be sustained" ("Great" 14). True, monetarism stirred among a small faction of Conservatives throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, but only under Thatcher was it unleashed in its fullest, most aggressive forms. In a short period of time, Andrew Gamble explains, the Conservative Party had "succeeded in reconstructing the political terrain in Britain in such a way that any party seeking to become or remain the opposition [...] would be forced to move a long way towards the new policy positions [...] staked out by the Thatcher government" (209). And the Labour Party, unwilling to budge on its social democratic principles during the eighties, floundered.

As early as 1984, Hall lamented that the Labour Party's dogmatic stance was dragging it increasingly farther from the populist appeal that the Conservatives had leveraged with aplomb, presciently arguing that a "labour movement which cannot identify with what is concrete and material in these popular aspirations [...] will look, increasingly, as if it is trapped nostalgically in ancient cultural modes, failing to imagine socialism in twentieth century terms and images, and increasingly out of touch with where real people are at" ("Culture" 20). Under the leadership of Michael Foot, Labour lost the support of the British public, who came to view the party's economic strategy as antiquated and stale. When Thatcher routed Foot at the polls in 1983, Hall was unsurprised: "We virtually fought the 1983 election on the 1945 political programme" (20). While the Conservatives spent the entirety of the 1980s installing a new economic and cultural hegemony in Britain, Labour's electoral defeat in 1983 "began a long and difficult process of self-examination, which would occupy the party for the rest of the decade" (McSmith 68). Indeed, even when Neil Kinnock (who succeeded Foot as Labour leader) flirted with reforms to

the party's platform in an attempt to "explore ways in which Labour might widen its appeal by changing its attitudes," this exploration, Tudor Jones explains, "did not yet extend to a desire to re-examine the traditional socialist analysis that underlay the democratic socialist values" the party "so ardently espoused" (117): Kinnock lost to the Conservatives twice – first to Thatcher in 1987 and then to her successor, John Major, in 1992.

By the time Blair returned the fallen Labour Party to power in 1997, the Tories had been in office for eighteen years. Blair's rebranding of the party – he insisted on the moniker New Labour – was emblematized by his controversial rewriting of Clause IV, a core principle in the Labour constitution that had mandated public ownership as a chief party objective. Thus, the socialist and collectivist ethos that constituted the Left during the seventies and eighties had effectively ceded, in a gesture of pragmatic resignation, to the monetarist ideology that had become the status quo. "To this extent," Eric Shaw concludes in his monograph on the Blair administration, "Labour has lost its soul" (207). In a marked shift to the right, New Labour now encouraged the growth of the private sector and believed in the power of the free market too. The neoliberal consensus had been successfully achieved.

Eighteen years of Tory rule had a profound impact on the theatre, and the effects of neoliberal policy were felt in a number of different ways. Perhaps the clearest reflection is to be found in the domain of arts funding, whose uneven distribution over time signalled a shift in the government's attitude towards the role and purpose of art. The arts represented a domain particularly ripe for monetarist intervention, as Lara D. Nielsen explains: "The rhetorical combination of collaboration, collective innovation, and entrepreneurial, or creative, qualities makes the prototypically resource-lacking productivity of the arts conspicuously attractive as a model for the unfettered efficiencies of neoliberal governmentality" (11). While subsidies to the arts increased during the 1960s and 1970s – which "represented national faith not only in the commercial but also the spiritual and social role of theatre in British society" – revisions to the funding criteria of the Arts Council suggested that "increasingly only its commercial success was considered worthy of recognition" (Peacock 168). Jane Milling notes that, notwithstanding a one-million-pound cut to arts funding in 1980, subsidies for the theatre remained fairly consistent throughout the decade – although, of course, the "impact of inflation on 'standstill funding' produced a real-terms cut" (37).

The larger problem with the Thatcher administration's handling of arts subsidy was its steady encroachment on the putative bipartisanship of the Arts Council. One major instance of this politicization manifested in the more prominent role played by the Association for Business Sponsorship of the Arts (ABSA), which had been founded under Labour in 1976 but "came into its own under Thatcher" (Milling 51). ABSA not only facilitated the corporate partnerships that Thatcher encouraged but also introduced strategies of financialization and managerialism to theatre companies, providing "business advice to arts organisations and helping them to conceive of themselves as producing a commodity like any other" (52). In this way, D. Keith Peacock explains, "Thatcherite capitalism, supplemented by the jargon of business and commerce, had largely succeeded, if not in naturalizing itself, at least in being absorbed into popular parlance and, by means of direct government manipulation, had penetrated all areas of the public sector including the arts" (7); the theatre, then, in order to secure any kind of public subsidy, had to articulate itself as "a successful industry that offered a good return on public investment" (54). More troublingly, the Arts Council came under fire as an increasingly political body, particularly when William Rees-Mogg, former editor of The Times and a staunch Tory, was made chairman in 1982 and Luke Rittner, the inaugural director of ABSA, was appointed secretary general the

next year. Their appointments

seemed to confirm that the direction of the Arts Council would be in line with that set by the Conservative government, rather than representing cross-party interests as had been the established practice before the 1980s. [...] Party political influence was most evident in rhetoric of Arts Council annual reports that celebrated and urged increased 'partnership' between public subsidy and private sponsorship, and the diversification of income streams to arts organisations – an explicitly Conservative idea. (Milling 39)

Thus, as Baz Kershaw argues, the "so-called 'arms length' principle which was supposed to stop state interference in the 'freedom' of the arts" – and which was by and large preserved before Thatcher's premiership – "was gradually amputated" (272).

As the decade came to a close, playwrights and theatre artists began forcefully to address what they perceived as a crisis in cultural policy, whose reforms not only mandated corporate sponsorship but also turned state subsidy into "challenge money" that would be secured only if "matched by other sources of income, especially support from commerce and industry" (Kershaw 275). In 1988, a conference of academics and theatre practitioners convened to discuss the state of British theatre after nearly a decade of Thatcherite leadership. Vera Gottlieb observed that "Thatcherism *has* worked on its own ideological terms. [...] Younger theatre groups immediately start off thinking about individual sponsorship, using the machinery and language of today" (qtd. in Lavender, "Thatcher's Britain" 119; emphasis in original), indexing the extent to which Tory monetarist policy had entrenched itself in the arts in such a short period of time. Similarly, playwright John McGrath – who that summer would resign from his theatre company, 7:84 Scotland, when the Arts Council insisted that it adopt a hierarchical managerial structure –

lamented that arts funding under Thatcher had been reduced to "survival of the fittest, the definition of fittest being those companies which attract Rothmans," denouncing the decade's arts policies as "utterly irresponsible in terms of cultural activity" (qtd. in Lavender, "Thatcher's Britain" 116). When the conference reconvened in December 1988, it again singled out the Arts Council as "an arm of the government" and lamented that "the prioritizing of monetarist values had replaced a more sensitive response to the social and aesthetic function of theatre" (Lavender, "Crisis" 210).

The same year also saw cultural economist John Myerscough publish a report titled *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain*, which made the case for the arts as a crucial component of British society, though the argument was articulated exclusively in terms of the arts' economic benefits - namely, employment, the production of goods and services, and theatre's export potential in the form of international transfers and tours. Myerscough's report influentially enshrined the theatre as part of a "culture industry" whose value hinged on its tangible contributions to the British economy. Milling finds a palpable irony in the report's language, however: "the initially critical term 'culture industry,' coined by philosophers of the 1950s Frankfurt School to describe a totalising force that reduced art to mass consumption controlled by market interests, became part of a lexicon of defence for government subsidy during the 1980s" (38). In 1989, when the accounting firm Deloitte offered financial advisory services to the Royal Court – a theatre it called "the market leader in new writing in the UK" (Proposal) – its pitch invoked precisely the business rhetoric that ABSA and the Arts Council encouraged: the cover letter alone promised that the firm would assist the Court in meeting its "statutory compliance obligations," provide "support and advice in a proactive and businessorientated manner," and help the company "in the areas of financial control, management

information, accounting systems, computerisation, and marketing initiatives" (Eccles 2); it also suggested primary objectives for the theatre, which included "[r]unning your company in a more commercial manner" and "[r]aising your chances of producing box office successes" (1).

A number of such box office successes would transfer to London's commercial West End, which was consolidated in the 1980s as an emblem of the theatre's economic potential. Ros Merkin explains that, throughout the decade (and since), "theatres aspired to commercial transfers to boost their shrinking budgets and to meet increasing demands for raising money not dependent on the public purse" (175). In its annual reports, the Arts Council "even listed transfers as a badge of honour" - though critics saw the tendency as reasonably problematic, "especially the move from simple transfers to co-productions with commercial producers" (175), as became the case with the many big-budget musicals that came to populate the West End. Long-time Guardian theatre critic Michael Billington argued that, "however well it accorded with the Thatcherite policy of stealthy privatisation of nationalised industries," such commercialization of subsidized theatre "totally changed the rules of the theatrical game" by subordinating the value of a given play to "the fundamental criterion of commercial theatre: is it a hit or a flop?" (State 291). When arts minister Lord Gowrie, at the 1985 Evening Standard Awards, praised the West End for succeeding "without a penny of subsidy" (qtd. in Rosenthal 386), National Theatre artistic director Peter Hall fired back that the minister was "spectacularly wrong": "We live in a mixed economy, and the commercial West End theater flourishes in London [...] chiefly because of the subsidized sector which feeds it and sustains it" (H1).

By the 1990s, this "mixed economy of funding – part state subsidy, part business sponsorship and part box office" – had become so entrenched that even subsidized theatre companies had succumbed to the "pressure to be successful businesses": "theatres rebranded themselves, acquired logos, learnt to use niche marketing, made sponsorship deals, redesigned their foyers and expanded their bar activities. Audiences became customers, and shows became product. The box office was king" (Sierz, *Modern* 34).<sup>1</sup> Corporate sponsorship had become a crucial component of every major theatre company in Britain. When the Royal Court signed a sponsorship deal with Barclays in 1989, Caryl Churchill – who had "called for a concerted rejection of private sponsorship [...] because of the level of control which it gives to business organizations whose values are ultimately those of Thatcherism" (Lavender, "Crisis" 211) – pronounced her displeasure at the theatre's association with a bank that had controversially invested in South Africa's apartheid government. Two weeks later, she resigned from the theatre's advisory council, explaining in a letter to its chairman, Matthew Evans, that she could not "accept the Royal Court being used to launder the image of the bank" (qtd. in Gobert 120).

The National, under the artistic direction of Richard Eyre, took a different approach. In a pragmatic response to the decade's reconfiguration of arts funding, "NT Development decided to speak to the City in a language it would understand" (Rosenthal 442), reaching out to the finance community in order to solicit sponsorship opportunities: its ten-page prospectus, titled the *Royal National Theatre Share Offer* – "the appellation was appealing," Daniel Rosenthal concedes – "appeared perfectly in tune with the Thatcher government's desire to turn Britain into a nation of shareholders" (442). The strategy proved successful. The turn of the decade saw the National secure a score of short-term sponsorship deals that helped to supplement its subsidy: £290,000 from the tech company Digital to computerize the theatre's box office; a £250,000 joint deal between Guinness and the British Council to sponsor a European tour of National Theatre productions; and even £25,000 from McDonald's (Rosenthal 443).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Aleks Sierz reports that, even today, "most venues depend on box-office takings for roughly 50 per cent of their annual income" (*Rewriting* 30).

This thoroughgoing commercialization of the theatre dovetailed with the ascent of Blair's New Labour, which, rather than reverse the trends that had so firmly taken root in the arts world in the previous decade, leveraged them in order to rebrand a Labour party that had lost traction with voters. His alignment with the mid-1990s' surge of flashy, sexy irreverence in British music, theatre, film, and art – known as Cool Britannia – "became a useful mechanism by which New Labour could shed its reputation for being stuck with postwar socialist dogma and be seen instead as a youthful and forward-thinking alternative to a beleaguered, fractious and increasingly weary-looking Conservative Party" (Saunders 11). Many were quick to point out, however, that Blair's instrumentalization of this cultural moment was barefaced in its "thrall to the ethics of consumer capitalism" (12). This rebranding – which effectively sanctioned the entanglement of corporate finance and the arts – signalled a political shift to the right that distinguished New Labour from the iteration of the Labour Party that preceded it, but, in so doing, it brought the Left's platform into uncomfortable proximity with the monetarist economic policies of the Conservatives, a strategy Blair called the Third Way. If there were distinctions to be made between the fiscal strategies of the Tories and New Labour, "Blair's Third Way economic policies muddied such differences," Ken Urban explains, "leaving the party open to accusations that Blairism amounted to little more than Thatcherism-lite" (40). But, where New Labour's economic policies entrenched monetarism in Britain and confirmed the neoliberal consensus on both ends of the country's political spectrum, what differentiated Blair's platform was its ostensible commitment to social progressivism: New Labour succeeded in "marrying free-market economics and social liberalism, or to put it more succinctly, they created a vision of counter-cultural individualism – the 1960s without the stink of the collective" (Urban 40).

New Labour thus continued to encourage corporate sponsorship and the marketization of

the arts, but its cultural policy also signalled a priority shift vis-à-vis the role theatre ought to play in British society, establishing criteria for social inclusion and representation. In order to secure funding, theatre companies would be "assessed on their social impact: the hunt was on for new audiences and greater access" (Sierz, Modern 34). Certainly, the aim is commendable: to increase the representation of people of colour on stage, for instance, or to make the theatre more affordable for working-class audiences presents a necessary revision to an entertainment culture that is too often racially homogeneous and commercialized to the point of being prohibitively expensive. But to tie these government objectives – important and well-intentioned as they are – to the distribution of subsidies represented, again, a politicization of the Arts Council that continued a longstanding "micro-management incompatible with the business of making theatre" (Haydon, "Theatre" 70). In his autobiography, Mike Bradwell, artistic director of the Bush Theatre from 1996 to 2007, lamented that "there was no one at the Arts Council who understood what the Bush was for, or valued our contribution to the theatrical wealth of the nation. What they did want from us, however, was a Cultural Diversity Action Plan" (261). This continued marshalling of the arts in the service of political objectives amounted to, in Janelle Reinelt's assessment, "an instrumentalism that was not nearly as progressive as it claimed," since its entanglement with free market economics and consumer culture "still placed the consumer/spectator at the center of the funding equation" ("UK Spectators" 342).

By the turn of the millennium, the entrenchment of corporate finance in the world of the theatre was not only an inescapable reality but also a hypervisible one. Consider the renaming of the Royal Court in 1998, when renovations to its building in Sloane Square stalled and the theatre looked for a donor to fund its completion: in the words of then–executive director Vikki Heywood, "there was a £3 million hole and we had to plug the gap" (qtd. in Little and

McLaughlin 387). Enter the Jerwood Foundation, a charitable arts organization who agreed to provide a three-million-pound grant, "conditional on the theatre adding the name Jerwood to both its auditoriums" (Sierz, *Modern* 33). Churchill, who maintained a close relationship with the theatre despite resigning from its council in 1989, denounced the agreement, arguing that to have "a sponsor's name on a building is the start of a very slippery slope" (qtd. in Roberts, *Royal Court* 228). But the deal was done by year's end: "The words 'Royal Court Theatre' were still to be on the façade, but above a neon sign would say 'The Jerwood Theatres at the Royal Court.' Inside there was to be the 'Jerwood Theatre Upstairs' and the 'Jerwood Theatre Downstairs'" (228) – signage which, twenty years on, has remained in place.

The National, too, secured a highly visible sponsorship deal at the turn of the millennium that continues to this day. As part of its strategy to meet New Labour's accessibility targets, the theatre sought to make its programming more affordable by offering a portion of its seats for ten pounds a ticket: "The budget assumed that the £10 season would secure support from trusts and foundations and find a title sponsor," but, when no sponsorship came through, "the rep leaflet for April to July 2003 went to press with £10 tickets for sale, but no sponsor in place" (Rosenthal 692). One soon emerged, however, in Lloyd Dorfman, founder of the foreign exchange bureau Travelex, who met with Nicholas Hytner, artistic director of the National from 2003 to 2015, and found that both companies targeted similar demographics. "NT audiences were very much our target audience," Dorfman explained of the partnership: "they are good travellers, corporate decision-makers, students. It hit lots of the right segments for us" (qtd. in Rosenthal 693). The branded "Travelex £10 Season" has since been heavily featured in the National's advertising materials (though the program recently changed its ticket price to fifteen pounds). And the visibility of the companies' productive business relationship achieved a sense of permanence

when Dorfman donated ten million pounds to the theatre – "its biggest ever private donation" (M. Brown) – a gesture that was recognized when the National's Cottesloe Theatre, after temporarily closing for renovations, reopened as the Dorfman Theatre in 2014.

The theatre of British parliament, meanwhile, saw its own reversals of fortune in the new millennium. In 2007, Blair – whose public image began to decline after he supported George W. Bush's invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan – was succeeded by his long-time friend and rival Gordon Brown, who saw Britain through the 2007–8 credit crunch but lacked his predecessor's easy charm: nonetheless, New Labour held Britain's political reins for thirteen years, "helped by the Conservative Party choosing a series of singularly inept leaders," in Dan Rebellato's words, "who, to put it mildly, fail[ed] to win a place in the public's heart" ("Introduction" 28). The trend would change with David Cameron, who led the Conservatives to win a plurality of seats in the 2010 election. His strategic coalition with Clegg's Liberal Democrats not only gave him the power to govern but also relegated Labour to the position it occupied when the Tories were last in office: out of touch with the electorate and struggling to get a handle on its message. This moment returns us to Cruddas's indictment of contemporary politics in Hare's The Power of Yes, for it flags up precisely the alignment of Britain's political parties in a way that blurs the political differences that once distinguished them. And while the Conservatives are far from assured the longevity of the Thatcher-Major years - Cameron resigned in 2016 after his disastrous mishandling of the Brexit referendum, and his successor, Theresa May, can barely contain the warring factions of her government – the opposition shows only limited promise: the Lib Dems were effectively neutralized when the 2010 coalition alienated a large portion of the party's base, and Labour, with the controversial Jeremy Corbyn at its helm, has shifted to the left in a way that risks re-embracing the socialist principles that undid the party's electoral appeal in the eighties.

Stage Business unfolds against this complex and ongoing political backdrop, for the economic hegemony that characterizes Britain's recent political history has produced a logical parallel in the country's theatre history, which has effectively accepted the mixed economy of arts funding and the necessity of cooperation with the worlds of finance and corporate sponsorship. In their form and content, the plays and productions discussed in this dissertation account for two undeniable trends in contemporary British drama. The first involves an explicit engagement not only with corporate finance and contemporary business culture but also with the ways in which neoliberal economics have impacted and revised cultural life. Connected to this thematic preoccupation is a structural trend that some have labelled "postdramatic," per Hans-Thies Lehmann's taxonomy, which involves a rejection of traditional narrative and characterization. This formal fragmentation requires theatre practitioners to make sense of radically open-ended theatre texts, inviting a considerable amount of creative collaboration. If the competitive individualism so central to capitalist logic has worked to delegitimize collectivism as both a political and ethical position – "the market's mechanism is centrally that of competition," Rebellato has observed, and thus "antagonism replaces solidarity as the basic mode" of social relations ("Because" 202) – perhaps theatrical collaboration offers an avenue for artistic resistance to those political forces that wear thin the social fabric.

These two trends thus coalesce in their mutual engagement with the dominance of the neoliberal political economy. Some scholars have argued convincingly that drama's capacity for political intervention is unique, in that it possesses a number of characteristics particular to its genre, chief of which is its foregrounding of collective experience. "The audience," Amelia Howe Kritzer tells us in *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain*, "exercises an essential function in the creation of meaning in theatre" (11), and she certainly isn't wrong. But her

definition of political theatre narrowly restricts itself to work that "mak[es] visible and/or interpret[s] particular social phenomena as public problems or issues" and "initiates a dialogue with the audience about politics within a national or cultural system shared by both the creators of the theatre production and the audience" (10). In this sense, her argument owes something to Michael Patterson's *Strategies of Political Theatre*, which gauzily asserts that watching a play "is an inherently political act, for the origin of political thought is in the willingness to identify with others, to share their problems, to experience transcendence" (3). These defences of the theatre limit their scope to the playing space – that is, to the thematic and performative concerns that constitute a rather large proportion of scholarship in the field – and thus fail to engage with the material realities of theatre's inevitable entanglement with politics and economics.

Other scholars, meanwhile, have located the theatre's multivalent political potential in its capacity to resist physical commodification. Most famously, Peggy Phelan has argued that the ephemeral nature of performance means that it "clogs the smooth machinery of reproductive representation necessary to the circulation of capital" and "resists the balanced circulations of finance" (148). There is certainly something powerful about performance's slippery evanescence, the impossibility of fixing it in place, for to document it or pin it down renders it something other than performance. Such a reading, however, retains a measure of abstraction that, once again, ignores material realities. As Shannon Jackson points out, "[t]he socio-political claims made for ephemerality – that it resists capitalist commodification – of course now seem increasingly hard to maintain," since performance's elusive "shape-shifting might actually enable rather than stall the flexibly de-referentialized spirit of new capitalist formations" (38). Indeed, to apprehend performance in this way unearths its unsettling consonances with the flexible mobility of capital in the neoliberal economy, in which, Maurya Wickstrom tells us,

people too are "shifted, moved, and repositioned quickly and easily according to the shifting flows of capital" (41). This comparison alerts us to physical work that makes performance possible, for theatre requires the consistent and repeated labour of everyone involved. To consider plays and productions not only as artistic creations but also as labour processes emphasizes their crucial relationship – whether critical, complicit, or both – to the political economy in which they are unavoidably embedded.

This dissertation's methodology, therefore, proceeds from an understanding that plays are not simply literary texts, nor are they merely blueprints for future performance or artefacts of previous productions. Rather, plays are artistic products with quantifiable cultural currency that, to an increasing extent, circulate in international markets. My theoretical base is thus necessarily wide, engaging with the theatre as a particular kind of cultural product – and, indeed, a particular kind of "work," in the multiple senses of the word – whose economic labour always continues in the present tense. As David Savran reminds us, "the laboring bodies onstage produce not a thing to be ingested but an experience as elusive and polyvalent as it is ephemeral" (334). My method follows the "materialist semiotics" developed by Ric Knowles in Reading the Material Theatre, which asserts that theatre scholarship should "take[] into account the roles of all aspects of theatrical production and reception" (4). To carry out an appropriately complex and extensive analysis of these plays, then, is to consider the wealth of material beyond page and stage: budgets, touring schedules, manuscripts, diaries, prompt books, video footage, and script changes from location to location, giving insight into how plays are adapted to local markets – which are "inevitably mediated by local producers, directors, actors, and performance traditions" (Savran 333). Such records are vital to a comprehensive analysis of contemporary theatre, not only because they sketch out a detailed portrait of the material conditions of plays in production

but also because they situate the plays I examine in broader cultural, political, and economic contexts. By engaging with the theatre from this complex methodological perspective, *Stage Business* produces a topography of Britain's changing theatrical landscape amid the aggressive thrust of global capitalism that has characterized the last four decades.

Chapter One, "Corporate Finance and/at the Theatre," examines dramatizations of the finance sector, excavating the amoral cupidity enabled and encouraged by a value system dictated by the market. Lucy Prebble's Enron (2009) theatricalizes the spectacular collapse of the titular American energy company after years of large-scale corporate fraud, but, instead of straightforwardly representing the events of the documentary record, Prebble crafts a hypertheatrical experience that succeeds in expressing – affectively rather than just narratively – the feverish intensity and seductive thrill of the corporate finance bubble. The play's subject matter and formal heterogeneity owe a great deal to Caryl Churchill's Serious Money (1987), which similarly dramatizes the frenzied amorality of the finance world, set immediately after the socalled Big Bang deregulated the London Stock Exchange in 1986. Though over two decades apart, the plays' production histories share uncanny consonances: both shows premiered in subsidized theatres, where critical acclaim and box office success secured profitable transfers to London's West End; when they reached Broadway, however, the plays were roundly rejected by critics and audiences alike, both closing in under two weeks and costing their investors massive amounts against the shows' initial capitalizations. The extra-theatrical lives of Enron and Serious *Money* thus supplement their respective dramatizations of corporate finance in a crucial way that is perhaps at odds with their own condemnations of our market-driven capitalist society, for their production histories emphasize the extent to which both plays represent artistic commodities to be bought and sold in a commercial market, products themselves of corporate entities whose

measure of success hinges exclusively on profit-making. If we deem *Enron* and *Serious Money* to have failed on Broadway, we surrender the artistic and theatrical merits of both works to the discourse of profitability and consumer taste, reflecting a thoroughgoing entrenchment of the values attending Thatcher's reconfiguration of the arts. On the other hand, that both *Enron* and *Serious Money* yielded such remarkable profits in London – via transfers, the buying and selling of rights, corporate sponsorships, and an awkward intimacy with the very finance sector they represent on stage – sits queasily at odds with the substance of their respective critiques.

This narrow focus on corporate finance cedes to a broader scope in Chapter Two, "Theatricalizing Time–Space Compression," which considers the wider implications of global capitalism per David Harvey's discussion of "time–space compression" in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (284). Harvey identifies within the broad, diffuse transition to post-Fordism in the mid-to-late twentieth century an acceleration of economic processes as well as diminished (but increasingly sensitive) spatial barriers, both of which are "doubly obvious when we consider the ways in which space and time connect with money" (239). The chapter analyzes stagings of spatiotemporal compression in order to consider the extent to which neoliberalism has revised cultural life and social relations, for, as Shannon Jackson summarizes, Harvey's work details a global economy "in which scales ranging from the macro-international to the micro-corporeal mutually define each other" (35). And the chapter's structure matches form to content: not only do the plays discussed dramatize condensations of space and time, but the chapter itself similarly zips backwards and forwards across space and through time, thus ceding to neoliberalism's spatiotemporal illogic.

Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* (2005) unsettles with its depiction of dystopian squalor and class struggle, and the play is haunted by a neurotic, amnesiac turn towards history – sometimes

(mis)remembered, sometimes invented. The result is a destabilization of memory, time, and place that dovetails precisely with Harvey's description of our social condition, riven by the exigencies and power structures of global capitalism. My discussion of *Mercury Fur* is augmented by analyses of two plays that similarly collapse time and space – one eleven years earlier, the other eleven years later. In Churchill's *The Skriker* (1994), contemporary London coalesces on the stage with a fairy underworld, at once alluring and sinister, whose incongruous measurements of time and empty promises of wealth analogize the seductive but dangerous potential of neoliberal excess. Alistair McDowall's *X* (2016), meanwhile, is set in a research base on Pluto some time in the future, though it indexes the realities of global capitalism here and now; when its characters suddenly lose the means to tell time, their spatial and temporal dislocation deprives them of their remaining faculties.

In the same chapter, I turn briefly to London's 1996 theatre season, which saw the premieres of Winsome Pinnock's *Mules* and Pam Gems's *Stanley*, two plays that confront globalization in rather different ways. In the former, Pinnock's thematic preoccupation with drug-smuggling sees the geographic circulation of her characters' bodies parallel the circulation of global capital; that the play went on to tour women's prisons in the United Kingdom similarly alerts us to how the play itself was developed with an eye to its own circulation. Meanwhile, *Stanley* profiles English painter Stanley Spencer, known for depicting biblical scenes in contemporary settings, itself a noteworthy unfixing of time and space; the play, like *Enron* and *Serious Money*, began in the subsidized theatre before transferring to the West End and then to Broadway (with considerably greater commercial success than Prebble's and Churchill's plays), thus circulating as a profitable commodity within global capitalism's culture industry. This emphasis on circulation alerts us not only to the commodification of the plays themselves but

also to the network of labouring bodies necessary to mounting the production of any play. The chapter's sprawl thus draws together disparate spatial and temporal threads, examining how the compression of time and space on stage indexes the lived realities of global capitalism.

Chapter Three, "Diffuse Labour and the Postdramatic," picks up on the previous chapter's consideration of contemporary labour practices and their intersection with innovations in theatrical form. When Lehmann published *Postdramatisches Theater* [*Postdramatic Theatre*] in 1999 (its English translation followed in 2006), he observed in late-twentieth-century European theatre a displacement of conventional narrative and character, a formal fragmentation that Martin Crimp introduced to the British stage in his career-defining play, Attempts on Her Life (1997). With neither distinct characters nor plot, the play consists of seventeen vignettes whose contents, though thematically linked, are sequentially unrelated. And the mise-en-page speeches divided by dashes but devoid of speech prefixes and stage directions – hints at the gulf between page and stage that must be addressed by those who mount the play. Fifteen years later, Churchill's Love and Information (2012) experimented similarly with form: its fifty-plus scenes, free to be shuffled around and cast with any number of actors, invite directors, designers, and performers to make meaning where the text provides only vague clues. The chapter analyzes the formal indeterminacy of both plays with reference to five productions in three different cities (London, New York, and Toronto), attending to the vastly different meanings and stagings the texts accommodate in each new production. But the fact that the postdramatic leaves so much to theatre practitioners and audiences might give us pause. On the one hand, this encouragement of collaboration may dismantle an entrenched theatrical hierarchy by unseating the playwright as the sole author of artistic meaning. On the other hand, by shunting the creative responsibility of meaning-making in this way – while still retaining primary billing and the financial returns that

come with subsequent productions – the playwright participates in an outsourcing of labour that uncomfortably parallels the exploitative labour practices of global capitalism.

The chapter ends with a coda considering Tim Crouch's The Author (2009), whose openended conclusion explicitly invites its spectators to comfort and console one another after collectively bearing witness to trauma and the "death of the author" (Crouch 60). The play's final gesture resembles a "utopian performative" of the sort Jill Dolan describes in Utopia in *Performance*, which immerses the audience "in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (5). But a number of scholars alert us, crucially, to the empty idealism of such utopian promises: Jackson's Social Works, for instance, questions "the stakes and limits of this social turn" (2), emphasizing the extent to which calls for collective unity and collaboration among the audience function as a deferral of responsibility that amounts to an outsourcing of emotional labour. Similarly, Claire Bishop, while acknowledging the potential of socially oriented participatory art to "rehumanize[] – or at least de-alienate[] – a society rendered numb and fragmented by the repressive instrumentality of capitalism" ("Social Turn" 180), argues that the "social turn" risks engendering a self-congratulatory spectatorship that surrogates real-world engagement with "actual (and innovative) social projects taking place *outside* the realm of art" (*Artificial Hells* 19; emphasis in original).

This bleak perspective of collaborative participation perhaps discourages. Chapter Four, "Collaborative Sites of Resistance" salvages a modicum of Dolan's "militant optimism" (98) in a gentle (perhaps cowardly?) rejection of the political resignation Slavoj Žižek advocates in *The Courage of Hopelessness*. The chapter examines the productive possibilities that have arisen from globalization's relaxed national boundaries by foregrounding plays that can be considered examples of collectivist resistance to the neoliberal consensus, particularly in light of the 2016 Brexit referendum, which charted a new – albeit still very unclear – path for Britain. Anders Lustgarten's If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep (2013) takes up the austerity measures of the Cameron administration in a play whose narrative structure sacrifices emotional resolution and dramaturgical integrity to the exigencies of grassroots, Occupy-style political protest. The play's focus on the everyday experiences of austerity is similarly taken up by Alexander Zeldin's devised theatre piece Love (2016), whose collaborative development and enfolding of the audience enacts a "social turn" of its own. Both plays, in their episodic form and collectivist politics, find a theatrical antecedent in Churchill's much earlier Light Shining in Buckinghamshire (1976), which dramatizes the religiously inflected protest for constitutional reform during the English Civil War. Developed through Max Stafford-Clark's Joint Stock method, the premiere production of *Light Shining* emphasized the collaborative at every stage of its process and performance, a constitutive dimension of the play that was lost in Lyndsey Turner's spectacular, large-scale revival at the National in 2015.

Finally, the chapter considers Simon Stephens's *Three Kingdoms* (2011), a trilingual play for which the playwright shares equal billing with German director Sebastian Nübling and Estonian designer Ene-Liis Semper, as an example of the kind of transnational artistic production that may no longer be possible should Brexit foreclose on the principle of free movement central to the European Union. *Three Kingdoms*'s production history – it premiered in Tallinn before transferring to Munich and London – inversely mirrors its geographically sprawling plot, which travels from Britain to Germany and Estonia in its dramatization of sex trafficking, examining the perils of globalization's diminished spatial barriers and boundless commodification. But the play's transnational development and production simultaneously take advantage of globalization's cosmopolitan potential in a way that attempts to revive the collective sensibility that animates the theatre. Where Brexit leverages the divisive, xenophobic rhetoric of Euroscepticism, *Three Kingdoms* – even as its subject matter engages the scariest dangers of a globalized world – articulates resistance not only by indexing Britain's thoroughgoing entanglement with the continent but also by celebrating the kinds of transnational collaboration afforded to the arts in a unified Europe.

Stage Business thus tells the story of forty years in the British theatre by zooming in on a selection of plays and productions that function as representative nodes in recent political, economic, and theatrical history. If the selection betrays an almost exclusive focus on London, my disproportionate attention to the capital's theatrical output reflects the findings of Olivia Turnbull in Bringing Down the House and Kate Dorney and Ros Merkin in their collection The Glory of the Garden, which document the extent to which the lion's share of Britain's arts funding is distributed to theatre companies in London, while regional theatres, competing for a smaller share of the subsidy, face "more bureaucracy, more governmental pressures and more dependence on the vagaries of central policy" (Turnbull 13). Unrelated, but of comparable note, is that Caryl Churchill emerges as a key figure in each chapter – hardly a surprise, since no other playwright has had her finger on the pulse of Britain's political and cultural life to the extent that Churchill has: the four Churchill plays I discuss, each from a different decade and heterogeneous in form and content, adumbrate not only the playwright's prolific oeuvre but also her concerted engagement with the country's changing political landscape. And the temporal range of this dissertation is significant. The earliest play, Churchill's Light Shining in Buckinghamshire, premiered in 1976, the same year that Labour prime minister James Callaghan conceded that the

Conservatives' promotion of monetarism (Thatcher had been elected Tory leader just the year before) might, in fact, represent the only feasible way forward, thus setting the stage for the neoliberal consensus long before its concretization in the nineties. The most recent play, Zeldin's *Love*, premiered in 2016, six months after the Brexit referendum saw a slim majority of British citizens vote to withdraw from the European Union, the inevitable conclusion of the Conservative Party's decades-long division over the question of Europe. These crucial moments bookend a political history that has ramified profoundly for the theatre, both artistically and financially, fundamentally challenging the theatre's cultural role and recasting our valuation of the arts in the context of the market.

Reinelt tells us, with regret, that "to assert the intrinsic value of the arts and their universally worthwhile character" has ceased to be a tenable position "in the current neoliberal conjuncture" ("UK Spectators" 340). But Kershaw perhaps offers an antidote to this view of the arts' degraded value attribution when he appraises the theatre as "an especially telling social practice," arguing that "as an *institution* it has to conform more or less to the disciplines of the market in order to survive, but as an arena for *creative performance* it always offers the potential for a radical critique of the social (and its economics) as a disciplinary apparatus" (270; emphasis in original). What this dissertation hopes to demonstrate, then, is the theatre's immeasurable value not only in reflecting the cultural and political contexts from which it emerges but also in the resistance it might offer against neoliberal hegemony – even, it must be said, when the theatre itself dangerously straddles the line of capitulating to the capitalist marketization of our cultural life.

### CHAPTER ONE

## "THERE'S A STRANGE THING GOES ON INSIDE A BUBBLE": CORPORATE FINANCE AND/AT THE THEATRE

In the first scene of Lucy Prebble's *Enron*, employees of the titular company mill about the stage, champagne flutes in hand, during an office party in 1992. One comes forward, amid "*projections of the joys and stability of the 1990s*" (9), to celebrate the decade's hospitability to big business and to crow over the fortune it promises: "It feels – genuinely – like the most exciting time to be doing business in the history of the world. There's a feeling that the people who are gonna change things aren't in parliaments or palaces, but in corporate boardrooms all over the United States of America" (9). In the decade following Thatcher and Reagan, the corporate boardroom indeed became a locus of political power, exerting ever more influence on government policy that privileged the finance sector and looked to deregulation as a means of attracting greater domestic and foreign investment. The momentous rise of Enron, the Texas-based energy giant that made a fortune when it transitioned from supplying oil to trading it, occurred in precisely this neoliberal bubble, and the corporation's catastrophic fall – when its projected profits (recorded as actual earnings) were revealed to be concealing billions of dollars' worth of debt – limned the dangers of deregulation and unfettered capitalist acquisition.

Though it incorporates verbatim content, *Enron* is no way a straightforward presentation of historical events. Rather, Prebble surrenders documentary to spectacle, leveraging a range of theatrical forms in order to capture the affective experience of being inside the bubble of corporate finance. In this capacity, the play has much in common with (and has been consistently compared to) Caryl Churchill's 1987 *Serious Money*, a blistering comedy that skewers the City of London after the Big Bang deregulated the Stock Exchange and opened it to unlimited foreign investment. Churchill situates her critique in this fraught moment of Thatcherite economic reform, signalling not only the exploitation facilitated by a deregulated stock market but also its promotion (if not outright celebration) of an individualist ambition that amounted to bald avarice. David Krasner summarizes the newly constituted form of class consciousness that, in many ways, came to represent Thatcher's economic legacy: "the wealthy were now adulated, [...] identity and self-worth were defined by what and how much they owned, profited, and were situated in the societal pecking order," and the social values of "compassion and community [...] were replaced by rapacity, individualism, self-interest, and corporate greed" (122).

The figures in Churchill's play (and Prebble's as well) are characterized by an amoral cupidity and a beatifying obsession with the acquisition of wealth, no matter what the human cost. Linda Bassett, who originated three roles in Serious Money, reflected that it had "become fashionable to be honest about being a predator rather than a human being" (qtd. in Bennetts, "Stock" C23). Meanwhile, critic Michael M. Thomas, writing about the City executives who flocked to see the show, mused that the play "depicts a world in which sheer barbarism is an attribute much prized [...]. What once no normally brought-up person would have liked to see in his psychological mirror is now – in the City and on Wall Street – cause for admiration" (82). And, although the play contains a number of contemporary real-world allusions to high-profile events in corporate finance – Ivan Boesky's conviction for insider trading, for instance, or Guinness's fraudulent manipulation of its share price – Serious Money follows the savage rapacity of fictional, rather than real-life, characters. As with *Enron*, however, plot is not the primary engine that drives Churchill's play, which wends its way through narrative convolutions and a superabundance of characters (almost thirty, whose roles and job titles are even harder to follow in performance). Martin Hoyle's snarky review of the play derided its "rambling plot,"

urging prospective audiences to "forget it – the author does" (81). But she does so intentionally: in *Serious Money*, narrative, secondary to the spectacle on stage, is "subordinated to the play's mimicry of the market's stupefying rush" (Gobert 57).

But Enron and Serious Money share more than thematic and performative consonances, for their production histories too bear remarkable similarities. Serious Money premiered at the Royal Court in 1987, and its commercial success led to a massively profitable run at Wyndham's in the West End later that year. Its Off-Broadway production at Joseph Papp's Public Theater proved equally successful, but, when the show opened at the Royale on Broadway in 1988 (with a new American cast), it bombed at the box office: it closed in under two weeks, having "never grossed in excess of its running costs, estimated to be \$140,000 per week" (Gobert 71), and lost its backers their entire \$700,000 capitalization. Enron faced a nearly identical reversal of fortune. It was a major hit in its premiere at the Chichester Festival Theatre in 2009, its transfer to the Royal Court later that year, and its West End run at the Noël Coward Theatre in 2010, but the play's Broadway production – "one of the most expensive non-musicals in Broadway history" (Knelman E5), also with an American cast ("[i]ts investors were adamant about that" [Maxwell, "Smartest" 14]) – abruptly closed, in an uncanny echo of Serious Money, after less than two weeks, "at a loss of \$3.5 million" against an initial four-million-dollar capitalization, "making it one of the most expensive flops of a play in recent years" (Kuchwara).

My analysis of these plays relies on the methodology developed by Ric Knowles in *Reading the Material Theatre*, which "understands *meaning* to be produced in the theatre as a negotiation at the intersection of three shifting and mutually constitutive poles": the conditions of production, the performance itself, and the spectatorial reception that occurs in the auditorium (3; emphasis in original). To attend to how differently Prebble's and Churchill's plays were received

on Broadway, then, necessitates a consideration of the "cultural politics of location" (2) and the material conditions of artistic production, which Knowles reminds as are "rooted, as is all cultural production, in specific and determinate social and cultural contexts" (10). That Enron and Serious Money share such striking similarities not only positions them in easy conversation with one another but also signals the extent to which they are mediated by the institution of the market: both offer a damning critique of corporate finance's ferocious acquisitiveness, but they do so while emphasizing the seductive, glamorous lifestyles of wealthy, high-flying capitalists and by tempting us to find something sexy about their amorality. Both rely, too, on a heightened theatricality that only the stage can accommodate in order to affectively communicate the exhilarating rush of the corporate finance bubble. Moreover, Serious Money and Enron gained purchase via their topical relationships to contemporary economic realities: the 1986 Big Bang, in the case of Churchill's play, and the 2007–8 financial crisis, in the case of Prebble's, not only because it was presaged by the collapse of Enron in 2001 but also because the company's fraudulent practices rehearsed the speculation and securitization strategies that would go on to instigate the subprime mortgage crisis.

Despite their thoroughgoing investment in critiquing neoliberal finance and economics, however, both plays possess well-documented corporate and commercial lives of their own, which reveal them, as Mark O'Thomas observes, "as the products of corporate entities themselves" (135). The substance of their thematic and political content thus sits uneasily at odds with the material reality of their production histories: both plays made "serious money" in London only to post massive losses in New York, and, in this way, their Broadway runs represent speculative gambles that ultimately cost their investors when the market failed to respond. But that *Enron* and *Serious Money* are universally deemed to have failed on Broadway – even a cursory glance at related newspaper headlines will pick up on the almost ubiquitous discourse of failure – reveals the extent to which the Thatcherite attitude towards the arts has become entrenched in our apprehension of artistic success. Both plays "failed," therefore, not because of any artistic shortcoming but, rather, because they were unable to recoup their production costs, indexing the theatre's wilful subordination to the same corporate logic and neoliberal marketization that *Enron* and *Serious Money* critique in the first place.

## §

With theatrical panache and a playful approach to its documentary material, *Enron* profiles the figures in one of the largest corporate collapses in US history. The megalomaniacal Jeffrey Skilling becomes Enron's president and institutes mark-to-marketing, "a way for us to realise the profits we're *gonna* make *now*. [...] [D]efinite future income can be valued, at market prices today, and written down as earnings the moment the deal is signed" (8; emphasis in original). Andy Fastow, his socially awkward, sycophantic CFO, devises creative financial instruments to burnish the company's share price and conceal its losses. And the elderly CEO, Ken Lay, remains wilfully oblivious to his executives' fraudulent business practices. *Enron*'s other major player is Claudia Roe, a character Prebble invented to serve as a "fictional amalgam of the various women who questioned Skilling's overreaching ambition" (Billington, "Show Me" 20). One such woman was Enron whistleblower Sherron Watkins, whom Prebble intentionally omits from the cast in order to mitigate the possibility of spectatorial identification with a comparably upright character: "I didn't want to provide the release valve of a whistleblower in order to make the audience more complicit with the action" (qtd. in Drachenberg).

*Enron*'s plot hews closely to the historical record. Skilling, on the back of his creative accounting ideas and ambition to move the company towards virtual commodities, is appointed

president and turns Enron into an industry leader, despite (or, indeed, because of) Fastow's complex strategies for debt concealment. When analysts begin to notice red flags – "You're the only financial institution that cannot produce a balance sheet or a cashflow statement with their earnings" (91) – public confidence breaks down, the corporation's share price freefalls, Skilling unexpectedly resigns, and the company declares bankruptcy just weeks after the 2001 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, leaving Enron's twenty-one thousand employees (who were paid largely in stock) with next to nothing. Finally, after hearings reveal the fictiveness of Enron's reported earnings, Skilling, Fastow, and Lay are handed down convictions for their involvement in the company's fraudulent business practices: Lay dies of a heart attack prior to sentencing; Fastow secures a reduced sentence for testifying against Skilling; and Skilling, defiantly unrepentant, receives the longest ever prison sentence for a corporate crime.

One of Prebble's most notable achievements in *Enron* is her translation of financial conceits into the language of stagecraft, a theatricalization that gave physical expression to often complex abstract concepts. In some cases, this theatricalization takes on cartoonish dimensions, as in the play's representation of financial services firm Lehman Brothers as conjoined twins: in one of the play's many instances of physical comedy, they "*struggle to turn round in unison, both pulling in opposite directions*" (61). Similarly, accounting firm Arthur Andersen, which was brought down by its complicity in Enron's fraudulent practices, is depicted as a ventriloquist and his dummy. When the former pledges that "Arthur Andersen are happy to provide all Enron-related documents" following the company's bankruptcy, Little Arthur pipes up, "Except for all the ones we shredded," and the stage directions indicate that "*Arthur Andersen wrestles his dummy into acquiescence*" (97). And the fictional law firm of Ramsay and Hewitt (references, perhaps, to Michael W. Ramsey, the lead lawyer of Lay's defence team, and Hewitt Associates,

the human resources consulting firm that facilitated the financial settlement between Enron and its former employees) ironically "*appear as 'Justice'; blindfolded, with sword and scales*" (51).

Such cartoonish and vaudevillian elements proliferate: at the top of the show, "[t]hreesuited individuals enter, finding their way with white sticks. They have the heads of mice" (3), recreating the three blind mice from an Enron commercial; stock analysts from Citigroup, J.P. Morgan, and Deutsche Bank perform a barbershop quartet number that rates Enron a "Strong Buy!" and proclaims that Skilling is "available and willing / To see to it that you make a killing!" (33); a choreographed sequence with lightsabers represents the deregulation of electricity in California (a *Star Wars* allusion referring to a market manipulation strategy that Enron traders nicknamed "Death Star"). And the central tension that the play explores – between Enron's public perception as a prosperous, upright corporation and the underlying reality of the shady, deceptive practices that sustained it – found clear visual expression in Anthony Ward's set design: Chris Megson argues that the production staged "an archetypal interaction between surface appearances (light, order, emptiness) and shadowy depths (dark, chaos, clutter)," an opposition that, on stage, "is spatialized through a contrast between the spotless executive offices of Enron, the scatological trading floor, and the dark basement" ("Beyond Belief" 47). The basement, of course, is Fastow's lair, the "huge construct that has been designed literally and metaphorically to 'support' the level above it, Enron'' (Prebble, Enron 54) and which, once "fully and complexly constructed," resembles a "a large, supportive web" (59).

Abstract financial instruments find theatrical expression on stage too. Dominic Maxwell commended the play for explaining "bamboozling financial terms, in constantly stimulating, ingenious ways" (*Enron* 850), and Sarah Hemming asserted that the production made "fiendish corporate fraud not just comprehensible to the layman but also dramatically exhilarating" (*Enron* 

985). In the play's most memorable instance, Fastow explains to Skilling his strategy for reducing Enron's debt: "We create a company that exists purely to fulfil Enron's needs. [...] We could push debt, we could push those losses into this other entity, *sell it* to this entity. So we make money *and* move a loss off the books" (47; emphasis in original). Best of all, Fastow eagerly explains, "We can make the company ourselves. I could use these raptor models. To make a sort of shadow company" (48). These debt-eating "raptor" companies are then literalized on stage as actual raptors (actors wearing raptor heads) – "Clever girls," Fastow coos when they first appear, a *Jurassic Park* reference (58) – who prowl around Fastow's shadowy underworld and literally eat Enron's debt: at one point, Fastow "*feeds one of them a dollar bill*" (62).

The sham nature of Enron's finances – which relied on a series of artificial investments, one nested in the next – is similarly theatricalized on stage. Fastow explains that, while the raptor companies are legally required to be independent entities, only "*three per cent* of its capital has to come from independent sources. [...] [S]o ninety-seven per cent of a whole shadow company could just be ... Enron stock" (48; emphasis in original). As Skilling surmises, the nominally independent entity constituting that three per cent can be yet another shadow company, itself made up of ninety-seven per cent Enron stock, thus producing a matryoshka doll of Enron's own holdings and whittling down to a pittance the amount necessary from a legitimate independent investor. To illustrate this strategy, Fastow gestures to the room as an example of the first shadow company, clears off space on his desk to represent the second, produces a shoebox as the third, a matchbox as the fourth – "On and on," Skilling understands – until he "*opens the matchbox and takes out a tiny red, glowing box*" (49). "For all this to be real, for this huge shadow company to exist," Fastow explains, "all we actually need [...] [i]s this" (49).

Michael Billington commended the scene for the clarity with which it communicated one

of Enron's most fraudulent strategies: "Even financial innocents" can parse this exposure of capitalism "as con-trick and illusion" (*Enron*, Royal Court 984). Hemming similarly praised the scene's "physical rendering of a financial scheme," which inventively "matche[d] creative accounting with audacious stagecraft" (*Enron* 985). Rupert Goold's production thus leveraged the confluence of theatrical illusion and the more dangerously deceptive illusions necessary to sustaining corporate finance. As Siobhan Murphy put it, the production's "heightened unreality [...] emphasise[s] how much of the company was actually a figment of the imagination" (985), thus translating into theatrical terms the financial concepts, instruments, and abstractions so central to Enron's success and eventual collapse.

As Prebble explains, "What you come to realise, really, [...] is that a lot of what went on made no sense even to the people who were trading it. People were mesmerised by the numbers" (qtd. in Adams). The play's most explicit index of this mesmerism comes from Sheryl Sloman, a Citigroup analyst, who takes the stage to identify not only the mass delusion that enabled Enron to accrue its imaginary value but also her own complicity in the company's overvaluation:

> There's a strange thing goes on inside a bubble. It's hard to describe. People who are in it can't see outside of it, don't believe there is an outside. You get glazed over. I believed in Enron. Everybody did. I told people again and again to keep buying that stock and I kept rating it and supporting it and championing it like it was my own child. And people say, how could you? If you didn't understand how it worked. Well. You get on a plane, you don't understand exactly how it works, but you believe it'll fly. [...] Imagine if the *belief* that the plane *could* fly was all that was keeping it in the air. It'd be fine. If everybody believed. If nobody got scared. As long as people didn't ask stupid questions. About what it is keeps

planes in the air. (95; emphasis in original)

Sloman's monologue articulates precisely the kind of blind faith that allows financial bubbles to exist, the feverish belief that Skilling "inculcated in coercive ways to the point of mass delusion" (Megson, "Beyond Belief" 49) in order to buoy public confidence in Enron and distract from the company's increasingly opaque business strategies – with calamitous effects for his employees. In a moment of guileful proselytizing, Skilling extends the stock option to Enron employees and proclaims, "if you're invested in the company you work for you are literally investing in yourself – it is an act of belief in yourself. Which you should all have. Because, I believe in you" (69–70). These multiple, intersecting strands of belief – Skilling's destructive belief in himself, his profession of belief in his employees, and their blinding belief in him – thus collude in fortifying a bubble that permitted (that is, encouraged) catastrophically unethical business practices.

But rather than straightforwardly condemn this corporate environment, the play wraps us up in the frenzy of the bubble that seduced so many of Enron's employees. In a puff piece for the *New York Times*, Prebble said *Enron* is meant to entrance audiences by providing a view "from inside the bubble," and Goold, in the same piece, asserted that the play purposefully strays from the "standard liberal line" on capitalist excess, choosing instead "to be interested in the glamour" (qtd. in Gee AR5). Praise for the play's slick aesthetic and theatrical flair abounded in reviews of every production, with critics hailing the play as "an opulent visual spectacle" that captured "the blustering energy of capitalism" (Hitchings, *Enron* 984) and "the allure and danger of greed. It draws us all into the bubble it creates" (Hemming, *Enron* 985). Goold's high-energy production floods the stage with bodies in ecstatic motion, their revelry described in the stage directions as "*absurd, luxurious, delusional, the peak of bull-market excess*" (57), and the frenzy, fun, and sexiness of unfettered capitalist gain find expression in a buffet of sound and lighting cues,



FIGURE 1: A trading scene in *Enron*, directed by Rupert Goold, Royal Court Theatre, London, 2009. Photo by Tristram Kenton.

choreographed numbers and dance sequences, video footage of public figures, and electronic ticker tapes projecting stock prices on the bodies and faces of the performers (see Figure 1). "This," wrote Billington "is the free market as jazzy fantasy" (*Enron*, Chichester 850).

The play thus approaches documentary material with an eye to the theatricality that best expresses its essence, for, as Charles Spencer correctly noted, "[t]he lack of naturalism in the production reflects the unreality of Enron itself" (*Enron* 850). Prebble's subject matter finds a perfect match, therefore, in the medium of the theatre: just as the stage leverages the tension between reality and representation – it places before our eyes and ears that which we know to be illusory but which nonetheless relies on real, material bodies to be performed – Enron's success exploited the gap between the representation of its future profits and the reality of its increasing debt. In this way, Prebble's playful engagement with the historical record privileges affective

truth over, say, the verbatim content of David Hare's *The Power of Yes*, premiered at the National in the same year. In *Enron*'s first soliloquy, a lawyer says of the play's treatment of Skilling that, "when we tell you his story, you should know it could never be *exactly* what happened. But we're going to put it together and sell it to you as the truth. And when you look at what happened here, and everything that came afterward, that seems about right" (3; emphasis in original). This flirtation with authenticity crops up throughout the play. Ian Shuttleworth noted that the "hand-jive" performed in the plays' trading scenes "consists of authentic signal movements" (*Enron* 66), something which Prebble confirmed in a *Guardian* interview before *Enron*'s premiere: Tim Adams reported that Prebble "and the cast visited the stock market bearpit to get a sense of its tone. She now has the buy and sell hand signals off pat."<sup>1</sup>

The effect is to immerse the audience in Enron's bubble, to enchant spectators with the production's feverish energy, its celebration of excess, and its escapist fascination with the cutthroat world of corporate finance – even (or perhaps especially) when it seems not to make sense. Letts's complaint that "[s]ome of the financial jargon crowd scenes are incomprehensible" (*Enron* 851) thus seems to miss the point, for these moments are affectively, rather than narratively, relevant. A trading scene titled "An Orgy of Speculation" hints at the bacchanalian exuberance Prebble intends to theatricalize: voices sing out a series of commodities – gold, aluminium, natural gas, orange juice, pork belly<sup>2</sup> – before "*build[ing] to an atonal babble of commodity prices and bids. It's a musical cacophony*" (20); moments later, traders "*flood the stage.* [...] *The chaos, the physicality, the aggression and shouting of a trading floor*," producing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Churchill too researched finance before writing. She explained that the trading scenes are "based on things that I heard when I was in the various markets" (Churchill and Cousin 14) and that she emended her script after receiving feedback from traders: "someone from the Metal Exchange came to see one of the previews when the show opened at Wyndham's and said that some of the terms people were using were wrong [...]. We changed the scene slightly and used some different phrases after that" (14–15). <sup>2</sup> Pork belly is mentioned in *Serious Money* too, traded alongside more traditional commodities (244).

a "*melee of sound and trading and speculation*" (21). In Act Two, when they aggressively trade power in and out of California's deregulated electricity market (in a scene tellingly titled "Texas vs California"), Prebble advises that the episode "*should be tremendous fun, extremely fast, physical*" (75); "[*e*]*veryone and everything is at fever pitch, yelling and encouraging*" (78).

Prebble's reassurance in the first trading scene that "[o]verlap is fine" (21) – by the next instance, "overlap is encouraged" (75) – suggests that the verbal content of her traders' speech is less important than the affective experience their frenzied onstage behaviour is meant to produce:

TRADER 7 Crude is up. TRADER 5 Gimme price. TRADER 7 Twenty-three. TRADER 1 Yes! TRADER 4 If the market closes below twenty-one, this guy's fucked. I really am. TRADER 1 You're fucked. TRADER 2 TRADER 1 I lose a million. TRADER 6 Hey, it's at twenty-three – TRADER 2 For now... TRADER 5 That's off the back of upgraded / carbon price forecasts. / Carbon price forecasts. Jesus Christ. TRADER 1 TRADER 7 Dropping! TRADER 1 Oh fuck. I'm gonna lose a million dollars. Fuck. (21–22; emphasis in original)

While one can feasibly detect a narrative thread in the cacophonous exchange – Trader 1 has bet a million dollars on the futures price of crude oil closing above twenty-one dollars a barrel – the scene serves no real narrative function. Trader 1's bet pays off by the end of the scene, but the thread is never picked up again – nor are any of the traders sketched out as characters in any meaningful way.<sup>3</sup> When we next see the traders' speech prefixes in "Texas vs California," no reference is made to their earlier "orgy of speculation," nor is there any indication that they are the same traders (or even performed by the same actors) as in Act One. Rather than advance the play in any dramaturgical or characterological sense, these episodes instead express visceral, experiential content, highlighting the intensity and greed of high-power trading. In video footage projected at the end of the first trading scene, US economist Alan Greenspan pointedly alludes to instances in which "irrational exuberance has unduly escalated asset values" (27) – and the script calls for two consecutive echoes of the phrase "irrational exuberance" – indexing the traders' capacity to wreak havoc on the market with their brash and reckless behaviour.

Churchill similarly re-enacts the irrational exuberance of the finance bubble in *Serious Money*, which Neil Collins hailed as "the first play about the City to capture the authentic atmosphere of the place" (Royal Court 369). The play profiles the amoral misdeeds of an unwieldy cast of characters who weave together and apart in non-linear time. In one of two parallel plotlines, a LIFFE trader, Scilla Todd, investigates the mysterious death of her brother, Jake, whose involvement in insider trading, she learns, was earning him the serious money of the play's title – a discovery that reorients her focus from solving his murder to locating his fortune. Her investigation brings her into contact with the figures of the play's second plotline, in which a corporate raider, Billy Corman, colludes with an international network of bankers, venture capitalists, and arbitrageurs as far flung as Ghana, Peru, and the United States, to exploit

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Director Max Stafford-Clark noted the same shallow characterization in *Serious Money*. A diary entry during rehearsals reports "[a]gonising hours where actors say how good the play is but just that their own particular parts are underdeveloped. The play is an epic account of the financial worlds, and it doesn't go into the psychology of the characters in any detailed manner" (qtd. in Roberts, *About* 230).

regulatory loopholes in an ambitious takeover of the bluntly named Albion – a corporation that, "for all its 'family business' facade, is run on principles as ruthless as Corman's" (Hiley 79).

In the premiere, directed by Max Stafford-Clark and designed by Peter Hartwell, the action was "[f]ramed by busy monitors, banks of telephones and shelves of champagne," which produced "an environment of bawled deals and schoolboy horseplay" (Hiley 79). The curtain opens on "[*t*]*hree different dealing rooms simultaneously. All have screens and phones*" (197), and the traders we meet – all in different time zones, a picture of neoliberal time–space compression that predated David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity* by two years<sup>4</sup> – alternate between multiple telephones so that their staggered, overlapping dialogue produces the muddled, cacophonous soundscape of the trading floor: "[f]or ten minutes of stage time, we watch the Paper, Shares, and Commodities exchanges erupt in a fast-paced bombardment of action and sound. There is neither conventional chronology nor formal plot. There is only a mass of color, linguistic bedlam, and flying paper notecards" (Troxel 155).

In trading scenes that anticipate those of *Enron*, Churchill's stage directions describe moments in which "[*a*]*ll burst at once, furious trading, everyone flat out*" (252). Even the *mise-en-page* gives a sense of these scenes' turbid disorder:

GRIMES	( <i>To Mate</i> ) Futures are up. ( <i>Phone</i> ) Champagne bar / at six?
MATE	( <i>Phone</i> ) Selling one at the figure. ( <i>To Grimes</i> ) I'm lifting a leg.
SCILLA	<ul><li>(<i>Phone 2</i>) We got you 10 for 5 bid, OK?</li><li>(<i>Phone 1</i>) Yes, champagne bar at 6.</li><li>(<i>Puts down phone 1, answers phone 2 again</i>) Yes?</li></ul>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> In the 2010 Shaw Festival production – *Serious Money*'s first professional production in Canada – the set, also designed by Hartwell, staged this compression of space and time by affixing digital clocks in all four corners of the playing space, each representing a different time zone in real time, while a "four-sided clock like Big Ben" hovered above the centre of the stage (Hoile).

GRIMES (*Phone 2*) Get off the fucking line, will you please?

MATE (To Grimes) 01 bid, 01 offered.

SCILLA (*Phone 2*) No, it's 5 bid at 6. I can't help you I'm afraid. (199) Speedy delivery and overlapping dialogue combine with virtually inscrutable Cityspeak not to advance the narrative – for the numbers are hardly relevant to the plot – but to recreate the frenzied world of corporate finance (see Figure 2). "Even when the actual action of *Serious Money* defies a market neophyte's comprehension," Frank Rich wrote of the play, "we feel that we are smack at the noisy, clamorous eye of a financial whirlwind, at once exciting and terrifying" ("Engaged" H5). In his diary, Stafford-Clark admitted he was "not sure how long a trading scene should be. At the moment the audience doesn't know what the fuck is happening" (qtd. in Roberts, *About* 232), but this incomprehensibility would become the very essence of the trading scenes. "The goal," Darren Gobert notes, "is more affective than thematic" (57).<sup>5</sup>

Christopher Innes asserts that "the vitality so evident" in *Serious Money*'s raucous dramatization of corporate finance makes the play's "vision of hell paradoxically attractive" (*Modern* 522), which is of course partly the point. But Churchill attracted her fair share of criticism for appearing to glamourize the world her play ostensibly critiques. In his review of the premiere, Paul Barker speculated that the playwright had "succumbed slightly to the tacky appeal of the new City, too. Notoriously, you can't truly parody something without having seen its charm" (375). Churchill, however, made a point of distinguishing her interest in the subject from her political stance: while the City's "huge energy was something that impressed us and that we wanted to capture," she said in an interview, "people confuse attractiveness and goodness. They

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> This chaos follows Scilla and Grimes even after hours. When they play the dice game Pass the Pigs – "It's a good way to unwind," Scilla says, "[b]ecause when trading stops you don't know what to do with your mind" (277) – their scorekeeping echoes the calls of the trading floor: "I've got forty-five. Trotter, fifty. Snouter, sixty. Double razorback, eighty. Hell, I've pigged out. Back to forty-five" (279).



FIGURE 2: Lesley Manville, Julian Wadlam, Gary Oldman, Linda Bassett, Meera Syal, and Allan Corduner in *Serious Money*, directed by Max Stafford-Clark, Royal Court Theatre, London, 1987. Photo by John Haynes.

think that if you show something as attractive it must mean you think it's good" (Churchill and Cousin 16). In both *Serious Money* and *Enron*, corporate finance is represented in all its sexy glamour, not because Churchill and Prebble seek to celebrate or glorify it but, rather, because they aim to tap into the seductive edge with which it lures so many.

The whirlwind energy of both plays thus helps us to understand the culture that Prebble's and Churchill's characters inhabit, in which all things cede to the pursuit of monetary gain. Here, every human drive is recast in the context of money: speculation, risk, and profit supplant all other satisfactions. As *Enron*'s Trader 1 puts it, after making his million for the day, "there's something... primal. You never felt more alive in your life. [...] Closest thing there is to hunting. Closest thing there is to sex" (26–27). We see him "*delighted, sweating, filled with testosterone* 

*and joy*" (26), his victory over the market electrifying him with a rush akin to orgasm. His monologue indexes the predatory nature of finance, its proximity to the politics of conquest, and the erotic dimension it surrogates. Indeed, even in a play whose second scene opens on the final throes of a boardroom quickie – we find Skilling "*doing his trousers up*" and Roe "*pulling down her skirt*" after they "*finish having quick, clothed sex*" (10) – money displaces sex, just as it displaces intimacy. Roe's first line in the scene, "I've been thinking about mark-to-market" (10), pivots to something decidedly unsexy. When they do address their sporadic sexual history – they quibble about how many times they've had "penetrative" sex – they remain resolutely focused on the numbers. Roe mentions they've only had sex three other times, while Skilling insists that a blowjob on the Enron jet should count towards the total sum ("That's penetration! I was penetrating your – " [12]). And, if Roe's opening line illustrates the perfunctory, dispassionate nature of their affair at the start of the scene, she doubles down at the end: "You got a Kleenex? I appear to be running," she asks off-handedly before "*wiping off the ejaculate that has run down her thigh*" and "*toss*[*ing*] *the Kleenex away deliberately casually*" (14).

For a play invested in the sexiness and glamour of corporate finance, there is a conspicuous lack of sex in *Enron* once Skilling and Roe end their affair. Rather, the language of sex seems only to articulate itself in the exploitative context of trading. As the traders manipulate California's electricity market, for instance, Trader 3 gleefully alludes to "[1]oopholes so big you could fuck a fat chick through 'em and neither of you touch the sides" (76). And, while the erotic charge of their vigorous physicality and breathless enthusiasm is contrasted with news reports of rolling blackouts ("surgeons were left without operating lights in San Pablo forcing patients to be airlifted to facilities out of state" [77]) and, worse, of lives lost ("The driver of a station wagon was killed early Friday when she collided with a transit bus at an Oakland intersection where the

traffic lights were down" [77]), which illustrate the real-life ramifications of their profit-making, Trader 4 triumphantly proclaims, "Let's rape this motherfucker!" (78).<sup>6</sup> Amid widespread chaos and destruction, the "*sound and activity*" of the traders' aggressive exuberance "*builds and builds*" until Prebble offers an apt stage direction: "*A climax*" (78). Here, the erotic is tied to outright domination, articulated in the most violent and degrading terms and subsumed by a ruthless capitalist logic that insists on conquest and acquisition as its modus operandi.

The same is true of the characters in *Serious Money*, for whom sex not only "vexatiously slow[s] the gravy train" (Hiley 79) but also disrupts market activity. Zac Zackerman, who shuttles between the play's storylines and occasionally serves as a narrator, laments that AIDS "is making advertisers perplexed / Because it's no longer too good to have your product associated with sex," though he swiftly finds an angle for capitalization: "it's a great marketing opportunity. / Like the guys opening up blood banks where you pay to store your own blood in case of an accident and so be guaranteed immunity. / (It's also a great time to buy into rubber)" (255). His speech arrives moments after traders perform the "Futures Song" that closes Act One, "an obscenity scat chant for gaudily-jacketed trading oiks" (Coveney, *Serious Money* 370) that is suffused with erotic aggression: the first line, "Out you cunt, out in oh fuck it," builds to a raucous refrain that fuses prurience with cupidity: "Do the fucking business do the fucking business do the fucking business / And bang it down on paper" (253).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The traders' nicknames for their strategies in California – "Ricochet! Fat Boy! Burn Out! Death Star!" (76) – unsettle when juxtaposed with their devastating repercussions. Churchill similarly emphasizes enjoyment over consequence, lending credence to Linda McDowell's reading that, "in *Serious Money*, dealing is portrayed as a game" (172): Scilla calls it "the most fun I've had since playing cops and robbers with Jake when we were children" (243) and "a cross between roulette and space invaders" (244), characterizations that capture both its ethos of conquest and its representation as play.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> The bacchanalian atmosphere of this musical number appears true to life. John Gross reported that, at the end of 1987, "as though to confirm Ms. Churchill, the Floor Committee of the London Stock Exchange instituted a new set of penalties in order to avoid the previous year's bedlam – fines for such offenses as 'malicious use of foul language' and damage to equipment and systems'" (H20).

As in *Enron*, however, the traders in *Serious Money* have no time for sex. When the Albion takeover enters its endgame, Corman instructs his team to "[p]ut your family life and your sex life on hold. / A deal like this, at the start you gently woo it. / There comes a time when you get in there and screw it" (236). Zac, meanwhile, struggles in vain to make a date with Jacinta Condor, the Peruvian businesswoman he enlists to help with Corman's takeover, but the various business ventures that congest their calendars crowd out any possibility to meet for personal reasons. Business trumps romance:

JACINTA	Dinner tomorrow Much to my sorrow I have with some Eurobond dealers.	
ZAC	Cancel it.	
JACINTA	Business.	
ZAC	Shit. (264)	

As Laura L. Doan rightly notes, "Zac and Jacinta, like most of Churchill's characters, understand that the quest for personal pleasure is incompatible with their greed" (77). And, when they finally meet near the end of the play, they articulate their romance in absurd rhyming couplets that rely on the language of finance, each stimulated exclusively by the other's business acumen:

JACINTA	I love the way you are so obsessed when you're thinking about your bids.
ZAC	I love that terrible hospital scam / and the drug addicted kids.
JACINTA	(That's true, Zac!) I love the way you never stop work, I hate a man who's lazy.
ZAC	The way you unloaded your copper mines drove me completely crazy.
JACINTA	Zac, you're so charming, I'm almost as fond Of you as I am of a Eurobond.

ZAC I thought we'd never manage to make a date. You're more of a thrill than a changing interest rate. (300)

But the exhaustion of relentless business precludes the sex they have been ostensibly pursuing for the entire play. Upstairs in her suite, Jacinta reassures Zac, "My feeling for you is very deep. / But will you mind very much if we go to sleep?" (300). In the world of *Serious Money*, pleasure is in the boardroom, not the bedroom. Even the announcement at play's end that "Jacinta marries Zac next week and they honeymoon in Shanghai" is wrapped up in capitalist ambition: "Good business to be done in China now" (306).<sup>8</sup>

Familial relationships are similarly surrendered to the need to accrue profit. While Scilla initially sets out to unravel the circumstances of her brother's death, her civilian investigation uncovers Jake's labyrinthine network of contacts in corporate finance, and she quickly realizes that his shady deals had likely been earning him a fortune: "He never told me. [...] He was making serious money" (243). Her resolve to explain his murder thus cedes to envy and injury that he had concealed his money-making from her: when she confronts her father to question his potential involvement, she asks petulantly, "aren't you annoyed he kept it secret from you and didn't share what he'd got?" (223). Her search leads her to Jacinta and Nigel Abjibala, a Ghanaian importer also involved in Corman's takeover of Albion, and Churchill makes explicit the reordering of Scilla's priorities vis-à-vis her brother's death: "Would either of them be likely to kill / Jake? Or more important still / Could they tell me about his bank account? / Which bank is it in? And what's the total amount?" (284). At the end of play, Scilla flies to the United States to meet Marylou Baines, the American arbitrageur for whom Jake arranged deals and his final point of contact. (Indeed, when Zac phones Marylou to inform her of Jake's death, she promptly

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> The play's other mention of marriage is tucked into the game of Pass the Pigs and instantly forgotten: Grimes asks Scilla, "Will you marry me?" to which she brusquely responds, "Leave it out Grimes" (278).

instructs her assistant to "[p]ut anything from Jake Todd in the shredder" [216].) But what ought to be a climactic face-to-face confrontation between Scilla and Marylou instead swaps out familial responsibility for financial opportunity. Scilla tells her, "I had been wondering if you killed Jake, but now I hardly care. / It's not going to bring him alive again, and the main thing's to get my share" (304), and her threat to expose Marylou – "You'll find me quite a dangerous enemy. / I'm greedy and completely amoral" (305) – amounts to a job interview: Marylou hires Scilla as her assistant on the spot, and Jake's death remains unsolved.

That sex, romance, and family are so ubiquitously swallowed up by business articulates a damning critique: "ideology maps itself onto personal life," per Janelle Reinelt, and "the values of the work world permeate and consume all aspects of 'private' life" (*After* 98). Every part of social life is refigured by neoliberal hegemony and held in thrall to a deified market – a system in which we, the audience, readily participate. In *Enron*'s epilogue, after Skilling is "sentenced to twenty-four years and four months in prison[,] [...] the longest sentence for a corporate crime in history" (110),<sup>9</sup> Prebble's disgraced protagonist delivers the play's closing monologue, indexing precisely the world's historically entrenched indenture to market values:

SKILLING You wanna hold a mirror up to nature?

The huge crack along the wall of the building glows from behind and becomes the jagged line graph of the Dow Jones Index over the last century.

*The line on the graph/crack glows.* 

SKILLING (*to us*) There's your mirror. Every dip, every crash, every bubble that's burst, that's you. [...] All humanity is here. (111)

By charting human history along the Dow Jones (with all the easy visual implications of an

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Skilling's sentence has since been reduced. In 2013, his lawyers struck a deal with prosecutors to drop ten years from his sentence on the stipulation that he "stop challenging his conviction" – he had glutted the courts with a series of appeals – "and forfeit roughly \$42 million that will be distributed among the victims of the Enron fraud" (Smith). He is expected to be released from prison in February 2019.

ascending line graph), Skilling argues that all human progress is born of fluctuations in the market: everything "worth anything has been done in a bubble" (111). (And that he lists the slave trade alongside innovations such as railroads and the internet makes clear that, by play's end, he has learned nothing of the human cost of capitalist pursuit.) But the historical sweep of his monologue and his repeated invocation of the audience – he speaks directly "*to us*," Prebble notes – implicates us in the neoliberal culture that accommodated Enron's fraud. David Cote offers an insightful reading of Skilling's monologue in this loaded final scene: "Guess what, he implicitly says about his crimes against economy, we're in it together. When it comes to the elaborate fictions that sustain our global marketplace, everyone's American" ("Why").

Serious Money expresses a similar condemnation of the way in which capitalist values are embedded in the national imagination, something Churchill accomplishes (at the start of the play rather than at the end) by invoking the play's theatrical antecedents and revealing the longstanding role trading has played in British economics. The play stages a prologue, performed in front of the curtain, lifted from Thomas Shadwell's 1692 Restoration comedy, *The Volunteers, or The Stock-Jobbers*. Discussing the profits to be made from buying and selling patent shares, one stockjobber questions "whether this be lawful or not," only to be reminded that his sole priority is to "turn the penny" (197). Churchill thus points out that trading is "an English tradition that was already a century old in 1692" (Müller 348). Reinelt identifies the historical resonances between Thatcher's Britain and the late seventeenth century, both marked by a "revolution in banking and monetary policy," which make Churchill's curtain raiser so salient:

> The rise of the great merchant class meant that money, not just property, could dominate and control the state apparatus and that overseas markets could help insure this fiscal "revolution." If the separation of use value from exchange value

was emerging with the other features of capitalism, the analogue today may be the separation of exchange value from any commensurate commodity at all. (*After* 97)

By highlighting the economic consonances between these temporally remote settings, Churchill urges her audience to reckon with a cupidity that has long been part of the British tradition. As Linda Kintz explains, "the monetarist 'revolution' introduced by Thatcher in the 1980s was touted as a return to the unregulated financial markets of what might be called an 'original' capitalism" (253): in this sense, Churchill marshals Shadwell's play as an intertext in order to acknowledge capitalism's longevity and its establishment of "profiteering as the spiritual superstructure of the current British culture" (Slagle 243).

In a similar invocation of Restoration theatrical convention – worth noting, of course, is the play's often omitted subtitle, "A City Comedy," which signals the theatrical antecedent whose energy and tone the play recreates – *Serious Money* is written in a playful doggerel verse that Churchill, at times, rigorously obeys and, other times, irreverently discards. Irene Morra positions this formal choice in relation to the play's genre, suggesting that Churchill's use of rhyming couplets, "whose associations with serious dramatic expression had been virtually extinguished by the end of the eighteenth century," is meant to "ironize[] its own aesthetic idiom" and establish *Serious Money*'s "comic, satirical emphasis" (195). Others have apprehended the play's verse as a means of marrying form and content. Milton Shulman's review argued that the "leaping, punchy, semi-anarchic doggerel" gives the play the "staccato urgency of a busy tickertape machine. It suits perfectly the bizarre, shouting antics of bargainmaking of the stock exchange" (373–74). Amelia Howe Kritzer agreed, suggesting that such formal rigour indexes "the extent to which the supposedly powerful barons of high finance are controlled by the environment in which they operate" (Review 394–95). Consider, for instance, a speech in which Corman is so bound by the constraint of rhyme that he splits a monosyllabic word across two lines: "Old-fashioned and paternal. / These figures stink. I can make it earn a l- / ot more for its shareholders" (225). But, if rhyme and verse stand in for the checks and balances placed on the financial sector, the ease with which Churchill's characters sporadically abandon them simultaneously evinces the way in which the high-powered figures of corporate finance get away with breaking the rules and regulations meant to curb their behaviour.

*Enron* too relies on evocations of dramatic history, with reviewers noting a range of theatrical antecedents. Kate Bassett called Enron a "barbed modern morality play (or immorality play?)" (Enron 851), a gesture towards the medieval that Kate Dorney and Frances Gray echo in Played in Britain, when they write that Skilling "sees himself as an Everyman" (218). Other critics looked to the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres for comparison: where Fiona Mountford characterized Enron's machinations as "Macbeth-like" (Enron 850), others alluded to Shakespeare's Richard III (Hemming, Enron 985) and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus (Bassett, Enron 852); and Robert Gore-Langton's vague estimation that the play "has an almost Jacobean feel to it" (852) found more specific expression in Gardner's review, which likened the play to a "roistering Jacobean City comedy" (66). Others still found traces of more recent theatre and film: Bassett cited the play's "almost Pirandellian confusions between the real and the illusory" (Enron 852); Billington said it "reminds one of Citizen Kane in its dazzling, vaudevillian energy" (Enron, Chichester 850); and, predictably, references to Serious Money abounded. Robert Hewison was the most succinct: "Churchill's Serious Money skewered the 1980s; Prebble's Enron knifes the Noughties" (851).

Enron doubtless reaches back to these moments in theatre history, but critical and

scholarly attention has most commonly emphasized the play's relationship to a much earlier dramatic antecedent, apprehending the play via its relationship to ancient Greek tragedy, evoking the very dramatists and philosophers upon whom our understanding of classical tragedy relies: Benedict Nightingale described Skilling as "a man destroyed by hubris and obsession – and, if Euripides were living, he would have relished him" (*Enron* 65), while Mountford, in similar terms, suggested "Aristotle himself would relish the hubris in this narrative of an overreaching organisation" (*Enron* 850). Prebble, for her part, has also acknowledged *Enron* as a modern-day capitalist iteration of ancient Greek tragedy: "We don't have those kings and emperors any more, the stuff of traditional tragedy, [...] but corporate CEOs are probably the closest we come to it," not only because they routinely "mak[e] decisions that affect millions of lives" but also because they are "often undone, as we have seen, by greed and worse" (qtd. in Adams).

Just as spiritual fervour animated drama in the days of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, Prebble charges *Enron* with religious electricity. Much of this energy manifests in the figure of Skilling, whose Icarian hubris not only transforms his oafish outward appearance – he gets rid of his glasses and buys a sharper wardrobe – but also self-aggrandizes to the point of deification. Prebble's stage directions make explicit the formidable presence Skilling manages to cultivate. When he is photographed for a magazine running a story on "*the dynamic CEO changing the world*," the photographer crouches, purposefully positioned "*beneath*" Skilling "*to make him look impressive, god-like*" (53), an attempt to achieve the perfect angle, surely, but a gesture that nonetheless reads as genuflection. Moments later, when Skilling announces that Enron will venture into virtual commodities, the "[*r*]*eaction is ecstatic, like a religious cult. Skilling is messiah-like*" (57). Even his baffling defence of electricity deregulation in California – which allowed Enron to "turn[] the power industry into a casino" and "yank[] the economy of California on a leash" (Bouquet) at the expense of human life – is articulated in terms of divinity: "We are the good guys in California. We are on the side of angels" (77).

Prebble indexes Skilling's affective hold over Enron's employees, shareholders, and investors by emphasizing the ardour he inspires as he binds them to his apparently revolutionary vision for the company. In this way, Ellen Redling asserts, Skilling resembles "a 'guru' or spin doctor who [...] evangelises his ideas" (167), and to great success for a considerable period of time. But Prebble's stage directions deify Skilling even in defeat. When Enron's stock price goes into freefall, Skilling prostrates himself in an overwrought gesture of self-sacrifice: "*He ends, his arms outstretched, crucifying himself before the market*" (92). Prebble thus relates the rise and fall of a contemporary figure with recourse to a millennia-old tradition; as Megson asserts, she "cast[s] the events of the documentary record in mythological terms, offering a sardonic insight into hubristic ambition while reinforcing the company's initial perception of Skilling as the anointed new messiah" ("Beyond Belief" 47). When Skilling "*looks down*," like an omniscient creator, "*at the Enron he envisioned beneath him*" (20), Susanna Clapp noted that, as "the word 'GOLD' flashes" across the back wall of the stage, "it's easy to miss the 'L'" (*Enron* 852).

That Prebble represents Skilling's hero worship in religious terms makes sense precisely because capitalist belief too possesses a religious dimension. The play thus "makes manifest what Walter Benjamin calls 'the religious structure of capitalism.' That is to say, the mystifying technologies and reified personal relations at the highest levels of global finance are made tangible for the audience in the symbolic form of quasi-religious iconography" (Megson, "Beyond Belief" 47). This attitude is expressed early in the play when Lay draws equivalences among a holy trinity of modern capitalist institutions: "In the past folks thought the basic unit of society would be the state, or the church or, Lord help us, the political party. But we now know it's the company. [...] I believe in God, I believe in democracy and I believe in the company" (15). The corporation attains metaphysical status, achieving parity not only with the divine but also with an organizing social principle that, like tragedy, traces its roots to the Ancient Greeks. But Lay's vision for Enron is more traditional than Skilling's: "I like holding things. In our father's day, a man worked and he saw himself in his work. If he made a table, he saw himself in the table he made. It was part of him, and he of it. I *am* oil and pipelines" (18; emphasis in original). The irony, of course, is that Lay's nostalgia reads more like a Marxist critique of the labourer's alienation from the means of production than a defence of modern capitalism.

Nonetheless, Skilling aptly makes his case for going virtual by appealing to Lay's religious convictions, to the intangible nature of spirituality: "There is a dignity to holding something, Ken. But your daddy was a baptist preacher. There's a dignity to giving people something they *can't* touch" (18–19; emphasis in original). By mobilizing Lay's religious faith and emphasizing the immaterial nature of our most cherished beliefs, Skilling not only convinces Lay to name him Enron's president but also establishes belief itself – in the higher power represented by Enron and its share price – as the company's driving force. Bassett's review of the play homed in on exactly this quasi-religious dimension: "The trading floor is drenched in rainbows of light, like a cathedral sunlit through stained glass windows. Here, though, the congregated throng – in their business suits and traders' blazers – are bathed in the glow of market statistics" (*Enron* 851). In the modern capitalist economy, then, as Megson puts it, "the corporation has replaced the cathedral as the locus of fervent belief" (""And I Was Struck'" 43): Enron, helmed by its eccentric, charismatic leader, comes to depend, like any other form of organized religion, on the belief of its congregation in order to thrive.

Prebble's play makes much of the fact that it was belief alone that drove Enron's success

for so long. Indeed, as Fastow remarks, Enron's "whole set-up is founded on the stock price" (73), an inflated measure of the company's worth that seduces investors despite being divorced from the material reality of Enron's hemorrhaging coffers. Tim Bouquet explains in the program for the play's West End transfer that, as the corporation's "mark-to-market 'profits' built and built, its share price rocketed. Because executives got paid largely in stock, the stock price was king. [...] ENRON was becoming a financial fantasyland still paying million dollar bonuses based on imaginary profits when it was \$30 billion in debt." Since the company's mark-to-market strategy records projections of future profits as current earnings, the buoying of the stock price becomes Skilling's sole priority, for Enron's fate is made to rely exclusively on public confidence in the company. When Fastow and Skilling meet with the Lehman Brothers, Prebble reveals the extent to which the manipulation of stock prices kept Enron afloat:

FASTOW	If you rated us right?	s Strong Buy, more people would invest in Enron,
LEHMAN BI	ROTHERS	I guess
FASTOW	-	eople invest in Enron, we can finance more projects, Enron stronger and therefore –
LEHMAN BROTHERS		Making it a / Strong Buy
FASTOW	/ A Strong Buy original)	y! See how it makes sense now? (61; emphasis in

The stock price thus represents not Enron's value but its own purely imaginary projections of worth. In the glossary she provided West End audiences of the play, Prebble accordingly defines the stock price as a measurement of the "earning *potential* of a company. The value of a company, and hence that value of a share of its stock, is an assessment of the value of all *future* earnings" ("Glossary"; emphasis added). Moments later, Roe – who, importantly, also "like[s] holding things" (18) and calls Skilling's insistence on the virtual "distasteful" (19) – laments the

increasingly illusory nature of corporate finance: "Something is happening to business. At the beginning of this century. Things have started to get divorced from the underlying realities" (63).

Roe, of course, is positioned as a counterpoint to Skilling, with her insistence on preserving Enron as a provider of energy, not a trader of it, by building brick and mortar power plants in India and South America. And, although Roe eventually dies on that hill, squeezed out of the company when its new vision no longer accommodates her on-the-ground approach, Prebble gives her the satisfaction of both escaping Enron's inevitable collapse – "I'm gonna go home, to my beautiful children. And I'm gonna sell every single one of my shares" (68) – and of having been right all along: "Is it true, after it fell – the only part of the business with any worth at all was my division? The things you could hold?" (108). Mapped onto Roe and Skilling, then, is the contrast between "Fordist industrial production and the post-industrial 'new economy' of finance and information," Skilling's eventual displacement of Roe thus "standing in for the transition between them and, as such, the hegemonization of neoliberal financialization" (Owen 116–17). Skilling relishes the abstraction of modern finance, and he leverages mark-to-market's opacity in order both to enrapture his employees and to feed his cult of personality.

Unlike Roe, however, who invokes parenthood on her way out and thus evinces her ability to find purpose beyond Enron, Skilling remains alienated from his daughter, which the play makes clear by physically distancing them whenever they share the stage: his daughter first "appears somewhere high up, not close to him," playfully quoting the Jerry Maguire line "Show me the money!" (34); she "blows bubbles somewhere on stage" (68) after Roe returns to her family; and, later, when Skilling's lawyer arrives while she silently "watch[es] an Enron commercial on television," she "leav[es] the room" before her father enters and calls out "Daddy!" from off stage (104). That she punctuates her father's utterances in one scene with the question "Why?" – that childish expression of curiosity which doubled as Enron's slogan – alerts us to the fact that Skilling can only communicate with her in the context of money and work.<sup>10</sup> Even when his paternal responsibilities provide an excuse for his sudden resignation – "A company like this, it consumes your life. I've neglected my daughter. This is personal" – he pivots back to business in the very next breath: "I'm doing this for the company" (93).

As Elaine Aston aptly summarizes, Skilling's daughter "is taught to count money, blows (capitalist) bubbles about to burst, and looks back at a large television screen of Big Daddy capitalism's rise and fall" ("Feeling" 590). Aston's metonymy here, Skilling as "Big Daddy capitalism," diagnoses not only the extent to which business mediates Skilling's relationship with his child – "I love you. Now let Daddy go to work" (69) – but also how central Enron is to Skilling's own sense of self, a fact he readily explains to her:

SKILLING	I have to check the stock price.
DAUGHTER	Why?
SKILLING	Because that's how Daddy knows how much he's worth.
DAUGHTER	Why?
SKILLING	Well, the market knows how many people believe in Daddy. That's important [] because I want people to like me. [] Because in business these things matter. [] Because that's how you make money. (68–69)

By conflating himself with Enron – indeed, he believes the stock price reflects public confidence in his worth as an individual – Skilling figures himself as synonymous with the company he

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The father–daughter relationship in *Serious Money*, though comparably structured by its relation to corporate finance, is markedly different. Greville regrets his daughter's line of work, claiming that LIFFE is "[h]ardly the spot for a daughter of mine" (213), but, in their final exchange, Scilla gets the last laugh not only by insulting him ("Daddy, you're trading like a cunt" [283]) but also by supplanting the stock-trading old guard he represents. Greville's displacement from the City is made official when he is "put in prison to show the government was serious about keeping the city clean" (306).

represents. In this way, the corporation is personified in Skilling, and Skilling is abstracted in the corporation, an equivalence Prebble dramatizes early on when the stock price is almost magically dictated by Skilling's moods: "I'm happy – (*He notices the stock price rise.*) I'm so excited – (*He sees it rise again.*) I'm a little sad? (*It drops very slightly.*) Ha! I'm Enron" (33).

This moment's stark to contrast to Lay's earlier insistence that "I *am* oil and pipelines" is clear. More important, however, is the unsettling extent to which the stock price is entangled with Skilling's identity: indeed, Prebble explicitly refers to it as "*his representation of his self-worth*" (92). Here, Skilling's hubris is laid bare, manifesting in a radically inflated self-belief and an overvaluation of his own worth that is, predictably, entwined with that of the corporation he helms. Samuel West, who played Skilling in London, interpreted his character via precisely this "overweening pride," writing in *The Times* that Skilling's "extraordinary self-belief allowed him to deceive himself about what his responsibilities were. If you're a true free-marketeer, and you believe there is no value to anything except what is accepted, you can go a long way before you can see that you are in the wrong. Skilling is in jail now, and he still doesn't believe he's done anything wrong." In an exchange with his lawyer near the end of the play – after he is "found guilty of nineteen separate counts of securities fraud, wire fraud and insider trading" (Prebble, *Enron* 102) – Skilling defiantly insists on the legal uprightness of his business practices:

SKILLING I told my daughter I was innocent. I believe I am innocent.

LAWYER Neither of those things make you innocent.

SKILLING Being innocent makes me innocent though, right? (105)

The blinding, mystifying power of this belief is central both to Skilling's characterization in the play and to the allegiance Prebble's characters pledge to Enron's share price – that imaginary figure, effectively divorced from the material realities it purports to measure, which informs

Skilling's obsessive, destructive behaviour and inspires cultish fealty in his employees.

Here, Prebble sketches another brief portrait of parenthood that is markedly unique from Skilling's and Roe's, for she situates it on the fault line of class. When Skilling, "*dishevelled and highly strung*" (81) as he faces down a bout of increasing paranoia, asks to have his office swept for bugs, the security officer takes a moment to express his gratitude for the stock option: "I got a daughter and I'd like her to go to college, do something real... Well, things become a lot easier with the stock options you've given us, that becomes a possibility" (82). The character presents us with a marked contrast from the people we've seen on stage to this point: his working-class background separates him from the high-flying traders and corporate executives whose wealth has been flaunted before our eyes. Where the latter figures chase massive profits for the sheer pleasure of acquisition, of seeing just how much wealth they can hoard, the security officer aspires only for enough money to send his daughter to college.

As Louise Owen notes, the purposeful casting of a black actor as the security officer – he was played by Howard Charles in London and Brandon J. Dirden in New York – allows the play to index "the racialized [...] dimension of crisis-induced victimhood" (118). Financial crisis is never meted out equitably: the marginalized experience economic inequality more acutely, a reality to which Skilling appears oblivious. In his interaction with the security officer, he twice betrays his disdain for those he considers beneath him: first, in his awkward attempt at small talk ("How's things in Maintenance?" to which the security officer politely responds, "I'm in Security, sir" [82]); then, in his furious outburst when the security officer appears insufficiently interested in Enron's securitization of weather ("Sit down! You want to be a doorman the rest of your life? Sit down and listen!" to which the officer once again patiently responds, "I'm a Security Officer, sir" [84]). In his exchange with Skilling – a powerful figure whose economic

privilege (to say nothing of his racial privilege) affords him the freedom to make bizarre demands and to rage unchecked – the security officer has no choice but to accept the social discipline of his station, to exercise restraint, and to answer in the measured way that he does, even when it becomes obvious that his boss sees him as an undifferentiated member of the help.

The scene's emotional impact resides not only in the fact that spectators are much likelier to identify with the security officer's comparably modest ambitions but also in its devastating dramatic irony: we know the injustice that befell employees like him, convinced that being paid in stock was financially prudent and then losing everything.<sup>11</sup> While Skilling's and Roe's children are financially insulated from Enron's bankruptcy, the security officer's daughter has no such luxury: her father's sudden unemployment and the loss of his investments jeopardize her education and her livelihood in a way that Roe's and Skilling's children will never experience. As Owen astutely notes, "the real losses of Enron's fall are suffered not by Skilling's daughter," who we see on stage at least three separate times, "but by the family of her silent and absent offstage double" (118). In this way, Prebble intends for us to condemn an unfettered finance sector whose tactics cavalierly disregard the real-life consequences for those who aren't pocketing million-dollar bonuses: as an American senator tells us at the end of the play, "[t]he financial practices pioneered at Enron are now widespread throughout the business world" (110).

Like *Enron*, *Serious Money* too attends to the real-world consequences wrought by unfettered capitalist acquisition: "When money [...] is the main commodity," Rich argued in his review of the play, "the game loses all connection to life. Real lives are soon cold-bloodedly crunched along with the fast-flying abstract numbers" (Review C3). But, where judges and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Bouquet gives us the specifics: "When ENRON filed for bankruptcy on 2 December its share price was just \$1. Its 21,000 staff in Houston were given \$4,500 severance pay and 30 minutes to clear their desks [...]. They lost \$1.2 billion in pensions and investments."

senators in the final moments of *Enron* might be seen to moralize, even if only facetiously – "The American Government will not stand for corporate crime on this scale. I mean, on any scale" (99) – *Serious Money* avoids explicit moralism altogether. Kritzer argues that "Churchill allows the dealers, traders, and manipulators of the City to speak for themselves, avoiding anything resembling a finger-wagging stance"; indeed, Churchill's characters "readily acknowledge the social cost of their activities, which aggravate such problems as unemployment and Third-World debt" (Review 395). Nigel, for instance, reflects on those developing countries forced to implement austerity policies in exchange for IMF loans: "These countries must accept restricted diets. / The governments must explain, if there are food riots, / That paying the western banks is the priority" (261). So-called fiscal discipline is thus foisted upon other countries in what amounts to economic imperialism, installing neoliberal policy across the world. Jacinta similarly contrasts Peru's lush, natural beauty with the squalor that has resulted from the West's economic interference in South America: "My country is beautiful, Jake, white mountains, jungle greenery. / My people will starve to death among the scenery" (261).

In spite of its sprawling portrait of transnational capitalism, however, *Serious Money* ends with a musical number that returns specifically to the play's local British context. "Five More Glorious Years" – the "pulsating pub rock hymn to [...] concupiscence and ratified pillage" (Coveney, *Serious Money* 370) – celebrates another election victory for Thatcher (though the premiere predated the 1987 election by three months): "We're crossing forbidden frontiers for five more glorious years / pissed and promiscuous, the money's ridiculous / send her victorious for five fucking morious / five more glorious years" (309). The song thus highlights neoliberalism's hallmark marriage of politics and big business. And Churchill explicitly dramatizes the Conservative–City alliance when Gleason, a Tory cabinet minister, meets with

Corman to dissuade him from taking over Albion, arguing that the optics might jeopardize the party's electoral chances: "We wouldn't interfere in a free market. / But we are of course approaching an election. [...] A takeover like this in the present climate / Makes you, and the City, and us look greedy" (297-98). When Corman protests, Gleason reassures him with what amounts to a bribe for his cooperation in helping the Conservatives secure their third election – "You can go on playing after we're elected. / Five more glorious years free enterprise, / And your services to industry will be recognised" – which Corman grudgingly accepts: "Cunt. Right. Good. / At least a knighthood" (299). But, as Zac presciently implies moments later, informing us that "the Conservatives romped home with a landslide victory for five more glorious years. / (Which was handy though not essential because it would take far more than Labour to stop us)" (306), corporate finance would go on to thrive in Britain with either party in office, something history confirmed when Blair's New Labour embraced big business and concretized the neoliberal reforms Thatcher had introduced the decade before. As Klaus Peter Müller argues, "[t]he situation presented in the play will not essentially change by replacing a Tory government with a Labour cabinet. The greed disease has too firm a hold" (357).

Prebble's play, meanwhile, even despite its gesture to the world of finance beyond Enron, is obsessively American in its focus. Indeed, it dramatizes the United States during a particularly fraught period at the turn of the millennium, encompassing the election of George W. Bush, the crisis of electricity deregulation in California, and 9/11, all of which are woven into the play's narrativization of Enron's collapse. Her dramatization of the 2000 election contains echoes of Thatcher's thunderous victory at the end of *Serious Money*: just as the thrill of Conservative victory spilled into a bacchanalian musical number, *Enron* dramatizes the emotional intensity of Enron's employees as states are called, variously, for Bush (*"The screen goes red.* [...] *They* 

*cheer*") and Gore ("*Screen turns blue*. [...] *They boo*") (70). When the make-or-break state of Florida appears, "[*t*]*hey inhale*": "TOO CLOSE TO CALL" (70). As Florida toggles between Democrat and Republican, Skilling appears physically afflicted by the suspense. Prebble's stage directions indicate that "[*h*]*e seems to be in pain – his stomach*" (72); when Lay enters to announce that Bush has won – "Gentlemen. Guess who's just off a call with the next President of the United States?" (74) – Skilling "*clutch*[*es*] *his stomach*" and "*falls to his knees with the relief*" (75). His desperate investment in the election makes sense, for Enron's business practices depend on administrations amenable to the company's exploitation of regulatory loopholes. A Gore presidency threatens to upend Reagan's neoliberal legacy, which was extended by Clinton in the nineties. Indeed, Enron seems to look favourably upon Clinton's Democrats, mentioned early in the play when an employee tells the audience, "He's a Democrat, but he understands the South" (9). Skilling makes a similar concession about Clinton's cooperation with big business, something he fears will be unlikelier with Gore: "Clinton's been real good to us. This guy... this guy scares me. [...] Without someone friendly to us right now, we're dead" (72).

But it is 9/11, just four weeks after Skilling's messy resignation from Enron and less than three months before the company declared bankruptcy, that serves as the play's narrative and emotional climax, footage of which is projected on screen at the back of the stage as Sheryl Sloman winds down her crucial monologue about "what it is keeps planes in the air" (95). Lay's tone-deaf speech a moment later – "Just like America's under attack by terrorism, I think we're under attack, at Enron" (95) – serves to braid together the parallel collapses of the World Trade Center and the Enron Corporation, not least because of their temporal proximity. Rather, it was the use of a controversial stage trick that illustrated the play's dovetailing of the two events: "*As the speech goes on, Lay becomes surrounded by tiny pieces of shredded paper being blown all*  over him, all over the stage," and, though Prebble explains that "[t]he shredding represents the huge destruction of documents going on at Enron and Arthur Andersen" (95), the scraps that shower Lay and accumulate on stage (and surely in the first few rows of the auditorium as well) inevitably read as the ash and debris that settled over Manhattan after 9/11.

New York critics proved especially sensitive to the imagery, identifying the shreds only in their secondary evocation of the collapsing towers: Ben Brantley alluded to the production's "rainstorms of sparks (and, later, ashes)" ("Titans" C7); Tulis McCall wrote that "ash falls out of the sky"; and Nicole Gelinas observed, with distaste, the "simulated debris" that "flutter[s] from the towers on stage." In an interview for the Daily Beast, Kevin Sessums addressed the scene head-on, asking Prebble about the fact that "9/11 is evoked with a stunning visual image and the raining down of paper debris as if from the Twin Towers." Prebble conceded she "fe[lt] the difference sitting here in the audience in America when the 9/11 imagery begins," but she also intimated confusion at the tetchiness surrounding representations of the event: "When it happened you couldn't get away from the image of it. [...] But now the image has become repressed because of its, I don't know - sacredness. That juxtaposition of it having been burned into our retinae and now our not being able to look at it is one which, though I admire and respect the emotions involved, [...] I find it interesting" (qtd. in Sessums). We might detect a similar distance in the play's premiere poster (see Figure 3): where Owen noted mythological allusion – she described "an anonymous male executive falling, Icarus-like, down the side of a high-rise office block" (115) – the poster instead more closely resembles *The Falling Man*, Richard Drew's widely printed photograph of an unidentified man plummeting from the World Trade Center's North Tower on the morning of 9/11.

Prebble's treatment of a tragedy so central to the American consciousness partially

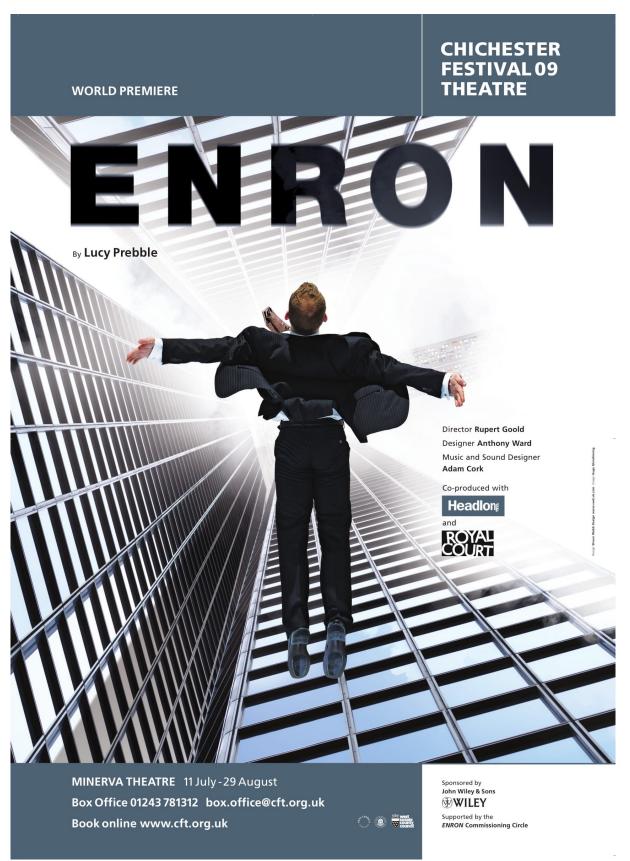


FIGURE 3: Poster for the premiere production of *Enron* at the Chichester Festival Theatre.

explains *Enron*'s radically different reception on Broadway. Gelinas excoriated the production, accusing Goold of being "obtuse at best – and cruel at worst – in forcing his audience to endure a cheap recreation of September 11, 2011." Indeed, she placed the blame for *Enron*'s Broadway failure squarely at the feet of its treatment of 9/11: "Enron failed in New York because Prebble and Goold ruined it with a six-minute scene that stopped time and betrayed the audience." As her article's subtitle asserts, "New Yorkers don't go to the theater for 3D restagings of 9/11." McCall echoed her criticism, claiming that, at the play's climax – that "shattering moment when the towers go down" – "[y]ou can hear the audience hit the glass wall. There we are running hard to keep up only to be lured into a booby trap." And Matthew Byam Shaw, who co-produced the show on Broadway, admitted that New York audiences had found the play "in some way un-American" (qtd. in B. Hoyle). For her part, Prebble believes the Broadway production demonstrates the extent to which "a play is not really complete until the audience are there. [...] The play, with that audience, was not a very good play" (qtd. in Stephens, "Lucy Prebble").<sup>12</sup>

Serious Money's Broadway run seemed to lose something in translation too. Its Royal Court premiere played to capacity, "taking in over £145,000 at the box office" (Gobert 61), and the West End transfer to Wyndham's proved even more lucrative: "investors started receiving dividends after only six weeks, by which time the Wyndham's capitalisation had been recouped. It continued to play for a year and remains the most-seen single production of Churchill's career" (63). Even its four-week Off-Broadway run at the Public Theater "played at 99.68 per cent of capacity, making the Public over \$230,000 in a month" (65), thus seeming to promise similar

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Nina Caplan's response to the scene in London illustrates the vastly different response produced by geographical distance: "Lay [...] sees the fall of the twin towers purely in terms of its disastrous impact on his company, and watching him pontificate from behind a projection of tragedy in action makes you feel sick, in the best possible sense" (67). Coveney similarly expressed a dispassionate critical distance from the scene, which he wrote was "built into the play as a powerful metaphor for the price to be paid for blind greed and the logical extension of corporate corruption" (*Enron* 849).

success with American audiences. Rich praised the Off-Broadway production in his *New York Times* review, writing that "Churchill valiantly makes the case, as so very few playwrights do these days, that the stage can still play its own unique role, distinct from that of journalism or television or movies, in dramatizing the big, immediate stories of our day" (Review C3).

By the time the show opened on Broadway, however, Rich was on a play-watching trip in Europe, and Mel Gussow, reviewing the play in his stead, proved decidedly less enthusiastic: "with its overlapping dialogue, stock market slang and sing-song verse, the comedy tends to confuse and can even alienate a theater-goer" (C17). Joseph Papp, who produced *Serious Money* in New York, publicly berated Rich, "the most influential theater critic in America," for "leav[ing] his post at a most critical time" and blamed him for the show's early closure: "It was our reasonable expectation that, whatever differences the Times critic would possibly have in the transition of the show from the Public Theater to Broadway, based on his apparent love for the play he would continue to support it. Mr. Rich was the absolute key if there was to be any chance at all" (H21). Rich, meanwhile, argued that the "real reason Serious Money closed on Broadway was that it was a lifeless show" that "mut[ed] the cacophonous Brechtian frenzy to a muffled gurgle worthy of Muzak" ("Fixing" C28). He too noted that "the new cast still seemed underrehearsed" (C28) – a valid point, considering that the British ensemble, who "had had months of practice in working up the play's frenetic speed, quick changes and complex logistics" were replaced by an American cast who "had only four weeks' rehearsal before beginning previews of a work they found hard even to follow" (Bennetts, "Frenetic" C21).<sup>13</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The only member of the original cast to remain for the Broadway run was Allan Corduner, whom Papp urged Actors' Equity to let stay "on the grounds that the five roles he plays would be difficult for a new actor to learn, given the brief rehearsal period" ("*Serious Money*" C32). In an article on the transition between the play's British and American casts, Leslie Bennetts noted the collaborative process of *Serious Money*'s premiere; by contrast, "[t]he American actors – all previously unknown to Mr. Stafford-Clark – were unaccustomed to the director's ensemble style and its requirements" ("Director" H5).

As Daniel Jernigan perceptively argues, the finger-pointing and buck-passing that attended *Serious Money*'s closure in New York uncomfortably reveals the "collusion between business and theater" that allows plays such as Churchill's to be performed in the first place: "that the play itself is as much commodity as art is emphasized by the fact that it is a British import, and then re-emphasized by Papp's and Rich's bickering in the press" ("*Serious Money*" 308). In the immediate aftermath of Rich and Papp's public feud, Liza Henderson similarly criticized both parties, arguing that Papp's "unquestioning prostration to a system of patronage" – that is, to Rich and the influence of the *New York Times* – "trivializes and disempowers Churchill's play," which becomes exposed as nothing more than a commodity on which to make or lose money: "Both Rich and Papp are squabbling over a business deal that has fallen through, and trying to cover their own assets" (88).

*Enron*'s early closure produced a strange echo of this fallout, in the form of another accusation that the show was sunk by the *New York Times*. This time, the accuser was Michael Billington, the veteran *Guardian* critic, who lambasted Ben Brantley for writing an "obtuse and hostile" review, despite the latter's influential role as a tastemaker among Broadway audiences: *"Enron*'s fate was sealed the moment Brantley's review appeared" ("Second" 6). Cote, too, a day on from Brantley's review, warned that "the disproportionate influence the *Times* wields in this town [...] could mean Goold's production will [...] close in a few weeks if the box office doesn't pick up" ("Why"). Certainly Brantley's characterization of the play as a "flashy but labored economics lesson" did little to boost its prospects, for he argued that "this British-born exploration of smoke-and-mirror financial practices isn't much more than smoke and mirrors itself" ("Titans" C1). His emphasis on the play's British origin illustrates the extent to which "British and American tastes don't always coincide [...], especially when the subject is American" (C7). As Byam Shaw lamented two days after the show's closure, "There was a feeling almost of New York critics waiting in their machinegun nests for us" (qtd. in B. Hoyle).

There are other sensitivities at play in this foregrounding of cultural difference. The first is aesthetic: Billington hypothesized that New York's tepid response to Enron had something to do with "the entrenched American view that visual pyrotechnics and razzle-dazzle are the province of the musical" ("Second" 6), a genre on which the American Broadway tradition lays considerable claim. And Jason Zinoman rationalized the production's scarcity of Tony nominations (announced just a week into the run) with recourse to precisely this argument: "Prebble and her director, Rupert Goold, tried to put on a big show, with music and spectacle and giant video screens. In the context of Broadway, this might have actually been a bigger risk than a sober drama, because when it comes to showmanship, Americans think they know a thing or two. You Brits talk nice, but leave the jazz hands to us." Zinoman noted that Enron's disappointing Broadway run "reveals much about the relationship between the English and American theater scenes,"<sup>14</sup> and Prebble too remarked, in a particularly disturbing anecdote, on the starkly different theatre culture she encountered in New York: "A woman died in the aisle in the first preview. [...] This lady collapsed and vomited in the aisle. She was very old. And obviously all of the ushers came, and it was difficult and horrible. And I remember a woman stepping over her and going, 'How long will this be delayed?' You know, and it was very... It was an atmosphere that I..." (qtd. in Stephens, "Lucy Prebble"). While Prebble trailed off and refrained from denouncing Broadway's theatre culture wholesale, Billington more scathingly pinned the difference between the British and American theatre scenes on a matter of artistic

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> An online comment on an article about *Enron*'s closure maligned the play exclusively in terms of its putative Britishness: "Those English audiences sure are suckers for them lit batons in lieu of something which might require any sort of emotional investment. [...] [I]t is gratifying that American audiences, for once, didn't fall for this pretentious bundle from Britain" (MacAdam).

integrity: "If *Enron*'s melancholy saga proved anything, it is Broadway's irrelevance to serious theatre. [...] [A]t heart Broadway is a big, gaudy commercial shop-window" ("Second" 7).

The other major point of contention related to the play's condemnation of American capitalism at a time when US citizens in particular were still smarting from a financial crisis caused by the very speculative gambles that Prebble dramatizes. While Billington argued that the subject matter's topicality ought to have made the show especially relevant to American audiences – "What with the collapse of Lehman Brothers and the Bernie Madoff scandal, you would have thought New Yorkers might have been willing to give house room to a play that points out our complicity in financial bubbles, and which argues that lessons have still to be learned" ("Second" 6–7) – others recognized that the play perhaps hit too close to home: "Undoubtedly, most of the high \$ ticket buyers in NYC already paid a price to see 'Enron, the Company' the first time nine years ago, and weren't quite ready to ante up again" (smf721). As Cote perceptively noted, "Irony always attended the prospect of *Enron* coming to Broadway. Here was one of the Great White Way's most expensive non-musical plays (a budget of \$4m), and it aimed to indict capitalist excess. Americans still bruised from the recession were being asked to pay as much as \$120 for a play about fiscal chicanery" ("Smart").

A comparable irony surrounded *Serious Money* as well, even before it travelled to New York. As Gobert explains, the Royal Court premiere "advertised the very conspicuous consumption that the script condemns, relying for its props on fifty companies, including Moët et Chandon, Christian Dior, Asprey, Gucci, and Jindo Fur Salon" (70), thus furnishing a rich display of consumerist excess that perhaps too closely emulated the subject under scrutiny. Moreover, a number of performances were bought out by individual companies, something the Royal Court attempted to leverage when management asked Churchill to deliver "speeches from the stage at the buy-out evenings encouraging future sponsorship" (Roberts, *Royal Court* 201).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, "[t]o add insult to her injury," Collins wrote in his review of *Serious Money* in the West End, "the same traders who are mercilessly pilloried have rushed to back the new production at Wyndham's by investing in the new production" (823). By the time it reached Broadway, the production seemed fully to embrace the very community the play satirizes. James Sterngold reported that the opening night party "was held on the trading floor at the Commodity Exchange" and "had as entertainment a mock trading session in the 'pits'" that "included real Comex traders and some members of the cast" (B3). Neither the playwright nor the director appeared particularly enthusiastic about the festivities: Churchill described the event as "puzzling," while Stafford-Clark "called the scene, with several hundred commodity traders eagerly mixing with the *Serious Money* cast and a number of other celebrities, 'eerie'" (Sterngold B3).

But Churchill predicts precisely this bizarre symbiosis of business and theatre in the play, teasing out the extent to which "collusion with the arts is used to add class to individual corporations" (Jernigan, "Theatrical" 126–27). When Biddulph, the investor Duckett summons as a "white knight" to stave off Corman's takeover, suggests the company commission a mural, Duckett's baffled "What's this about art?" elicits a pragmatic response: "You don't give a fart, / I know it, they know it, you just mustn't show it" (274). Meanwhile, Corman receives comparable advice from his PR advisor, Dolcie Starr, who explains that he can improve his public image via arts sponsorship: "You need the National / Theatre for power, opera for decadence, / String quartets bearing your name for sensitivity and elegance, / And a fringe show with bad language for a thrill" (286). The allusion to the National Theatre is particularly pointed, especially when Corman meets Gleason during the interval of a performance of *King Lear*: "I'm not watching it,"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> The Royal Court's subsequent establishment of an "entrepreneurial team to profit from future opportunities" (Dorney and Gray 136) compelled Churchill to resign from the theatre's council.

Corman admits, to which Gleason responds, "I keep jerking awake when they shout" (297). And the minister's offhand reference to "Goneril and Reagan and Ophelia" (297) not only swaps out one Shakespearean heroine for another but also misnames Regan, invoking in her stead a figure for whom Gleason presumably has more esteem. The exchange reveals the pair as "theatrical Philistines whose connection with the theatre is purely instrumental" (Howard 47).<sup>16</sup> Churchill saves her most acid punchline for last. At the end of the play, Corman is made "chairman of the board of the National Theatre" (307) – "a particularly rude joke," according to Rich's review of the show at the Public, "given the real Mr. Boesky's onetime service on the board of the theater in which the New York audience of *Serious Money* sits" (Review C3). Churchill thus explicitly addresses capitalism's thoroughgoing suffusion of the arts in general and of the theatre in particular, perhaps anticipating the way in which each subsequent production would more actively engage the world of finance criticized in the play.

Capitalist excess ironically surrounded *Enron*'s Broadway production as well, and the similarities to *Serious Money*'s run at Wyndham's two decades earlier are uncanny. Financial journalist Cyrus Sanati, for instance, reported on the high-profile audience at *Enron*'s premiere at the Broadhurst, including not only Hollywood celebrities but also several big names from Wall Street, "including James S. Chanos, the hedge fund boss of Kynikos Advisors, who made a killing shorting the stock of Enron as it collapsed from about \$90 a share to zero in just a few months." But, if the City traders who attended *Serious Money* in droves largely enjoyed seeing their world dramatized on stage, their Wall Street counterparts proved harder to please at the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Consider how the *Royal National Theatre Share Offer* pitched itself to potential sponsors with precisely this same rhetoric: "The returns are significant in terms of increased corporate awareness, enhanced public image, high profile media coverage and prestigious entertainment facilities. [...] Whatever the gap in your Public Relations portfolio, the RNT has the perfect option to fill it" (qtd. in Rosenthal 442).

premiere of *Enron*. Sanati reported that their "most common complaint [...] was the incessant use of metaphors and monologues to explain financial topics," which led some spectators to feel "like they were being 'talked down to" – a departure from Mountford's assurance that the play "take[s] us through complex concepts with ease, without bemusing or, worse, patronising us" (*Enron* 850). Moreover, Sanati (underlining both his background in finance and his own biases vis-à-vis savvy business practice) lamented that the play's exploration of the financial sector was "cast in an anti–Wall Street light": "the play's attempt to explain something as complicated as mark-to-market accounting to an audience of laymen in 30 seconds forced the playwright to give a one-dimensional view of this multifaceted accounting technique. It was sold as some sort of accounting trick and not an accounting method that was manipulated by Enron's accountants."

While the press paid due attention to the many possible explanations for *Enron*'s early closure – from questions of genre and form to considerations of cultural sensitivity – one recurring motif abounded in the discourse surrounding the play's Broadway run: its cost. Most figures priced the production at four million dollars (*The Times*'s Ben Hoyle reported three; *Variety*'s Marilyn Stasio, five), a staggering amount for, if not a straight play, certainly not a mega-musical more likely to command such a large production cost. To compare – "And here's a shocking lesson in theatre economics," wrote Martin Knelman – "[t]he cost of producing *Enron* in the West End was about \$600,000" (E5). And where that run "recouped the investment in record time: four weeks," according to co-producer Nick Salmon, "[o]n Broadway, it's a disaster [...]. We're losing so much money we can't afford to keep it going" (qtd. in Knelman E5).

But the discourse of finance that swirled around *Enron* began long before the show crossed the Atlantic. Consider Gardner's review, which articulated its praise of the show's director in the terms of financial speculation: "In recent years, the stock of director Rupert Goold [...] has risen so high that he is regularly mentioned as a future artistic director of the National Theatre. The bubble shows no sign of bursting [...]. Audiences that put their money in this ticket are guaranteed a return" (66). Indeed, as much as the play earned plaudits for its timeliness and theatrical daring, press coverage also emphasized the commercial success of its three British productions. In the lead-up to its West End run, Maxwell reported that "rave reviews at its debut in Chichester helped to sell all 22,000 seats of its autumn stint at the Royal Court before the run even began. [...] In London, it's already taken more than £1 million in advance bookings" ("Smartest" 13). Alistair Gee hinted at what this meant for Prebble's own income when he reported on "her original payment for  $Enron - \pounds 6,000$  (about \$9,400 at current exchange rates)," plus, more lucratively, "a small percentage of ticket receipts" (AR5). And Caroline McGinn noted the money-making potential available even to the show's spectators, again blurring the line between the capitalist excess the play condemns and the market economy in which it inevitably participates: "Canny folks who've snagged tickets to the Royal Court's sold-out run [...] could tout them for upwards of  $\pm 100$ . Isn't that what Enron's mouthy bunch of macho whiz-kid traders would do? [...] [T]hey'd have bought up all the tickets at subsidised rates then flogged them back to desperate theatre-goers for quadruple the price" (Enron 985–86).

The ubiquity of the language of finance reveals *Enron* as a participant in the very market economy it critiques: "in its mainstream financial model that entailed West End and Broadway transfers," the play "clearly reflects the economics of a commoditized mass entertainment market" (O'Thomas 135). This context makes explicit the show's status as a commodity of the creative culture industries, a product whose value fluctuates – spiking in London, crashing in New York – according to the public confidence it inspires. Like the employees of Enron the corporation, the producers of *Enron* the play lost their shirts when the public ceased to see the

play as a worthwhile investment. *Serious Money*, too, which began in a "state-subsidised, noncommercial theatre," eventually found itself in "the most expensive for-profit theatre market in the world," a trajectory that perhaps "demonstrate[s] Churchill's principal point about capital" – that is, its insidious capacity to "penetrate even the unlikeliest corners" (Gobert 71).

Maybe the most explicit condemnation of corporate finance in *Enron* and *Serious Money* occurs not in the plays themselves but, rather, in their parallel production histories, whose similarities adumbrate the material conditions of a theatre industry embedded in the market economy, illustrating the fickle, turbulent, divisive character of capital and the extent to which it reconfigures our social lives. As Gobert writes of Serious Money, in an assessment that could just as easily be applied to Enron, the play "followed the capitalist economy's characteristic pattern: a bullish success giving way to a spectacular and expensive crash." But, if we glean anything from the play's skewering of Thatcher's monetarist legacy, we might think twice about "seeing Serious Money's quick closing as a 'failure,' since surely Churchill asks us to consider success in terms other than those of financial enterprise" (72). The plays' engagement with the world of finance, both in their subject matter and in the material realities of their respective productions, evinces just how deeply the strategies and values of capitalism have entrenched themselves in the world of the theatre, reflecting precisely the Thatcher administration's financialization of the arts and its restructuring of arts funding – which, by compelling theatre companies to secure private financing via corporate partnerships, effectively mandated business sponsorship of the theatre. If Enron and Serious Money dramatize capitalist logic's infiltration of every aspect of social and cultural life at the turn of the century, they too, perhaps inadvertently, confirm that the arts are no exception, indexing the extent to which neoliberal economics and the pursuit of profit have irretrievably structured the theatre as well.

## CHAPTER TWO

## "I DON'T KNOW WHEN THIS IS": THEATRICALIZING TIME–SPACE COMPRESSION

An underworld of sinister sprites and fairies "springs into existence" in the most visually arresting scene of Caryl Churchill's The Skriker (268). Premiered at the National Theatre in 1994, the play sees its eponymous figure, an ancient shape-shifting fairy, at turns beguile and torment two young women, Josie and Lily, the latter pregnant, the former in psychiatric care after killing her ten-day-old daughter. As the Skriker escorts Josie into her lair – which has steadily encroached on the "real" world of the play – the underworld clamorously takes centre stage: "Light, music, long table with feast, lavishly dressed people and creatures [...]. It looks wonderful except that it is all glamour and here and there it's not working – some of the food is twigs, leaves, beetles, some of the clothes are rags, some of the beautiful people have a claw hand or hideous face" (268–69). Thus, though "the first impression is of a palace" (269), it becomes clear that such first-blush assessments are not to be trusted. The feast, extravagant and alluring but ultimately repulsive ("in the middle of plates piled high with cake, there is a stuffed dog," observed Louise Doughty in her review of the play [98]), reveals the Skriker's menacing capacity for seduction. Despite the urgent warning of one of the underworld's prisoners – "Don't eat. It's glamour. [...] Don't eat, don't drink, or you'll never get back" (270) – Josie digs in, and she is subsequently condemned to a lifetime of servitude in the underworld.

In her essay "Feeling Global," Elin Diamond contends that *The Skriker* articulates, in the language of theatre and stagecraft, the dizzying energy and force of globalization: "Bursting through barriers, ever mutating, manipulating the desire of Josie and Lily and turning them into consumers of fairy glamour, the Skriker incarnates, in the words of Deleuze and Guattari, 'the

awesome schizophrenic accumulation of energy [in] capitalism'" (483). The ostentatious feast that welcomes Josie into the underworld, then, is unmasked, in Darren Gobert's formulation, "as just another commodity in a globalized economy: perhaps shiny, actually hideous, probably toxic" (29). And the allure of commodity culture tightens its grip early on. After Lily offers the Skriker a kiss, an unwitting Mephistophelian contract, "[p]ound coins come out of her mouth when she speaks" (252), though the Skriker warns (in her erratic, corrupted idiom of alliterative free association), "fuckit buckets and buckets of bloodmoney is the root of evil [...] the cash dash flash in the panic of time" (253). As Josie and Lily acclimate to the Skriker's ubiquitous presence in their lives – "like capitalism, she is everywhere and *in* everyone" (Diamond 483; emphasis in original) – they become accustomed to their roles as consumers: "That's the way," the Skriker encourages them, "You'll begin to get a taste for it" (258). If Josie's enslavement and Lily's mouthful of coins are any indication, however, Churchill ultimately suggests that "[g]lobal capitalism rests on the fairy tale of plenty for all, even as it co-opts us into doing its evil bidding" (Gobert 30). The spatiotemporal illogic that pervades *The Skriker* theatricalizes precisely the compression of time and space that geographer David Harvey identifies as central to neoliberalism in his landmark book, The Condition of Postmodernity. This confluence of ideas that is, the translation of theory into theatre – provides the impetus for this chapter, which examines theatricalizations of spatiotemporal compression in order to consider how global capitalism has ramified for contemporary cultural life, and the chapter's frenetic structure weaves together a suite of plays whose spatial heterogeneity and achronology mirrors the neoliberal phenomena Harvey theorizes.

From *The Skriker* – whose spatiotemporal collapse reflects its critique of late capitalism – I leap forward eleven years to Philip Ridley's *Mercury Fur* (2005), which dramatizes a near-

future dystopia in London's East End, though its international productions replace geographical specificities with local references. While the play's fragmentation of memory destabilizes time and place, Ridley's dramatization of wartime squalor indexes the economic inequality produced by neoliberalism, and it thus dovetails neatly with the Marxist, class-conscious dimension of Harvey's work. My discussion then jumps ahead eleven years still to Alistair McDowall's *X* (2016), whose spatially and temporally remote setting – a research base on Pluto in the distant future – engages global capitalism here and now. When the play's characters are unexpectedly bereft of time's regulatory power, their dislocation unravels them, offering an extreme portrayal of the extent to which neoliberal compressions of space and time revise and mediate our lives.

The chapter ends by looping back twenty years to London's 1996 theatre season, which saw the premieres of Winsome Pinnock's *Mules* and Pam Gems's *Stanley*, two plays whose content and production histories seem, on the surface, irreconcilably disparate. *Mules*'s dramatization of drug-trafficking aligns the geographic circulation of her characters' bodies with the circulation of global capital, a parallel augmented by the production's own circulation, which went on to tour women's prisons throughout the United Kingdom. *Stanley*, on the other hand, which profiles English painter Stanley Spencer – known for depicting biblical scenes in contemporary settings, itself a noteworthy unfixing of time and space – was a West End hit before transferring to Broadway, and the play thus circulated as a profitable commodity in the global arts market. This emphasis on circulation alerts us to the boundless commodification of not only plays themselves but also the bodies whose labour makes them possible.

I offer here a crucial conceit: if the plays threaded together in this chapter appear arbitrary or diffuse, they are. They wend forward and back through time, in terms of both their premiere dates and their temporal settings: the present day in *The Skriker* and *Mules*, the early twentieth century in *Stanley*, the near future in a time of catastrophe in *Mercury Fur*, and a more distant future when Earth has become nearly uninhabitable in *X*. Geographically, too, they cast a wide net, particularly with respect to the spaces they dramatize: from Britain, Jamaica, and New York to the folkloric underworld that co-exists with our own, and from one end of our solar system (if we read the Mercury of Ridley's title as a planetary reference) to the other. Darting back and forth through time and across space, this chapter cedes to the spatiotemporal illogic that Harvey identifies as vertebral to neoliberalism, drawing together disparate threads of time–space compression on stage in order to index the lived realities of global capitalism.

§

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, Harvey synthesizes a wide-ranging series of changes in economic policy and labour control that have inaugurated a gradual and diffuse shift towards what he calls "flexible accumulation," characterized by "flexibility with respect to labour processes, labour markets, products, and patterns of consumption" (147). This flexibility has fundamentally restructured capitalism by unyoking it from the centralization of the Fordist model which dominated the first half of the twentieth century. As a result of a number of substantial changes – deregulation, the rolling back of union power, the replacement of the gold standard with the floating exchange rate – volatility has become the chief characteristic of the neoliberal economy, helplessly in thrall to what the Skriker calls "market farces, see if I carefree" (275), a clear indictment of laissez-faire economics. And symptomatic of this transition to flexible accumulation, according to Harvey, is the compression of time and space: "the time horizons of both private and public decision-making have shrunk, while satellite communication and declining transport costs have made it increasingly possible to spread those decisions immediately over an ever wider and variegated space" (*Condition* 147). The increasingly rapid rate of technological innovation thus condenses geographical distance, renders the world infinitely more traversable, and accelerates the circulation of capital, contorting everything within reach with its spatiotemporal illogic.

That the publication of *The Condition of Postmodernity* coincided with the ten-year anniversary of Thatcher's premiership well positioned Harvey to reflect on the myriad changes to political and cultural life that the neoliberal agenda had instantiated in the preceding decade. Too, Harvey correctly predicted neoliberalism's tenacity, for, five years later, Tony Blair would take the helm of the moribund Labour Party and perform an unlikely resurrection, rechristening the party and laying to rest its traditional commitment to the social welfare state. If Blair's premiership represents neoliberalism's entrenchment as political hegemony, it too emblematizes a mounting disillusionment with politics at the turn of the millennium, the bleak realization that beneath the guise of political choice were merely variations on a theme. And Blair's enthusiastic cooperation in the invasion of Iraq – the stain of which has only darkened over time, especially after the publication of the Chilcot report in 2016 – contributed to the cynical conclusion that political machinations operated unperturbed in spite of public sentiment.

As Harvey refined and updated his analysis in the years after *The Condition of Postmodernity*, he diagnosed a widespread ignorance of neoliberalism's insidious yet fundamental class dimension, which has only abetted its ascent to hegemonic dominance. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, published in 2005, he argues,

> The possibility [...] that the ruling ideas might be those of some ruling class is not even considered, even though there is overwhelming evidence for massive interventions on the part of business elites and financial interests in the production

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of ideas and ideologies: through investment in think-tanks, in the training of technocrats, and in the command of the media. (115)

The spotlight Harvey focuses on class here is, of course, germane to his argument about neoliberalism on the whole, which he asserts has "all along primarily functioned as a mask for practices that are all about the maintenance, reconstitution, and restoration of elite class power" (*Brief History* 188), and it is this orchestrated redistribution of power and wealth – a siphoning up rather than a trickling down – that produces the disorientation and spatiotemporal illogic that afflicts cultural life in the neoliberal state.

The Skriker puts on stage this disorienting compression of space and time, not only superimposing the physical space of the fairy underworld onto contemporary London – its creatures roam the stage, visible to us but unseen by Josie and Lily - but also suturing the present day to the ancestral reservoir of English folklore, "all the stuff you would call history," the Skriker explains, "long before England was an idea, a country of snow and wolves where trees sang and birds talked" (257). Thus, Diamond asserts, Churchill "reach[es] back to a region's earliest oral traditions" and renders them "able, like global capital, to take on new shapes and traverse national borders" (481). The play, too, dramatizes "our historical existence under conditions of globalization [...] marked by temporal discontinuities" (481). When Josie emerges from the underworld after what she believes to be a decades-long period of confinement – "How long's it been? [...] I had a whole life. How long? [...] Years and years, longer than I lived here, I wasn't much more than a child here hardly" (274) – the scene snaps back to the moment just before her descent; no "real" time has passed at all. Meanwhile, Lily, believing she has mastered the underworld's temporal (il)logic – "if it's what Josie did I'll be back in no time. It could feel like hundreds of years and [...] I'll be back the same second" (289) – meets a different fate. She

experiences merely a "solid flash" of the underworld and returns decades later: "everybody was dead years and tears ago, it was another cemetery, a black whole hundred yearns" (290). *The Skriker*, then, like global capitalism, sprawls and shrivels, swallowing "all in its fairy maw without regard for either chronology or causality" (Gobert 23).

This theatricalization of neoliberal phenomena manifests throughout Philip Ridley's Mercury Fur, which not only stages compressions of time and space but also indexes global capitalism's ramifications for class. The play, as with much of Ridley's work, proved controversial, dividing critical opinion and regularly provoking walkouts: Paines Plough, the company that produced the play, claims that "at least ten audience members a night left every show, unable to take the atmosphere of threat and violence portrayed on stage" ("Past Productions"). Mercury Fur is set in a futuristic English dystopia whose aimless youth lose their grasp on history and memory as they become addicted to hallucinogenic butterflies released upon the populace by an ambiguous invading power. While the protagonist, Elliot, ekes out a living peddling butterflies in an ice cream van, he and his brother, Darren, make their real money by throwing "parties," clandestine meetings for rich clients who pay exorbitantly to fulfil their most violent and murderous sexual fantasies. The play, performed in real time, sees the frantic preparation for – and eventual botched execution of – one such party for a City of London executive (the Party Guest), whose Vietnam War-themed fantasy involves torturing and killing a child Elvis Presley impersonator (the Party Piece) with a meat hook. Unsurprisingly, given the subject matter, moral outrage attended Mercury Fur's initial run, with Faber, Ridley's long-time publisher, going so far as to refuse to print the play.

Commissioned for Paines Plough's thirtieth anniversary, *Mercury Fur* joined plays by Enda Walsh, David Greig, and Douglas Maxwell to "think about English as a language and how it shapes our identity" (Publicity flyer). The season's title, "This Other England," tells,<sup>1</sup> combining the proximity of the demonstrative *this* with a modifier that points elsewhere; that these adjectives are capped by an evocation of national identity produces a curious kind of friction that destabilizes our sense of space. This other country, the title suggests, exists both within and without, its various representations limning the margins of English identity – and the language so fundamental to its constitution – both here and there, now and then.

Ridley's play undoubtedly offers an alternative vision of a "nightmarish contemporary England, a bitter place where memory and all sense of history have been so eroded that the young think the second world war [*sic*] was caused by Kennedy fighting Hitler over Marilyn Monroe" (Gardner, "Devil" 11). And language has been irretrievably eroded, too, "a mix of fourletter words and racist abuse," what Michael Billington called "the vocabulary of hate" in his review of the play (279), likely referring to Elliot's favourite insult, a potpourri of racial slurs strung artlessly together: "you nigger, Paki, wop, spic, chinkie, Muslim, Christian cunt!" (13). Notably, some of this racist language, published in the version of *Mercury Fur* collected in *Plays: 2*, is replaced with rather different imagery in the 2012 Bloomsbury edition (cited here throughout): "a polished bullet up a nigger's arschole" (84) becomes "a polished bullet up a napalmed arschole" (14), and "a million miles of Paki afterbirth" (86) becomes "a million miles of machine-gunned afterbirth" (16). The racist violence that saturates the play's language thus gives way to images of military brutality, apparently commonplace enough to be woven into casual insults, lending to a disturbing portrait of this other England perhaps not so far away.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Five years earlier, the Royal Shakespeare Company staged a season of Shakespeare's history plays with the title "This England," after John of Gaunt's exaltation of the country in *Richard II*: "This other Eden, demi-paradise, / This fortress built by Nature for herself / Against infection and the hand of war, [...] This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England" (2.1.42–44, 50). If the England of Shakespeare's histories celebrated the country's insularity, both culturally and geographically, the modified allusion in Paines Plough's title signals the reality of England's place in a reconfigured global landscape.

Like all of Ridley's plays before it, Mercury Fur contains several geographical specificities – the opening stage direction describes "a derelict estate in the East End of London" (4) – though the myriad references to places like Bethnal Green Road and Victoria Park that pepper The Fastest Clock in the Universe and Ghost from a Perfect Place are less pervasive. Despite its East End setting, however, the play also manages to seem geographically unfixed. Like Sarah Kane ten years earlier, whose *Blasted* smashed together the "here" and "there" of 1995 – that is, a posh hotel room in Leeds and the war-torn streets of Srebrenica – Ridley limns the reach of military atrocities in 2005, collapsing the distance between Blairite London, the Middle East, and central Africa (though "there" in these plays is merely suggested, never identified). This spatial coalescence is conspicuously literal, as characters allude to a sandstorm that ushered in the play's dystopic state of affairs. Lola recalls, "In the morning I looked out of my window and saw... sand. A layer of sand over everything. [...] [T]he storm – somehow – had sucked up sand from some desert thousands of miles away. And this cloud had travelled all the way here and... rained sand" (61–62). The desert has quite literally come to London, and, with it, the wartime atrocities so comfortably demarcated as "there" and, therefore, far away.

This meteorological phenomenon is not entirely fictional. The Met Office, Britain's national weather service, dubs it "Saharan Dust," explaining that "wind can blow strongly over deserts – whipping up dust and sand high into the sky. [...] Once it is lifted from the ground by strong winds, clouds of dust can reach very high altitudes and be transported worldwide, covering thousands of miles" ("What Is Saharan Dust?"). As in the play, seemingly discrete places cease to appear so far apart, as national (even continental) barriers diminish in their ability to demarcate space. The sandstorm recalls an instance in Ridley's childhood, which the playwright relates in the introductions to the Methuen Drama anthologies of his work. A series of

biographical fragments, they are rife with images and motifs that crop up in his plays. Of course, Ridley wrote the volumes' introductions long after the premieres of the plays published therein, but he insists on the legitimacy of their autobiographical content and the relationship between these events from his personal life and their later iterations in his work for the stage:

What I decided was... because a lot of people have always thought of my work as far fetched [*sic*] and fantastical etc., I wanted to show them that, on the contrary, it was based on something real. Something from my life experience. That my work is all very personal. That I take events and, yes, sometimes I turn the colour up and make them more intense... but no matter how sci-fi or fantasy they end up becoming... they are emotionally true. Now... that's not saying I didn't exaggerate and turn all the colours up in the autobiographical episodes. Of course I did. But in spirit they are sort of what happened. Sort of. I suppose the best way to describe them is as "autobiographical hallucinations." ("Re: Research")

In the first fragment of the introduction to *Plays: 2*, Ridley, like Lola, describes waking up one morning to find the East End covered in a layer of sand: "Everything in the street; the pavement, cars, dustbins – it all appears a little faded, like a sepia photograph" (ix). Consider this evocative image's interplay of space and time: the transported sand collapses geographical distance, just as the old photo crystallizes the past and carries it into the present moment. This spatiotemporal compression configures both the style and the substance of *Mercury Fur*, whose political and theatrical stakes are bound up in its simultaneously vast and claustrophobic messiness.

This relationship between space and time – their mutual condensation and inextricability from one another – manifests beyond the dramatic text in John Tiffany's premiere production at the Drum Theatre, Plymouth, and then the Menier Chocolate Factory in London. Before reaching the auditorium, spectators were led by flashlight through an antechamber that was deliberately designed to unsettle the audience in anticipation of the horrors that were to follow. In her review, Kate Bassett warned her readers of what they were in for: "Groping towards a distant torch beam, you pass through a wrecked child's bedroom into the main space: a sea of litter, broken toys and upturned armchairs" ("Shocking" 20). If the moment risks seeming like a gratuitous capitalization on the play's macabre subject matter, the antechamber served a significant function at the play's climax: it was the room in which Naz, a naive drifter who volunteers to help the brothers throw their party, is tortured and nearly killed when he is forced to surrogate for the Party Piece, who dies before the Party Guest's fantasy is enacted, and the offstage scene was accompanied by a grisly soundscape perhaps more evocative than any mimetic representation possible on stage. Integral to this moment was the collective spectatorial memory of having passed through the very room in which such unimaginable violence was occurring: "even if the violence took place out of sight, we remembered its look, feel and smell" (Sierz, *Rewriting* 201). The original production's climax thus compressed time and space even on a small scale, relying on the audience's memory – its ability to deliver the recent past into the present – to condense a currently unseen but vividly remembered room into the unoccupied playing space.

That the compression of time and space figures so prominently in the play's subject matter as well as in its theatricalization should come as no surprise given Ridley's concern with late capitalism's penchant for indiscriminate commodification. In the neoliberal state, seemingly anything (and anyone) is eligible to be bought and sold. Ridley has said that "the play began by asking, 'What's the logical conclusion?'" (Ridley and Sierz 115), referring to the increasing accessibility and ubiquity of violent pornography. "Well, the logical conclusion," he determined, "is that you don't just watch it, you enact it" (115). The conceit, of course, is that unbridled

visual consumption reduces the onscreen body to a thing, renders it an object of pleasure, and obscures its personhood. The extreme consequence of this objectifying gaze is the conflation of the human being with its filmic simulacrum, so that the Party Guest fails even to conceive of the Party Piece as anything other than a necessary bit of equipment in his elaborate sexual fantasy. Anna Harpin argues that, in this sense, Mercury Fur articulates a call to accountability for our visual consumption, what she calls the "ethical gaze": the play "actively invites an audience to take responsibility for the act of looking" (108). And Tiffany's production countered precisely the distancing gaze produced by perspectival staging, opting instead for a traverse staging "so insistently, nastily involving that the viewer feels uncomfortably complicit in the horrors enacted onstage" (Marlowe 279). Harpin, too, found that the traverse staging "rendered the performance incredibly loud and impossibly close" (107), ultimately locating the audience "within the disoriented landscape as opposed to on its perimeter" (110). The New Group's 2015 production in New York followed suit, seating a number of spectators on the onstage furniture so that the parallel banks of seating seemed to bleed into the playing space. Both strategies emphasize the act of seeing – as you watch the play and watch others do the same, you become simultaneously aware that you, too, are being watched – bringing the audience collectively and uncomfortably closer to the performers in order to "prompt a sober, portentous and ethical embrace with (an)other life" (Harpin 110).

The staging of the New Group production thus militated against the possibility of distancing oneself from the play's action, a strategy that Ridley explains is common to all international productions of *Mercury Fur*. In addition to the Romulus Linney Courtyard Theatre's uncomfortably intimate seating plan, changes to the performance text served to localize the action, swapping out references to Victoria Park and the British Museum for more

pointed allusions to Washington Square Park and MoMA, locations which strike considerably closer to home for a New York audience. Ridley explains that he purposefully emends the text for every production outside of London, providing local references to situate the play's disturbing action as immediately as possible to the spectator's lived experience: "This is the only one of my plays that I allow this to happen with. The reason is, I don't want to allow the audience the luxury of 'distancing' themselves from the events. i.e. of saying, 'Oh, something like that could never happen here. It can only happen... over there'" ("Re: Research"; emphasis in original).<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the New York production of *Mercury Fur* foreclosed on this possibility of geographical dissociation by abandoning the language and style of London's East End in favour of more locally recognizable nuances: the accents were American; "brov" became "bro"; and Spinx traded in his fur and bling for denim and leather.<sup>3</sup> Here, then, is the geographical compression emblematized by Saharan dust, violently swept up over there and making its way here. An international audience is denied the comfort of gesturing vaguely to London, to somewhere other than here, as a site for the kinds of violence and trauma *Mercury* Fur thematizes. The reconfigured text ensures that this violence and trauma – and our bristling, uncomfortable proximity to it – happens in every city in which the play is performed.

Geographical space is not the only site of compression in Harvey's formulation of flexible accumulation. Hand in hand with the collapse of physical distance is the acceleration of time, "[s]ymbolized by clocks and bells that called workers to labour and merchants to market" (228). These "new rules of temporal discipline" (228), Harvey reminds us, reveal "capitalist

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Ridley has taken aim at this sensibility in other plays. Recall Anita, in *Vincent River*, who assuages her son's anguish over the Vietnam War with precisely this politics of distance: "I said, 'You've got nothing to worry about Vincent. That happened miles and miles away. No one's gonna hurt you here'" (41).
<sup>3</sup> One incongruent Americanism from the original production was not reproduced in the New Group show. In London, when Fraser Ayres's Spinx toasted to "roses and nuclear weapons" (84), he pronounced the word "nucular," calling up US president George W. Bush's notorious mispronunciation.

modernization to be very much about speed-up and acceleration in the pace of economic processes and, hence, in social life" (230). Time–space compression thus emerges as the central feature of the neoliberal economy, simultaneously emphasizing and effacing the specificity of geographical place while accelerating and destabilizing time. He observes the emergence of a "contemplative memory," however, hopelessly out of sync with neoliberalism's frenetic temporal logic, as a tenuous corrective to capitalist revisions of social life and identity, "a generator of a sense of self that lies outside the sensory overloading of consumerist culture and fashion. The home becomes a private museum to guard against the ravages of time–space compression" (292). But, of course, neither the home nor the museum fares well in *Mercury Fur*.

The play's opening stage directions index a devastation of the home: "*Layers of peeling wallpaper (many cleaner patches where framed photos once hung), several pieces of old furniture (armchairs, sideboard, shelves, etc.), well-worn carpet and smashed ornaments*" (9).<sup>4</sup> And the British Museum has fared no better – "Big building up West. Glass roof. They set fire to it" (29) – though Naz, who has looted the museum for artefacts with which to barter for drugs, clearly fails to recognize it (let alone understand its cultural significance).<sup>5</sup> This destruction of cultural history is, in Ridley's assessment, fundamental to neo-imperialist strategies of social control, a phenomenon he observed in the US-led invasion of the Middle East:

Now of course that is stage one of an invasion for any imperialist force. That's what America did in Iraq. That's why no one was stopped from looting the museums in Baghdad. The Americans just let it happen, let the Iraqis destroy their

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The stage plan, too, indicates that the "timber cupboard interior" has a "couple of lonely hangers, mothballs," and its "doors hanging off" (Stage Plan).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> When Darren recalls his brother's childhood aspirations – "Elliot wanted to be something when he grew up. […] It had a name. He wanted to be someone who… digs up old things. Like bones and stuff" – Naz replies, "Never heard of that" (35). Even archaeology, the professional practice of cobbling together a coherent sense of history through the remnants of its material culture, has become obsolete.

history because they'd be easier to control. And Mercury Fur is about what

happens to people when you take away their history. (Ridley and Sierz 114) Here, in addition to the devastation of these vital reservoirs of historical memory, the concerted dismantling of history is accomplished by the dissemination of habit-forming butterflies that "bit by bit [...] take away people's memory" (114). And the loss of memory – even the most banal fragments of recollection – is indexed early in the play. When Darren, a frequent butterfly user who struggles to retain new information, pronounces, "I remembered the wooden guns," his unexpected success at recalling a moment from his childhood is remarkable enough that "*Elliot stops what he's doing*" (17). Darren feels around for additional details – "The wooden guns. Dad made 'em. Remember? He carved our names in the handles" (17) – and his repeated invitation to Elliot to join him in actively recalling their past ("Remember?"), perhaps to corroborate his own memory, becomes a refrain that Darren articulates with increasing urgency throughout the play, as he seeks recourse to a shared memory of the past in order to make sense of the present.

Naz, too, has only fleeting memories of his childhood, but he recounts the beheading of his mother and rape of his sister in a supermarket – an episode Lyn Gardner explains is "based on a similar event that took place in Rwanda," citing Ridley's "scrapbooks in which he has documented news from around the world" ("Devil" 11) – and he relates the traumatic episode with an almost indifferent demeanour, recalling more easily the rapists' choice of drink than his own sister's name, itself an acid sign of consumer culture: "He sticks his cock in her. One of the others fucks what's left of her mouth. They all drink Coke. They fuck Stace and they drink Coke" (39).<sup>6</sup> But the disturbing clarity of this recollection appears anomalous, as the rest of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> The ubiquity of consumerism – its resilience to widespread trauma – manifested visually, too. The original production's setting list records a "Ronald Mcdonald [*sic*] figure inside onstage edge of window frame" and an "Action Man attached to Exterior of bed frame" (Setting List). Similarly, rehearsal notes for 11 January specify that "[t]he cigarettes should be Marlborough [*sic*] Lights" (Rehearsal Notes).

Naz's childhood memories elude him, leading him to conclude, "It's the butterflies, ain't it?" (63). Elliot confirms the correlation, but his own recollection of the sandstorm that introduced the butterflies in the first place – and Ridley encourages us to trust Elliot's memory, since he refuses to consume the drug himself - points to a more sinister origin for the insects, in line with Ridley's broader political observations: "It's planes! There's so many of them. They're way, way up. Their lights are all twinkling. Then I feel it. [...] On my face. Like dust. [...] It's sand. And... something else. [...] A cocoon. A butterfly cocoon. [...] I keep hearing planes. I keep seeing sand and cocoons. But I don't see or hear any fucking storm" (66). Here, then, is confirmation of what we have feared all along, that the sandstorm ("A freak of nature, the telly said" [62]) was, in fact, phase one of an orchestrated invasion designed to obliterate cultural memory and subdue the populace – an idea based on reports that "the CIA flooded black neighbourhoods with drugs, as a means of destabilising the emergent civil rights movement" (Rebellato, "Philip Ridley" 438). Thus, Andrew Wyllie's assessment that "the absence of memory that lies at the heart of the play [...] serves as a portrait of the fatal dangers of *allowing* cultural and personal memory to become obscured" (66; emphasis added) is perhaps in want of nuance. The erosion of memory and history in Mercury Fur is less a choice, passively permitted by its characters, than a top-down governmental strategy of neo-imperialist domination.

For Ridley, the consequences of this memory loss represent, once again, a contemporary trend taken to its logical conclusion. He laments that the "majority of the younger generation have got their sense of history completely skewed and if you start to lose your sense of narrative then you start to lose your sense of identity, and then you start to lose your sense of morality. And all of those things for me are tightly connected" (Ridley and Sierz 115). This intersection of history, identity, and morality lends a different colour to Darren's memorable discussion of assassinated US president "Dallas splat head Kennedy" (43), as he calls him – a speech that reveals the extent to which history and cultural memory have been irrevocably fractured:

He used to be President. He was married to this blonde tart called Marilyn Monroe. They went to Germany for a visit and they met this guy called Hitler. This Hitler liked blonde people so he tried to give it to this Marilyn Monroe up the arse, didn't he. Kennedy got the right 'ump. [...] He declared war on Germany and started dropping all this napalm and stuff all over the joint. [...] All I know is Kennedy won the war. I think he dropped a couple atom bombs or something and turned all the Germans into chinkies. (43)

This disordered synopsis of the twentieth century exemplifies what Rebellato calls the "characters' persistent scrambling of modern history into a peculiar amalgam of misplaced fact, rumour and pornographic fantasy" ("Philip Ridley" 439). The speech might elicit laughter, given its implausible mosaic of historical events and unwittingly clever connections (Marilyn Monroe as Hitler's ideal Aryan love object, for instance), but Darren's splintered rendering of recent history disturbs more than it amuses. In collapsing the rise of the Third Reich, the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Kennedy's rumoured affair with Monroe, and the atrocities of the Vietnam War, Darren accomplishes a staggering compression of time and space that obscures historical fact and narratively divorces it from the present. No lessons can be learned from this history folded in on itself. Thus, the speech's racist inflection and salacious preoccupation with sex index a general acceptance of the racial and sexual violence that is ubiquitous in the play.

But the alignment of graphic violence with sexual pleasure, thematized most obviously by the climactic party for which Elliot and Darren fastidiously prepare, inheres earlier in the play, too, just after Darren's impromptu history lesson to Naz. As he describes his favourite butterfly – "Red with silver stripes," which leads users to hallucinate political "[a]ssassinations. [...] You see political leaders snuff it" (42) – he recounts that morning's butterfly-induced high, wherein he witnessed Kennedy's assassination through the eyes of Jackie Onassis, in her iconic pink Chanel suit, brought to orgasm in the back of the car by the spectacle of blood and gore: "My cunt is getting juicy and creaming up. I fiddle with the bone and brains on me dress. I'm gonna cum. I feel it. The sun. The heat. Bone. Brain. Blood. And then – gushhh! My cunt sprays cunt juice all over the car" (44). This eroticization of violence – of violent death, even, Darren's word "snuff" surely chosen purposefully<sup>7</sup> – speaks precisely to Ridley's preoccupation with the sexually commoditized human body, its personhood negated, its status as object reified. Recall the play's infamous meat hook, not to mention Paines Plough's promotional material, which depicted the Party Piece, dressed in gold lamé, standing in front of a butcher shop window with carcasses of meat hanging overhead (see Figure 4).<sup>8</sup> Indeed, when Naz casually suggests that he and Darren "wank each other off, yeah?" (44), he attempts to arouse Darren by eagerly taking his direction in a role-play scene that, again, aligns sexual pleasure with the infliction of pain: Darren instructs him to "get down on the floor. [...] Your hands – they're tied behind your back. [...] You're moaning [...] like you're being hurt. And move about a little bit'' (45), before he disengages, not sufficiently in the mood.

Into this context of sexual sadism, Ridley introduces a class element, too, signalled by the arrival of the Party Guest, a twenty-three-year-old financial type who "*wear*[*s*] *a neatly cut, shot silk suit, white shirt, top button undone, loose tie*" (93) and "work[s] in the City" (94). When he

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> We might think of the Skriker's admission that "I like snuff movies" (283).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> That the Party Piece is situated among the offerings of a butcher shop makes his status clear. But the image forces us to question our own status as well. Taken from inside a car (its reflection is visible in the shop window), the photo situates us as prospective buyers in the market of Party Pieces, thus calling us to account not only for the visual consumption Ridley condemns in the play but also for our complicity in the class stratification that abandons children like the Party Piece to a dehumanizing market.



FIGURE 4: Paines Plough's promotional image for *Mercury Fur*, directed by John Tiffany, Menier Chocolate Factory, London, 2005. Photo by Stuart McCaffer.

boasts, "I see something I want – I go for it with all I've got. [...] I deserve it!" (100), he seems sincerely to believe in his entitlement to the Party Piece's prepubescent body – indeed, his life – for his own sadistic pleasure, merely by virtue of his privileged economic status, an attitude driven home in an earlier draft of the play when he aggressively reminds Darren and Elliot, "Listen, you cunts, who's paying for this?" (Seventh Draft 89), pointing out the authority that inheres in his purchasing power (though the line was later cut). The Party Guest emblematizes the non-empathetic spectatorship that Ridley seeks to carry through to its logical conclusion, a kind of consumption – initially visual but finally fatal – that negates human dignity and personhood. Moreover, this non-empathetic spectatorship, Ridley seems to suggest, is part and parcel of a certain class privilege, made possible by capitalism's unfettered marketization and the reconstitution of elite class power that Harvey identifies as neoliberalism's structuring principle.

While the Party Guest's entitled sensibilities and clear economic privilege confirm the class status suggested in his initial entrance, he finds his inverse representation in the Duchess, who, at thirty-eight years old, appears as a relic from the past – Spinx muses, "Look at those lips, Naz. [...] You don't get lips like that any more. The Duchess is from another time. A prehistoric time when they knew how to kiss" (88) – and her outward appearance is soon revealed to be jarringly out of sync with her social position: "*She is wearing a dress (covered with ice-blue sequins and rhinestones) and a white fur coat. Pearl earrings, diamond rings, necklace, bracelets, and a sparkling tiara*," but Ridley swiftly follows by advising us that "[*e*]*verything about her seems fragile and damaged. She is blind*" (74). The Duchess's frailty – we witness her fainting spells and anxiety attacks, hear of the frequency with which she soils herself – renders her fully dependent on Spinx, who offers her champagne and feeds her cheese and pineapple on cocktail sticks (an improvement, no doubt, over the "bloody, offal-looking meat" – "Monkey

brains" – he serves her in an early typescript of the play [Seventh Draft 77]). Naz's response to these snacks is telling: where the monkey brain prompts an excited "Me favourite!" (78), he asks, "Can I have a taste?" (89) of the cheese and pineapple in the final text, signalling the peculiar class distinction to which Spinx aspires in his careful treatment of the Duchess.

Fragile and damaged, too, is the Duchess's grasp on history and her own past (which militates against the possibility that we misidentify the play's loss of cultural memory as generational, merely an aberration of drug-addled youth), but the Duchess's fragmented sense of history – her circuitous, interrupted storytelling, her narrative lapses – seems less a symptom of butterfly consumption than a scotomization of trauma. When prompted to recount her life, she shrinks, childlike, deferring to Spinx for legitimacy – "When I was a child... – Is this right, Papa?" (89) – and, only moments later, her story dissolves into a panicked flurry of unsettling historical references: "I'm all lost again. How did I end up here? Fucking blackshirt fucking Nazis! Distant bombs. People being cooked in ovens. Lampshades of human skin" (91). Her recourse to an adverb of place, "here," to interrogate a temporal, rather than spatial, location underlines the play's thoroughgoing coalescence of space and time.<sup>9</sup> The Duchess's clear allusion to World War II reminds us of Darren's earlier muddled account of the mid-twentieth century, and the parallel is significant; in his review for the Jewish Chronicle, John Nathan reminded readers that, although "[s]uch ignorance may seem ridiculous[,] [...] according to recent statistics, nearly half the population of Britain has never heard of Auschwitz" (282), echoing one of the chief concerns Ridley sought to explore in writing the play.

But the narrative associations that connect the Duchess to Darren signify for other reasons, too. It becomes clear that the Duchess's biographical narration borrows not from her

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Josie articulates a similar sense of temporal placelessness in *The Skriker* when she returns from the underworld, frantically asking, "When is this? I don't know when this is" (275).

own lived experiences but from those of Maria von Trapp, the protagonist of Rodgers and Hammerstein's The Sound of Music (which provides context for her anachronistic memories of the Holocaust). She recounts her time in a convent (with Spinx supplying narrative prompts – "You're not a good nun, are you, Duchess? [...] Always late for prayers" [90]), before she was sent to a "castle... it belongs to a man... I marry him. We have children. Two boys. I sing to them. 'Do-re-mi.'" (91). Of course, hers is a slightly corrupted version of the musical – the governess, the widowed captain, and his seven children are, here, rendered as a married couple with two sons – but where these details are incongruous with the source material, they indicate a measure of biographical legitimacy.<sup>10</sup> They, too, catalyze a startling moment of recognition, calling up Darren's fleeting childhood memories at the start of the play, his nostalgic recollection of watching the film adaptation of The Sound of Music with his family: "Know what I liked the best. Watching telly late at night. That musical Mum and Dad liked. The mountains and all those kids going, 'Do, re, mi.' Running up and down mountains and going, 'Do, re, mi.' Remember that, Ell?" (18). The revelation amplifies the resonance of Darren's allusion to "Edelweiss. [...] That's the tune. On the ice-cream van" (27), and it explains Elliot and Darren's shared horror when they learn that Spinx is set to arrive with the Duchess in tow. Darren's panicked insistence, "I can't do it, Ell. The party. Not with the Duchess here. Can you? Can you do it?" (72; emphasis in original), is followed by three instances of the same telling stage direction, "Elliot and Darren look at each other" (73), as the Duchess is heard approaching the stage.

*The Sound of Music* (though never mentioned by name) functions as a key intertext that is vital to our understanding of the shattered family dynamics at work in *Mercury Fur*. It not only

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Ridley devised his own history for the play's characters (though the document is unpublished): in it, he records that the Duchess was "born (as Brenda Portway)" on 16 August 1966, and, in 1973, she "sees 'Sound of Music' with parents" and "vows she will become a nun. Or singer" ("Chronology").

identifies the Duchess as Elliot and Darren's mother but also serves as the linchpin that draws together the boys' fragments of memory with the Duchess's, enabling us to cobble together a coherent narrative of their past. Thus, the physical damages that Elliot and Darren bear on their bodies – Elliot "*walks with a limp*" (9) and sporadically "[*c*]*lutches his leg*" (15), while Darren shows Naz a dent in his skull from a hammer blow that "happened ages ago. [...] When I was twelve or something" (46) – take on a poignant resonance, another chill of recognition, during the Duchess's anguished account of the trauma that led to her blindness:

My husband is attacking our children! [...] He wants to kill them to save them! To save them from this terrible place. [...] My husband is hitting them with a hammer. He's hitting my eldest on the leg. It's all smashed. And the little one – the little one's been hit on the head! No! No! There's so much blood! Oh, the look in their faces. How can Daddy do this? I grab my husband round the neck. He hits me on the head. Everything goes dark. I... I... can't see. (92)

This is the family Darren and Elliot so affectionately recalled near the start of the play – greasy pizza and wooden guns and movies on TV – violently splintered at the end of a hammer, their father dead by self-immolation after his failed mercy killings and their mother no longer able to recognize her own children. Significant, too, is that the Duchess relates this trauma not as a past event but as something occurring in the present tense, consistent with her earlier muddling of spatiotemporal logic. She transports herself, becoming increasingly agitated and unstable, as she delivers the past into the present moment and relives it so vividly that she needs to be sedated.

But, where the Duchess's story unsettles and disturbs, it unexpectedly comforts, too, a Ridleyan trademark of excavating human tenderness and love from the rubble of violence and brutality. When Naz surmises that the person who dented Darren's skull "must've hated your guts," Darren defensively maintains that "[i]t wasn't hate! It was the opposite of hate. They hit me 'cos they loved me. Okay? They loved me so much they wanted to save me from... bad things. That sort of love don't exist any more. It's prehistoric" (46), the same word Spinx uses to describe the Duchess, thus situating Darren and Elliot's parents' generation in a long-forgotten past, even in spite of temporal proximity. But, like the dent in Darren's skull and the chronic pain in Elliot's knee, traces from this "prehistoric" age – how they kissed, how they loved – crop up in the present day. Elliot inherits his father's protective sensibilities, telling Lola that he "made a promise to Darren. I'd kill you both before I let anyone hurt you. [...] I'd shoot you while you slept or something" (70). Motivating this hypothetical act of violence is genuine care, a loving impulse that resorts, desperate and unwilling, to death as a safeguard against a world that offers only suffering. And perhaps Lola grasps this sensibility more than she lets on. As she describes an obsolete butterfly that "made you feel immortal" (64), Naz asks her to define the adjective: her response in the seventh draft, "Like you'll live forever" (55), became "Like there's no tomorrow" (64) in the final text, swapping out the possibility of a limitless future for a suspended present, a temporal standstill to ward off the violence and trauma that surely lie ahead.

Elliot's admission follows the appearance of a new butterfly – "It's mauve and midnight blue but... well, people're calling it black. Just like they called the first one white. A neat little symmetry, don't you think? Almost like someone's planned it" (69) – that psychosomatically brings to fruition its users' suicidal fantasies: "The butterfly does it all for you. [...] [V]eins open without blades. Necks break without rope. Brains splatter without a single bullet being fired" (69). If inundating London with memory-eroding butterflies was stage one of the play's enigmatic invasion, this lethal black butterfly is surely the second. And when Elliot informs a horrified Lola that users are "getting together to do it now. Suicide parties," the indication of genocide is clear: "Twenty were found in a club a few days ago. The place was like an abattoir" (69). These are the brutal conditions that induce Elliot's escapist impulse, and he confesses he can relate to the black butterfly's suicidal users. Death represents an active choice that not only absents the self from the misery of contemporary life but also offers a measure of agency in the face of social and political powerlessness: "The power's still in our hands, Lol. Don't you see? We can decide... not to carry on. We can decide to... disappear" (70).

It is a desperate notion, surely, and it achieves its clearest expression in this scene, but vaguer iterations appear throughout the play. Indeed, Elliot's articulation of the lengths to which he would go for love retrospectively suggests a richer dimension to the brothers' macabre calland-response game in the play's opening scene, a playful, yet poignant, ritual that Darren prompts by asking his brother how much he loves him:

ELLIOTI love you so much I could chase you and chase you.Darren gets up and faces Elliot.

DARREN	I love you so much I could grab you and grab you.
ELLIOT	I love you so much I could grab you harder and harder.
DARREN	I love you so much I could make you scream and scream.
ELLIOT	I love you so much I could kick you and punch you.
DARREN	I love you so much I could punch you and kick you.
ELLIOT	I love you so much I could make you bleed and bleed.
DARREN	I love you so much I could kill you and kill you.
ELLIOT	I love you so much I could burst into flames.
DARREN	I love you so much I could burst into flames.
Elliot and Darren embrace. (20–21)	

Once again, Ridley juxtaposes the expression of love with images of increasingly violent cruelty, the two sensibilities chafing against each other in an unsettling symbiosis. In the original production, Elliot and Darren's professions of love were accompanied by movement – Ben Whishaw and Robert Boulter gestured urgently over their hearts before tenderly holding each other's faces, repeated with variations for each line – a kind of private sign language which suggested that their mutual love sought expression beyond a scorched language that failed to adequately communicate. And the revelation of the boys' past, their attempted murder at the hands of their father in order to prevent their future suffering, evidences that the rehearsed threats of violence they recite express not an impulse to harm one another but a desire for salvation. Importantly, the Duchess alludes to the boys' exchange in her first attempt to perform a song,<sup>11</sup> suggesting its origin in their childhood (albeit, we hope, in a less violent form), and she fuses the reference with another fragment of *The Sound of Music*: "I love you so much... [...] I love you so much I could... [...] I love you so much I could climb every mountain..." (83).

This exchange was tellingly reworked for the play's premiere. In his seventh draft of the play, Ridley forwent the word "could," writing each sentence in the present indicative – "I love you so much I chase you and chase you. [...] I love you so much I grab you and grab you" (14–15) – before shifting to the conditional for the last three lines. Thus, the violence the boys describe – chasing, grabbing, kicking, and punching one another, making each other scream and bleed – seems linked to acts that are occurring contemporaneously, a declarative articulation that itemizes rather than conjectures. But the sudden introduction (in the eighth draft, which would serve as the prompt script for the premiere) of "could" – "I love you so much I *could* kill you and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Elliot reveals the Duchess was a singer once. He tells Lola he used to "love listening to Mum sing in the pub. She wears this beautiful dress and when the light shines on it ... it sparkles" (66), anticipating the Duchess's entrance moments later in her sequined, rhinestone-studded dress.

kill you" (Eighth Draft 15; emphasis added) – evinces a potentiality the boys acknowledge but hope they never have to realize. In the play's final moments, as "[*t*]*he sound of distant bombing starts*" (131), Elliot points a gun at his brother's head – Whishaw brandished the weapon slowly, sadly, and gently beckoned Boulter with his hand, a resigned invitation to come forward for the mercy killing – and Darren desperately reinitiates the sinuous hand movements of their call-andresponse sequence, leveraging (even more clearly now) not its threat of fatal harm but, rather, its repeated invocations of love, in order to deny the potential of the conditional "could":

Elliot aims gun at Darren's head.

DARREN (pushing gun away) Say it, Ell! I love you so much –

The fire gets louder and brighter. The sound of bombing gets louder. Elliot aims gun at Darren's head.

DARREN (*pushing gun away*) Say it, Ell! (132)

The sequence repeats – Elliot points the gun and Darren swipes it away, urging him to respond, as the bombs draw nearer – an excruciating stretching out of time against an impossibly loud soundscape, until an abrupt blackout ends the play and leaves the boys' fate ambiguous. But that the final moments cede to Darren's unflinching determination – "Ell! We'll be okay! We'll find a way. Like we've always done. Me and you. [...] Put the gun away, Ell. It's not the way" (131) – suggests that the brothers' love for one another will hold out against the devastation closing in on them. The possibility that either brother "could kill you and kill you" is countered by the hope that neither will. And, rather than "burst into flames," Darren entreats Elliot to continue surviving, even as the flat burns down with them inside. Darren's pleas thus come to represent an antidote to his father's (and, indeed, Elliot's) recourse to death as a form of salvation, a renewed invocation of familial love that manifests in the struggle to keep on living.

The play's ending thus fulfils Ridley's promise to "lead you through this tunnel and take you back to a place of light. [...] [T]here has to be this sense of redemption at the end" (Ridley and Sierz 112), but it doesn't disparage Elliot's or his father's point of view, rendered with a sensitivity that beckons us to empathize and to seek to understand. The desperate sensibility they express, like the play, Tiffany asserted, is "the product of a diseased world, not a diseased mind" (qtd. in Gardner, "Devil" 11). Tiffany's defence of Mercury Fur came at a time when the play needed defending. While some critics championed the work – Gardner praised its "genuine faith in the possibility of redemption" (11), while Miranda Sawyer argued that it "speaks about contemporary life" and "makes us question our complicity" (11) – others condemned it, their reviews ranging from dismissive to disgusted. Perhaps the most infamous review in this camp was penned by Charles Spencer of the Daily Telegraph, who self-consciously acknowledged his echoes of Jack Tinker when he described *Mercury Fur* as "the most violent and upsetting new play since Sarah Kane's *Blasted* opened at the Royal Court 10 years ago,"<sup>12</sup> and accused Ridley of being "turned on by his own sick fantasies. [...] Mercury Fur is a poisonous piece, and [...] all involved are demeaned by the play they bring to life with such hideous conviction" (280).

Spencer was not an outlier in his moral disgust. Faber, Ridley's long-time publisher, refused to print *Mercury Fur*, "object[ing] to the play," Ridley claimed, "because of its cruelty to children. [...] I had gone too far" (qtd. in Gardner, "Devil" 11). That the play's dramatization of violence might disqualify it from publication adumbrates the limits, for Faber at least, of acceptable dramatic representation, even at the level of text. But this sensitivity to the danger of visual consumption – the benumbing that accompanies repeated exposure to disturbing images –

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Tinker described *Blasted* as "utterly without dramatic merit," its budget "better spent on remedial therapy" (42). Spencer, too, dismissed *Blasted* as motivated only by "an adolescent desire to shock" (40), anticipating his assessment ten years later that *Mercury Fur* "offer[ed] no more than cheap thrills" (280).

is to be found in *Mercury Fur* itself, having in large part motivated Ridley to write the play in the first place. The irony of Faber thus censoring Ridley's purposeful artistic deployment of violence is especially pointed in light of the global news media's reliance on violent and horrific images to tell (and sell) real-life stories, a discrepancy the playwright identified as particularly germane: "I'm being told by my editor that I've gone too far because of this play and there's the Beslan siege on television. So I'm watching children getting blown up by terrorists, while being told by my publisher that I have written an unacceptable play about cruelty to children!" (Ridley and Sierz 114). The consequent falling out – for Ridley has since been published by Bloomsbury – perhaps reveals the extent to which Faber failed to recognize Mercury Fur's clear engagement with contemporary world events. Indeed, different reviewers found the play to be in conversation with crises unfolding in numerous diffuse geographical locations (Chechnya, Rwanda, Iraq) and historical moments (the Holocaust, the Gulf War, 9/11). The sprawling geography and historicity of the play's associations, then, not only reflect Mercury Fur's engagement with real-life trauma and violence but also signal the play's dramatization of the space-time compression that is part and parcel of the global neoliberal turn.

Harvey reminds us that, as a result of flexible accumulation, "accurate and up-to-date information is now a very highly-valued commodity" (159). Information is capital in *Mercury Fur*, at no point more so than when Spinx reveals that the Party Guest is paying not with money but with vital information on how to avoid the impending bombing of London: "He's paying with contacts. Where to go. Where to be safe. What to say" (116). And Spinx's announcement that their white-collar client will soon be leaving for "[a]nother country. His whole company's getting out" (115) echoes Harvey's assessment that "[a]ccess to, and control over, information [...] have become essential to the centralized co-ordination of far-flung corporate interests"

(159). Class resurfaces in this moment, as the Party Guest defends his opportunistic flight from the city by declaring, "I ain't part of this shit," before Elliot rebuts, "But you don't mind having your fun in the shit before you fuck off!" (116). Access to information is thus revealed as a marker of privilege, and information, itself, a powerful currency, leveraged by the corporate class for political interests – but with real life-and-death consequences for the down-and-outs represented by Elliot, Darren, and the rest of the characters in *Mercury Fur*.<sup>13</sup>

Mobility, too – the Party Guest, by virtue of his economic status, is afforded the chance to flee London (even if his plans are ultimately thwarted) – signifies in terms of class, speaking to Harvey's claim that, in the neoliberal economy, "[s]uperior command over space becomes an even more important weapon in class struggle" (294). Denied access to this geographical mobility, the play's characters become sitting ducks in the impending onslaught, outlined by the Party Guest with the dispassionate detachment of someone who won't be around to see it: "There'll be three days of non-stop bombing. Fire bombs. Napalm. Technology we ain't even heard of. Everywhere's a valid target. Civilian. Military. The whole fucking thing. After three days the soldiers will move in" (116). The preliminary steps of the play's ominous invasion – the staged sandstorm, the hallucinogenic butterflies, the calculated erosion of cultural memory and history, the recently introduced black butterfly that slays its users – culminate, then, in out-andout genocide, the utter devastation of a city and its people, particularly its disenfranchised, who are rendered incapable of fleeing and powerless to fight back.

If hope does, indeed, exist for the brothers at the end of the play, it relies on geographical displacement, a disorienting relocation to somewhere new in the reconfigured spatial landscape

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> If information in the play is a commodity to be bought and sold, Darren notably cancels the transaction. When Elliot implies that Naz will have to be killed after helping with the party (thus paying for privileged information with his life), Darren ultimately saves him and kills the Party Guest instead, resisting capitalist logic with recourse to friendship and compassion.

of the world (or perhaps even beyond). Darren suggests as much when he likens himself and Elliot to "[s]pace explorers. Right, brov? [...] And we're exploring this... new planet. To see if it's fit for human life. [...] But it's not. Is it, Ell?" (129–30). It is the resigned acceptance of this reality – that the very planet on which they live is unfit for human life, inhospitable to their existence – that renews Darren's determination. He assures Elliot, "We've got to find another planet. [...] A more friendly planet, eh, brov? That's what we're gonna find, Ell" (130). Perhaps this moment gestures to the planetary reference in the play's title: Mercury, equally unfit for human life, becomes a symbol of futile hope in the face of imminent doom, for, if it represents an unlikely safe haven from the atrocities of Earth, it remains the first planet to be engulfed by the Sun when the latter evolves into a red giant, similarly destined to "burst into flames."

Where Ridley's image of violent displacement alludes to the planet closest to the Sun, Alistair McDowall's *X*, directed by Vicky Featherstone at the Royal Court in 2016, ventures in the opposite direction, reaching out to the farthest end of our solar system. After Earth has been largely destroyed by its inhabitants, Pluto seems to offer a grim, distant home to the galaxy's displaced, though the play suggests that the characters' research mission is motivated less by scientific inquiry than by financial cunning: Ray, the crew's embittered captain, explains, "It's a financial work-around. It's a tax write-off" (30). And when Clark optimistically reminds him that their earnings are tax-free, Ray retorts, "There are easier ways to avoid tax" (31), an acid remark whose resonance was bolstered by an uncanny coincidence of timing: the Panama Papers, which revealed large-scale corporate and governmental tax evasion via holdings in offshore accounts, were leaked only four days after the play's premiere.

Instability creeps into every facet of X – Merle Hensel's set was "[t]ipped askew at an angle, [...] fram[ing] everything with disorientation" (Brooks) – and the play seems to proceed

directly from where Mercury Fur's dystopic vision leaves off. Earth has been ravaged and devastated - "There's nothing left back there. Trees. Birds. Animals. Countries gone" (32) - and we gradually cobble together its history from fragments of the crewmembers' conversation. The insular Cole once built a bomb shelter, fitted with "[a]ir filtration, water purifiers," in the event of a nuclear holocaust, "a strong possibility at the time" (16). Ray recalls the extinction of birds: "I'm just about old enough to remember the day they all fell out the trees. [...] First the trees stopped singing. Then they stopped breathing" (27–28).<sup>14</sup> And Clark remembers seeing one of the last trees in South America, though he shrugs it off: it is Mattie who insists, "One of the last ever. Do you know how rare that was? To see it? To touch it? [...] [Y]ou touched something considered by an entire generation to be *mythic*. You literally touched the past" (14; emphasis in original). But Clark dismisses the past, his pronouncement that "History's bullshit" (15) a defiant rejection of temporal causality: "There's just this second, right now, as I'm saying it it's dying, it's gone. There it goes" (15). His articulation of the suspended present, cut off from the past and future, speaks to the broader sense of suspension at work in the play, not only spatially – for, of course, they are stranded in space with no contact and no way home – but temporally, too.

McDowall flags up time immediately. His stage directions indicate "*a large digital clock displaying the time*" (4) at the back of the stage, running in real time, hovering over the action. Between scenes, the bright red colon delimiting hour from minutes cuts through the onstage darkness, rendering time itself a ubiquitous spectre that pervades the play. But if the digital clock reminds us of time's relentless progression, McDowall disabuses us. We sense, early on, that time is less reliable than we imagine. When Gilda reminds Clark to clean a large brown X smeared on the back window (its origins not yet revealed), they quibble over temporal details:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> We might recall, too, Darren, in *Mercury Fur*, explaining to Naz that the zoo is "where they keep the dead animals," before Elliot's deadpan clarification: "They weren't always dead" (30).

GILDA	I asked you to clean it weeks ago –
CLARK	Days ago.
GILDA	Weeks ago, I told you, I asked you to do it weeks ago –
CLARK	Nah it was like yesterday. (17; emphasis in original)

And the scene ends with a curious stage direction indicating that Clark "*cleans the X from the wall. It takes as long as it takes*" (24). The moment was cut from performance – Clark sprayed the X once, and it vanished by the next scene – but the stage direction provides an opportunity for performance time to both chafe against and coalesce with play time.

The clock imposes Earth time on Pluto's 153-hour days, a disorienting system out of sync with the dwarf planet's rotation, but it is the crew's only way to temporally navigate the nearconstant darkness. Mattie suggests masturbating as a "way of giving the day structure [...]. I know we're locked to Earth hours but it barely means anything when it's always dark, so if I rub one out morning noon and night it gives everything a bit more shape" (48). Thus, even as time is revealed as an arbitrary imposition, the crew seeks out the structure and regularity it provides. And desperately so. At no point is this clearer than when Cole discovers that the digital clock has malfunctioned.<sup>15</sup> He and Clark stare intently as "[*t*]*he display stutters, faults, then snaps backwards one hour and forty-three minutes*" (67), inaugurating the distressing realization that they are unable to know not only what time it is but also how long it has been since they could. As Susannah Clapp noted in her review, the "time scheme has been smashed. Cause and effect become jumbled" (367), and Clark's desperate utterance "I don't know how old I am" (72) activates a series of destabilizing temporal slippages that dominate the rest of the play.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> The broken clock is a recurring image in Ridley's work, too. The Captain in *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* finds his wristwatch has stopped working – "Good Lord, stopped again. [...] Where's the –? Cougar? Where's the clock? And the one over there?" – only to learn that Cougar has "smashed them" (110). And, in *Leaves of Glass*, Debbie laments, "Broke. Smashed. That clock my sister got us" (261).

As Cole pores over futile algorithms to make sense of the broken clock, Clark asks, "what are we looking for? The un*known*. What's X?" prompting Cole's sombre response, "Time. X is time" (66; emphasis in original). But the standard algebraic variable already connotes differently, as we recall the brown X Clark cleaned from the wall. When Ray appears onstage in the next scene (despite the earlier revelation that he has died), the shuffled chronology of the first act becomes clear, as does the origin of the X.<sup>16</sup> Ray, wrists bandaged from a suicide attempt, experiences a disturbing hallucination in which a young girl emerges from the cupboard, an X carved into her face where her mouth should be. He savages his throat with a penknife, spattering blood all over the stage, and "*paints a vast, smeared X onto the wall with the colour that pours from him*," while, above, "[*t*]*he clock is frozen on unreadable characters*" (86). The gruesome scene not only confirms the play's rejection of narrative linearity but also links the enigmatic title letter to the isolation and psychological instability that instigate Ray's suicide, to the disintegration of time and its devastating effects on human consciousness.

In the second act, the clock has ceased to function altogether: scrambled characters populate the display; when the stage is dark, the delimiting colon appears crooked. As Gilda, Clark, and Cole struggle to arrive at an agreed account of what has happened – their memories incongruent, unreliable – we quickly realize we have no way of knowing how much time has passed since Cole's discovery of the broken clock. Neither do they. Clark asks, exhaustedly, "How long do you think it was? [...] Do you – Do you think it was months, or *years*" (116; emphasis in original), and the question takes on added resonance given the scene's remarkable temporal compression. In the span of minutes (in real time), Cole develops a limp, falls ill, is diagnosed with cancer, becomes bedridden, soils himself, and dies, and the episode plays out in a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> McDowall indicates, in a note at the end of the published text, "Nothing should underline when time is speeding up, shifting, etc. The shifts in the dialogue are the only clues" (157).

rapid-fire exchange of desperate questions and answers, the trio incapable of retaining recent memories and forced to compulsively re-narrate events as time zips by. Cole cries out, "slow it down, stop, stop it [...] *Stop it.* MAKE IT STOP" (115; emphasis in original), but there is neither the possibility of decelerating time nor the means of tracking its impossibly swift passage.<sup>17</sup>

The play continues to enforce its project of disorientation when we are made to doubt the existence of Mattie, who has weaved in and out of the first act as a crewmember but appears in the second as an astronaut come to rescue the team (a hallucination, we realize) and, finally, as Gilda's daughter.<sup>18</sup> While Gilda insists that Mattie was real, Cole (with whom Mattie, tellingly, has had no direct contact in Act One) urges Clark not to listen: "She told us some fiction and enough time's passed that she's convinced us it's fact. [...] She's implanted a false memory [...]. Do you even think this is the first time we've had this argument?" (106). Memory atrophies. And here, again, is the intrusion of X, "a mind-boggling enactment of uncertainty" in reviewer Lucy Brooks's words. As Clark and Gilda continue to lose grasp of their situation, their identities, too, begin to decay. They fumble awkwardly, desperately, over each other's names and those of their dead crewmembers, resorting inevitably to the titular variable:

CLARK	Carrr
GILDA	Carl –
CLARK	C – Cl – Cllarr -
GILDA	Х
CLARK	X (121)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> The script offers textual clues to this fragmentation that are unavailable in performance. For instance, the title of the second act is rendered as "A\_ct Two" (87), the underscore inserting, into an otherwise intelligible title, a blank space that mirrors the act's unknowable passage of time. Similarly, the scene numbers McDowall provides in the header for Act One are replaced, in "A\_ct Two," with empty brackets. <sup>18</sup> The stage directions indicate Gilda's aging when she "*pushes her hands through her hair, which greys as she does so, colour ebbing away*" (147), a moment not theatricalized in Featherstone's production.

X, the unknown, comes to dominate Gilda and Clark's communication, colonizing their shared language to the point of incomprehensibility.

The play's climax is textually rendered as three pages filled with hundreds of X's. In Featherstone's production, it was a dizzying explosion of disorder and disintegration, aided by Lee Curran's lighting and Tal Rosner's video design, which projected a flurry of colours, patterns, and symbols all over the stage (see Figure 5).<sup>19</sup> Gilda and Clark, meanwhile, are "reduced – as all sense of time, place and self disintegrates – to re-iterating that sound ad nauseam in a frantic call-and-response" (Cavendish 366). But, if X symbolizes the dissolution of memory and identity in the play, McDowall leaves a sliver of space, too, for something else. As Clark's life wanes, and he and Gilda make love – they do not move; their lovemaking occurs in one of the infinite lapses of time we don't see on stage – they exchange their final words:

CLARK	X
GILDA	Х.
CLARK	хо
GILDA	XO. (139–40)

Like Darren at the end of *Mercury Fur*, Clark and Gilda attempt to leverage what's left of language in order to cultivate meaning and express love for one another, in spite, remarkably, of conditions that have eroded their memory and crippled their ability to communicate.

Like Churchill in *The Skriker*, McDowall develops the spatiotemporal compression of *X* against a backdrop of ecological devastation. Henry Hitchings asserts that McDowall's play is rife with questions about "the responsibilities of parenthood, expressing the anger of a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Among the projected images was a large tree, formed of zeroes and ones. The reference, not least to the now mythic tree but also to binary code, recalls Ray's complaint that "[n]o one has anything that *exists* anymore. Everything you own is just ones and zeroes" (77; emphasis in the original).

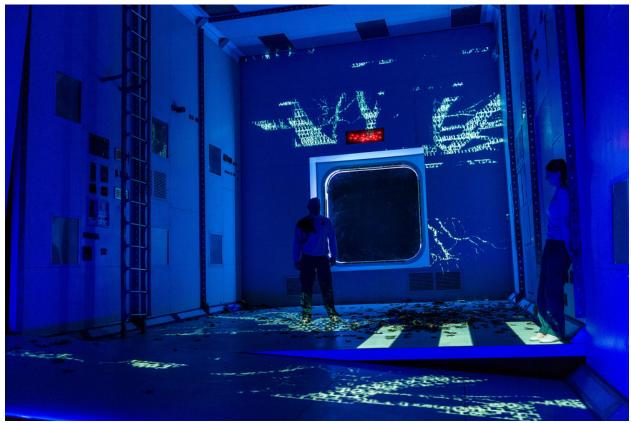


FIGURE 5: Video projection by Tal Rosner in *X*, directed by Vicky Featherstone, Royal Court Theatre, London, 2016. Photo by Manuel Harlan.

generation [...] who feel paralysed by decisions their elders have made" (*X* 365), calling us to account for our mishandling of climate change, of foreign policy, of finance and economics.<sup>20</sup> The play thus articulates an anxiety about technology's propensity for ecological destruction and its encroachment on human capabilities, hence Ray's collection of bird whistles, which reproduce the sounds he remembers from his childhood: "when I get back to Earth, there's only *recordings*. And that's just another form of memory, cept it's a computer remembering instead of you" (28; emphasis in original). Ray also collects old photos, insisting that physical images he has hoarded for decades – he rejects their digitized versions – "have a life. Light trapped in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Recall Lily's unborn child in *The Skriker*, "floating in the dark with its pretty empty head upside down, not knowing what's waiting for it" (256). When Lily returns to Earth generations later – "the daughters grand and great greater greatest knew she was from the distant past master class, then rage raging bullfight bullroar" – she encounters a descendant who "*bellows wordless rage*" at her (290).

paper. Something from then I can hold onto now" (77).<sup>21</sup> Ray's preoccupation with remembering, with remaining as connected as possible to a past that is inexorably slipping away, indexes a suspicion of computerization – emblematized by the digital clock (in contrast to the analogue watch on Ray's wrist, which has also stopped working) – a valid concern, given the ramifications of the clock's malfunction.

Ray's suspicions are linked to a political state of affairs towards which he feels resolutely cynical. When he reassures Gilda, at the start of the play, that they are certain to be rescued, he adds, "not because of us, but because you don't send billions worth of gear to Pluto then forget about it" (9). The primacy of the dollar thus announces itself early on, with even the crew acknowledging that their wellbeing is secondary to financial efficiency. Their potential rescue hinges not on a concern for their human lives but on the prospect of losing billions of dollars' worth of equipment. And, like the arrival of the Party Guest in Mercury Fur, Ray's discussion signals a class element at work in X, too. In Billington's words, "the human race, having wrecked its own planet, now transfers its problems to the colonised outer reaches of the solar system" (X365), but, as the play goes on, the space exploration its characters describe seems increasingly like luxury tourism. "All that'll happen next is the rich'll start shipping themselves out to their own private tin cans like this one, on whichever planet they can afford" (79), Ray asserts, underlining the economic privilege that will enable a select few to escape Earth's untenable living conditions, while the rest will be left behind, "crammed too close together on what's left of the land" (35). The spatial vastness alluded to in McDowall's play thus speaks to the impossibly far-reaching grasp of capitalist enterprise, exerting its dominion over the farthest spaces conceivable and leveraging them to the advantage of the economically privileged. If "the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Naz, in *Mercury Fur*, has a photograph, too – "It's me and my mum. It's the only thing I've got" (62) – the lone material artefact that connects him to the past.

mapping of the world opened up a way to look upon space as open to appropriation for private uses" (Harvey, *Condition* 228), imagine the mapping of the solar system. This, too, as McDowall's play suggests, has "turned out to be far from ideologically neutral" (Harvey 228).

Despite its setting and high-tech staging, however, X is hardly about space exploration. Rather, the play compresses that distant space – Pluto, the erstwhile planet farthest away from the Sun – into a dramatization of our current global condition on Earth, leading Hitchings to recognize that the play is "about the here and now – the grinding routines of the workplace and the unsettling effects of isolation" (X 365) that are part and parcel of the neoliberal political economy. The play thus mirrors, on a grander scale, what Harvey describes as the "drive to relocate to more advantageous places (the geographical movement of both capital and labour)," motivated by capitalism's relentless pursuit of "[n]ew spaces," "new markets, new sources of raw materials, fresh labour power, and new and more profitable sites for production operations" (*Condition* 106). No wonder, then, that Brooks begins her review of the play by noting "how a story set in the furthest reaches of our galaxy can feel so hauntingly close to home."

The compressions of time and space that proliferate throughout *X*, *Mercury Fur*, and *The Skriker* vividly theatricalize the theoretical concepts undergirding Harvey's formulation of late capitalism, indexing neoliberalism's entanglement with class stratification and the reconstitution of elite class power. Twenty years before the premiere of *X*, London's 1996 theatre season saw two concurrently running plays – Winsome Pinnock's *Mules* at the Royal Court and Pam Gems's *Stanley* at the National – that similarly adumbrate global capitalism's intersections not only with class but also with the theatre itself. *Mules* collapses geographical distance in its dramatization of the international drug trade, theatricalizing the flexible mobility and circulation of both bodies and capital in the neoliberal economy. By contrast – and the difference between the plays is stark

*Stanley*'s spatiotemporal compressions, both in performance and in the play's production history, alert us to the circulation of art in a way that should remind us of *Enron* and *Serious Money* (though Gems's play was far more "successful" on Broadway than either Prebble's or Churchill's play).

Commissioned by Clean Break, whose mandate involves providing a theatrical voice for incarcerated women and female ex-offenders, *Mules* examines women's exploitation by global drug trafficking, "a lucrative trade which effectively performs as a multi-national corporation" (Programme). The translocation of women's bodies in the service of the drug trade thus becomes "synonymous with the circulation of drugs, the movement that generates the capital" sustaining the patriarchal capitalist structure privileging any number of unseen (male) characters (Griffin, *Contemporary* 218). Roxana Silbert's production used large grey suitcases to situate each scene as the play shuttles between locations, and its episodic structure – Jane Edwardes evocatively noted that the "scenes come in as fast as the planes at Heathrow" (*Mules* 547) – contributes to a "fragmented narrative that offers no real concept of time," while the "[m]ultiple settings, and rapid shifts, emphasise feelings of rootlessness, transience and displacement" (Goddard 31). The resulting aesthetic theatricalizes what DeLinda Marzette describes as the "episodic discord that occurs first from migratory displacement and fragmentation, and second from an attempt to secure a sense of stability, belonging, and wholeness that is often elusive" (50).

Significant, too, in this respect was the play's casting. While Pinnock said the roles "could be taken by any actress, irrespective of culture or background" (Bartholomew), <sup>22</sup> the twelve parts were divided up among Sheila Whitfield, Abi Eniola, and Clare Perkins, three Black

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Minutes from a meeting two months before auditions projected that the "cast of three actresses will probably all be black and must have some sort of ex-offending or ex-institutional history. [...] A cast of ex-offenders should be seen as a positive element of the production which should be stressed when its excellence is judged by the press" ("Meeting"). The decision was ultimately abandoned.

actors, whose embodiment of the characters necessarily underscored the racist dimension of capitalist exploitation.<sup>23</sup> The casting of *Mules*, according to Gabriele Griffin, thus "replays one particular employment history of the British Empire repeatedly presented in Pinnock's plays, [...] namely the extraction of black labour from colonized countries to support the expansion of the post-World War II British economy" ("Remains" 200). But the division of twelve roles among three actors – especially in a play so "rich with the multifarious accents, intonations, speech patterns and dialects of the various communities represented" (Bayley 545) – meant that Whitfield, Eniola, and Perkins played a range of nationalities and class backgrounds. Bernhard Reitz notes that this doubling was "predominantly [...] realised linguistically" and bolstered by onstage costume changes that "visually denominated the different social status" of each character (43). Toggling between economic privilege and disenfranchisement, Elaine Aston rightly asserts, "meant that any one performer had to switch between dominant and subordinate positions" (134), thus "crossing between materially empowered and disempowered roles" and "mak[ing] visible to spectators the inequities produced by a capitalist system" (*Feminist* 134–35). But it, too, reveals capitalism's precarity and instability, dramatized when Bridie - the jet-setting recruiter who seduces women with promises of world travel – is found beaten and bloodied at the hands of a higher-up in the drug ring. "Good way as any of motivating your staff, I suppose" (65), her colleague reflects grimly: "She's nothing but a mule" (67). Josie experiences a similar fall from grace in *The Skriker*. One moment, she partakes of the sumptuous underworld feast; the next, she "appears on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor" (271).

Mules shares another uncanny consonance with The Skriker. Nowhere is the parallel

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> I would be remiss to ignore *Mercury Fur*'s own preoccupation with racist exploitation. It is certainly no coincidence that the Party Piece is routinely cast as a young boy of colour. Naz, too, selected as the Party Piece's surrogate in the final scene, was played, in the original production, by Shane Zaza and, in the New Group production, by Tony Revolori (of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* fame).

clearer than during Bridie's recruitment of the homeless Allie. She explains – half to Allie, half to the audience – that "[b]egging is the purest form of commercialism" (41), and Pinnock's stage directions indicate that Bridie "throws a coin to Allie who catches it. As she speaks she throws more coins to her. By the end of her speech she is throwing coins to the ground and Allie is scrambling around on all fours to collect them" (41). Bridie disguises her seduction as charity, though she caps off their exchange with an acid reminder that "you will be paying for it. Eventually" (42). The scene, of course, reminds us of Lily "talking good as gold speaking pound coins round coins" (253) after kissing the Skriker. Elizabeth Sakellaridou observes in this "gestic transaction of money" ("Old Wine" 131) an alignment of Bridie with the Skriker, both sinister yet seductive trickster figures who hover over their respective plays. But, unlike the Skriker, Bridie is mortal – a Black woman, "a subspecies within the main species" (36), as one of Pinnock's characters (referred to only as Bad Girl) hypothesizes: "Main species homo-caucasian with hetero-erotic tendencies. Everything else is baloney" (37) – and, thus, she is just as much at risk of being victimized by the capitalist system she attempts to master as the girls she recruits.

Bridie's success seems a product of her consistent rootlessness. She boasts to sisters Lou and Lyla about travelling "[a]ll over the world. The States, Europe – Spain, France, Britain, Amsterdam. [...] I travel so much I don't have a proper home" (26–27), a living situation that perhaps parallels that of Allie, forced into homelessness after fleeing an abusive household and being evicted from her flat. Bridie's lack of home, by contrast, is a choice. But her exchange with Lou and Lyla gives us pause, for the play opens with Bridie having finally become a homeowner – after the "[y]ears you've lived out of a suitcase" (4) – only to sell her new house and move out in the second act. Bridie expresses a claustrophobic sense of confinement related to the concept of home, as opposed to transient spaces like hotels, where "you always feel as if you're going somewhere. En route. [...] When I stop travelling, I still feel like I'm flying" (50). Central to this glorification of rootlessness, then, is the alignment of mobility with power, hence Bridie's rejection of anything that might hinder her freedom of movement. She advises Lou, "you don't want anybody to hold you back. I can see you've got a future. You could end up going all over the world" (32), suggesting that one's success – one's "future," a curiously temporal articulation of a capitalist goal – dovetails with the ability to move as freely as possible.

If Pinnock offers us, in Allie, an antipode to this impulse for movement – she eagerly rents a room and "*savour*[*s*] *being alone in a room that she temporarily 'owns*" (7) – the other women in the play follow Bridie's lead. Lou confesses, "America, Englan'. I would like to see those places" (26), her dream of leaving Jamaica wrapped up in a consumerist fantasy of being "dress up in Gucci and Gabbana" (35). The irony, of course, is that the mobility Bridie encourages enslaves rather than liberates. The women's romanticized notion of travel "emerges as a forced movement that keeps women in their place within the patriarchal capitalist economy in which they play their role as mules on a treadmill keeping the machinery and machinations of male owners going" (Griffin, *Contemporary* 221). The play's sharpest indictment, then, arrives when Lou and Allie are imprisoned in the same jail cell: one woman dreamed of travel while the other strove to put down roots, but both are equally victimized by the capitalist system with which they engage in order to pursue their respective ambitions.

This confinement – not only to a physical space but also to a marginalized stratum of what bell hooks identifies as the "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (22) – prompts a different fantasy of mobility, freed from both consumerism and strictures of time and space. Allie imagines mounting a giant bird that carries her away into a nebulous expanse, and Lou, who has so far only reluctantly reciprocated Allie's attempts at conversation, joins in the fantasy:

LOU	Higher and higher.
ALLIE	Above the clouds. [] Moving swiftly through London's different zones.
LOU	Up, up, up.
ALLIE	Land disappears. [] Day and night passing us in seconds. Time passing quickly with the miles. (64)

This new dream of mobility rejects the geographical locations Lou wished to visit, and it too spurns the temporal logic to which capitalism is bound. In this moment, Sakellaridou writes (with a curious essentialism), "the black spirit of migration, emancipation and visionary longing creates a special atmosphere, transience and transcendence" ("Winsome Pinnock" 392). If Bridie concedes that she is "obsessive about time" (35), Allie and Lou fantasize about extricating themselves from time and space altogether, a withdrawal from the spatial and temporal domains over which the neoliberal model has established control.

The sisterly solidarity that plays out between Allie and Lou – reinforced in the premiere by Sheila Whitfield, who played Allie, doubling as Lyla – suggests an antidote to the alienation Pinnock weaves into the play, evinced most clearly by recurring images of failed motherhood. While Bridie's mother abandoned her at fourteen and Allie's shunted her aside in favour of a new man, Lou and Lyla describe shamefully rejecting their mother, who "sleep naked a roadside. Sometime I see her I have to turn my head away like as if I don't know her" (31). And, later, when Bridie visits Trenchtown and finds Lyla caring for several neighbourhood children, Lyla explains that "[t]hem mother disappear. [...] She was a higgler, go off on a shopping trip to restock. Nobody see or hear from her since" (58), drawing attention to the capacity of the market to destructively intervene in familial relationships, something to which Pinnock alludes in Lou and Lyla's first scene, set in the Kingston market where they "higgle" their wares.<sup>24</sup>

For Bridie, the sisterhood that binds Lou and Lyla represents the same sense of confinement and stasis that she sees emblematized by the home, which explains why she urges Lou to "[t]ake my advice, trust no one. Not even that baby sister of yours" (32). Bridie's concept of sisterhood is thoroughly recast in the context of capital – consider Allie's recollection of learning to insert cocaine-filled condoms into her vagina: "Bridie taught me how to put them in. Like a big sister teaching you how to use tampons" (55) – and, like capital, her sense of sisterly obligation is volatile and unreliable. When Bridie reports a number of her mules to customs (Lou among them) – a calculated loss to distract from the larger number of mules who make it through – Lyla entreats her, "You know what it like when you hear you sister crying out because she get stop at the airport? You know what it like when you can't stop and help her? When you can't even look back? When you have to get on the plane even though her screams ringing in your ears?" (60). The answer, of course, is no. Bridie has already confessed, "As an only child I can't say that I've ever understood the bond between sisters" (31).

Lou's shared fantasy with Allie, then, militates against this disintegration of the bond between sisters, between mothers and daughters. And Pinnock closes the play with an image of Lou and Lyla that is at once dismally circular but marginally hopeful too. Lou, having served her prison sentence, returns to Trenchtown, where Lyla works in a ganja field for an exploitatively low wage. The sisters' stasis – adumbrated by Lou's final line, "We will never leave the ghetto" (71) – is mitigated only by their reunion, a reconstitution of family and community that emerges

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> The motif of motherhood helps us make sense of how Allie analogizes the comfort of touching the imaginary bird: "Oh God, that feels good. [...] Like lying on your mother's tit when you were a baby" (62), indexing the yearning for maternal care wrapped up in all four women's respective desires.

in the play as anomalous.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting on her time in jail, Lou tells Lyla, "Every day I thought about you, carry your picture to bed to help me sleep, think about home," and Lyla reassures her, "An' now you never have to leave again" (70). Unlike their first onstage appearance set in the market, this final exchange between Lou and Lyla invokes home - indeed, it invokes roots, tellingly set in a field, regardless of what grows in it – and, most importantly, the stage direction indicating that Lyla "carries a baby on her back" (67) invokes motherhood too. Of course, Lou's worldview has not entirely changed: as she cradles her newborn niece, she tells the infant, "I hope that you will travel to far away lands. I wish you the power of flight" (71), articulating the same fantasy of mobility that induced her to enter the drug trade at the start of the play. But, though Lou and Lyla will continue to be exploited by the "neo-colonial policies of transnational capitalism" (Sakellaridou, "Old Wine" 129), reduced to working for the same trade that exploited and separated them, the renewed bonds of sisterhood and motherhood that Pinnock dramatizes in the last scene of Mules - as Ridley would almost a decade later at the end of Mercury Fur, with Darren's desperate evocation of brotherhood and the resilience of familial love – emerge as perhaps the only viable means of thriving.

In keeping with Clean Break's mandate of speaking to and about women and criminality, a touring production of *Mules* visited a number of prisons for women and young offenders after the completion of its initial run, participating in a purposeful circulation that bore at least some consonance with its subject matter – a different kind of labour, to be sure, but one which relied on the translocation of women's bodies in order to exist. As *Mules* prepared to leave the Royal Court, Gems's *Stanley* enjoyed a lengthy run at the National, where it ran in repertory in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> The play's evocation of a community of women speaks to Clean Break's "women-only identity," which the company maintains is "crucial to our history and rationale" ("About Us"). The principle extended beyond the stage: in addition to Silbert and the all-female cast, Clean Break stipulated to the Royal Court that the "Stage Management team must all be female" ("Notes").

Cottesloe (home to *The Skriker* two years earlier). Its commercial success led to a West End transfer and then a Broadway run at the Circle in the Square the following year. Thus, like *Mules*, Gems's play engaged in a remarkable kind of circulation, but in a way that more clearly underlines its status as an artistic commodity. Harvey warns against underestimating capitalism's capacity to penetrate the arts: "Cultural life is often held to be outside rather than within the embrace of this capitalist logic," but, indeed, "[p]recisely because capitalism is expansionary and imperialistic, cultural life in more and more areas gets brought within the grasp of the cash nexus and the logic of capital circulation" (344). In contrast to Clean Break's touring production of *Mules* – spurred on by its desire to foster communities of marginalized women and, overall, a significantly less lucrative production – *Stanley* emerged as a cultural product whose circulation indexes precisely the relationship between capital and the arts that Harvey describes.

The play was a hit on London stages, but, as it prepared to head overseas, *Sunday Times* journalist Clive Davis expressed uncertainty about how *Stanley* would fare in front of American playgoers largely unfamiliar with the play's titular English artist, asking, "can the international audience be won over to this seemingly most English of painters?" (8). Apparently, they could. *Stanley*'s Broadway transfer seemed to successfully face down the forces that caused plays like *Serious Money* and *Enron* to flounder in New York, garnering commercial success and a Tony nomination for Best Play. And while Antony Sher – who earned a Tony nomination for his portrayal of Spencer (in addition to the Olivier he won in London) – lamented that "Americans knew about neither his private life nor his work. [...] We played our full three-month run, but to half-empty houses" (qtd. in Rosenthal 548), the Broadway run's grosses, published in *Variety*, indicated otherwise: the production's impressive net receipts and attendance records boasted a run low of 79.3% attendance in the show's second week, followed by 99.3% in its third, before

settling into the eighties for the remainder of the run (74, 88).

Stanley profiles the eponymous artist's two marriages – first to the long-suffering Hilda Carline, then to the emotionally (and sexually) unavailable Patricia Preece – and his ambition to construct a cathedral showcasing his artwork. While it engages issues of gender and sexuality (Preece's lifelong romantic relationship with Dorothy Hepworth, for instance, or Spencer's ardent hope that Preece and Carline would indulge his fantasy of a threesome), the play is politically uncomplicated, to which it perhaps owes much of its success. Aston assesses that "passion rather than polemic [...] motivate[s] Gems; biographical 'truths' rather than political ends remain her theatrical objective" ("Pam Gems" 171). By the time Stanley premiered at the National, Gems had already written a number of biographical plays, among them dramatizations of Edith Piaf and Marlene Dietrich, and she would continue to focus on biographical content in her plays until her death in 2011. But – if Aston's scare quotes around the word "truth" are any indication – some critics were less than impressed with Gems's treatment of history. In a particularly acid review of Marlene, Michael Feingold called Gems "the literary equivalent of mad cow disease [...] on the rampage again, turning yet another dead celebrity's career into tainted hamburger," and he reflected on *Stanley*, too, as "stupid and tiresome" (149).

Kenneth Pople, Spencer's foremost biographer – who wrote the first in-depth biography of the painter, compiled with unlimited access to his diaries and letters – reviewed the script before the premiere and objected strongly to Gems's dramatization. In a letter to Angela Fairclough, the production's stage manager, Pople accused Gems of emphasizing the salacious details of Spencer's personal life and playing fast and loose with historical fact in favour of box office appeal:

This material has then been re-arranged – distorted to the purist – in the interests

of stagecraft. More Ben Travers in fact than Ibsen. I ask myself by what right a playwright who acts in this way takes it upon herself to turn the life, art and vision of a dedicated, admired and recently deceased painter into entertainment without enlightenment. I see no justification.

Pople itemized what he deemed to be factual inaccuracies and mischaracterizations in the play: "Scene Two is fictitious, and to a biographer highly unconvincing"; "Scene Six. Maybe a good theatrical stage scene, but otherwise unrealistic"; "Stanley 'hysterical' at war recollections. Unlikely." He took issue, too, with Gems's characterization of the other artists in Spencer's coterie. When Stanley laments, "Dudley's worried, [...] he says he can't sell my work! [...] He says people think it's dirty" (63), Pople wrote, "Bottom of page, 'dirty'. Did Dudley Tooth say this? I doubt he would have been so tactless as to be quite so blunt. His daughter, Mrs Pauline Tooth-Matthews, might wish to comment." Indeed, she did – in the form of two handwritten letters to Fairclough: the first included the copy of the script she had been lent and a request that Fairclough "secure me some seats for the Preview of Monday, January 29th – just let me know if I need to pay for some of them"; the second, dated 30 January, read, "Thank you <u>very</u> much for organising the four seats for last nights [*sic*] Preview of 'Stanley' – which we all <u>really</u> enjoyed. [...] [W]e were all thrilled to be there" (underlining in original).

The play pleased not because it offered a historically rigorous account of Spencer's life and art but precisely because it didn't. Gems's privileging of stagecraft and theatricality over biographical truth impressed even Richard Hurley, chairman, at the time, of the Friends of the Stanley Spencer Gallery, who urged Fairclough to "[p]lease let everyone know how exciting we thought the whole production – the scenery, staging and direction as well as the acting. [...] We should be pleased to see you, and anyone else connected with the play, in Cookham at any time." The warm reception *Stanley* enjoyed, even among those closely affiliated with Spencer's legacy (Pople, of course, is the notable exception), indexes, at some level, a general acceptance that history is open to manipulation in the service of entertainment – that is, commercial profitability and capital gain. Importantly, Hurley's gesture to Tim Hatley's set underlines arguably the production's most lauded element (besides the performances), a stage design meant to immerse the audience in Spencer's artistic vision, which coalesced religious iconography and fleshly sensuality: the use of pews in the auditorium "transformed" the Cottesloe "into a sort of secular cathedral" (Taylor, *Stanley* 129), while "every surface ha[d] been covered with Spencer's lumpen, writhing figures" (Edwardes, *Stanley* 127). Benedict Nightingale raved that "[t]he Cottesloe can never have looked so exotic" (*Stanley* 129).

The staging thus attempted to replicate the unusual collapse of time and space that Spencer accomplished in his work, emblematized by "The Resurrection, Cookham," which depicted biblical events restaged in his native Berkshire village, to which he remained steadfastly attached throughout his life. Reviewer John Peter saw Spencer's commitment to Cookham as "a kind of emotional agoraphobia" and noted that the artist "talked so much about his village that his fellow students called him Cookham" (*Stanley* 130), and the metonym certainly grounds him in a fixed geographical place. But, in "transform[ing] the very solid flesh of English country people into contemporary versions of biblical myth" (Innes 245), Spencer simultaneously achieved an exceptional compression of spatial and temporal distance: the Christ figure in Cookham, his (and Spencer's) working class peers recreating the acts of the disciples, illuminates the artist's hand reaching into the past, over to the Middle East, in order to deliver its material reality into his present spatiotemporal moment, much like the Saharan dust in *Mercury Fur*, the sepia photographs Ridley recalls from his childhood, or the Skriker's mystified observation of television: "it's happening there and it's here" (254; emphasis in original).

What these five plays accomplish, then – in their stagecraft, their thematization of place and travel, their telescopic treatment of history and time, and their geographical circulation as works of art (and, indeed, of labour) – is a remarkable theatrical translation of the political, economic, and cultural forces Harvey has observed at work since the end of the Second World War. If time-space compression is the hallmark feature of global capitalism and flexible accumulation, its recurring dramatization speaks to the dizzying ubiquity of capital in our daily lives, holding us always in thrall to its spatiotemporal illogic and contorting us according to its characteristic flexibility. In this context, the Skriker's instruction to Lily to "[w]atch the lightyear" (289) connotes suddenly differently, tapping into the term's conflation of time and space, a measurement of galactic distance that seems to evoke time in its name. In neoliberalism's cultivation of a "highly unified global space economy of capital flows" (Harvey 296), the world - indeed, the universe - has seemingly become smaller, wrangled into the parameters and jurisdiction of the so-called global market, just as time has been reconfigured and leveraged in the service of capitalist ends. By staging such compressions of space and time, the plays in this chapter diagnose not only neoliberalism's revision of cultural life but also its constitutive preoccupation with class stratification and wealth acquisition, the ramifications of which penetrate even the remotest corners of our world and beyond.

## CHAPTER THREE

## "A LABOUR INTENSIVE RATHER THAN MATERIAL COST": DIFFUSE LABOUR AND THE POSTDRAMATIC

In his influential treatise *Postdramatic Theatre*, Hans-Thies Lehmann asserts that the conventions of plot and character – constitutive elements of traditional drama – have become increasingly absent on the contemporary stage, a tendency he identifies as characteristic of "postdramatic" theatre: "The adjective 'postdramatic' denotes a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama, at a time 'after' the authority of the dramatic paradigm in theatre" (27). Where there was once plot, scenes unfolding sequentially in the service of dramatic tension and cohesive storytelling, there is now montage, scenarios set off against each other, working against the dramatic constraint of narrative continuity. Where there were once characters, there are now anonymous speakers, bearers of speech who have, in David Barnett's summation, "no other responsibility than to deliver text: that is, not to interpret. The theatre becomes a place in which speech is not processed on the stage but in the auditorium" (18). Language, then, unfixed from character and characterization, represents a newly independent element of performance in the postdramatic theatre, "appear[ing] not as the speech of characters – if there still are definable characters at all – but as an autonomous theatricality" (Lehmann 18). No longer necessarily in service to the advancement of plot or the development of character, the language of postdramatic theatre functions as a spur to creative invention, inviting theatre practitioners to make meaning in the much wider gaps between page and stage, to translate into performance a theatre text that is fundamentally distant from the dramatic tradition as we have known it.

"Postdramatic" is a term I approach with scepticism and curiosity in equal parts: scepticism because the term is not particularly useful beyond its taxonomy; curiosity because what the term describes correlates with a broader shift in theatre and performance that has not yet been fully contemplated. The influence of Lehmann's book, translated into English by Karen Jürs-Munby's in 2006, should not be understated – indeed, the word "postdramatic" has been uncritically deployed for two decades – but it has attracted its share of controversy and challenge as well. Piet Defraeye, for instance, described the study as "overwhelmingly production-heavy," with a demonstrable cultural bias that takes its cues from the work of Dutch, Flemish, and German theatre companies (646). The theatrical sensibilities Lehmann describes, therefore, even when they share commonalities with, say, contemporary theatre in Britain, should not be so broadly applied without considered recontextualization. Similarly, Elinor Fuchs suggested that the sheer volume of theatre practitioners classified in the book as postdramatic artists signals a totalizing perspective that invariably obfuscates the distinct qualities of their respective works: "With a single term, Lehmann re-creates three or more generations of theatrical outliers as a movement. Virtually every contemporary theatre artist and group of international note is here identified as a practitioner of the postdramatic" (179).

Perhaps the most basic challenge to Lehmann's terminology invokes a consideration of the term "drama." If performance broadly conceived – or even theatre as an institution – might be aptly described as postdramatic, can a *play* ever be classified in the same way? Does the absence of plot and character, in other words, necessarily void a play of drama? In *Performance Theory*, Richard Schechner defines drama as a "written text, score, scenario, instruction, plan, or map. The drama can be taken from place to place or time to time independent of the person or people who carry it" (71). What he describes is the textual output of playwrights and theatre devisors, something that retains a level of consistency each time that it is performed. A play, then, which generally relies on a static script, fulfils from the outset what Schechner sets out as

the minimum requirement for drama: in most cases, its structure depends on a "tight, verbal narrative; it allows for little improvisation; it exists as a code independent of any individual transmitter; it is, or can easily be made into, a written text" (94).

I focus primarily in this chapter on two plays – Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* and Caryl Churchill's *Love and Information* – whose coherence as theatre texts locates them firmly under Schechner's rubric for drama but whose formal characteristics have more commonly led to their classification as postdramatic. *Attempts on Her Life*, premiered at the Royal Court in 1997 in a production directed by Tim Albery and revived a decade later at the National Theatre by Katie Mitchell, consists of seventeen discrete scenes united by a central motif – the eponymous "Her" – but without any narrative continuity or semblance of conventional plot. Characterization is similarly jettisoned: dashes replace speech prefixes, so that we have sense of neither who is speaking nor how many people are on stage. *Love and Information*, whose 2012 Royal Court premiere and 2014 New York Theatre Workshop production were both directed by James Macdonald, shares several of these formal and textual features. Its fifty short scenes (as well as the several optional scenes that can be inserted at the will of the director) explore the play's titular topics in verbal exchanges entirely discrete from one another and devoid of stage directions and speech prefixes.

In the introduction to her translation of *Postdramatic Theatre*, Jürs-Munby argues that contemporary postdramatic plays give "renewed attention to the materiality of performance in theatre" and provide "renewed challenges to the dominance of the text" (4). It is precisely this notion of the drama as a written text demanding obedience – and its attendant deification of the playwright, whose vision must be realized with care to preserve its integrity – that is undone by the postdramatic. In this newer form, the once hallowed dramatic text becomes "just one element

in the scenography and general 'performance writing' of theatre" (4). But this chapter has little interest in interrogating the legitimacy of *Attempts on Her Life* and *Love and Information* as postdramatic plays. Rather, my focus is on how their postdramatic qualities – their tremendous latitude for theatricalization and their invitation to directors, designers, and actors to invent and make meaning from an unusually blank and ambiguous text – shine a necessary light on creative labour in the theatre and destabilize a hierarchical mode of performance practice that has persisted in British theatre culture for the better part of a century. In so doing, they index the theatre's persistent entanglement with global capitalism and the inevitable parallels between Britain's political and theatrical histories: just as neoliberalism enshrined itself as the country's economic status quo, so too have its ramifications for social life been reflected in both the labour practices and formal experimentations of the theatre.

My analysis of both plays, then, in line with Ric Knowles's "materialist semiotics" (4), is concerned with the material exigencies of their productions and the creative effort required to bring to life two dramatic texts that provide only minimal guidelines for theatricalization. In the case of *Attempts on Her Life*, I pay particular attention to rehearsal notes from both Albery's premiere and Mitchell's ten-year-anniversary revival in order to glean an understanding of not only how both directors approached the ambitious task of making sense of Crimp's script but also how their ideas, in tandem with those of their designers and performers, shifted and adapted over the course of rehearsals – especially given that the high-tech nature of both productions required the actors to navigate and operate an abundance of onstage machinery. My analysis of *Love and Information* similarly illuminates the radical polyvalence of Churchill's text by examining scenes that accommodated – perhaps even encouraged – wildly different stagings in both Macdonald's London and New York productions as well as in the play's 2018 production in

Toronto, co-directed by Tanja Jacobs and Alistair Newton. These differences in staging reveal the degree to which the meaning of *Love and Information* inheres less in the written text itself than in its material realization on the stage – that is, in the meanings made by the directors, designers, and performers who bring the show to life and by the spectators who witness it.

While Miriam Buether's set design in London and New York emphasized the snapshotlike quality of Churchill's script by concealing the show's onstage and backstage labour, the Toronto production, like Albery's and Mitchell's productions of *Attempts on Her Life*, visually emphasized the labouring bodies of its performers. This foregrounding of physical work – as a corollary of the creative work that happens in the rehearsal room leading up to opening night – reminds us that the theatre is enmeshed in a broader network of labour markets, in no way insulated from the ebbs and flows of flexible accumulation. Maybe there is an analogy to be made between, on the one hand, Crimp's and Churchill's shifting of the creative labour of meaning-making, traditionally the domain of the playwright, to the directors and designers of their plays and, on the other, the outsourcing of labour that has become a fixture of the worldwide neoliberal economy. Contemporary theatre has often critiqued and resisted the advancement of global capitalism, but it too has been made to adapt in ways beyond its control: that it may have absorbed the strategies of neoliberal consensus politics, whether unwittingly or under duress, hardly seems unlikely.

If the trend towards the postdramatic correlates with the diffusion of labour that is part and parcel of the global capitalist model, however, it simultaneously dissolves a hierarchical performance practice in such a way that relies more broadly on collaboration – not only among the theatre practitioners mounting a play such as *Love and Information* or *Attempts on Her Life* but also among the spectators in the auditorium, whose apprehension of what they see on stage calls on them to make meaning as well. This invisible, immaterial labour – which, as Nicholas Ridout tells us, encompasses "as 'work' all kinds of activities that are not normally understood as such," including "acts of spectatorial consumption" (*Passionate* 122) – bears its own parallels to neoliberal labour practices, for we might see the encouragement of spectatorial meaning-making as an outsourcing of creative labour to the audience. In this chapter's brief coda, then, I turn, as a kind of provocation, to Tim Crouch's *The Author*, whose final moments resemble at once the "utopian performative" extolled by Jill Dolan and the "social turn" critiqued by scholars such as Claire Bishop and Shannon Jackson. But, even if the work entailed by the postdramatic bears unsettling similarities to the diffusion of labour in the neoliberal economy, perhaps we paradoxically find therein a renewed impulse towards the lateral, collaborative kinds of labour that dismantle longstanding hierarchies and provide new avenues for political resistance.

## §

Martin Crimp achieved success in the eighties and early nineties with a string of plays at the Orange Tree Theatre, two Royal Court premieres – *No One Sees the Video* in the Theatre Upstairs in 1990 and *The Treatment* in the Theatre Downstairs in 1993 – and a well-received translation of Molière's *The Misanthrope* at the Young Vic in 1996. But it was not until 1997's *Attempts on Her Life*, which Aleks Sierz described as "an ambitious attempt to recast theatrical form" (*In-Yer-Face* 119), that Crimp achieved the height of his recognition and notoriety with a play that many still hail as his most important work. Subtitled "17 Scenarios for the Theatre" (3), the play comprises of a series of loosely related vignettes, each apparently involving a woman – or some iteration of a woman – referred to by various derivations of the name Anne (Anny, Anya, Annushka, etc.). The ominous first scenario, composed of a day's worth of voice messages left on an answering machine, sets the tone by drawing our attention to Anne's

conspicuous absence. This introduction – which has often been cut in performance – gives way to sixteen more scenarios in which the titular "Her" is described, analyzed, debated, advertised, ventriloquized, sung about, mused over, and otherwise represented in various ways, despite very likely never actually appearing on stage.

This vague attempt at synopsis misleads, however. There is no coherent narrative in Attempts on Her Life, certainly not in the Aristotelian sense of plot; the play's arrangement of events places side by side scenarios that share neither causal connection nor narrative continuity. And, thus, the accounts we receive of Anne often have little or nothing to do with one another: some scenarios depict her as the protagonist of a pulpy screenplay – a nod to another iteration of Anne (albeit a more cohesive one) in Crimp's earlier play *The Treatment*<sup>1</sup> – while others describe her as a suicidal artist, a porn star, a terrorist, a child murderer, a host body for aliens on a terrestrial spy mission, and a sleek new sports car that, remarkably, assists in ethnic cleansing: "There is no room in the Anny for the degenerate races. [...] No room for gypsies, Arabs, Jews, Turks, Kurds, Blacks or any of that human scum" (39). In her assessment of the play, Elisabeth Angel-Perez identifies this polymorphous figure as an "object of consumption in a psychotic universe where the difference between subject and object, matter and spirit, is abolished,"<sup>2</sup> an observation in line with Sierz's claim that the ambiguous "Her" of the play's title is ultimately "an absurdist notion, an absence filled by other people's opinions and ideas" (*Theatre* 52). Punctuating these varied scenarios are two musical numbers, one of which, titled "The Camera Loves You," appropriately celebrates "all the things that Anne can be" (25).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In *The Treatment*, Anne is an onstage character whose life story is being adapted – with extreme artistic liberty – into a film. Mary Luckhurst identifies the character as "a partial fore-shadowing of 'Anne' in *Attempts on her Life*, [...] sexually and emotionally used by two film executives who are interested not in her but in the salacious abuse narratives they wish to invent around her" (53).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> My translation; in the original French, Angel-Perez writes that "Anne devient objet de consommation dans un univers psychotique où la différence entre sujet et objet, matière et esprit, tend à s'abolir" (104).

Crimp's rejection of traditional narrative and characterization finds its most radical expression in the play's fragmented textual form: lines are designated by dashes, but the play is devoid of speech prefixes, thereby unfixing dialogue from specific or stable characters. Indeed, there are no characters at all (at least not in the conventional sense), since the presence of developed characters with cohesive individual identities would dull the bite of Crimp's argument – that identity is less the product of self-determination than a violent imposition from without – and risks "confer[ring] a representation with a sense of singularity where no such quality may be said to exist" (Barnett 15). As Rachel Spengler puts it, because Anne "is embodied by multiple figures, this anonymous epic subject which replaces traditional dramatic character constitutes not so much a *non-personage* as an *impersonage*, bound to a nomadic identity."<sup>3</sup>

Nor is there any definitive indication of how many performers are on stage at any given time or even how many actors make up the cast. Instead, Crimp, in the play's unpaginated front matter, ambiguously calls for "a company of actors whose composition should reflect the composition of the world beyond the theatre." This intentionally vague production note opens up an infinite number of possibilities, depending on which "world beyond the theatre" a director desires to portray, and a production's casting choices – perhaps intended to underscore gender, race, age, etc. – can effect radically different meanings within the broader context of the play. (Charles Spencer, for instance, complained that Mitchell's 2007 revival featured "a cast where women outnumber blokes by almost two to one, and there aren't any old or ugly people" [*Attempts* 310].) As Sierz asserts, therefore, "the piece positively heaves with potential for imaginative stagings" ("Reality" 103) and destabilizes, from the very start, the certainties of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> My translation; in the original French, Spengler writes that, since the play's central subject "s'incarne en de multiples figures, le sujet épique anonyme qui se substitue au personnage agissant et caractérisé ne compose donc pas tant un *non-personnage* qu'un *impersonnage*, voué au nomadisme identitaire" (55; emphasis in original).

dramatic convention to which we have become so accustomed in the theatre.

Not surprisingly, the play "posed a serious dilemma for reviewers of the premiere" (Luckhurst 47). While some reviewers refrained from engaging critically with the piece, others, such as Nicholas de Jongh, denigrated the play. In his review for the *Evening Standard*, de Jongh began by wondering if *Attempts on Her Life* had "fired a warning shot to suggest what the brave new theatre of the twenty-first century will look like – both on stage and page," but he went on to conclude that the play was "[j]ust heartfelt pretension" (*Attempts*, Royal Court 311). Alistair Macaulay similarly derided what he perceived as the play's "obscurantism," dismissing it as "slick, ironic, detached, flashy, wiseguy stuff[,] [...] post-civilisation, post-truth, post-feeling, post-teeth, post-everything" (312). But Crimp's acid criticism of postmodern pseudo-intellectual navel-gazing and his renunciation of dramaturgical convention are precisely the point of *Attempts on Her Life*, whose ironic deployment of postmodernist aesthetics and sensibilities is emblematic of the playwright's regular experimentation – which here reaches its zenith – "with different ways of matching form and content" (Sierz, "Form" 376).

The premiere, designed by Gideon Davey, opened at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs (temporarily housed at the Ambassador's in the West End while the Royal Court building in Sloane Square underwent renovations). Sierz itemizes the unusually detailed set:

In defiance of the Court's tradition of austere staging, *Attempts on Her Life* was overtly theatrical, a richly entertaining event despite its tiny budget. Images of Albery's production that stick in the mind include the two long lines of red lights that converged at the back of the stage, suggesting an airport runway; a black frame reminiscent of airplane windows, conference venues or a television screen; the passing images of X-rayed luggage on an airport carousel[,] [...] bleak

cityscapes and a violent TV movie[,] [...] a rap song while a film projection showed a girl's legs dangling – which suddenly twitch as blood starts running down them, soaking her white socks – and [...] a showbiz song-and-dance routine. (*Theatre* 51)

As Sierz correctly infers, the show's spectacular staging stretched the production's budget to its limits, and archived letters demonstrate the consternation Attempts on Her Life provoked among Royal Court management during the play's development. In a three-page memo to Donna Munday, the Court's financial administrator, just one week before Attempts on Her Life's first rehearsal, production manager Paul Handley detailed his reservations about the show's production demands and technical requirements: "The problem is the whole scale of it and the principle by which it is expected to be realised." He was concerned, too, that the budget for an Upstairs production – he conceded that "considering this project with a downstairs budget would be frightening enough" – would only "achieve the basic elements of this project [...]. It won't go anywhere near realising the technical detail of it," which he anticipated would "stretch each of the technical departments to its utmost. This will have obvious financial implications [...] and quite easily double the current figure." Handley too worried about the production setting "a precedent [...] for what can be achieved" in the Theatre Upstairs, citing "the difference with the Theatre Downstairs which has budgets over ten times as great and stage management paid considerably more for the professional work they do. It's a different relationship."

Handley's anxiety about the production, explicitly linked in the memo to the Royal Court's financial constraints, surely had just as much to do with *Attempts on Her Life*'s peculiar sense of sprawl, the pervasive amorphousness and unfixity with which it purposefully invites directors to engage and invent. Crimp's pair of notes in the front matter of the play's first published edition perfectly encapsulate the creative carte blanche that *Attempts on Her Life* offers to those who stage it: first, the already mentioned casting note and, second, the directive that "each scenario in words – the dialogue – unfold against a distinct world – a design – which best exposes its irony." That Crimp's note sets off in dashes this pair of terms, "dialogue" and "design," signals a parallelism crucial to the play. Of course, the text is sustained by clear, "recognizably conversational dialogue" (Sierz, "Form" 380): while no broad narrative continuity links any one scene to the next, the internal logic of each scenario coheres around an easily apprehended dramaturgical conceit, and its speech is articulated in uncomplicated (if sometimes rhymed or sung) language, "the language not of poetic invention but of real people" (380).

But Crimp's pairing of dialogue with design prioritizes – to return again to the elements of drama itemized by Aristotle in his *Poetics* – spectacle over plot. The precise meaning of each scenario, then, inheres not simply in its dialogue, not in the text per se, but rather in the way that each scenario's dialogue is realized on the stage, an endeavour for which Crimp provides no substantial guidance, "leav[ing] all the image-making" – that is, the totality of the play's theatricalization – "up to the director" (Taylor, *Attempts* 311). Jane Edwardes agreed: "With no stage directions in the script, Crimp leaves all the imagery to the director and the designer; in this case Tim Albery and Gideon Davey have done him proud" (*Attempts* 312). The responsibility for meaning-making is thus transferred from the traditional domain of the playwright to that of the theatre company producing the play. In *Attempts on Her Life*, Crimp's parallelism of dialogue with design makes clear that it is incumbent upon the director (as well as the designers, performers, and other theatre artists involved in the production) to create meaning, precisely because so much of the play's meaning resides outside the text itself.

This shifting of emphasis from text/plot to design/spectacle indexes a stark departure

from a principle that has sustained Britain's dramatic tradition for the better part of a century: that is, the hallowed place of the playwright, whose text demands the obeisance of the directors, actors, and designers charged with bringing it to life as faithfully as possible. Consider David Hare's comments on the *Royal Court Playwright's Podcast* likening playwriting to painting, a form he claims endows the artist with the ultimate responsibility for every facet of the work and wherein all creative decisions are governed uniquely by the artist's vision, feelings, and style:

> It would be truer to say that every single thing [...] feels right or doesn't feel right in exactly the same way that a painter says something feels right or doesn't feel right. [...] And, similarly, if an actor paraphrases a line, I say, "I'm sorry. That is not the line. The line is *that*." And they say to you, "Well, it's exactly the same. It *means* exactly the same. Why does it have to be the way you want it?" And I say, "Well, it's style. And the mystery of style is precisely that: it's a mystery. But I know that it pleases me if you say my line, and it doesn't please me if you paraphrase my line. And I can't explain to you why it sounds better or more perfectly expresses what I want. I can't tell you *why*. I can only tell you, you have to do it. Because you are in *my* painting. I am the writer, and you have to be in *my* painting, and you have to behave like a character in *my* style. And you can't behave in another style." And that doesn't mean the actor can't bring something incredibly creative, but they have to accept the discipline of belonging in my picture. (qtd. in Stephens, "David Hare")

Despite a certain measure of petulance, Hare articulates in his comments a reverence for the playwright that has shaped Britain's theatrical culture and identity for decades. And there is a consonance between Hare's position and the fact that he expressed it on a podcast affiliated with

the Royal Court, a theatre whose first season in 1956 initiated a tradition of discovering, supporting, developing, and spotlighting new writers – though Hare, himself, has long maintained a fractious relationship with the theatre. (Less consonant is that the *Playwright's Podcast* is hosted by Simon Stephens, whose plays have often embraced collaborative creation and directorial intervention. For *Three Kingdoms*, Stephens shares authorial billing with director Sebastian Nübling and designer Ene-Liis Semper, a purposeful decentring of the writer that I discuss in further detail in Chapter Four.) Indeed, that the theatre puts out a podcast dedicated specifically to playwrights – each episode features an hour-long interview with a different writer associated with the Court – is perhaps evidence enough of the extent to which its artistic identity is structured by the figure of the playwright, situated at the peak of a creative hierarchy.

Hare's model not only deifies the playwright but also enshrines the written text itself as fixed and unassailable, hemmed in by the exigencies of authorial intention and impermeable to directorial or performative intervention. Indeed, as Jen Harvie has discussed in *Staging the UK*,

artists in British theatre besides the writer – from actor to director to lighting designer – have been expected to work in the service of letting "the text speak for itself." [...] These ideological commitments [...] maintain a vision of the British theatre industry as not only romantically naive but also hierarchical and fundamentally resistant to practices of devising and/or collaborating. (116–17)

In its premiere production and in every subsequent revival, *Attempts on Her Life* resists the hierarchical dominion of the British playwright: surely Crimp's language provides the play's armature, but the text, with its sheer dearth of exegetic material, "breathes and vibrates" (Angelaki, *Plays* 181) – even "heaves" (Sierz, "Reality" 103) – with possibilities for creative decision-making, open to nearly everyone else involved in the production.

Rehearsal notes from the Royal Court premiere of Attempts on Her Life paint a vivid picture of just how plastic and amorphous the show's development proved to be, each scenario's call for a unique design entailing a tremendous amount of creative labour. And if Crimp's text "breathes and vibrates," changing and evolving from one iteration to the next, so did its manifestation in performance. The first edition of the play, for example, included a scenario titled "Jungfrau [Word Association]," which consists of a brief monologue about Anna ("She is nineteen, has a long braid of glossy mahogany hair, and holds a silver stop-watch") and her relationship with a married man named Karl ("He has a thick beard, a family, and a list of one hundred words") (Crimp [1997] 58).<sup>4</sup> Apart from one line that is deliciously Crimpian – "He takes her hand and begins to suck her ringless fingers, right down to the root" (58) – the scenario, admittedly, doesn't sing. And it stands out visibly from the scene titles listed in the production notes for 13 February 1997: while the others have a corresponding entry or, in the absence of which, the tag "No news," "Jungfrau [Word Association]" is blank (Production Meeting Notes). Over the course of rehearsals, the short scenario went from featuring Sandra Voe and having an "approx. running time at present [of] 30/45 secs" (Rehearsal Notes 4 [RC]) to being eliminated entirely three weeks later: "Jungfrau' has been cut – new scene arriving on Monday!" (Rehearsal Notes 18 [RC]).<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, much of the show's development involved a process of creation and deletion, with successive rehearsal notes documenting the generation of an idea – be it for props, costumes, or effects – only to be cut a few rehearsals later. "The New Anny," a disturbing parody

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Unless noted in the parenthetical reference, as in these quotations of "Jungfrau [Word Association]" from the play's first print in 1997, all quotations from the play come from the 2007 Faber edition.
<sup>5</sup> The scene that would take its place, "Communicating with Aliens," discusses the titular Her as "a kind of Trojan Horse" for aliens, "by which they can gradually invade all of human *consciousness*" (64; emphasis in original).

of a sports car advertisement – "*spoken in an African or Eastern European language*" ("[i]n the first production, Serbo-Croatian"), after which "[*a*]*n English translation immediately follows*" (Crimp 36) – was initially to be staged featuring "4 separate slides" projecting the scenario's foreign speech "followed by its English translation. (obviously in small print!)" (Rehearsal Notes 7 [RC]). Six rehearsals later, notes indicate the "'small print' slide [...] is now <u>cut</u>. The actors are saying it instead" (Rehearsal Notes 13 [RC]; underlining in original). And that underlined word, *cut*, emerges as a refrain: "The hand held mic' has been cut. [...] The trees have been cut" (Production Meeting Notes); "It looks as though quite a few props may be cut" (Rehearsal Notes 7 [RC]); "Exhibit items in bags (Sc 14): confirmed list is as follows [...]. Everything else is cut" (Rehearsal Notes 9 [RC]); "The slide saying – 'A South American country in the 1990's' is <u>cut</u>. [...] One of the tumblers of whisky is cut" (Rehearsal Notes 13 [RC]; underlining in original).

Surely, there is nothing particularly noteworthy about a production cutting props over the course of rehearsals. What marks these cuts as significant is that they address creative choices that have almost nothing to do with Crimp's text; that is, they index the degree to which collaboration and directorial vision informed the generation and development (and, often, rejection) of creative ideas, all occurring in the more lateral space of the rehearsal room rather than being decided from the hierarchically enshrined vantage point of the playwright. The repeated decision to cut, therefore – whether motivated by practical concerns, limited finances, or creative preference – variously involved the input of the many people working on *Attempts on Her Life*'s production, from Albery and the cast of eight actors to Davey and the stage crew responsible for the production's many effects. And it is equally worth mentioning that this dehierarchization – particularly among actors and stagehands – reads visibly on stage too: in one scene, mock body parts are "pre-set behind [a] screen. The actors will strike them" (Production

Meeting Notes); in another, mugshots are "shown on the onstage projector," which is "operated by the actors" (Rehearsal Notes 12 [RC]).

Mitchell's ten-year-anniversary revival of the play, performed on the Lyttelton stage at the National Theatre in 2007, relied even more explicitly on the onstage labour of its performers, who were "kept restlessly busy" per Michael Billington's review (Attempts, National 309). Indeed, a number of reviewers noted the sheer amount of work required of the actors by the show's high-tech staging: Patrick Marmion described the production as "a highly crafted multi media splash staged by a diligent team of 11 actors working costumes, lights, cameras and microphones" (312); de Jongh similarly commented on the show's "frantic on-stage activity," in which "performers double as scene-setters and musicians and work several video cameras" (Attempts, National 309).<sup>6</sup> Of note, in this context, is that the production gave directorial credit not to Mitchell alone but to "Katie Mitchell and the company" (Programme) – something that critic Matt Wolf characterized as "an unusual admission of largesse, one might assume, from those directorial ranks commonly thought disinclined to give an inch when it comes to sharing out the credit" (313). Such acknowledgement, Wolf continues, makes sense, given that the production "is at least as much about its staging as about the play itself. Shouldn't the two coexist seamlessly?" (313). Attempts on Her Life, therefore, which not only invites but relies on directorial invention - "a dream ticket for Mitchell, a keen practitioner of director's theatre" (A. Jones 309) – foregrounded in its 2007 revival a collaborative effort between director and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Rehearsal notes archived at the National Theatre speak to the many complications anticipated and encountered in this kind of staging. Notes for 1 February, for instance, mention that "[s]ome of the ladies are concerned about high heels and stepping over cables etc." (Rehearsal Notes 7 [NT]). Similarly, notes for 13 February indicate that performer Claudia Blakley intended to "kick off her heels and be barefoot for the drumming sequence" featured in "The Camera Loves You," but this idea was overruled since Blakley was also responsible for "wheeling the drum riser into position and this poses a trapped toes hazard" (Rehearsal Notes 14 [NT]).

performers that manifested visually in the actors' operation of the onstage machinery.<sup>7</sup>

If the visibility of this onstage work – actors clearing props and operating technology – signals the broad collaboration that characterizes the show, it too highlights the production's emphasis on the labour that inheres in mounting a play, drawing our attention to the "overlooked, ignored, discounted, or disappeared individuals, objects, and systems that underpin artistic production" (Essin and Schweitzer 141). As Elizabeth A. Osborne and Christine Woodworth remind us in their introduction to *Working in the Wings*,

Another important consideration at the intersection of work and theatre centers on the workers of the theatre itself – writers, actors, directors, designers, choreographers, managers, stage technicians, run crew, builders, marketers, and producers – who contribute to and create the work that manifests on stage for an audience. While performance tradition foregrounds the visibility of actors and directors for audiences and scholarly traditions often privilege the written text[,] [...] the individuals necessarily located "behind" the illusion often remain in the proverbial shadows. (10)

The strategy employed in *Attempts on Her Life* does not necessarily bring these obscured theatre labourers out into the light, for the actors doing work on stage are already endowed with visibility by virtue of their craft. But it works against a "legacy of shrouding the work of artists and craftsmen in order to foster a deceptively seamless [...] night at the theatre" (Osborne and Woodworth 2).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Not everyone viewed the 2007 revival as an altogether successful example of director–performer collaboration, noting the production's many hallmarks of Mitchell's idiosyncratic style: Georgina Brown asserted that Mitchell "appears to be stuck in a technical rut in which nothing on the stage can be presented straight but must be refracted by another medium" (*Attempts* 311), while de Jongh wrote that the show "succumb[ed] to Mitchellitis – a dreadful form of directorial embellishment" (*Attempts*, National 309).

To disrupt the seamlessness that characterizes the lion's share of theatrical production – especially to the extent that *Attempts on Her Life* does – effects an almost Brechtian estrangement. Robert Butler's review of the play acknowledged as much, drawing attention to the show's "array of distancing devices: answerphone, interviewer, surtitles, slides, TV, a translator" (313), and so on. And the play's Brechtian impulse, hypervisible in performance, resides equally clearly in its form. Recall Brecht's advocacy in "A Short Organum for the Theatre" for episodes "knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. [...] The parts of the story have to be carefully set off one against another by giving each its own structure as a play within the play" (201). Here is the privileging of discrete scenarios, of the kind that compose *Attempts on Her Life*, over scenes that "succeed one another indistinguishably" (201). Brecht too advises that such scenarios make strategic use of titles – an estrangement strategy he used to great effect to mitigate suspense in plays such as *Mother Courage and Her Children*: "To this end it is best to agree to use titles" that "include the social point, saying at the same time something about the kind of portrayal wanted" (201).

Indeed, a number of the titles Crimp assigns to his seventeen scenarios capture precisely the kind of ironic social comment Brecht has in mind. In "Tragedy of Love and Ideology," speakers brainstorm the "basic ingredients" (10) of a bloated, esoteric film treatment. As a send-up of the kind of awards fodder that clogs cinemas at year's end, the scenario's title ironically links tragedy – with its historical connections to religious ritual, moral instruction, and emotional relief – to the outright commercialization of banality in modern entertainment. "The Threat of International Terrorism<sup>TM</sup>" is even more on the nose, reproducing its superscript trademark symbol throughout the scenario. This time, Anne – "the same child who had Fantasy Barbie<sup>TM</sup>, Fantasy Ken<sup>TM</sup> and all the outfits" and who "prayed to God<sup>TM</sup> each night" (43) – stands trial for

terrorism-related offences in a scenario whose setup, per notes recorded in an early rehearsal text, is meant to recall the television series *Prime Suspect* (Rehearsal Text 43).<sup>8</sup> But, as the scenario's title indicates, even here the reach of commercialism takes hold: Anne, since committing her crimes, has "appeared twice on the cover of *Vogue*<sup>™</sup>" and "sold the film rights for two and a half million US dollars" (46).<sup>9</sup>

If scenarios such as these capture the play's interest in the ubiquitous commodification that characterizes late capitalism, its gendered dimension quickly becomes clear. Consider, for instance, Mitchell's idea to have Claudia Blakley "cut out of her costume in the shopping channel setup within the 'The Occupier' scenario as if she is being sold as a product" (Rehearsal Notes 2 [NT]). What emerges to connect all seventeen scenarios is not simply a shared thematic preoccupation with the Her of the play's title but the myriad ways in which, as Barnett notes, "human agency in the text is fundamentally interrogated" (18), variously limited, compromised, or circumscribed by external forces – whether in the form of photographs, screenplays, answering machines messages, or pretentious art show banter. Indeed, even Anne's terrorist avatar, who we are told "lives works sleeps kills and eats entirely on her own" (45), will inevitably succumb to the mediation and loss of agency that accompanies posing for *Vogue* and selling the film rights to her life story.

This central preoccupation of the play builds to a crescendo in scenario sixteen, entitled

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> We might think of Lehmann's observation that, in the postdramatic, we "hardly find dramatic actions"; in their place are "playful imitations of scenes and constellations from crime novels, television series or films" (119).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> As evidence of the 2007 revival's emphasis on Crimp's condemnation of ubiquitous commercialism, brand names proliferate throughout the production's prompt bible: an item in the rehearsal notes for 19 February requests "Marlborough [*sic*] lights for rehearsal please" (Rehearsal Notes 18 [NT]); the setting list specifies a "Moleskin notepad" for Kate Duchene, "Herbal Cigarettes x 6 in Lucky Strike packet" for Michael Gould," and a "Zippo Lighter" for Jonah Russel (Setting List 7–8); even the decision to have the cast "enter at the top of the show wearing red AIDS awareness ribbons" (Rehearsal Notes 25 [NT]) can be read as an ironic comment on the commercialization of philanthropy.

"Pornó," in which the stage directions indicate that "[*t*]*he principal speaker is a very young woman*" (71) – the only instance in which a performer is explicitly described. She dismisses the argument that women are objectified or commodified by pornography, claiming that the porn industry "build[s] up for her the kind of security and independence many women would envy. / Porno. / ...is actually a way of taking control" (73). But the other shoe soon drops, per Crimp's characteristic injection of the sinister. Suddenly, the speaker falters, looking desperately off stage for a prompt – "*She seems to have forgotten what to say: but this should imply a distress which is never allowed to surface*" (74). She continues to sputter until, finally,

> She turns away. Momentary confusion. But then another speaker takes over. In fact the rest of the company have probably appeared and may share the following lines, while the first girl drinks a glass of water and is revived; again it should not be clear whether she's suffering stage fright or true distress. [...] The young woman gradually begins to join in again, supported by the other voices. [...] All with growing élan. [...] Passionate gypsy violin music begins. (75–76)

If the music cue reminds us of Nora Helmer, her unbridled tarantella a prelude to the slamming of the door that signals her reclamation of agency at the end of Ibsen's play, Crimp throws us a savagely ironic red herring. As Luckhurst has it, "[t]he music, a clichéd symbol of wild abandon, is a grotesque offset to the policing of any self-expression from 'Anne,' onto whom fantasies are continually projected but who is herself denied desire" (59). Unable to stick to the script and effectively carry out her own representation, the speaker – whether or not Crimp intends for her to be Anne – is subsumed and ventriloquized by the crowd that unexpectedly appears on stage.

Mitchell's production staged the scenario to particularly great effect. The principal speaker was a woman in a red dress, by now a familiar figure, as various nearly identical women

in red dresses weaved in and out of the action throughout the show (most unsettlingly in "The Threat of International Terrorism<sup>TM</sup>," in which one lay dead in a pile of garbage). Presented with a physical script to read aloud, as if under duress, the woman's repeated hesitations eventually led her handlers to swap her out for another woman, signalling the interchangeability, even disposability, of her body. Clara Escoda Agustí interprets this moment as the play's most explicit index of the violence visited upon women's bodies, in which "translation/interpretation is directly equaled with rape" ("Short" 110). But she also identifies in Mitchell's revival a definitive choice to "portray Anne on stage," noting that the women in red "paraded through the stage while the characters talked about 'Anne,' thus suggesting they were the different 'Annes' referred to" (Martin Crimp 116n12) – a reading that is probably too literal. I'm not convinced that the production's procession of women in red dresses pins down the elusive Anne any more than the play's elliptical scenarios do. Rather, this staging speaks precisely to the abstraction and polyvalence by which Anne is characterized in Crimp's text, less an actual person than an idea, a palimpsestic assemblage of constructions and projections. In this sense, she more aptly recalls the Woman in the Red Dress in the Wachowskis' 1999 science-fiction film The Matrix, a computer simulation who "doesn't talk much" (that is, at all) but seductively holds the protagonist's gaze as he navigates the simulacral world he once believed to be real.

The high-tech staging that characterized both the premiere and the 2007 revival thus articulates an equally salient critique of technological mediation, a hallmark of twentieth-century postmodern critique that provides context to Lloyd Evans's classification of *Attempts on Her Life* as a "state-of-the-nation play" (*Attempts* 312) (despite the term's association with a decades-old tradition whose political critique employed a markedly different aesthetic). The programme for Mitchell's revival explicitly acknowledges the play's engagement with contemporary British

politics, noting that it was first staged "a couple of months before the election victory of Tony Blair's New Labour, [...] but the world of the play is no less familiar now" (Programme). Sierz too in the programme reflected on the political disillusionment that set in at the time of Blair's election in 1997: "Emerging from behind the grim clouds of sleaze, a new sun blazed down on the dazzled Brits. Victory was pure theatre: flag-waving grannies, Tony and Cherie kissing kids, a theme song full of promise. But, to some, the confident proclamation that things could only get better felt like a certain prediction that they would only get worse" ("Attempts").<sup>10</sup>

That an alleged state-of-the-nation play would so explicitly foreground technological mediation dovetails with Crimp's critique of turn-of-the-century political ennui, precisely the state of the nation Sierz described in the revival's programme, symptomatic of an age in which political choice is illusory and surface displaces depth: "as reality drained out of politics, the public – sensing its own impotence – looked elsewhere for 'real' life" ("Attempts"). Moreover, that a piece of so-called postdramatic theatre might be categorized in such a way as to place it alongside the work of Hare, Howard Brenton, and Alan Bennett suggests a porousness in such classifications as "postdramatic" and "state-of-the-nation" that compromises the accuracy and utility of both. The postdramatic thus hardly coheres as a unique aesthetic approach to the theatre, for it reveals itself as an impossibly capacious designation. Rather, plays like *Attempts on Her Life* signal a destabilization of the creative hierarchy that has structured Britain's theatre tradition throughout the twentieth century, a destabilization that aligns temporally with the diffusion of labour that has been the outcome of neoliberal economics. For doesn't the so-called postdramatic play entail its own peculiar version of outsourcing, contracting directors, designers,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> The song to which Sierz alludes is discussed in Vicky Angelaki's monograph on Crimp: "Opening to D:Ream's 'Things Can Only Get Better,' used in Labour's 1997 election campaign, the production made sure to establish the ten-year trajectory of the text from the start. [...] In 2007, *Attempts on Her Life* did not feel like a blast from the past; on the contrary, its urgency remained intact" (*Plays* 58).

and actors to perform the creative labour once assigned to the playwright? Indeed, both the premiere and the 2007 revival of *Attempts on Her Life* flag up the kind of labour-intensive work, to return to Handley's phrasing, involved in realizing a text whose amorphous open-endedness shifts the lion's share of creative responsibility away from the author.<sup>11</sup>

Consider, too, that Crimp would have been paid handsomely for Mitchell's revival of the play, despite not having a direct hand in its production: with each new revival, then, he is compensated for the creative labour of other theatre practitioners in a way dissimilar from a traditional licensing agreement, since the open-ended text calls for considerably more intellectual and creative labour. Choreographer Ian Spink recognized as much when he reflected on his string of collaborations with Caryl Churchill and David Lan in the 1980s and early 1990s, together producing plays such as *A Mouthful of Birds* and *Lives of the Great Poisoners*:

[I]t was accepted that the writers would go away and write – that they could publish their plays and earn money and royalties – when in fact a lot of the material that went into the piece came from the actors and a lot of the ideas about the structure of the piece came from me. Those names do not appear on the title page. [...] The idea of the author in the traditional sense obviously does not work very well in these kinds of pieces. (Spink and Cave 302–3)

Directors, designers, and actors are no doubt thrilled to tackle the artistic challenge of a play like *Attempts on Her Life*, but they do so under the name of the author, who not only receives top billing but also earns more financial remuneration than the other theatre artists involved in the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Consider, for instance, this item in the notes for the first rehearsal of Mitchell's revival: "As a general note; we are currently still experimenting with ideas, therefore the notes that follow are a guideline and will require further discussion" (Rehearsal Notes 1 [NT]). The impression is one of starting from scratch, which was precisely the case. With no real directives vis-à-vis casting or design provided by the script, each new production must build itself entirely from the ground up, without recourse to authorial intent or even previous productions, as if the play were being staged for the first time.

production. Built into these postdramatic plays, then, is a perhaps unintended side effect: a financially inequitable outsourcing that uncomfortably mimics neoliberal labour markets. And, in the subsequent years, the formal characteristics that marked Crimp's play began to appear with increasing frequency in the plays of Crimp's contemporaries.

Churchill's Love and Information takes a similar tack. Premiered at the Royal Court in 2012, the production was directed by James Macdonald, whose directorial experience with textual fragmentation dates back to the premiere of Sarah Kane's posthumous 4.48 Psychosis in 2000. The play is organized into seven sections (which "should be played in the order given"), each consisting of seven scenes that "can be played in any order within each section" (2), free to be shuffled and rearranged as a director sees fit. Also included at the end of the script is a coda titled "Random," a collection of scenes that "can happen in any section" (74). The "Random" scenes are even briefer fragments than those found throughout the rest of the play, many containing only a single line. "Pig Latin," for instance, consists of the question "Ancay ouyay eakspay igpat atinlay?" (75), while "Cold" restricts itself to a single stage direction: "Someone sneezes" (77). And six scenes in this optional section - "Semaphore," "Morse," "Sign Language," "Birdsong," "Dance," and "Flags" (75) – are listed by title alone, with no speech or stage directions assigned to them whatsoever. Perhaps the most noteworthy element of Churchill's "Random" coda, however, is the inclusion of a subsection called "Depression," which comprises a series of phrases, each "said by one person to another who doesn't respond" (74). What marks these moments as outliers from the play's general structural conceit is that "[t]he characters can be the same each time, or the depressed person can be the same and the others different" (74), which presents the possibility for a narrative continuity that the play otherwise disallows. And Churchill insists that, although "[t]he other random items are

optional," the "Depression" scenes are "an essential part of the play" (74).

Apart from broad thematic connections to the titular topics of love and information, there is nothing to explicitly connect any one scene to another: no identified characters, no speech prefixes or stage directions, and no narrative continuities between scenes (unless, of course, a director casts the same performer(s) across the "Depression" scenes – something Macdonald opted not to do in either the London premiere or the 2014 New York Theatre Workshop production that he also directed). The effect of this "depersonalized surface," per Claire Allfree in her review of the premiere (978), is a kind of textual collage, brief snatches of speech that signify only minimally on the page and depend on performance to mine their potential meanings. In the programme for the 2018 Canadian Stage production in Toronto, co-directed by Tanja Jacobs and Alistair Newton, Newton called the play "a theatrical Rorschach test for both its audience and its creators" (Jacobs and Newton).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, because the scenarios are so brief and textually sparse, the meanings that might be teased out of them rely entirely on performance.

Reviews of the London premiere returned compulsively to this aspect of the play, emphasizing not only the creative labour of the director and performers but also the work required of spectators to interpret what they are seeing. Julie Carpenter, for instance, asserted that the play "makes you work," before going on to explain that "it's down to the audience to make connections between the scenes and to extrapolate their collective meaning" (979). And the sentiment was echoed by both Georgina Brown ("In every playlet[,] [...] a piece of information is dropped, like a stone into a pond, leaving the ripples to be imagined by the audience" [*Love* 979]) and Maxie Szalwinska ("you have to make your own sense of it" [980]). Macdonald, for his part, similarly acknowledged the collective work required by the play, describing it as "a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Twenty-one years earlier, Michael Billington made the same analogy in his review of *Attempts on Her Life*'s premiere, calling it "the theatrical equivalent of a Rorschach test" (*Attempts*, Royal Court 312).

giant Sudoku" that "asks a director and actors and designers to just invent, far more than one usually gets to invent" (qtd. in Piepenburg AR8). In his review of the New York production, Jesse Green wrote that Churchill "wants everyone, including the actors, the designers, and the audience, to do their best work. This is especially evident in the latitude she not only allows but requires of the director, whose craft, often so obscure, is on full parade here."

Indeed, most reviews of the London and New York productions, even if ambivalent about the play itself, foregrounded Macdonald's virtuosic direction. Comparable attention was paid to Miriam Buether's set design, which placed the action inside a white cube whose ruled walls resembled graph paper, perhaps alluding to the information Churchill mentions in her title, each brief scene a mere data point in an incomprehensibly vast representation of contemporary life. Buether's cube set, ringed with LED lights, saw blackouts between scenes that allowed for sometimes shocking set changes – "there are more prop and costume changes than at a Lady Gaga show," per Dominic Maxwell's review (Love 977) – as large, often cumbersome set pieces (beds, sofas, an upright piano, a vertical patch of grass from which Josh Williams, in London, was suspended upside down in "Star") were carried on and off set in a matter of seconds. But what so many of the reviewers singled out for praise was the way Buether's set, Peter Mumford's lighting, and Christopher Shutt's sound design worked to conceal the obvious physical labour involved in so swiftly setting and striking the stage between scenes. Macdonald's productions were thus characterized by a slickness that, while duly emphasizing the creative work of the director, designers, and performers, obfuscated the tremendous physical toil that occurred backstage during every performance.

Clapp asserted that "the technical dazzle is an entertainment of its own, with one utterly different episode slamming down after another" (*Love* 979), producing an effect "similar to TV

channel-hopping" (G. Brown, *Love* 979) that likened the white cube set to a screen that "appear[ed] to snap shut at the end of each frame" (Carpenter 979). But Kate Bassett's review hit nearer the mark with respect to the production's concealment of backstage work, suggesting that "Miriam Buether and the Royal Court's technical crew deserve an award [...] for the miraculous scene changes, where double beds and lawns and café tables materialise with the ease of a dream (*Love* 980). Quentin Letts expressed a similar sentiment: "A bronze medal to the backstage crew who achieve most of these changes efficiently. Only a few bumps and one crash were audible" (*Love* 978). That Letts saw fit to mention the occasional bump and single crash – and frame them as an achievement for their relative scarcity – articulates a latent desire to preserve the invisibility of the kind of labour that makes theatrical performance possible. While Macdonald is praised for the hypervisibility of his directorial vision, the backstage crew is commended for staying as out of sight as possible.

Reviews such as these reveal quite a lot about the critical establishment's hierarchical attitude towards the labour of theatrical production, one that privileges the intellectual, creative, and artistic work of direction and design over the sweating, labouring bodies that bring these ideas to life. Shannon Jackson reminds us that the aesthetic support undergirding all theatrical production "takes human form and extracts human costs, a fact trivialized when such laboring bodies are cast as 'rude mechanicals'" (30), an allusion to the bumbling craftsmen in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. What surprises, then, is that reviewers praised the show precisely *because* it so effectively concealed the physical labour essential to its realization, so that once again "the individuals necessarily located 'behind' the illusion [...] remain in the proverbial" – and, indeed, this time literal – "shadows" (Osborne and Woodworth 10).

Eo Sharp's set design for Jacobs and Newton's Toronto production took a markedly

different approach from Buether's slick, digital design in London and New York. Where Buether's white cube restricted our field of vision and concealed the show's supernumerary costumes and props, Sharp left everything in view. Most of the action took place in, on, or around a black, four-sided, plywood structure that resembled a modern "tiny house" – a modular home whose furniture folds into the walls or ceiling in order to maximize limited space. The structure, built on a revolve, was rotated by the performers throughout the show, allowing the audience to observe it from a number of different angles, and the actors consistently manipulated its exterior to produce tables, chairs, a bed, and so on. But if the tiny house was the set's focal point, one could hardly help noticing the costume racks on either side of the stage, along with the many other set pieces, large and small, used throughout the play: a piano, a sewing machine, a stretcher, boom mics, a red flag. The performers, too, when not featured in a scene, rested in the wings, fully visible throughout. The clearest callback to Buether's design was the white grid taped to the floor and the vertical wire grid against the back wall – what reviewer Istvan Dugalin described as "a white wireframe in a black void" - once again suggesting that the play's scenes constituted data to be graphed.

Unlike in London and New York, where each new scene seemed to materialize and then vanish, cinematic snapshots between blackouts, Sharp's design made visible each transition from one scenario to the next: we watched as the performers carried on and arranged set pieces and props, rotated the central structure, and changed costumes before our eyes. Apart from lighting and sound, then, the actors were uniquely responsible for setting and striking each and every stage picture for the entirety of the show. "Everything about that design required human effort," Newton explained to me: even as the vicissitudes of performance mark each night's show as different from the last, "what would be the same is the effort of the people inside of it. The actors had agency and were real people inside of that world. [...] It's the sweat and toil of those people that are driving it all forward" (Newton). Like the cast of *Attempts on Her Life*, then, the performers of Jacobs and Newton's production were responsible for operating every aspect of the onstage machine in order for the show to work.<sup>13</sup> This emphasis on visible physical labour, a jarring departure from its concealment in Macdonald's London and New York productions, better articulates the kind of labour required in order to bring to life as sparse a text as *Love and Information*, for it analogizes the tremendous conceptual work the play demands of its director, designers, and performers. There is certainly sense to be made of the play, but Churchill divests herself of the responsibility to produce a narratively cohesive drama that demands obeisance – the traditional domain of the playwright, certainly in the British context at least – so that the final product is less a mounting of Churchill's play than a radically unique and almost always valid interpretation of an ambiguous but fecund text.

A scenario titled "Virtual," in which one speaker defends the legitimacy of his/her romantic feelings for an AI to a sceptical interlocutor – "I've never felt this way about anyone" (69) – illustrates the plurality of meanings allowed by the text in performance. The scene played for laughs in Macdonald's London and New York productions, which divided the dialogue between two gym-goers arguing on parallel exercise bikes. Jacobs and Newton's Toronto production took a different approach, mining considerable gravitas from the brief scene: the lovestruck speaker insisted on the veracity of his virtual lover while confined to a wheelchair. In her review of the production, Karen Fricker took issue with the staging – "why does one of them need to be in a wheelchair?" – and she articulates a valid concern about instrumentalizing

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The Toronto staging of "Grass," especially, provided a visual callback to the aesthetic of *Attempts on Her Life*. While the dialogue was divided between Jason Cadieux and Ngozi Paul, the pair was shadowed by other performers operating cameras and boom mics, suggesting something akin to a reality television show in the vein of the *Real Housewives* franchise.

physical disability as an onstage prop. But she, too, seems to overlook the play's central conceit: in a text so sparse, it is precisely staging choices such as these – such as putting an actor in a wheelchair when the script proper calls for no such thing – that generate meaning. Unlike Hare's insistence on authorial intent and meaning inhering in the written text, *Love and Information* invites the creation of meaning from without. Predictably, then, other scenes too took radically different forms in Macdonald's and Jacobs and Newton's respective productions. "Dream" features a speaker who reveals his/her partner's infidelity, which the interlocutor seizes as an opportunity for initiating a sexual relationship: "So that leaves the way clear for us?" (26). Again, Macdonald opted for playful humour bordering on the absurd, dividing the dialogue between two competitive ballroom dancers in London, played by Amanda Drew and Joshua James, and a pair of children's clowns in New York, played by Susannah Flood and Nate Miller. Jacobs and Newton, on the other hand, cast Ngozi Paul and Sarah Deller as two women in a bar, beer bottles in hand, in a slow verbal exchange increasingly rife with sexual tension.

In "Ex," in which a pair of former lovers reminisces about their relationship but struggle to recover any shared memories – "You remember the Italian restaurant? / no, yes, on the corner was it? / with the bushes outside? / no, I'm mixing it up with / I can see the waiter now / no, I can't get the waiter" (37) – Macdonald achieved poignancy by casting Linda Bassett and Paul Jesson in London and Randy Danson and John Procaccino in New York as elderly couples whose bygone love has faded with the passing of time and the advancement of age: "We were really happy. / Or sad, we used to cry" (38). In Toronto, Ngozi Paul played the scene opposite David Jansen, presenting us with a couple notably younger than Bassett/Jesson and Danson/Procaccino. But the scene also included the even younger pair of Sheila Ingabire-Isaro and Reid Millar, seated on top of the central structure upstage, her head resting on his shoulder;

they remained a silent presence throughout, for they weren't assigned any of the scene's lines. The stage picture suggested the pair as younger versions of Paul and Jansen, a visual echo of the scene's primary couple that focused our gaze on the fading memories of a relationship as it recedes from view (see Figure 6). But the inclusion of Ingabire-Isaro and Millar had another internal resonance in the production, too, for the pair had already appeared as a couple in an earlier scene titled "Remote." In that scene, Millar gently urged Ingabire-Isaro to appreciate being off the grid in what appears to be a remote cottage without television or cell phone reception: "It's quiet here" (13). And the end of their exchange perhaps unintentionally anticipates that of the ostensibly older couple in "Ex": "I want you to be happy here. / I am happy here" (13). Their reappearance later in the play, then, especially in a scene that appears to reach back into the past, creates a fleeting strand of narrative continuity that can be cultivated only in performance, for this continuity is something that Churchill's text, without narrative structure or stable characterization, cannot do on its own.

A similar kind of narrative connection emerged in the Toronto production between another pair of scenes. The first, "Message," consists of two (or perhaps more) speakers debating the intended effect of terrorist attacks:

if enough people did it because they don't really feel terror do they, they don't live in terror, if they lived in terror they'd be getting the message.
Would you do it yourself?
I don't think I would, no.
Because you're scared?
I don't think that message is what I want to say. (20)

Jacobs and Newton once again cast Millar, this time opposite Maggie Huculak, who lay in bed facing away from him, visibly distressed as he sat only half on the bed and over the covers,



FIGURE 6: Ngozi Paul, David Jansen (foreground), Sheila Ingabire-Isaro, and Reid Millar (background) in *Love and Information*, directed by Tanja Jacobs and Alistair Newton, Canadian Stage, April 2018. Photo by Dahlia Katz.

contemplating the efficacy of terrorism as a means of conveying a political message: "they understand what you're telling them [...] because the deaths show how important it is" (20). The difference in age between Huculak and Millar – combined with a domestic bedroom setting that, importantly, worked against the impression of a shared bed – suggested mother and son.

When they reappeared together in the scene "God's Voice" – in which someone insists s/he has been instructed by the voice of God – the actors were separated by glass, and Millar donned an orange jumpsuit, suggesting that God's instructions led him to violence. And when Huculak asked, incredulously, "God told you to do it?," Millar replied, "He did, yes" (29), with the same affectless demeanour that he possessed when he defended terrorism in their earlier scene; the suggestion that the pair might be distraught mother and unrepentant son, therefore, persisted. In their reviews of the show, J. Kelly Nestruck and Glenn Sumi read the actors'

relationship in the same way: the former described Huculak as "a mother talking to her imprisoned son" (Nestruck); the latter, as "a mother concerned for a disturbed son" (Sumi). Newton himself too identified the pair as mother and son in both scenes and acknowledged their thematic connection – "It seems totally clear that Reid's character in 'Message' goes on to commit some act of terrorism and his mother then comes to visit him in prison in 'God's Voice'" – but he also confessed that the congruence was coincidental, for he and Jacobs had cast and directed the scenes separately: "Tanja and I didn't cast it collectively. That was completely random" (Newton).

Compare Jacobs and Newton's sober staging of "God's Voice" to Macdonald's comic interpretation of the scene in New York, where he set the exchange in front of a bright orange traffic barrier on the side of the road and featured a woman questioning a younger male relative (her nephew, according to Erik Piepenburg [AR8]) about his decision to drop everything and go hitchhiking – because God told him to. In Macdonald's reading of the scene, "[t]he tone feels playful and ironic in the way she is questioning him" (qtd. in Piepenburg AR8), an interpretation of Churchill's text that could not be tonally further from that of Jacobs and Newton in Toronto. His concept for the scene in London, meanwhile, cast Amit Shah and Linda Bassett: here, however, it was the younger man who questioned the older woman about her religious fervour, and neither the staging – they sat at a high table sipping tea – nor their performance of the scene suggested anything close to terrorism or violence, even though, like Millar, Bassett too had appeared minutes earlier in "Message" to defend the rhetorical viability of terrorist attacks. Nothing in the London premiere, however, apart from the physical presence of Bassett's body, indicated a connection between the various speakers she represented from one scene to the next. Jacob and Newton's casting of Huculak and Millar in both "Message" and "God's Voice," on the other hand, combined with the scenes' respective stagings, generated a link between the two scenarios that emphasized their thematic consonances and constructed a brief narrative thread, urging us to consider what might have happened in the intervening period between Millar's relative pacifism in the play's second section – "I don't think that message is what I want to say" (20) – and his insistence that God compelled him to violence, per the staging, in the third: "He said do it. [...] In words and inside me in knowing it was the right thing to do" (30).

Jacobs and Newton's Toronto production thus managed to tease out narrative continuities that Churchill's text otherwise seems to preclude – and which Macdonald, in both the London and New York productions, expressly avoided. Darren Gobert notes that Macdonald's distribution of lines sought to "us[e] each actor once in each section and with few exceptions giv[e] actors new scene partners in every appearance" (191). The only instance of potential continuity that Churchill explicitly acknowledges in the script relates to the "Depression" scenes, which she notes might reasonably make use of purposefully consistent casting. But, even here, Macdonald held fast to the general principle that governed his apportioning of lines throughout the rest of the play, staging the episodes in such a way that they "collectively required the entire cast and thus demonstrated the impact of depression across demographics" (Gobert 191). On the other hand, the Toronto production, despite the playwright's insistence in the text that "DEPRESSION is an essential part of the play" (74), featured none of the fragments from that section of the script. According to Newton, the "Depression" scenes were omitted due to time constraints (though he also suggested Churchill perhaps "overstates by saying it's 'essential.' [...] I don't know, I'm a bit suspicious about saying that it's vital, but it was always my intention to use them. I just couldn't make it work"). Rather, the production sought to emphasize the play's polyvalence by experimenting with multiple different stagings of specific scenes.

In "Savant," someone prompted with the question "What did you have for lunch on October the third 1998?" (36) goes on to outline in meticulous detail the day's proceedings. The scene received two treatments in Toronto: in the first, David Jansen played a turbaned carnival-style fortune teller effecting a heightened RP accent, egged on by Ngozi Paul as an equally hammy TV presenter, on what resembled a talent-show reality program; the camp of this particular staging was offset by the clinical sterility of the scene's immediate repetition on the other side of the stage, this time with Huculak in a lab coat taking notes as Cadieux, seated on a table, recounted the events of 3 October 1998 in short, affectless bursts, his face occasionally contorted by tics and twitches. The contrast exemplifies Jacobs and Newton's "interest[] in looking at scenes from two totally different perspectives" (Newton), a strategy that highlights – within one production rather than by comparing two or three – the manifold interpretive possibilities Churchill's text allows. Not only the scene's verbal content but also its narrative isolation, its absence of a clear reference point anywhere else in the play, accommodate any number of vastly different readings.

Jacobs and Newton staged repetitions of "Sex" too. The scene features a conversation about the evolutionary function of sexual intercourse as a means for exchanging genetic information – a discussion that neatly weaves together the play's titular topics – though it ends on a tonally ambiguous note:

So sex essentially is information.

You don't think that while we're doing it do you? It doesn't hurt to know it. Information and also love. If you're lucky. (49)

In Toronto, Cadieux played the scene three consecutive times, lying in bed with a different scene

partner in each variation (first Huculak, then Jansen, and finally Ingabire-Isaro), producing snapshots of three markedly different relationships with respect to age, race, and sexuality. But the performers' delivery of the lines too cultivated vastly unique interpretations of the text: Ingabire-Isaro's sunny explanation of genetic exchange optimistically emphasized its emotional element – "Information *and also love*" – and elicited an affectionate, almost grateful "If you're lucky" from Cadieux as he moved to embrace her. The moment called to mind Brantley's review of the play in New York, which urged us to remember that "love, as well as information, is part of the play's title and that love comes first" ("57 Bits" C5).<sup>14</sup> The warmth of Cadieux and Ingabire-Isaro's exchange, however, chafed against the variation of the scene that was played a moment earlier, in which Jansen delivered a flat, indifferent summary of reproductive science – facing away from his partner, no less – that prompted Cadieux to utter the scene's final line with cynicism if not outright disdain. The relationship briefly brought to life by Cadieux and Jansen was marked by a double irony: if love appears absent from their sexual intercourse, so too, of course, is the exchange of genetic information that can only occur in heterosexual sex.

A central preoccupation of Jacobs and Newton's production, therefore, was to experiment with the various possibilities that inhere in Churchill's text, and Sharp's set design similarly contributed to the show's exploration of the play's multivalent interpretations. As the set's central structure was repeatedly rotated, manipulated, opened, unfolded, closed up again, its polyvalence fostered Jacobs and Newton's interest in "playing with the idea of perspective" and allowed the audience to "look[] at one object simultaneously from multiple points of view"

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Brantley went even further, articulating a perhaps audacious claim about *Love and Information* in the context of Churchill's wide-ranging oeuvre: "It turns out that while this work has the intellectual vigour we expect of Ms. Churchill, it may also be her most sentimental play" ("57 Bits" C5). Other reviewers were less generous. Spencer ended his review with a snide dismissal of what he characterized as intellectual navel-gazing: "It's just a shame that one leaves the show with the slightly sick feeling of having spent an evening gorging on canapés" (*Love* 977).

(Newton), just as their variations of "Savant" and "Sex" generated multiple different readings of the same singular written text. A scene such as "God" literalized precisely this notion of seeing something from multiple perspectives: while Jansen and Millar sat facing one another on either side of an all-white chessboard, Ingabire-Isaro and Deller lay on top of the structure with their own board, giving us what seemed like an aerial view of their chess match (see Figure 7).<sup>15</sup> The effect was one of simultaneity, theatricalizing Newton's suggestion that the play's scenes are, in fact, unfolding all at once, offering a sprawling, kaleidoscopic cross-section of contemporary life: "it's almost as though, when the mother and son are having the conversation in prison, at the same time across town are the two lesbians in the café, and the kid on his roof with the flags, and the people looking at the stars. It's all simultaneous. So you're seeing all these moments [...] from fifty-eight different points of view all at the same time."

But the creative and interpretive work necessary to making sense of *Love and Information* is not exclusive to a given production's director(s), performers, and designers: as Newton suggested in his comparison of the play to a Rorschach test, meaning is made in the auditorium as well. As one reviewer put it, "Depending on your particular sensibility and life experience, some vignettes will hit deeper than others. [...] Moments that seem absurdist or abstract to some [...] will strike a deeper chord with others" (Dugalin). Indeed, such was the case in London: while Caroline McGinn identified "Memory House" as the play's "best scene, in which a woman (Drew) tries to memorise a series of lists and is surprised by a long-lost memory of her father" (*Love* 979), Spencer crankily described the sentimental scene as the play's "longest

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> The all-white chessboard featured in the Toronto production was, according to Newton, a reference to Yoko Ono's "Play It by Trust," in which an all-white chess match becomes virtually unplayable once the two sets of indistinguishable pieces begin to mingle. Newton said the prop also anticipated the flood of free-associative speech in "Manic": "in China white is death and here black is death but ghosts are white of course so a chessboard is death against death" (62).



FIGURE 7: David Jansen, Reid Millar (below), Sheila Ingabire-Isaro, and Sarah Deller (above) in *Love and Information*, directed by Tanja Jacobs and Alistair Newton, Canadian Stage, April 2018. Photo by Dahlia Katz.

(and most boring)" (*Love* 977). The play's formal reliance on performance does more than simply illustrate the potential for wild differences in taste, however. While "Memory House" may have provoked opposing reactions from Spencer and McGinn, more noteworthy is the capacity of the play's scenes not merely to prompt either positive or negative affective responses but to signify in entirely different ways depending on the individual spectator. *Love and Information*, first brought to life by directors, designers, and performers, continues to allow for the making of meaning by the audience too.

I turn here to the play's final scene, "Facts," which consists of a lengthy series of obscure trivia questions and answers whose supposed facts range from the unlikely ("How many diamonds were mined in 1957? / Sixty thousand four hundred and twenty-eight") to the demonstrably false ("Who was president of Coca-Cola from nineteen twenty-five to seven?" / "HB Jones") and the outright ridiculous ("What sound does a capercaillie make? / Aaaah") (70) – especially since in all three of the London, New York, and Toronto productions, the questioner seemed to be consulting an answer key. (How might one verify in a book, for instance, the sound that a "capercaillie" makes?) As Gobert discusses in his monograph on Churchill, the title of the play's final scene intentionally misleads, for a closer examination reveals that its so-called facts are, without exception, entirely false:

The last scene's first question elicits a fact that research discredits. And successive facts prove absurd (duck and fennel as the traditional ingredients of "poulash") or unverifiable. The Linnaean classification for sea anemones is, in fact, fabricated. Most telling: a nonsense equation answers the question "What is the formula that disproves Gödel's theorem?" Gödel's theorem, of course, concerns uncertainty in the first place; [...] [s]o the respondent not only claims

certainty where none exists but also falsely repudiates the very theorem that asserts the limits of knowledge. (198)

In some sense, the scene too tests the limits of our consumption of information as spectators in the audience, for if we accept without question the ostensible facts Churchill fabricates in *Love and Information*'s final moments, it surely suggests something about our own capacity for critical thinking, our ability to sift through fact and fiction in a time when fake news and misinformation abound with increasingly dangerous consequences. As Henry Hitchings suggested in his review of the premiere, "At the heart of the play is the idea that it's hard to process the data with which we are bombarded. The urge to know about the world – to possess facts about it – seems to have squashed humanity and emotional intelligence" (*Love* 977).

Of particular note, however, is that the scene – and effectively the play – ends in an exchange that not only introduces the question of love into a veritable barrage of (mis)information but also appropriately accommodate(s) contradictory readings:

Do you love me?

Don't do that.

[...]

By what name do we usually refer to Oceanus Australensis Picardia? I do yes I do. Sea anemone. (71)

In London, New York, and Toronto, this final exchange allowed for a moment of tenderness to displace the glut of putative information that makes up the rest of the scene. All three productions thus aligned with Brantley's sentimental reading of the play that, as in the title, privileged love over information. But that my heart was warmed by the play's penultimate sentence, "I do yes I do," spoken by Laura Elphinstone in London, Jennifer Ikeda in New York,

and Sheila Ingabire-Isaro in Toronto, likely says more about me as a spectator than it does about the scene itself: why did I, each time, accept this utterance as true when every other statement had, in fact, been completely false? I unquestioningly assigned legitimacy to the scene's emotional content, even as I questioned the other purported facts (before verifying their inaccuracy), perhaps because my own unique spectatorial sensibilities sought an emotionally satisfying ending to the play.

When, after seeing the Toronto production, I told a friend about the last scene – she was unfamiliar with the play and hadn't seen the show – she clicked her tongue and remarked on its sadness. For her, this final profession of love, embedded in a litany of falsehoods, registered as dissemblance, a reading of the scene that, in the six years since I first read the play and despite the three productions I've seen, had never once occurred to me. The meaning one gleans from Love and Information, therefore, varies radically from one spectator to the next. Where one finds love enduring the technological deluge of twenty-first-century life, another detects duplicity and manipulation. Churchill sets forth neither reading as definitive or correct, nor do the play's directors and performers: rather, the play, while undoubtedly shaped and curated with particular interpretations in mind, continues to breathe and shift and take any number of shapes in the auditorium, existing variously and polyvalently in the minds of its spectators, a fracturing of meaning that parallels the play's fragmented form. Recall Lehmann's discussion of the postdramatic as a "theatre that is no longer spectatorial" in the conventional sense, for it "eludes objective description": "for each individual participant it represents an experience that does not match the experience of others. A reversion of the artistic act towards the viewers takes place. The latter are made aware of their own presence and at the same time are forced into a virtual quarrel with the creators of this theatrical process: what is it they want of them?" (106)

My earlier analogy about outsourcing, then, applies to spectatorial meaning-making as well. Harvie writes in *Fair Play* that the increasing deregulation of labour in the arts "corresponds to the broader deregulation of markets – particularly labour markets – under neoliberal capitalism" (29). Perhaps the theatre, then, as an industry, even in spite of its resistance to the wholesale reconfiguration of its structure that began under the Thatcher administration, has adapted to neoliberal economic hegemony by unwittingly integrating into its aesthetic and creative forms the strategies of diffuse labour. If the final scene of *Love and Information* (or, indeed, the play as a whole) dissuades passive spectatorship and calls on the audience not simply to apprehend but to actively make meaning, hasn't a considerable amount of creative labour – already delegated from the outset to the theatre practitioners who have mounted the play – been similarly outsourced to the spectator as well?

There is a distinction between this outsourcing of meaning-making and the active spectatorship of Brecht's epic theatre: where the latter activates the audience in order to engender political awareness, the postdramatic delegates to the spectator without an explicit call to politicization: "The concern here is precisely to close the gap between production and reception, between actor and spectator, in as much as interpretation by an 'active' spectator is recognised as being integral to how the 'meaning' of any performance is generated" (Carroll, Jürs-Munby, and Giles 7). Certainly, there is something provocative, even gratifying, about contemplating how a postdramatic play like *Love and Information* or *Attempts on Her Life* signifies and resonates differently from one spectator to the next, but the increasing frequency with which audiences are asked to do the work once firmly enshrined as the author's should alert us – if for no other reason than temporal coincidence – to analogous developments in labour markets outside the theatre. As Harvie suggests, this "delegation of labour to audiences who are usually unpaid and, indeed,

often *paying* can exploit free labour in ways that replicate, extend and potentially naturalize exploitative trends in contemporary labour markets more broadly" (41; emphasis in original).

While the formal characteristics of these so-called postdramatic plays analogize the diffusion of labour under global capitalism, perhaps the delegation of creative and emotional labour is intended, by some playwrights, as a shift towards collaboration that might actually represent a kind of resistance to neoliberalism, rather than simply a blind absorption of its strategies. I turn, then, as a coda, to Tim Crouch's *The Author*, a play whose central dramatic mechanism is the audience's consciousness of itself, made immediately obvious when spectators enter the space – the Royal Court Upstairs in the case of the play's 2009 premiere. As Crouch explains in the author's note, "This is a play that happens inside its audience. As the audience enter the space, they encounter two banks of seating, facing each other, comfortably spaced apart but with no 'stage' in between'' (18). Four performers (including Crouch, himself, as a fictional playwright named Tim Crouch), are situated in the stands as ordinary spectators and perform the play among the audience (see Figure 8). What is being spectated, however, is spectatorship itself, something Ian Shuttleworth succinctly noted in his review of the play, writing that the play's implication of its spectators "is not audience participation; it is the audience at once being the theatre and interrogating it" (Author 1039).



FIGURE 8: Adrian Howells, Esther Smith, Tim Crouch, and Vic Llewellyn perform among the audience in *The Author*, directed by Karl James and a. smith, Royal Court Theatre, London, 2009. Photo by Stephen Cummiskey.

The characters contemplate the ramifications of having participated in a fictional Royal Court show whose violent subject matter has affected each of them in different ways. This metatheatrical reference to the Court's tradition of programming controversial, disturbing plays (think Edward Bond's *Saved* or Sarah Kane's *Blasted*) contains within it an acid condemnation of unfettered visual consumption – a trend Crouch takes to its extreme (or perhaps its "logical conclusion," as Philip Ridley would have it [Ridley and Sierz 115]) in a searing monologue about casually accessing child pornography online: "I'm a little shocked with myself. I turn down the volume. I decide to continue. Just like that. In a second. Less than a second. Click. Click" (58). His subsequent suicide, which he justifies to the spectators around him via the direct address that has characterized the entire show – "You won't forgive me, anyway. I know you. Look at you. You won't. You won't forgive me" (59) – is followed by Crouch's exit from the auditorium and a stage direction indicating "[*t*]*he death of the author*" (60).<sup>16</sup>

In his place remains the audience, left alone to process the play's disturbing finale in the care of not only actor Adrian Howells (and later Chris Goode after Howells's death) but also one another: "*Together they will deal with what's left – in whichever way is felt appropriate at that moment – enabling the audience to leave the theatre*" (60). This final gesture, calling us to account for our own visual consumption (situated on a continuum that includes both highbrow theatre and the darkest corners of the internet), simultaneously urges us "*to talk if we want to*[,] [...] *to go see another play one day, to swap recommendations, to keep in touch, to have safe journeys home, to look after each other*" (61). The play's lack of a fixed conclusion – for the closure facilitated by Howells and then Goode varied from one performance to the next in ways

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> Recall Ridley's reassurance that, in spite of his often disturbing subject matter, he leads his audience "through this tunnel" and then "back to a place of light" (Ridley and Sierz 112). In *The Author*, Crouch perhaps abandons ship, but only so that his spectators might look to one another in order to find redemption and light together.

that rested almost entirely in the hands of the spectators – aims to foster a sense of community in the audience that is atypical of most nights at the theatre: "*Certainly*," Crouch's final stage direction reads, "*there will be the intention of creating an imperfect act of love and hope*" (61).

The play's conclusion might resemble what Jill Dolan calls a "utopian performative," the term she gives to theatrical gestures that, "in their doings, make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better" (6). This hopeful reading of performance relies precisely on the notion of the theatre as a shared space, "a place where people come together, embodied and passionate, to share experiences of meaning making and imagination that can describe or capture fleeting intimations of a better world" (2). And, for Dolan, this affective experience of community has the potential to ramify positively even after the spectators have left the auditorium: not only can the communal space of the theatre "model new investments in and interactions with variously constituted public spheres" (10), but performance itself "can describe, through the fulsome, hopeful, radically humanist gesture of the utopian performative, how social relationships might change" (141). This utopic perspective insists on the social function of theatre as a transformative one, in that it "encourages spectators to relate the society of the stage to the social world they themselves inhabit, and to imagine their responses to the performance as contributions to a dialogue or debate about that social world and how it might be improved" (Ridout, "Social" 38). But a number of scholars have expressed scepticism of Dolan's optimistic formulation, attending to the material concerns that mark all theatrical production. Jackson's Social Works draws attention to the complexion of the audience itself, urging us to consider "what it takes to gather but to limit the people, what it means to secure a space and specify a time, what it means to be one of the limited people who will make the effort to get that space at that time" (38–39). If affective transformations of the social sphere unfold in the auditorium,

therefore, Jackson reminds us to question which slices of society have the benefit and privilege of attending these transformative experiences.

The "social turn" at the end of *The Author* thus reveals itself as potentially problematic. In one sense, it perhaps delegates a disproportionate amount of emotional labour to the audience: Fiona Mountford, for instance, lamented that "Crouch is probably asking too much of us" (Author 1039). More importantly, the social transformation it aims to engender risks surrogating - rather than mobilizing - real-world activism outside the theatre, for the frisson of engagement produces what Keren Zaiontz calls "narcissistic spectatorship," characterized by a spectatorial "consumption of the self" (407): "The spectator is not positioned as an author or agent who has the power to create or enact concrete change, but as an experiencer of the piece" (408; emphasis in original). Moreover, as Barry Freeman tells us, the "social turn" too often relies on the platitude that "an active audience is an ethically engaged audience" (112), when no such guarantee exists. Ridout similarly reflects on performances in which spectators are encouraged "to engage in a relationship of care or support, to accept an ethical responsibility for the other" – and The Author might well be considered one such performance - and pointedly asks, "Is being there enough?" (Theatre 64). Whereas Dolan suggests that the "temporary publics" formed in the auditorium might be convinced "to be active in other public spheres, to participate in civic conversations that performance perhaps begins" (10), Freeman points out that "there is a way in which an 'active' audience may imagine itself occupying a 'moral high ground' of a different order, one based on a willingness to co-create with artists in a shared, public encounter" (113); self-satisfied artistic participation, he suggests, risks displacing civic participation outside the theatre. "The aspiration is always to move beyond art," Claire Bishop writes in Artificial Hells, "but never to the point of comparison with comparable projects in the social domain" (19).

The final moments of *The Author* marshal hope and community in an attempt to leverage the shared theatrical space and engender a social transformation that spectators can carry away with them – and hopefully disseminate – once the performance has ended. The objective is laudable, and I want desperately to believe in it: like Dolan, I, too, often experience transcendence at the theatre. But the stage's entanglement with politics and economics, its eerie reproductions of neoliberal logic and labour practice, and its inevitable capitulation to the flow and circulation of capital are simply too hard to ignore. If the postdramatic, in its themes, indexes our political disillusionment and societal fragmentation and, in its forms, queasily parallels the diffusion of labour under neoliberal hegemony, its material practices simultaneously rely on collective work – both among the theatre practitioners who put on plays and the theatregoers who see them – that maybe help us dismantle traditional hierarchies and leverage the political potential of the collaborative. Of course, such appeals to the collective are always and invariably enmeshed in networks of neoliberal capital and labour practices. No matter the creative and physical labour of the theatre company giving shape and meaning to Attempts on Her Life and Love and Information, no matter the intellectual labour of the audiences trying to make sense of them, and no matter the emotional labour asked of spectators of *The Author*, inequitable remuneration marks the theatrical process as inextricably bound up in the hierarchical exigencies of the neoliberal economy. We might very well locate a powerful strain of resistance in the collaborative work such plays require, but, then again, the resistance of artistic social engagement is rarely as straightforward as some theatre scholars suggest. Perhaps whether or not we identify such resistance as effective depends on our respective understandings and interpretations. Here, too, we are tasked with making meaning.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## "CAN I TELL YOU ABOUT IT?": COLLABORATIVE SITES OF RESISTANCE

On 23 June 2016, the fiercely divisive Brexit referendum – which promised to put to rest, finally, decades' worth of political strife over the so-called "Europe question" – ended when a slim majority of British citizens voted to withdraw from the European Union. The next morning, a number of Britons awoke, in collective disbelief, to a country "simultaneously in freefall and at a standstill, in a moment of intense and collective disorientation. We don't know what is happening and it is happening very fast" (Younge). Indeed, at the heart of this dizzying, post-Brexit whirlwind – a convulsion of incredulity on the part of those who voted to stay, smugness and nationalist pride on the part of those who voted to leave, and outrage at the Leave campaign's almost instant reneging on the lofty promises with which it secured victory – remained an obstinate uncertainty about what Brexit would actually look like and what it would mean for British and EU nationals living and working in continental Europe and the United Kingdom. David Cameron, who had called the referendum in a gambit to appease his party's Eurosceptic contingent, was forced to resign, and home secretary Theresa May won a Conservative leadership contest to become Britain's next Prime Minister, charged with the arduous task of seeing the country through its divorce from the continent.

This chapter's point of departure is the fraught period leading up to Cameron's ill-fated concession to the Eurosceptics, when, as Jonathan Freedland concluded in the weeks after the vote, Cameron revealed himself as "the true heir to Blair": "Both men had a lopsided vision of Britain's place in the world, one that placed too much weight on our relationship with the US and too little on our relationship with continental Europe," and "each will be remembered for a single

decision of utter recklessness" – Brexit in the case of Cameron, support for the Iraq war in the case of Blair – "that history will be slow to forgive." If, as I have argued in previous chapters, the neoliberal consensus was concretized as political hegemony under the Blair administration, the final months of Cameron's tenure as prime minister made visible the perilous cracks in the pavement and the far-right vitriol that had long lingered somewhere beneath the surface.

I begin with Anders Lustgarten's 2013 play, If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep, which dramatizes in Act One the noxious combination of austerity policies and xenophobic scapegoating before opening up the stage in Act Two to a collectivist Occupy-style demonstration, hailing anti-capitalist grassroots activism as a corrective to neoliberal control. More recently, Alexander Zeldin's devised theatre piece Love, which premiered at the end of 2016, similarly addresses contemporary income inequality and the failures of Britain's social care system, and the play enfolds collectivist politics into its process by virtue of its collaborative development. The formal, thematic, and developmental preoccupations of both plays find an antecedent in Caryl Churchill's Light Shining in Buckinghamshire, which opened in 1976, the same year that Britain implemented an earlier set of austerity measures in exchange for a loan from the IMF. Light Shining was, for Churchill, an experiment in collaborative theatre-making that foregrounded a sense of the communal in its writing process, rehearsals, and division of roles. Thus, the play came to be known not only for its spartan design and small cast but also for the collectivist sensibility that informed nearly every element of its creation. The National's revival of the play in 2015, however – with its magnificent set and cast of sixty-two – problematized the collaborative impulse considered by many to be the play's organizing principle. And the respective timings of the two productions tell: the premiere opened a year after Thatcher became leader of the Conservatives, when the neoliberal agenda – and its

concomitant implications for global capitalism – began to pick up steam as the only feasible way forward; the revival opened a year before this once-lauded globalist model would serve as fodder for far-right populism and sink David Cameron's political career for good.

I conclude my chapter with an analysis of the 2011 play Three Kingdoms, an international collaboration of English playwright Simon Stephens, German director Sebastian Nübling, and Estonian designer Ene-Liis Semper. As in Light Shining, a collaborative impulse enlivens the production of *Three Kingdoms* (in spite of the play's grisly and unsettling content), for the border-crossing that governs the structure of the plot – the characters travel from London to Hamburg and then Tallinn – was replicated in reverse in its touring production: the show premiered in Estonia before transferring to Germany and then England. While it undoubtedly articulates an anxiety about the dangers of globalization's diminished spatial barriers and neoliberalism's limitless commodification – it's about sex trafficking, after all – Three Kingdoms seems to me more intimately invested in the productive possibilities of transnational collaboration, animated by a celebratory, rather than apocalyptic, attitude towards globalization and the integrated European community. That such a play will be possible in the same way in post-Brexit Britain seems unlikely, especially since limiting freedom of movement (relating in particular to EU nationals working in Britain) proved to be the linchpin of the Leave campaign. *Three Kingdoms*, then, as a theatrical artefact, explicitly indexes the impingement of macroeconomic and geopolitical concerns on the arts.

Taken together, these four plays emblematize the productive possibilities of artistic collaboration in resistance to neoliberal consensus politics. Appealing to the collective as a safeguard against the divisiveness and alienation of global capitalism – whether by advocating for protest and urging us to organize or by harnessing the possibilities of a globalized landscape

- these plays engage with a crucial moment in Britain's political history when the neoliberal agenda put forth by Thatcher's Conservatives in the late 1970s seems, four decades later, to have reached critical mass. The chapter thus begins and ends in precisely this moment of fearful uncertainty, and perhaps it invokes a measure of hope in its analysis of a group of plays that are unified in their call to organize, to collaborate, to mobilize collectively, and to unite rather than divide. Here, again, is the utopian vision of Jill Dolan, for whom the theatre is animated by "our belief in social justice and a better future, [...] love for human commonality despite the vagaries of difference" (171). But this chapter, too, teases out the bristling, unsettling realities with which we currently grapple in the face of far-right populism's threat to democracy, a realization Slavoj Žižek synthesizes in his recent book *The Courage of Hopelessness*: "In 'democratic' procedures (which, of course, can have a positive role to play), no matter how radical our anti-capitalism, solutions are sought solely through democratic mechanisms that themselves form parts of the apparatus of the 'bourgeois' state that guarantees the undisturbed reproduction of capital" (30).

When the alternative to Donald Trump, for instance, is Hillary Clinton's neoliberal endorsement of global capitalism, or when the alternative to Brexit is the European Union's enforcement of fiscal discipline (to say nothing of the Cameron chumocracy), we are faced with two sides of the same coin: we oppose the bogeyman of the far right with recourse to the Good Old Days of the same neoliberal agenda we once resisted, now reconfigured as the lesser of two evils. The notion of collectivist theatre-making as a real form resistance, therefore, might appear quaint when we acknowledge that our lack of real political choice – encapsulated by the acquiescence of democracy to capital – has seemingly reached its apotheosis and enshrined itself as political reality. But these plays' steadfast commitment to the values of community, solidarity, ethics, and social cohesion indexes at least a fleeting hope – more Dolan, finally, than Žižek – that we might someday locate a viable alternative politics to the neoliberal consensus, one that will unfetter itself, both in discourse and in practice, from the tyranny of capital.

§

The months leading to the 2016 Brexit referendum revived the spirit of a long-festering division in the Conservative Party regarding Britain's place in the European community, one that had been rehearsed numerous times in Tory circles since Thatcher's tenure as prime minister – for, indeed, her myopic mishandling of the Europe question played prominently into the denouement of her political career. Europe remained a contentious subject for the Conservatives, not only during John Major's premiership but, too, under the party leaderships of William Hague, Iain Duncan Smith, and Michael Howard when the Tories were in opposition. Cameron, however, succeeded where his predecessors did not. Taking the reins as Tory leader in 2005, Cameron promoted himself as uniquely equipped to appease both camps of an intensely divided party. For a time, he appeared to have made good on his promises: he ended the Blair-Brown era when he led the Tories to victory in 2010 - albeit twenty seats short of a majority, persuading Nick Clegg's Liberal Democrats to form a coalition government – and then delivered a surprise landslide victory in 2015 (on a platform that promised, whether merely lip service or not, a referendum on EU membership), trouncing Labour candidate Ed Milliband in the popular vote and securing the first Conservative majority government since Major's election win in 1992.

Part of Cameron's initial success at the helm of the Tory statecraft owed to his appeal to the centre ground, presenting the Conservatives as "the mainstream option between a Europhile and a Europhobe extreme" (Bale 215). But divisions in the party, despite appearing momentarily healed, continued to fester and bleed under the Cameron plaster. By the time he ceded to his Eurosceptic backbenchers and promised an in/out referendum on EU membership, Cameron found himself "edg[ing] closer to a destination he did not desire, in order to placate people whose support he did not really want" (Shipman 9). His director of communications, Craig Oliver, however, argues that Cameron had little choice, describing the referendum as a "political reality. The issue of whether we should remain in or leave the EU had been a slow train coming for years. It just happened to arrive in the station on David Cameron's watch" (9).

If Cameron intended the referendum as merely a gesture of good will towards the mutinous ranks of his party – indeed, he seemed certain the country would vote Remain and (at least for a time) stem the tide of Eurospectic separatism – he gravely underestimated the malaise of rural, working-class Britons, whose (justified) economic discontent and (less justified) anxieties about immigration and free movement provided Nigel Farage's UKIP with the raw materials it needed to mobilize a pseudo-grassroots movement characterized by divisive, hateful rhetoric and xenophobia. At no point was this blatantly racist appeal (and its horrific consequences) clearer than on 16 June, one week before the referendum, when Farage unveiled Leave's infamous "Breaking Point" poster, which featured "a crowd of brown-faced men looking like they are filing into [Britain]," even though the image was actually of Syrian refugees crossing the border between Slovenia and Croatia and thus "had nothing to do with free movement" (Oliver 331). Worse, Oliver tells us, "the original picture had white faces in it," which were darkened for the poster (331). Just hours later, Labour MP Jo Cox, a campaigner for Remain, was murdered in broad daylight by one of her constituents, Thomas Mair, a neo-Nazi and white supremacist who shouted "Britain first!" as he shot and stabbed her to death.

Three years earlier, Anders Lustgarten dramatized the intersection of austerity measures, economic inequality, and xenophobic nationalism in the tepidly received *If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep.* If the title didn't sufficiently betray Lustgarten's politics, the

opening choreography certainly accomplished the task, featuring "*a group of people in pinstriped suits and balaclavas robbing a bank, taking not just cash but paperwork, the office plants, the lot.* [...] *They rip off the balaclavas and assume a professional attitude round a table*"

(3). These are the high-powered financiers whose exploitation of the market (at the cost of ordinary people) instantiates the action of the play and, ostensibly, the kinds of austerity policies implemented by Cameron at the time of the play's premiere. In order to eradicate the "culture of dependency. [...] That 'I-want-something-for-nothing' disease" (4; emphasis in original), the speculators propose Unity Bonds (a nightmarish iteration of social impact bonds) in an attempt to widen the grip of privatization: "Unity Bonds transfer the costs of social repair from the taxpayer to the private sector at a healthy return. Problem families can now be monetised, at a profit to investors [...]. The fewer people receive treatment for the problems, and/or the greater the reduction in offences, the higher the returns" (4). Lustgarten's indictment is clear: even if the market could be leveraged for social good, the private sector's incentive to work towards social cohesion is motivated by profit margins, not by a benevolent interest in the wellbeing of humanity. When Lucinda, a small business owner whose inclusion on the board fills a quota, asks, "Why doesn't the state pay for it? [...] From, you know, taxes," the others at the table "politely suppress their collective amusement" (6), for the small-scale entrepreneur – who deals in chocolate, not bonds – is clearly in over her head, not quite tuned to the frequency of capitalists who everywhere sniff out opportunities for privatization and profit.

Lucinda's sentiment is echoed in the next scene by Joan, a retired nurse, who evokes the traditional responsibilities of the welfare state to which she was accustomed earlier in her life: "A place to call home. Food on the table. Why shouldn't we have them things? What's a society for unless to make sure people have them things?" (7). But, if Joan has been around long enough

to remember the Keynesian consensus of post-war Britain, she certainly recalls, too, the systematic rolling back of the welfare state instantiated by the Thatcher administration and its ascension to political hegemony under Blair. What follows is a series of vignettes that dramatize the consequences of unfettered privatization for ordinary British citizens whose demographics run the gamut, from the elderly Joan, to a Zimbabwean immigrant, to a group of disaffected youth whose difficulty finding work leads them to petty theft and starting fights in pubs. Joan laments, "It's the way we treat each other now. Like threats. That's what I can't bear. We treat one another like threats" (7), and, unsurprisingly, Unity Bonds do nothing to turn the tide, their ironically utopic name a conspicuous signal of their failure to bring about social restoration.

Lustgarten articulates this societal disrepair first through a recently state-employed labourer, who reflects on his eighteen-month-long period of unemployment when he muses, "There's a way people look at you now when you're out of work, you'd think with more of us there'd be more solidarity, but it's the opposite" (9). Most of the venom of this interpersonal alienation, however, is directed towards McDonald, a structural engineer from Zimbabwe who, since moving to London, has found only low-wage labour for which he is overqualified. Worse, he despairs that he "cannot remember what my children feel like, what my wife smells like. [...] Of all the humiliations here, the stooping and the begging for things that should be mine by rights, to forget the feeling of something that came of my body, that is my body, is the worst" (32). But the characters McDonald encounters throughout the play deem his right to the promised benefits of British citizenship less valid, the markers of otherness he bears on his body and history – his skin, his accent, his place of birth – disqualifying him from Britishness and isolating him as a scapegoat for nationalist discontent. When Joan is turned away from an emergency room – the justification that "Unity incentives are based on the reduction of waiting lists. One rather effective way to achieve that is not to let people on them" (15) – she turns her wrath on McDonald, who enters bleeding profusely and is promptly treated: "What gives you the right to jump over me? What gives you the right to bloody be here at all? [...] Parasite! Why don't you piss off back to where you come from, get them to look after you?" (16).

Her xenophobic racism is hardly uncommon. It is, after all, precisely the kind of rhetoric that fuelled the popularity of UKIP in the wake of the financial crisis, a party that capitalized on "recessionary times to whip up animosity against 'alien' interlopers" (Alibhai-Brown). As Gary Younge explains, "nativist parties" like UKIP "always play best during times of recession, when resources are scarce and people are looking for someone to blame." Indeed, UKIP readily scapegoated migrants for the recession (rather than the bankers and financiers who caused it) by characterizing them as leeches on Britain's welfare state, and, in doing so, the party refrained from looking to the Cameron administration's inherited tradition, from both left and right, of steadily chipping away at public services. It was this same xenophobic, anti-migrant rhetoric, too, that formed the contemptible backbone of Brexit's Leave campaign, which seemed to legitimate racism as a valid political stance and offered overt bigotry a prominent platform from which to spew its bile.<sup>1</sup> Even Alan Sked, who founded UKIP in 1993, has expressed horror at Farage's (intermittent) leadership of the party since 2006, conceding that "[t]he party I founded has become a Frankenstein's monster" (qtd. in Jeffries).<sup>2</sup> But Lustgarten suggests that the xenophobic sentiment UKIP leveraged with gut-churning aplomb during the Brexit campaign

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The *Guardian* reported that "[m]ore than 3,000 allegations of hate crimes were made to UK police – mainly in the form of harassment and threats – in the week before and the week after the 23 June vote, a year-on-year increase of 42%" (to say nothing of those crimes that went unreported); the UN took a thinly veiled shot at Farage and then–foreign secretary Boris Johnson when it asserted that "prominent politicians should share the blame for the outbreak of xenophobia and intimidation against ethnic minorities" after a campaign "marked by divisive, anti-immigrant and xenophobic rhetoric" (P. Butler). <sup>2</sup> Even more remarkable is Sked's quoting of Keynes – arguably, the antithesis of UKIP's neoliberal platform: "As Keynes said, 'When the facts change, you have to change your opinions"" (qtd. in Jeffries).

remains an all-too-common attitude among those most affected by joblessness and austerity.

When the fiercely racist Jason, whom Ryan has joined for a pint, sees McDonald enter with a mop and bucket, he alleges, "It's cunts like him that's why you're here. [...] He's got your job," ignoring Ryan's subdued rebuttal, "I don't wanna wash floors" (18). And the divisiveness promoted by UKIP's ultra-nationalist platform (a euphemism) is most clearly articulated when Jason asserts, "Everyone, everyone's got a piece of the pie except for us and I am sick and fucking tired of it. [...] It is us against them" (19; emphasis in original). While right to lament the working class's denial of a share of the pie, he fails to see that McDonald, too, has been barred from the table. The ensuing altercation results in McDonald being stabbed (by Ryan, not Jason); when we see him again at the end of the play – wearing a colostomy bag – the social alienation and violence he has experienced in Britain has poisoned him against any sense of community, and he expresses the same divisive animosity that predicated Jason's racist abuse and Ryan's physical attack: "Why should I care about this godforsaken country when it has never, for one moment, cared for me? [...] I look at everyone, every man, every white man, as an enemy, because of you. You have ruined this country for me. You have narrowed my world" (64). Victimized by their socioeconomic conditions, characters like McDonald, Ryan, Jason, and Joan turn on each other rather than forging bonds of solidarity, which Paul Mason, in his write-up for the BBC, saw as emblematic of the way in which "the relentlessness of economic crisis – even if it is no longer sharp or deep – eats away at people's hope, patience and decency." The characters thus identify those who suffer similar economic oppression as threats to their wellbeing instead of as potential allies, and this conflict, Lustgarten suggests, provides a convenient distraction from the capitalist machinations that have engineered economic inequality in the first place.

When Asset-Smith, one of the financiers from the first scene, diagnoses the inefficacy of

Unity Bonds, he facetiously encourages Thomas to "[I]ook out of this window. Do you see a rise in social harmony on the horizon? Is that angry roaring noise in fact the sound of an enormous number of colourful butterflies?" (24).<sup>3</sup> He concludes, instead, that "[s]ocial discord seems the safer bet. An almost guaranteed bet, in fact. It would be a dereliction of my duty to shareholders not to make that bet" (24), his responsibility to investors clearly outweighing any sense of moral responsibility to the society in which he lives. Thus, Lustgarten's financial dystopia sees the capitalists turn to social disrepair, rather than unity, as a vehicle for profitmaking: "We short rape. [...] Crime, depression, illiteracy. [...] Set up new markets in all of them" (23). And when Lucinda – ever slow on the uptake where ruthless capitalization is concerned and therefore unaware of the side bets Asset-Smith has created – approaches McLean about the failure of Unity Bonds, she receives a lesson in market morality:

LUCINDA	They didn't actually bring down crime. Or depression. Or rape. [] Those things have gone <i>up</i> .
McLEAN	And generated, via the derivatives market, a cascade of new revenues to deal with those issues.
LUCINDA	But then it goes round and round for ever and you –
McLEAN	- turn social problems into an endless motor for growth. Correct. You spin the grubby cotton of common lives into golden thread. You give ordinary people, most of whom, let's face it, have no future as consumers in this society, [] a purpose. (28; emphasis in original)

Their purpose, evidently, is to furnish the coffers of the already wealthy, the golden thread they spin located so far above them on the social ladder that they can hardly conceive of its existence. Understanding, finally, the social ramifications of the scheme to which she has contributed,

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> If the reference to butterflies doesn't sufficiently recall the unforgiving state of affairs in *Mercury Fur*, we might remember the Party Guest's similar call to "[o]pen your window, for fuck's sake. It's a shit hole out there. Riots. No law" (116), indexing the same kind of social unrest Asset-Smith observes.

Lucinda asserts, with incredulous revulsion (and a clarity that can be attributed only to her function as a momentary mouthpiece for the playwright), "You're making human weakness into raw material for financial speculation" (29).

In Act Two, the play's form swerves abruptly. Where the first half of the play contains an episodic flurry of short vignettes, the second is, instead, a single protracted scene featuring all eight actors sharing the performance space as they work together to stage an Occupy-style demonstration in protest of austerity measures. Among the collective, we recognize Ryan and Joan, the latter of whose participation is explained by her dissatisfaction with retirement: "I've always loved work. It's the thing that makes me feel most real" (38).<sup>4</sup> But when the scene opens on Meera Syal and Laura Elphinstone as Jen and Kelly, two new characters, the doubling resonates: the pair had also played McLean and Lucinda, whose exchange most explicitly synthesizes Lustgarten's indictment of big business in the first half of the play. Here, however, as Kelly bandages a head wound Jen received at the boot of a police officer, the women speak to the collective's spirit of resistance and protest. Jen maintains, "You keep plugging away and you never give up and you keep fighting. I'm not special, Kel. Anyone can do it" (34).

As the group tidies up an abandoned courthouse (they plan to put the financial system "on trial"), there is "*an unexpected arrival: Thomas, the former trader, dressed down*" (37). Shrugging off accusations that he is a mole – for the group has just received word, via a "[1]eak from the plod," that they have been deemed one of a number of "[h]igh-level terror threats to the City of London" (39) – Thomas (whose speech prefix appears, now, as Tom) explains, "I came down here because I would very much like to feel my contribution to this life was something

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> We might consider the implications of work being what makes Joan feel "most real," as though the capitalist construction of labour is so imbricated in her identity as a post-industrial subject that she is at risk of feeling less real, less herself, without it.

more than making money out of pain" (50). The others, however, take shots at his former career as a trader and express unease at his participation in the group: Kelly mutters that bankers already "have their say all the time: it's called government policy" (46). When Tom scoffs at the hand signals they use during group discussions – a fist to veto, two fingers to directly respond, "jazz hands" to agree – Jen defends their silent communication as a democratic discourse "[i]n favour of equality. Probably not much like where you came from, is it?" (43). Tom's sardonic responses in this exchange – he quips that the gestures "make[] you look like a Marcel Marceau tribute group" and mimes putting his "*hands on an invisible glass wall*" (43) – provide needed comic relief in a talk-heavy second act that includes heady lectures on the London Stock Exchange and Alexander Nahum Sack's concept of odious debt (which led one reviewer to call the play "unashamedly preachy" [Edge 146]). But if the laughs Tom garners come at the expense of the collective action Lustgarten champions – for the playwright certainly pokes fun at some of the group's more contrived practices and affectations – this humour did little to mitigate what critics roundly characterized as political heavy-handedness.

Kate Bassett called the play "[e]mbarrassingly inept for a Royal Court main house premiere, [...] a didactic, clunking effort" (*If You Don't* 148), while Libby Purves described it as "simplistic and smug" (*If You Don't* 146). And, though many bemoaned the play's lack of nuance vis-à-vis its political agenda, even more criticized Lustgarten for crafting a play devoid of drama. Henry Hitchings lamented that the play was "structurally awkward, not least when it stops abruptly, just as it's beginning to get interesting" (*If You Don't* 147), while Andrzej Lukowski described it as a "wonky, underwritten play" whose second half – by departing from the fast-paced, episodic structure of the first act, which he praised as "feisty, fiery and free of undue pontification" – failed to deliver "any emotional or narrative pay-off" (149).

In their lamentation of the play's didacticism, halting structure, and lack of narrative, the reviews echoed critiques, thirty-seven years earlier, of Caryl Churchill's Light Shining in Buckinghamshire, a play that is similarly episodic and concerned with grassroots protest (albeit in the sixteenth century, which hindsight permitted Churchill to depict as dishearteningly ineffectual). Light Shining opened at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh before transferring to the Royal Court Upstairs in September 1976, where it was characterized as "truthful reportage but slow-moving drama" by the Daily Telegraph's John Barber, who "found some of the sermonizing dialogue heavy going" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 30). Irving Wardle's review for the *Times*, meanwhile, observed that "each scene, no matter how powerfully charged, [is] cut off as if by a guillotine" (qtd. in Fitzsimmons 30), a stylistic move that might remind us of Brecht. The National Theatre's lavish revival in 2015 drew similar critiques from reviewers anachronistically concerned with the play's dramaturgy. Dominic Maxwell, for instance, called it "a right old slog: a piece of theatrical eat-your-greens" (Light Shining 405), while Lloyd Evans grumbled that "[i]t's hard to trace any connection between one part of the script and another. All her scenes are shapeless prolix creatures [...] dropped on to an empty stage from nowhere" (*Light Shining* 406). That the strategy borrows from a crucial tradition in modern political theatre, of course, seems to escape Evans (even in spite of forty years' worth of scholarship on the play), but we ought not to be surprised: he begins his review, after all, by asserting, with all the masturbatory bluster of an internet troll, that "Churchill must be the most over-rated writer the English theatre has produced. She has virtually no dramatic skills" (406).

That both plays were so similarly received signals an affinity between them in terms of not merely their content but their form as well. *Light Shining* culminates in the dejected petering out of political resistance, as the characters' protest for constitutional reform – inflected with

religious fervour as they await the second coming – yields nothing in the way of progress. Briggs resigns himself to the reality that "Christ will not come. I don't believe it. [...] I don't believe this is the last days," and Churchill trajects his hopelessness into a prophecy for her own historical moment: "England will still be here in hundreds of years. And people working so hard they can't grasp how it happens and can't take hold of their own lives, like us till we had this chance, and we're losing it now, as we sit here, every minute" (233). Claxton, too, who earlier revelled in the rush of protest – "I found my heart was pounding and my breath got short going up the hill. My body knew I was doing something amazing. I knew I was in the midst of something. I was doing it, not standing still worrying about it" (220) – withdraws entirely from the social sphere he so intensely desired to change. His final lines close the play not with a reiteration of the Ranters' communal beliefs but with an appeal for solitude: "I sometimes hear from the world that I have forsaken. [...] My great desire is to see and say nothing" (241).

In the same way, reviewers lamenting the absence of narrative or emotional resolution in *If You Don't Let Us Dream* likely resented that the play ends on the cusp of a dramatic development we never actually see. When McDonald comes face to face with Ryan for the first time since his stabbing in the pub – he has been assigned to inspect the courthouse, as he now works for Health and Safety – the animosity he feels towards his former assailant seems certain to put a premature end to the group's demonstration, but Ryan pleads with him to allow the trial to take place, explaining that the collective offers him an alternative to the lifestyle he led when he and McDonald last met: "If I go back to that pub, I am never coming out. If there isn't something else, if I can't *imagine* something else whether it's this or something different but the *possibility* of something else, I am never coming out" (65; emphasis in original). McDonald relents momentarily, confused by the prospect of their mock trial, and Ryan poses the question

that closes the play: "Can I tell you about it?" (65).

Potential reconciliation between Ryan and McDonald – indeed, any sense of communitybuilding or chance that McDonald might cease to "look at everyone [...] as an enemy" after Ryan's attack (64) – is temporally foreclosed upon by the play's abrupt ending, deferred beyond the final curtain, thus depriving the audience of the "emotional and narrative pay-off" that Lukowski sought in his review (149). But, perhaps, this is a political strength rather than a structural weakness. Where the play seemingly fails to dramatize (and thereby cogently articulate) a cohesive alternative politics as an antidote to austerity, it demonstrates, importantly, that the conversations which will yield viable solutions can still be had, that the politicoeconomic state of affairs is not so far gone, the neoliberal consensus not yet so entrenched, as to prevent opposition and collectivism from mobilizing.

In this sense, *If You Don't Let Us Dream* neatly aligns with the Occupy protests of 2011 (which inspired the play in the first place), whose detractors pointed out the movement's failure to specifically propose the alternative vision it claimed to pursue. In his essay "Insurgencies Don't Have a Plan – They *Are* the Plan," Benjamin Arditi defends such revolts as "passageways that open up possibilities of something other to come. [...] To ask that they also provide us with blueprints of a future order is to demand from them something they are not" (8). Few, if any, would be faulted for interpreting this defence as a less-than-convincing deferral of responsibility, but Arditi maintains that the significance of Occupy-style protests need not be tied to whether or not they spell out a utopic vision of the future; they are "already making a difference by merely demonstrating, occupying and generally defying the given" (3). Lustgarten's refusal, then, to provide a narratively satisfying ending – indeed, even a climax – lends to the broader political project of which the play is a part: it seeks to dramatize not *how* things can be changed but *that* 

they can be changed, even if we never see such change enacted on stage. The "insurgent moment," Arditi continues, is "of the nature of an event": "the insurgencies rather than their proposals are the plan because they aim to modify the boundaries of the given and the narratives through which we make sense of it" (9). The play echoes Arditi's argument when Tom poses the same question that critics of Occupy lobbed at what they perceived as aimless protesting: "if you're going to raise our hopes that things can be different, you have to give us an alternative. [...] Don't you?" (50). But Kelly insists that a force as deeply entrenched as capitalism can't be taken on without "a new space and a new language. It's not the answers right now, it's the questions. We are trying to learn to ask the right questions, ones that don't start with money, that start with people. Asking those questions: that's the alternative, Tom" (51).

Lenient though this reading may be, the play is clearly guided by a political rather than a dramatic impulse; nonetheless, its narrative shortcomings were sufficiently grievous for Paul Taylor to conclude that Lustgarten's "skills as a polemicist, seemingly a stranger to self-doubt, still far exceed his talents as a dramatist" (*If You Don't* 148). Though intended as a slight, the assessment coincided with a puff piece by Jonathan Watson, published in the *Stage* the following week, whose subtitle read, "Anders Lustgarten sees himself as activist first and playwright second" (22). And the interview – in which Lustgarten accuses Thatcher of "want[ing] people to be ripped out of their sense of social rootedness, ripped out of their sense of reciprocity, their responsibility to others" (qtd. in Watson 22) and describes neoliberal politics as "a startling U-turn from the traditional Keynesian liberal model" (22) – concludes with the playwright's telling admission that "I never used to go to the theatre, I've got no theatrical background" (qtd. in Watson 23), which perhaps offers an additional resonance to Arditi's assertion that "rebellions might turn out to be lost causes but we can't peg their failure to the absence of a script" (8).

It is through these principled but unscripted (and uncertain) interventions that Lustgarten, in his introduction to the play, believes we might glean a newfound "sense of optimism and excitement, and optimism is about the most radical quality you can possess right now" (xviii). Simon Jenkins made a similar claim after the Brexit referendum, describing the result as a "triumph for the pessimist tendency" and asserting that "[o]ptimism must become a strategy." Former prime minister Gordon Brown, too, placed the blame for Brexit on the shortcomings of the Remain campaign, which "decided to make the negative argument – that leaving was a risk – and not to articulate any positive, principled case." Their position recalls Dolan's insistence on "militant optimism" in the theatre, through which "performance presents another way to dissent from state regulation and ideological fixity" (98).

Such a perspective could not be more remote from Žižek's provocative diagnosis of our current political condition, which argues that real courage entails not optimism but acceptance of our bleak reality. And he dismisses hope as a cowardly, untenable strategy for political change:

Giorgio Agamben said in an interview that "thought is the courage of hopelessness" – an insight which is especially pertinent for our historical moment, when even the most pessimistic diagnosis as a rule finishes with an uplifting hint at some version of the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. The true courage is not to imagine an alternative, but to accept the consequences of the fact that there is no clearly discernable alternative: the dream of an alternative is a sign of theoretical cowardice, functioning as a fetish that prevents us from thinking through to the end the deadlock of our predicament. In short, the true courage is to admit that the light at the end of the tunnel is probably the headlight of another train approaching us from the opposite direction. (xi–xii)

For Žižek, then, the optimistic strategy – one which passively rests on a faintly Hegelian reassurance that everything tends towards betterment, that the Left is on the "right" side of history – obstructs and neuters us, espousing a leftist post-truth politics that spares us the trauma of admitting that things may indeed get much worse. But hope, in *If You Don't Let Us Dream*, is not quite the safety blanket Žižek describes, less a strategy of optimistic passivity than an active mobilization of informed, politically-minded collectivism that aims to recuperate social relations badly strained by the capitalist ethos.

That the play ends with Ryan's offer to tell McDonald about the demonstration - to open up a channel for communication that was previously closed – suggests the possibility of community-building and the radical potential for solidarity among even the unlikeliest of allies. As Aleks Sierz notes, "If these two can find something human in common, [...] then all sorts of political and economic change could occur. It's as idealistic and provocative a point as the views of the activists he puts on stage" (Review 17). And, importantly, the prospect of Ryan and McDonald coming together to share in a collaborative moment works to thwart the divisive social forces that pitted them against one another in the first act. Narratively unfulfilling as the second act may be, its departure from the first, in both content and form, signals a shift towards the kind of collectivist sensibility for which Lustgarten fervently advocates. If the structural splinters and fragments of Act One give formal shape to the interpersonal fissures wrought by the beatification of the market – which Asset-Smith reminds us "are not responsible to anyone. That is their particular beauty. It's what makes them free" (25) – Act Two, in its very wholeness, in its suggestion of continuity after the final curtain, offers a hopeful corrective, emphasizing cooperation and solidarity in place of social disrepair.

In this way, If You Don't Let Us Dream succeeds more as a demonstration, itself, than as

a dramatically sound play. As a kind of neo-agitprop, it fulfils Lustgarten's call for a "return of proper political theatre [...] that takes on the overwhelming reality of 2013: the propaganda of markets that they're indispensible" (xix), and other politically-minded theatre artists saw the play as a sign of an important of-the-moment theatrical revolt. Two months after the play's premiere, playwright Fin Kennedy exulted in the *Stage* that "already 2013 feels like the year that British theatre finally began mobilising against the government" (10). He lauded Lustgarten's barefaced anti-austerity agenda and willingness to firmly plant the theatre in the realm of politics in order to vocally critique neoliberal market values, which he characterized as reminiscent of the kind of theatrical opposition that occurred during the Thatcher administration:

Is it conceivable that the Royal Court would have staged such an angry polemic at any other time? Lustgarten even went head-to-head with a right-wing opponent on BBC Radio 4's Today programme. When was the last time a playwright did that? During the 1980s perhaps – but that is precisely the point. We are seeing a politicisation of theatre not seen since the last time a Tory government sought to downgrade British culture and creativity. (10)

The right-wing opponent Kennedy refrains from naming is Sir Ronald Cohen, the co-founder and then-chairman of Big Society Capital, Britain's first social investment institution, launched by the Cabinet Office in 2012, whose mission consists of establishing a "vibrant, diverse, well capitalised and sustainable social investment market" that will "[a]ttract greater and more diverse sources of investment" ("Our Vision"). Toby Johnson's write-up on the "brilliant and cruelly guillotined" four-minute *Today* segment explains that Cohen "was generous enough to say he liked the play, but pointed out that [social impact bonds] were invented to fund not-for-profit enterprises, and there is no market in which you can trade them. However he did admit that such

a market could develop over time if SIBs took off as a financial instrument."

The social impact bonds Big Society Capital facilitates – burnished by its gauzy (and only vaguely articulated) initiative to "drive greater impact and social change" ("Theory") clearly inspired Lustgarten's depiction of Unity Bonds in the play, but the playwright seems even more concerned with the unsettling possibilities of SIBs should they, indeed, take off as a financial instrument in the way that Cohen conceded. This logical extension of unfettered marketization signals Lustgarten's thoroughgoing engagement with real-life events happening on the ground: "Everything in the play has either happened or is in the process of happening," he told the BBC, forecasting an untenable near future with his insistence that the play "isn't dystopia: it's a news report from 2015" (qtd. in Mason). And here, too, we easily detect If You Don't Let Us Dream's common ground with Light Shining: each play casts its glance on an England temporally removed, Lustgarten's looking forward into the near future while Churchill's revisits the distant past, in order to interrogate the anxieties and insecurities of our tenuous, volatile present-day politics. And both centralize a form of legal proceedings - the staged "trial" that we don't see come to fruition in Lustgarten and the 1647 Putney Debates on constitutional reform from which Churchill quotes verbatim in her first act – to condemn the economic bondage forced upon a citizenry that has no say in its country's fiscal policy.

In *Light Shining*, Rainborough (based on Thomas Rainborough, who represented the Levellers and served as MP for Droitwich from 1647 until his death the next year) indignantly declares, "And this is the old law of England – and that which enslaves the people of England – that they should be bound by laws in which they have no voice!" (214). John Wildman, a soldier and civilian advisor at the debates, expresses solidarity with Rainborough's perspective when he asserts, "The question is: Whether any person can justly be bound by law, who doth not give his

consent?" (214). A similar sensibility – a question, finally, of freedom and sovereignty – ripples throughout the second act of *If You Don't Let Us Dream*, not least when Zebedee explains Sack's principle of odious debt, which Lustgarten links to the massive bailouts following the 2007–8 financial crisis and then serves up as the ultimate contemporary emblem of our economic subjection to governments run by the financial elite:

[T]he main reason we don't have to pay these debts is they're not ours to pay.

[...] Sack had this doctrine of odious debt, which held that [...] if the debt was incurred for specific rather than national interests, and the lenders knew that, "This debt is not an obligation for the nation; it is a *regime's* debt, a personal debt of the power that incurred it. The creditors have committed a hostile act with regard to the people." [...] If the bank bailout was used for the benefit of a tiny clique at the expense of ordinary people, we don't have to pay it back. (58–59; emphasis in original)

Thus, *If You Don't Let Us Dream* articulates a raw, passionate response to the political culture in which it exists, even if, as a piece of theatre, it failed in the eyes of most critics to do justice to the medium. But, if the play's structure and narrative dissatisfy – more confused than confusing – Simon Edge gave Lustgarten the benefit of the doubt, concluding his review by suggesting that "confusion isn't entirely unfitting for a state-of-the-nation play in such unfamiliar times. We are all groping our way so why not the playwright too?" (146).

Indeed, Lustgarten hardly set out to provide definitive answers: "I wrote it to make you feel," he asserts in his introduction, "and therefore to think" (xix). That the playwright emphasizes a move beyond feeling and towards thinking – he stages contemporary political material whose primary engagement is intellectual, rather than emotional, the latter stymied by

structural fail-safes – might, like Churchill's play, remind us of Brecht (indeed, Mason called the play "Brechtian not just with a capital B, but a loud and guttural 'ch' as well"). Indeed, it is Brecht who insists that "we cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither" (201); instead, the play must call the audience to attention and stir spectators from the trance in which they "stare rather than see, [...] listen rather than hear" (187).

One of the formal strategies Brecht suggests for staving off the complacency of emotional immersion is structuring the play so that it draws attention, throughout, to its composition as a piece of theatre, its scenes "knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgment" (201). Constantly alerted to the play's theatrical construction, then, the spectator is necessarily reminded of her own position among an audience of other spectators, each of whom experiences and processes the theatrical event in a different way. But, if we are estranged from the dramatic content on stage, the opposite becomes true of our relationship to our play-going peers, even despite the multifarious judgments each of us imposes upon what we see: the strategies for which Brecht advocates in his formulation of epic theatre reaffirm a certain potential for community in the auditorium, not by cultivating a homogenous spectatorial experience but by provoking an intellectual engagement that unites spectators and theatre-makers alike in a collective sense of politicization.

At the risk of belabouring Mason's comparison, Lustgarten, too, identifies theatre's communal dimension and, rightly, sees its similarity to the grassroots activism he both dramatizes in *If You Don't Let Us Dream* and champions outside the theatre. He explains, "I love the feeling in a room of an audience and a cast feeling and creating something collectively. It's a

microcosm of a good society" (xviii), and it is this collectivist principle which informs the play's aesthetic more than any appeal to narrative or dramatic convention. If the play's form is Brechtian, its intent is to politicize the audience and leverage the theatre as a site of collectivist resistance, urging spectators to come together, to unite, to bridge their gaps – both in and out of the playhouse – as a corrective to the divisive consequences of austerity and financialization. Lustgarten argues (with all the emphasis that Caps Lock can offer),

AUSTERITY WAS NEVER ABOUT FIXING THE ECONOMY. [...] Austerity is about fundamentally reshaping not just government but our basic understanding of what it means to be a member of society, in order to serve the needs of financial markets. [...] All parties cringe before the market. The result is that, in an era that touts 'choice' as its cardinal value, politically we have none. (xvii)

Put this way, it is easy to see how austerity functions as simply an extension, a new iteration, of the neoliberal conquest instantiated by the Thatcher administration, and the playwright articulates a thoroughly valid disillusionment with the possibility of change at the parliamentary level. To resist, the play suggests, is to mobilize in honour of a return to Keynesian welfare-state principles and to revive a traditional conception of society: neither Blair's Third Way nor Cameron's Big Society – which cemented cooperation with (or, more accurately, capitulation to) the private sector as the only viable economic strategy available – but a nostalgic recollection of a time when the state provided for its citizens and we loved our neighbours, a rather conservative message, finally, for a play that so clearly pits itself against the establishment.

*Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*'s original production articulated this appeal for collectivism in its collaborative process. Like *Serious Money* a decade later, the play was developed through a series of workshops with Max Stafford-Clark's company Joint Stock, and it

inaugurated a new phase in Churchill's career, giving her an "opportunity to belong to an artistic community where sharing reading and researching ideas was an important part of the making process" (Aston, "On Collaboration" 146). The collectivist sensibility activated by the play's creative process is doubly important when we consider its political context in relation to that of If You Don't Let Us Dream. Where Lustgarten's play laments neoliberal hegemony's obliteration of political choice in the new millennium, Light Shining premiered in September 1976, the same month that Labour prime minister James Callaghan effectively conceded that the Conservatives' new economic vision might be the only way forward. At the party's annual conference, he proclaimed that Britain was "living on borrowed time. [...] We used to think that you could spend your way out of a recession and increase employment by cutting taxes and boosting Government spending. I tell you in all candour that that option no longer exists," and the solution he offered was steeped in the same market-driven rhetoric that would go on to characterize Thatcher's administration in the eighties: "we can only become competitive by having the right kind of investment at the right kind of level, and by significantly improving the productivity of labour and capital" (qtd. in Bell 254). By repudiating the Keynesian economic model – for he foregrounded a competitive private sector ahead of public spending and privileged investment and capital over the resources of the traditional welfare state – Callaghan advocated for a capitulation to neoliberal market values that, importantly, came from the left, anticipating New Labour's concretization of the neoliberal consensus two decades later.

If Callaghan's 1976 conference address indexed the beginning of a steady chipping away at collectivist sensibilities in British policy, Joint Stock deployed a collaborative process that foregrounded collectivism at every turn. Its mandate suffused not only the content of *Light Shining* but its form, too, speaking to a notion of "theatre-making as 'joint" – hence the

company's name – with "democratized labour informing all aspects of process, practice and production" (Aston and Diamond 4). The experience was a new one for Churchill. Darren Gobert explains, "The result was 'something much more open, a much less *private* way of working' as Churchill put it: a script produced by a '*common* imagination'" (127; emphasis in original). And the playwright's emphasis on the distinction between private and common figured into the play's distribution of roles, in that the six performers in the premiere "would not own but instead share their parts: the dialogue, woven from collective improvisation and public domain sources, became a commons in another sense" (Gobert 129). Thus, characters were divided among several actors, each of whom performed the role in different scenes, mitigating any sense of ownership over a specific part, perspective, or experience. In an interview four years after *Light Shining*'s premiere, Churchill explained that the workshop agreed to "let everybody play different parts, and not worry about characters going through," with the result that "it made everybody's experience seem shared" (qtd. in Hayman 31), imbuing the play with a collectivism that originated in the rehearsal room (and the writing process) long before it arrived on stage.

A more recent play, Alexander Zeldin's *Love*, which premiered at the National in December 2016, was also collaboratively devised (like much of Zeldin's work), and the play takes up many of the same austerity-era issues that Lustgarten addresses in *If You Don't Let Us Dream*, here with an emphasis on the housing crisis and Britain's underfunded social care system. Driven less by traditional narrative than by an impulse to represent contemporary life as it is – "neither tubthumping agit-prop, nor class tourism," reviewer Ben Lawrence assured (1388) – *Love* profiles eight people (a recently evicted family of four, a fifty-something-year-old man caring for his ailing mother, a Sudanese immigrant, and a Syrian refugee) cohabitating in a temporary housing unit while dealing with the Kafkaesque bureaucracy of their local housing council. In an interview for the *Stage*, Zeldin speaks to the collaborative spirit of devised theatre, as it "goes beyond the professional realm and becomes a common, shared purpose with what we're trying to do with our time" (qtd. in Love). Indeed, he explains that *Love*'s process went a step further than that of his previous plays, created in collaboration not only with the cast but also with people living in temporary accommodations while on council housing waiting lists: "[W]hen we've had people come to visit us – homeless people living in B&Bs – we've asked them to get involved in the theatre side of things and direct a bit of rehearsal or act in a bit of it. And that participative work has [...] gone a step further and let people actually act" in the devising process (qtd. in Love). An ethics of community thus reveals itself as a constitutive element of the play, woven into *Love*'s creative process via a collaboration extended into the very community the play seeks to dramatize.

Rather unlike the cool reception that met *If You Don't Let Us Dream*, *Love* was hailed by reviewers upon its premiere, who were united in their praise for the play's earnest and uncompromising (but, importantly, not gratuitous) dramatization of poverty. Cited in particular was Natasha Jenkins's design, which transformed the Dorfman Theatre into "a large soulless communal area whose harsh lighting scheme extends over the entire auditorium" – for, indeed, the strip lighting (that doubled as the house lights) stayed on for the entirety of the show – "meaning we cannot look away" (Mountford, *Love* 1389). Too, the set was constructed on the Dorfman's floor level rather than on the raised stage, with the first two rows of seating – the seats spaced farther apart than usual – located in the playing space (and performers occasionally sat among the spectators in seats intentionally left empty). Both these staging choices – the permanence of the house lights and the blending of the performance space with the auditorium – yoke the play to the world with which it engages, mirroring the broad collaborative process

(between Zeldin, the cast, and the homeless) that informed Love's creation.

The purposeful coalescence of these two conventionally discrete spaces reaches its zenith in the final moments of the play, when Anna Calder-Marshall's elderly Barbara, wait-listed for a nursing home and who, moments earlier, accidentally soiled herself on stage, "walks towards the audience; she is very frail. She uses the audience to support her as she walks out of the theatre" (53). In his review of the play, Matt Trueman recounts that, "on press night, a woman in the second row reached out sobbing. 'I'm so sorry,' she said." Wading precariously through the seats, Calder-Marshall relied on the spectators, literally, for physical support – their shoulders, their arms, their hands – in order to stay upright. And, as she exited the theatre into the outside world – for "[w]e sense that she's on the street" (53) – her unsteady path carved out a corridor tethering the stage to that quotidian space outside the theatre into which we return at the end of a play. Zeldin perhaps echoes Lustgarten in his claim that "[s]olutions have no place in the worlds we are creating" (qtd. in Perkins), and certainly *Love* offers no suggestions for how to remedy the unforgiving conditions of the housing crisis; rather, the play, by locating the performance space and the outside world in a literal continuum marked by Calder-Marshall's perambulatory trajectory, actively engenders an empathic spectatorial engagement akin to the "ethical gaze" Anna Harpin identified in Mercury Fur, "a shift from theatrical watching to theatrical witnessing" (108) and "a sober, portentous and ethical embrace" - on the press night of Love, even a physical embrace – "with (an)other life" (110).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> This crucial moment of performer-spectator interaction in the auditorium, with its emphasis on the intimacy of physical touch, directly follows an unexpected reconciliation on the stage that likewise deploys touch as a means of recovering solidarity. Emma, pregnant and increasingly aggravated by Colin's cynicism, "goes mad and starts taking out everything that's happened till now in the play out on him. She slaps him in the face. Pause – like she's seen herself. [...] Something happens beyond words" (48). A moment later, Colin asks, "Can I touch it?" (48) – a request that might remind us of the curtain line of *If You Don't Let Us Dream* – before "[h]e touches her belly and begins to cry" (49).

In addition to this affecting call for empathy and community, Zeldin foregrounds his impulse for collaboration textually too, for his stage directions describe a performance style that visually emphasizes the joint effort and cooperation of the ensemble. In the first act, a family argument upstage overlaps with Colin and Tharwa fighting over the shared bathroom downstage, and both episodes "happen[] simultaneously – there are regular interruptions between the two scenes so that in some way they feel like one musical piece" (25). Similarly, Zeldin's stage directions describe Act Two as "a complex 'ballet' in which the staging carries a lot of the energy" (30). The blocking thus visually communicates a kind of physical harmony among the performers – indeed, Zeldin invokes music and dance in his directions for their movement – that underlines their collaborative effort, even as they argue over the bathroom, the unwashed dishes, or, in one instance, the rightful ownership of a red mug. Ownership, then, in contrast with the appeal for community articulated by *Love*'s staging, emerges, as it does in *Light Shining*, as especially divisive, most evidently in that Zeldin's disprivileged characters – and the real-life people they represent – are disbarred from participating in that most revered form of ownership since the Thatcher administration, with all of its implications for class and status: home-owning.

That both *Love* and *Light Shining* take aim so aggressively at the concept of ownership, in both content and form, reflects their preoccupation with the rampant inequality that ownership has historically produced. While *Love* concentrates its focus on Britain's have-nots, *Light Shining*, like *If You Don't Let Us Dream*, accomplishes its aim by dramatizing the haves as well, not only signalling a disproportionate accumulation of wealth and material goods among a minority economic elite but also underlining the harrowing real-life consequences of such flagrant inequality. In *Light Shining*'s second act, a butcher rails against his customers in the street, condemning them for the luxury of being able to afford meat when most are starving: You don't look hungry. You don't look as if you need a dinner. [...] What do you need it for? No, tell me. To stuff yourself, that's what for. To make fat. And shit. When it could put a little good flesh on children's bones. It could be the food of life. [...] You've had your lifetime's meat. All of you. All of you that can buy meat. You've had your meat. You've had their meat. You've had their meat that can't buy any meat. You've stolen their meat. Are you going to give it back? [...] I said give them back their meat. You cram yourselves with their children's meat. You cram yourselves with their children's meat.

This appeal for wealth redistribution slices deeply, first, because it reveals that income inequality is, for many, a matter of life and death; the image of emaciated infant bodies conjured up by the butcher's speech are thrown into relief by the fat and shit of those gluttonous consumers with more than their fair share. But, worse, the butcher suggests that, in this kind of economic configuration, far more than just material goods are consumed by the economically privileged: the poor, themselves – their bodies, their flesh – become meat for wealthy consumers.



FIGURE 9: Es Devlin's set design for *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, directed by Lyndsey Turner, National Theatre (Lyttelton), London, 2015. Photo by Marc Brenner.

The National's 2015 revival made literal this very image as soon as the safety curtain rose for the first act. The central set piece in Es Devlin's design for the Lyttelton Theatre was, in reviewer Daisy Bowie-Sell's words, "what must be the biggest table ever seen on a London stage" (406) (see Figure 9). Indeed, the surface of the enormous dining table occupied the entirety of the playing space, "laden [...] with a sumptuous banquet of roast pig and exotic fruits and surrounded by feasting bigwigs from the *ancien régime*" (Taylor, *Light Shining* 406). And, seemingly unobserved by the two dozen Royalists sitting around it – their shoulders barely visible; so large was the table that they, too, were dwarfed by its size – the play's disenfranchised peasants navigated their way among gigantic, oversized silver platters of fruit and meat, appearing as mere morsels of food on which to be feasted by the wealthy (see Figure 10).

The peasants also performed manual labour on stage: first, they cleared the table of its dishes, platters, and candelabras and disposed of the gold-threaded tablecloth in order to convert the table into a giant desk with clerks on each side; then, they pried off the planks composing its surface to reveal a massive plot of soil in need of tilling. The imagery is clear: undergirding the opulent banquets and offices of the wealthy is a world of dirt and punishing physical labour, concealed to the point of invisibility unless the boards are pulled off and thrown aside.<sup>6</sup> The closing scene, however, emphasized the inefficacy of the protest Churchill documents. As rain fell from the ceiling of the Lyttelton stage, the actors faced the audience and delivered their final lines in the downpour, the contested soil at their feet turned to mud. Taylor, in his review, did well to succinctly identify the historical context linked to this disheartening conclusion: despite the fervour of protest and revolution, "the commonwealth, in effect, redistributed the old

 $<sup>^{6}</sup>$  Love, meanwhile, theatricalizes the labour of daily routine – "Zeldin tests our patience with his real-time realism," Lawrence's review warns us, staging "plenty of mundane moments as we wait for kettles to boil or food to be prepared" (1388) – but this labour is refracted through the doubly strenuous lens of poverty: a package of instant rice is dinner for four; in another scene, Colin washes Barbara's hair with dish soap.



FIGURE 10: Joshua James as Cobbe in *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, directed by Lyndsey Turner, National Theatre (Lyttelton), London, 2015. Photo by Marc Brenner.

privileges and propelled the country one step nearer to capitalism" (Light Shining 406).

If the visual extravagance of *Light Shining*'s 2015 revival magnified the politics of the play's content, however, the sense of collectivism that so thoroughly informed the premiere – its writing, rehearsal process, and division of roles wrapped up in an aesthetic of community and sharing – suffered. In his review, Michael Billington disapproved of the revival's scale, arguing that the play "works best when presented with a minimalist austerity that matches Churchill's text" (*Light Shining*, National 405). (One wonders if Billington intentionally cites himself here: his review of the premiere in 1976 praised its "austere eloquence that precisely matches its subject" [*Light Shining*, Royal Court 31].) Indeed, austerity – a choice word – was nowhere to be found in 2015. Gone was the "clean, spare beauty" Max Stafford-Clark observed in the original's bare stage and cast of six (qtd. in Little and McLaughlin), replaced by an elaborate set, supernumerary props, and an ensemble of more than sixty performers.<sup>7</sup>

An ensemble cast of this size surely enjoins a kind of collaboration, but it is of a markedly different sort from the collaborative thread that ran through the original iteration of *Light Shining*, a theatre-making process that explicitly engaged a collectivist politics at every stage of its creation and performance. This kind of communal artistic production demonstrates a potential model for theatre-making that integrates collectivist thinking and democratic collaboration into its content, form, and creative process. The politics of community and shared theatrical experiences need not, then, restrict itself to merely an exchange between spectators and performers, a romantic swirling together of stage and auditorium that abruptly snaps back when the houselights go up. It can occur long before the performance reaches the stage, unfolding between actors, between directors and designers and theatre practitioners of all stripes, who work

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Hitchings wrote that the revival was "reimagined along almost operatic lines, with 44 members of the NT's Community Company augmenting a cast of 18" (*Light Shining* 404).

against the increasingly hierarchical, top-down structure of the theatre industry by producing art borne of lateral collectivism.

*Three Kingdoms* – a 2011 collaboration of English playwright Simon Stephens, German director Sebastian Nübling, and Estonian set and costume designer Ene-Liis Semper exemplifies an international expansion of this model beyond British borders and into the European continent. I turn to the play - part of the World Stages London festival and coproduced by Teater NO99, the Munich Kammerspiele, and the Lyric Hammersmith – mindful of the uncertainty that hovers over the arts community in post-Brexit Britain. While the question of funding endures as a perennial challenge for UK theatre companies in Britain, especially in the era of austerity, international co-productions have emerged as a viable strategy in the absence of significant national subsidy. Lyn Gardner predicts that "it's those companies who have already been looking beyond these shores for collaboration and co-productions who are likely to be the survivors as belts continue to be tightened here in the UK"; indeed, she argues that a company such as Forced Entertainment, which regularly collaborates with theatre artists from continental Europe, "owes its survival as much to fees and commissions from beyond the UK as it does from UK funding itself" ("UK Theatre"). If Three Kingdoms's collaborative creation and purposeful performance history speak to the possibilities of joint artistic production in a unified European community – work which leverages the productive opportunities that have emerged from free movement and the globalist turn in Europe – the play stands as a powerful reminder (indeed, possibly even a relic) of the kinds of transnational artistic output upon which Britain may have foreclosed on 23 June 2016.

*Three Kingdoms* follows a murder investigation that travels from England to Germany to Estonia, navigating a complex international network of human trafficking and sex slavery. Each



FIGURE 11: German supertitles in Act One of *Three Kingdoms*, directed by Sebastian Nübling, set and costume design by Ene-Liis Semper, Münchner Kammerspiele Schauspielhaus, Munich, 2011. Photo by Arno Declair.

act is performed in the national language of the country in which it's set, with supertitles translating the languages of the other two acts (see Figure 11). Appropriately, the play's production history mirrored the geographical movement of its plot by traversing the same (albeit inverse) trajectory: it premiered first in Tallinn before opening in Munich and then London.<sup>8</sup> Border crossing thus emerges as an essential feature of not only the play's tripartite structure but also its methodology and performance. Surely, the play dramatizes the perils of globalization's diminished spatial barriers and boundless commodification, but it also leverages the creative possibilities of transnational collaboration. By harnessing this productive cosmopolitan potential, Stephens, Nübling, and Semper took advantage of the globalizing turn in their creation of an internationally collaborative work that emphasizes, in a way quite different from *Light Shining* 

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Act Two of *Three Kingdoms* is set in Hamburg. The production was initially intended to transfer from Tallinn to Hamburg's Deutches Schauspielhaus but, after the theatre withdrew, the Munich Kammerspiele was secured as a co-producer and the show transferred to the Kammerspiele Schauspielhaus instead.

and If You Don't Let Us Dream, the communal dimension of the theatre.

When *Three Kingdoms* begins, English detectives Ignatius Stone and Charlie Lee interrogate a young man after police discover the severed head of a sex worker named Vera in the Thames. What follows is as much an excavation of the detective thriller genre as a disturbing exposé of the international sex trade. As the case steers them to Hamburg and Tallinn, they navigate a labyrinthine network of sex workers, pornographers, pimps, and traffickers in an attempt to reconstruct the chain of events that led Vera from her native Russia to the shore of the Chiswick Eyot. Though the investigation (which remains unsolved by the end) constitutes the substance of the plot, sex trafficking functions metonymically here: as Trueman notes in his review, the play examines "the entire cultural system into which trafficking fits. *Three Kingdoms* is largely not a play about sex trafficking at all. It is about globalisation." Certainly, the play offers an unsettling representation of the international community, but it is a necessary one; here, after all, is "a picture of our world, the way that transnational movements of goods, labour and services have conspired to allow the New Global Slavery" (Rebellato, "Three Kingdoms").

In a particularly disturbing scene, four young men discuss the virtues of doing business in the global economy – "to wish well of humankind, to seek God, finding humanity in the marketplace" (112) – as a captive girl lies at their feet, and Semper's costume design drives home the already obvious power imbalance: the trafficked girl wears a deer head; the men, wolf masks (see Figure 12). The four traffickers – whose philosophical musings about business include the diagnosis that "[p]eople are exhausted by the tedium of globalisation. They're searching for an affirmation of identity through the possibility that their experience, established by what they consume, is particular and unique" (110) – fancy themselves entrepreneurs, cunning businessmen tapping into a demand for flesh that has become only easier to satisfy



FIGURE 12: Wolf heads and deer masks in *Three Kingdoms*, directed by Sebastian Nübling, set and costume design by Ene-Liis Semper, Münchner Kammerspiele Schauspielhaus, Munich, 2011. Photo by Arno Declair.

given the increased permeability of national borders. Goods thus circulate along world-spanning trade networks, achieving the mobility and flexibility that are requisite characteristics of global capital, but the goods in this case – women's bodies – confront us with the disquieting reality that virtually anything and anyone is eligible to be transacted as a commodity. Conceived of as products rather than people, the play's largely unseen trafficked women figure into their captors' business aspirations only in the context of their movability, their integrity as quality products: "There is a hunger for authenticity. We can provide that" (110).

The traffickers – who name themselves after Vito Corleone's sons in *The Godfather*, itself a nod to the international dispersal of cultural commodities – fantasize about remapping the world's trade routes: "In the future we'll be finding girls in London and selling them to Beijing. We'll be finding girls in Paris and selling them to Mumbai. We'll be finding girls in Frankfurt and selling them to Rio de Janeiro. We'll be finding girls in Amsterdam and selling them to Moscow" (112). In the new global economy, where geographical boundaries offer a seemingly endless capacity to be redrawn, western Europe's young women are available to be shipped anywhere in the world where there exists a demand. And it is precisely at this moment that "the trafficking gang turn slowly, terrifyingly, our way" (Trueman), collapsing the distance between performer and spectator, reminding us that the world dramatized on stage is, of course, the very same world we inhabit when we leave the theatre.

It is perhaps no surprise, then – given what Stephens calls "the atomised, hallucinatory nature of sex and travel and money" (qtd. in Bolton vi) – that the play seems to spiral out of control in the third act, ending without a clear resolution, the people responsible for Vera's death never firmly identified. Rebellato notes a consonance between the play's form in the final act and the dizzying collapse of time and space that is part and parcel of globalization, describing the end of the play as the "complete breakdown of narrative movement, of spatial organisation, of character. We can no longer know who is responsible, whether distinctions of place are meaningful, if we're dreaming or awake, and the imagery places us at the heart of this collapse" ("Three Kingdoms"). The result is a deeply unsettling work that forces us to question "whether we can survive unscathed the crimes committed everyday in the name of aspirational mobility and erasing boundaries" (Angelaki, "Witness" 148), and it urges us to consider the human lives at stake in the apparently unstoppable thrust of global capitalism.

In contrast to its reception in Germany and Estonia (and with the exception of a number of British bloggers who strongly praised the play), *Three Kingdoms* was roundly pummelled by the majority of London's mainstream print critics – Quentin Letts called it "magnificently bad, laughably awful, a real honking turkey (if turkeys honk)" (*Three Kingdoms* 508) – who lamented its overlong playing time and Nübling's overblown direction, which Billington described as "grossly self-advertising" (*Three Kingdoms* 509). This charge of theatrical excess abounded, even in those reviews more sympathetic to the production: "Love the theatrical fecundity, fellas, but how about some editing?" Maxwell asked before concluding, "Nübling's production is an adventurous misfire that gives us too much Oz, not enough Kansas" (*Three Kingdoms* 509). That Maxwell longs for Kansas rather than Oz speaks to a fear of losing one's sense of place, the simmering Eurosceptic anxiety that Britain's individual national identity might dissolve into a dazzling European whole – that is, the disconcerting possibility that Oz might be the inevitable reality and familiar, old Kansas just the dream.

Billington echoed Maxwell's discomfort with the play's rootlessness, writing that it led him to "question the very concept of a European co-production in which [...] you end up with something that displays geographical diversity but has no specific identity" (*Three Kingdoms* 509). But the play's resistance of a singular national or cultural identity is, in a sense, the whole point, even as its British protagonist articulates frustration with the language barrier: "I can't understand a word anybody's actually saying to me. It's all a huge babble. It makes me feel uncharacteristically lonely" (67). Here, then, is what Christopher Innes characterizes as the "destructive effect of the confused and incomprehensible multiplicity of languages in the EU" ("Interchanges" 203). In a review of the Munich production, German critic Steffen Becker described (somewhat more sensitively) the centrality of this estrangement to the play's project, asserting that "the confusion of languages leads to the very core – the experience of the stranger in a space outwardly defined as a united Europe."<sup>9</sup> Of course, what differentiates Becker's assessment from those of Billington and Maxwell is a tacit acceptance that this experience is an inevitable consequence of the globalized world and a unified European community.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> My translation; the original reads: "Das Sprachengewirr führt auch zum eigentlichen Kern – der Erfahrung des Fremden in einem Raum, der sich nach außen als Einheit Europa definiert."

Of particular note, here, is the lack of textual fixity that accompanied *Three Kingdoms* in performance. In the text (published only in English), it is Charlie who articulates his sense of loneliness and isolation amidst the "huge babble" – Babel indeed – of foreign languages. In performance, however, Nübling and Stephens agreed that Ignatius, whose path is most closely followed in the play, would be the monoglot, thereby centralizing his experience of cultural and linguistic alienation from the European community outside of Great Britain, a decision that ramifies even more clearly years later with the hindsight provided by Brexit. The kind of artistic flexibility represented by these changes to the script – one which refocuses attention on the sum of the production's many moving parts (rather than on the text as a definitive document that demands obedience) – decentres the playwright, a move that is consonant with Nübling's observation that, "in the British theatre, the play and the playwright come first" (qtd. in Bolton viii). By contrast, Stephens recalls in his A Working Diary that Nübling "told the British actors in my play Three Kingdoms that the first thing he ever did when he got a script was cross out all the stage directions," and the playwright acknowledged the productive potential of this strategy: "I sometimes think this is what all directors should do. It might make rehearsal rooms more creative places" (6).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, Nübling's directorial process routinely harnesses the creative energy of the rehearsal room by enjoining the cast in improvisation: "Through improvisation," he explains, "a cast creates far more theatrical material than can actually be used in the end. But through these hours of playing together, actors develop a special theatrical language for each production" (qtd. in Bolton ix). In this sense, Three Kingdoms has quite a lot in common with Light Shining and especially Love, as it cultivates an embodied physical language that emphasizes the intimacy and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Stephens recounts a similar experience during rehearsals for *Carmen Disruption*, which Nübling directed in Hamburg in 2014: "Sebastian rang me during the week to tell me he was cutting the bulk of the text of the chorus – something no British director would do, I think. And that he was changing the ending. [...] There is a daring to this gesture that I find stimulating" (*Working Diary* 78).

joint effort of the performers on stage.

The play, too, resembles *Love* in its collaborative gesture beyond the theatre towards the transnational communities that contributed to the play's creation: Stephens's dedication credits "the law officers and sex workers who let me talk to them about their lives in London, Hamburg and Tallinn" (1). If the transnationality of its creative process, plot, and production history functions as a constitutive element of *Three Kingdoms* – a lateral geographical movement that connects the eastern and western confines of the European continent – the play equally reaches beyond the stage, a "seepage into the auditorium," in Stephens's words, that is characteristic of Nübling's directorial style: "the imaginary world" of the play "is always acknowledged to being present in a theatre" (A Working Diary 100). It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Three Kingdoms instigated, if unintentionally, a paradigmatic upheaval in theatre criticism, further illustrating the variegated meanings and receptions that attend the local contexts in which a play is performed. When the production opened in London, the online theatre community emerged to forcefully counter the negative notices appearing in British print media, what Haydon calls "a defining moment for the theatre blogosphere" ("Brief History" 144). As the run continued, the play developed an online reputation that increasingly supplanted the verdict of London's critical establishment and unexpectedly translated into box office success: "the production gathered momentum, becoming \*the\* play to see in London. The last few dates completely sold out" (Haydon, "Brief History" 145; asterisks in original).

As Haydon argues, *Three Kingdoms* and its discrepant coverage exemplifies the increasingly prominent role of independent critics, reviewers, and spectators who leverage the ubiquity of the internet, replete with its own variegated localities and communities, in order to heterogenize theatre criticism, nuance mainstream opinion, and achieve a polyvocal plurality of

meanings and responses even within a single local context. Independent online criticism, then – and the unprecedented weight it has managed to throw around in the theatre community – represents, in my estimation, a fairly recent development in performer-spectator interaction: an amplified word of mouth, a virtual "touch," that strengthens the ties that bind plays and the people who see them. "That *Three Kingdoms* represented a paradigm shift is now a commonplace," Haydon asserts; "it is understood that online reviews and Twitter feedback can reverse poor reviews in the mainstream press. Theatres [...] can stage plays with non-mainstream appeal and those plays will \*find their audience\*" ("Brief History" 145-46; asterisks in original). If Haydon is right, he signals good news for artistic directors the world over, who might dependably expect online critics to shepherd in an audience when the notices are bad or a production underperforms commercially. But even the optimistic sense of community or collectivism suggested by the newfound prominence of online theatre criticism is everywhere shot through with the discourse of the box office. The theatre industry, irrespective of its often altruistic aims, represents merely a single junction in a much larger capitalist network, one to which it necessarily pays obeisance and upon which it depends for survival.

Perhaps it is appropriate, then, that, in *Three Kingdoms*, Steffen – the aggressive, unpredictable German detective assigned to help Ignatius and Charlie in Hamburg – easily identifies the sex trade's location in a sprawling capitalist network that includes taxi drivers, launderettes, bar owners, football players, and, of course, theatregoers: "The money doesn't trickle down here," he asserts. "It trickles up. This whole city is built on the back of a Bulgarian teenager" (95). As Jen Harvie reminds us in *Fair Play*, "Damage to social equality is not only an effect of neoliberal capitalism, it is an *enabling condition* of neoliberal capitalism" (81; emphasis added). Steffen's point, of course, is that Hamburg is merely one node of activity in an even larger network of circulation that spans all of Europe and the rest of the world. Worth noting is that his "specious economic argument" (95), as Ignatius calls it, includes an inferred attack on funding for the arts, recalling an earlier diatribe in which he laments that there is "no money for any ambulances any more. No money for any fucking new cars for the Kriminal Polizei. No money for cleaning the streets [...] but we're getting a really exciting Philharmonic Concert Hall" (61). Curiously, this speech, which appears in *Three Kingdoms*'s published text, was replaced in performance with the comparatively flippant suggestion that Ignatius take time to enjoy the city: "Maybe you can plan something, man. You can spend time at a philharmonic concert, for example" (38).<sup>11</sup> Thus, in performance, Steffen, while certainly cognizant of the socioeconomic status quo, does not hesitate to urge Ignatius to take advantage of the luxuries it offers, regardless of the exploitative scaffolding that undergirds these luxuries' availability.

This combination of Steffen's encouragement to consume art and his apparent excoriation of arts funding indexes a curious contradiction in the neoliberal state's attitude towards the so-called creative sector. Harvie insists that the neoliberal state, in dramatically slashing its subsidization of arts production, is "diminishing its responsibility for the arts, even as it continues to want to exploit them through a wide variety of instrumentalist agendas. The arts are called on to support national brand identity and its dissemination in the global market" (*Fair Play* 185), but the financial means that enable their continued production are increasingly derived from private and corporate – rather than public and government – funders, which renders art vulnerable to instrumentalization by "so-called 'venture philanthropy' or 'philanthrocapitalism' as practised by super-wealthy entrepreneurs" (185).

Thus, as arts production comes increasingly under the domain of private and corporate

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> My translation; the unpublished performance draft reads: "Lässt sich doch vielleicht was organisieren, Alter. Sie können ja mal in ein philharmonisches Konzert zum Beispiel."

interest, the theatre, too – in spite of the countless virtues for which we praise it – inevitably comes to participate in the very same capitalist network, the same mercantile economy, the same exploitative market that circulate bodies and lives as product. Here, then, is a fertile tension between, on one hand, the unsavoury reality that theatre is located on the same capitalist continuum as human trafficking and, on the other, the theatre's productive capacity to do social good, to enlighten and inspire us, to confront us with our world so that we might more fully and sensitively engage with it. If we identify this space of contestation in our understanding of the theatre, Stephens, Nübling, and Semper explore an analogous tension in contemporary discourses enumerating the bounties and dangers of globalization. While it dramatizes with unsettling intensity the violence and trauma facilitated by the global market, Three Kingdoms is itself a product of the European community's economic and cultural integration, taking advantage of (capitalizing on?) the relaxation of Europe's national borders, albeit not its national identities, in its transnational collaborative process. As the production's inconsistent reviews demonstrate, geographical movement flags up the "cultural politics of location" Ric Knowles discusses in Reading the Material Theatre (2), allowing the play to signify differently according to where it is performed: "an internationally conceived, collaborative, festival-supported piece like Three Kingdoms [...] establish[es] multiple points of contact with international audiences, who will vary greatly in their cultural sensibilities" (Angelaki, "Witness" 147). Indeed, as Amanda Rogers reminds us, productions "acquire multiple meanings as they move between localities, operating as forms of travelling culture that reflect and disrupt cultural expectations" (10).

The wide variety of local responses to *Three Kingdoms* points to an interesting feature of globalization: where one might expect an accumulating homogeneity, we find a crystallization of national and cultural identities in the face of more permissive borders. Put another way, laxer

spatial differentiation has galvanized a more aggressive cultural differentiation. Aihwa Ong, in *Flexible Citizenship*, clarifies that the worldwide availability of commercial brands and goods "is not bringing about a global cultural uniformity; rather, these products have had the effect of greatly increasing cultural diversity because of the ways in which they are interpreted and the way they acquire new meanings in local reception" (10). The same can be said of transnational theatre, which is, as David Savran points out, "inevitably mediated by local producers, directors, actors, and performance traditions" (333).

In the case of *Three Kingdoms*, these local mediations were knowingly incorporated into the creative process from the very start, employing theatre practitioners from Britain, Germany, and Estonia and – in Andrew Haydon's estimation – paying homage to the theatre heritages of all three countries: "the production offers portraits of each country through a kind of distilled essence (perhaps even gentle pastiches) of their theatrical cultures. Where Britain opens with an almost Pinter-y dialogue, and where Germany inevitably collapses into mess and nudity, Estonia is represented by a violent athleticism and physicality" (Review). Reductive though these descriptions may be, they signal the production's attention to the locations not only dramatized in the play but also in which the play was to be performed, foregrounding the collaborative nature of the work and the creative possibilities of its transnational scope. Stephens identified the collaboration as "exemplary theatre making," asserting that it "suggests real possibilities for this frantic, eroding, collapsing, important continent" (qtd. in Bolton viii). Duška Radosavljević agrees, praising the play's "directorial methodology and the contribution this production makes towards a potential paradigm shift in how contemporary theatre is made" (111).

*Three Kingdoms*'s Estonian dramaturge Eero Epner – one of two dramaturges that worked on the production (the other was Julia Lochte of Germany) – insists that the play's

creative process honours the theatre's tradition of collectivism, especially so in a commercial industry whose financial structure forecloses upon the kind of anti-hierarchical sensibilities collectivism engenders: "Theatre is a collective art. Don't laugh, I mean it. And everybody in this process has an equal share. [...] There is no hierarchy. Well, of course there is in today's theatre, but it's a completely fucked-up system. We did it all together" (qtd. in Bolton xii; emphasis in original). He implicitly refers too, of course, to the increasing entrepreneurialization of the arts and the managerialism and hierarchization imposed upon the theatre (enforced by ever more stringent eligibility criteria for state funding), an agenda carried out with ruthless alacrity under the Thatcher administration in Britain and which continues to gain traction in Germany and Estonia. Nübling acknowledges that, even though all of Germany's city theatres are subsidized by the state, "they are permanently under pressure to prove that they are worth the money the state invests in them. [...] [E]ven in Germany the economic situation is getting harder" (qtd. in Bolton x). That political and economic conditions ramify for theatre production is an inevitable reality theatre practitioners face regardless of their intentions. Even Epner must concede that "on the poster there should actually be the names of all the actors, sound engineers, etc. who made this work. But there is simply no space" (qtd. in Bolton xiii). In Savran's words, "This may not be the world theatre we want, but this is the world theatre we have" (337).

*Three Kingdoms*, then, in spite of its damning exploration of globalization's capacity to violate, victimize, and exploit, simultaneously works as a site of collectivist resistance to the very ideological and economic phenomena that facilitated its realization. Its transnational breadth – on the stage, in its performance history, and throughout its creation – emphasizes collaboration at every turn, demonstrating the productive potential made possible by the crossing of borders. When Aleksandr, the foul-mouthed pimp for whom Vera worked before her murder, spits out his

venomous belief that humanity is "not a fucking family" (47), we might recall Thatcher's decontextualized (but nonetheless often quoted) assertion that there is no such thing as society. But if globalization means that our world is indeed shrinking, ever easier to traverse, its people brought increasingly closer together, Stephens, Nübling, and Semper – along with Epner and Lochte, composer and sound designer Lars Wittershagen, lighting designer Stephan Mariani, the actors, technicians, stagehands, and everyone involved in the production of *Three Kingdoms* – remind us that there is community too, artistic value beyond financial incentives, and the potential for sprawling collaborative networks whose work might effectively counter the divisive individualism that runs roughshod over progressive values.

The kind of collaborative transnational work represented by *Three Kingdoms* seems almost a relic in the present context, especially as Brexit's messy negotiations have so far produced no definitive pronouncement on the status of either EU nationals in Britain or British citizens on the continent. In a 17 January 2017 speech that promised to lay out her Brexit strategy, May showcased the Conservatives' ironic new slogan for country's departure from the European Union: "A Global Britain" (bold typeface on "Britain," no less), printed along the front of her lectern and, too, on the backdrop, hovering over her left shoulder. In May's estimation, Britain "voted to leave the European Union and embrace the world" ("Theresa May"), even as its organizing principle has consistently appeared to enjoin an insularity from, rather than an embrace with, the world, characterized by an obsessive preoccupation with controlling its borders and a categorical refusal of the European Union's principle of free movement.

What Brexit portends for Britain remains suspended in a protracted process of negotiations and an ongoing saga of intra-party warfare that continues to weaken May's grasp on her premiership. What Brexit means for British theatre, however, is considerably easier to surmise, given the Conservatives' traditionally hostile attitude to arts funding, which will only be compounded by the financial ramifications of withdrawal from Europe. But, if I may briefly indulge in the kind of optimism that Dolan describes – for perhaps I'm not courageous enough after all to embrace the hopelessness that Žižek identifies as a necessary condition for real political change – one thing has emerged, to my mind, as a certainty: the fetid mire of divisive, post-truth contemporary politics lays the most fertile ground for the kinds of subversive, resistant, and collaborative work (theatrical and otherwise) that this chapter's selection of plays represents. If Brexit means anything at all, it's that the fiercest resistance is yet to come.

At least I hope so.

## EPILOGUE

While in London during the spring of 2015, I booked an unlikely show. Not typically one to see a musical in the West End, I purchased a ticket to *Matilda the Musical*, Dennis Kelly and Tim Minchin's stage adaptation of the Roald Dahl children's novel. Kelly, whose plays often unsettle and disturb with their physical and psychological violence, seemed to me an improbable adaptor. As Matt Trueman put it in the play's West End programme, Kelly's work "can be very, very adult" ("Matilda"), though he has, in fact, written a number of plays for young people. More unusual to me was the extent to which the musical's highly commercial status – it was a West End fixture by this point<sup>1</sup> – appeared to chafe against the anti-capitalist sensibility that animates so much of Kelly's work. The contrast intrigued me enough that I paid £66 (the second-tier price) for a seat in the stalls, and, though I entered the Cambridge Theatre resolutely sceptical, I found myself floating towards the concessions stand at the interval, eagerly queuing to buy a programme. Henry Hitchings's review of the premiere captured something of this unlikely winning over: "I'd have been embarrassed by my involuntary snorts of laughter if they hadn't been drowned out by the almost universal ecstasy of the rest of the audience" (*Matilda* 1430).

The sheer pleasure I unexpectedly experienced while watching *Matilda*, almost in spite of myself, sent me out of the theatre with an affective rush that I later described to a friend (only half facetiously) as akin to walking on air, a feeling similar to the audience reaction critic Libby Purves observed on press night: "We got to our feet [...]. We cheered. Nearly didn't get out in time to write this. Didn't want to leave" (*Matilda* 1431). Breathless reports of spectatorial euphoria abounded in reviews of the play. Mark Shenton's account of "waves of pleasure from

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> As of this writing, *Matilda the Musical* is still running at the Cambridge Theatre. The show is currently booking until October 2019.

the audience that are actually audible" (1306), for instance, tallied with my own experience of the show, especially since I saw it on a Sunday afternoon, when the auditorium was filled largely by children with their parents. And they proved to be a remarkably engaged audience. Even before the show began, I overheard children marvelling aloud at Rob Howell's set design, finding hidden words among the multi-coloured letter tiles covering the proscenium arch and then pointing out letters to spell out words of their own (see Figure 13) – a game I found to be in heartening concert with Matilda Wormwood's love of reading.<sup>2</sup>

This enfolding of the audience pervades the show, according to Laura MacDonald, who argues that Matthew Warchus's production invites spectators to identify with Matilda and her classmates by blurring the distinction between stage and auditorium. The number "When I Grow Up," for instance, has the play's schoolchildren sail through the air on long rope swings, high above the audience, a spectacular, whimsical stage trick that "asks spectators to join Matilda's classmates and imagine, or remember, the potential such hopeful swinging prompts" (MacDonald 358). Given the young audience's ecstatic reaction to moments such as this one, or the scene in which the tyrannical headmistress, Miss Trunchbull, hammer throws Amanda Thripp into the stalls by her pigtails and her classmates rush out into the aisles to catch her, there is merit to reviewer Caroline McGinn's assertion that *Matilda* "should spark a lifetime love of theatre for a new generation of round-eyed show-goers" (*Matilda* 1306). Garry Lyons, who classifies the play as what he calls a "large-scale family epic," agrees, writing that, "[f]or many children," the glossy, big-budget, family-friendly musical "is their very first entrée into the theatre, and a memory that will stay with them for the rest of their lives" (360).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Sarah Hemming praised *Matilda* along these same lines, writing that the show "transmits a great passion for literature. My 10-year-old companion loved it and, on arrival home, made straight for the book. Matilda would have been pleased" (*Matilda* 1305).



FIGURE 13: Rob Howell's set design for *Matilda the Musical*, directed by Matthew Warchus, Cambridge Theatre, London, 2011. Photo by Manuel Harlan.

But Lyons too problematizes the genre for its naked embrace of the commercial: "Even the most compelling family epics," he points out, "are tainted by market populism," and, while he praises *Matilda* for its international success, he also suggests that "it is becoming hard to see the difference between its business model and the one that drives *The Lion King*, with all the tee shirts and souvenir brochures and assorted merchandise" (359). *Matilda*'s curious relationship to the commercial theatre illustrates a tension that has proved vertebral to this dissertation: on the one hand, the show provides a rich and moving theatrical experience that took me entirely by surprise, a glimpse of Jill Dolan's utopia in performance if there ever were one; on the other hand, its installation in the West End and its suite of international tours – Trueman tells us that more than two million people have seen the show, "many of them more than once" ("Matilda") – stands as a clear example of the thoroughgoing commercialization of the stage, revealing the

show as a highly marketable British export in the global trade of artistic commodities.

In fact, *Matilda* was not born of the commercial theatre at all. Produced by the Royal Shakespeare Company – one of what Aleks Sierz calls the "twin peaks of the state-subsidised sector" along with the National Theatre (Modern 38) - the show was developed entirely with Arts Council funding augmenting the company's own income. (A note in the programme explains that "73 per cent of the RSC's income is self-generated from box office sales, sponsorship, donations, enterprise and partnerships with other organisations" [Programme], a triumph of ABSA-era ideals.) Unlike Les Misérables, for instance, which the RSC co-produced with Cameron Mackintosh in 1985 - a public-private partnership that yielded the longestrunning musical in West End history (it is still running at the Queen's Theatre) - Matilda emerged exclusively from Britain's subsidized theatre with no commercial partner underwriting its development and production. In his review of the play's 2010 premiere at the Courtyard Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon, Quentin Letts questioned the financial implications of the show's massive publicly funded budget should *Matilda* eventually move into the commercial sector: "Some will say the success of this show justifies the RSC's pursuit of new work. But is it the duty of Arts Council cash to underwrite commercial risk? If *Matilda* becomes a global hit, as I suspect it will, let us tax-payers scoop the financial profit" (Matilda 1432–33).<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the West End and international success of *Matilda* promises to handsomely augment the RSC's Arts Council subsidy for years to come, just as *Les Misérables* has for over three decades.

I hold up Matilda as a wondrous contradiction, and I conclude this dissertation by settling

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Dennis Kelly, meanwhile, insists that such a play would simply not have been possible outside the subsidized sector: "For one thing, I know with absolute certainty that at that time no commercial producer would've gone near me. They are playing with either their own money or the money of investors, and with so few West End shows ever turning a profit the smart thing to do is to try to shorten those odds, not lengthen them by picking wild cards like me and Tim" (Kelly).

into the productive liminal space between what the production seems to represent: both a work whose "artistic integrity and commitment to a cross-generational audience" makes it a "remarkable, socially and emotionally uniting experience" (Lyons 360) as well as a massively profitable cog in the British (and now global) neoliberal theatre machine. In its most basic functions, then, *Matilda*, like all theatrical production, participates in and thereby reproduces the ethos of capitalism that fundamentally structures cultural life. As Nicholas Ridout reminds us, even when the theatre, at its best, manages to "generate feelings of community and solidarity and ignite desires for social change," it reveals its constraints by virtue of its classification as a so-called leisure industry, thereby "extending an organization of life by work that limits what kind of change can be imagined. [...] Inasmuch as it remains a theatre for consumers, then, theatre can only perform a very limited social function, beyond its confirmation of the logic of work in capitalism" ("Social" 39).

Whereas Dolan suggests in *Utopia in Performance* that the theatre's power can unveil to us a promise that "beyond this 'now' of material oppression and unequal power relations lives a future that might be different" (7), Ridout counters forcefully in *Passionate Amateurs* that the theatre, even when it inspires and transforms us, can never exist outside of the capitalist organization of social life, for it "does not posit a position on the outside of contemporary regimes of production; there is no clear exterior space of opposition available [...], let alone a utopia" (55). Rather, theatre, as an industry, demarcated as a particular kind of "work" that offers temporary respite from other kinds of "work," extends capitalism's figuration of the subject as labourer, "produc[ing] the recreation that is an essential aspect of the worker's self-reproduction" (*Passionate* 51). Ridout's Marxist materialism leads us to a disheartening conclusion: "theatrical production, far from being an instance of the heterogeneous exteriority to capitalist production that might be claimed by and for aesthetic subjectivity, is of course a nest in which the logics of that production assert themselves with insidious and delightful force" (55).

Herein lies the unsettling contradiction that hovers over the stage: no matter how forceful its spirit of resistance to the marketization of cultural life, the theatre will never extricate itself from the capitalist superstructure that shapes our world. Indeed, rather than existing outside or against the institutions it often critiques, the theatre is ultimately a product of those very institutions, whose operations enable it to exist in the first place. And yet, for all its problematic entanglements with neoliberal finance and its ubiquitous confirmation of capitalist realism, theatre in Britain persists as a vital cultural force with the power to articulate important social critique and stimulate profound feeling among its spectators, the effects of which ought not to be discounted. Even at a play like *Matilda*, the West End iteration of which makes hypervisible its commercial status, I found myself moved to both laughter and tears, embarrassed by my own affective response to a show I expected to hate, and heartened by the agency and resistance the play aims to inspire, especially among its young spectators.

The play's titular protagonist is a study in resilience, as she weathers verbal abuse and emotional neglect at the hands of buffoonish parents who deride her literary interests and bully her for her intelligence: at the end of the show's opening number, "Miracle," she sings, "My daddy says I should learn to shut my pie hole. / No one likes a smart-mouthed girl like me. / Mum says I'm a good case for population control. / Dad says I should watch more TV" (12). The Wormwoods' virulent anti-intellectualism figures prominently in their mistreatment of their daughter – in one scene, they "*laugh sadistically*" as Mr. Wormwood "*begins to cruelly tear out individual pages*" of a book Matilda has borrowed from the library, "*flinging them down at the floor in a fit of rage, one by one*" (40) – setting up a central opposition between Matilda's literary consumption, to which she owes her remarkable emotional maturity, and her parents' mindnumbing obsession with television: in a later ode to his TV, Mr. Wormwood will boast, "All I know I learned from telly. (Telly!) / The bigger the telly (Telly!), the smarter the man! / You can tell from my big telly (Telly!), / Just what a clever fella I am!" (69). While Matilda appears resilient to her parents' toggling between neglect and abuse, she poignantly reveals the extent of her longing for affection and validation: when her teacher, Miss Honey, bowled over by Matilda's prodigious intelligence, encourages her avid reading and promises to "bring a collection of very clever books that will challenge your mind," Matilda, "*holds Miss Honey's gaze before running up and hugging her very tightly*" (58). Miss Honey thus represents the only adult in the play attuned to Matilda's emotional and educational needs – and the only adult with whom Matilda shares any physical affection or tenderness.

Barring Miss Honey, the play's generally unfavourable representation of adults facilitates among children in the audience an easy spectatorial identification with the protagonist, an alignment accomplished too when the Wormwoods' crusade against intellectualism spills out into the auditorium. At the top of the second act, Mr. Wormwood addresses the audience to state "guarantorically" (his speeches are filled with bizarre malaprops) that "we do not want any children, who might be in here tonight watching this, to go home and try these things for themselves. I am of course talking about READING! It is not normal of kids to behave in this fashion" (67), before he childishly attacks spectators who, by a show of hands, confess to reading: "BOOKWORM! STINKY LITTLE BOOKWORM! READING ALL YOUR BOOKS LIKE A STINKY LITTLE BOOKWORM!" (67). The children in the audience are thus interpellated as analogues to Matilda, subjected to the same anti-intellectual verbal abuse as the protagonist but strengthened by the solidarity of the countless other children in the auditorium who proudly raise their hands when asked if they read books.

If the Wormwoods reveal themselves as merely clownish villains, their oppression of Matilda finds a more frightening agent in Miss Trunchbull, the towering headmistress – a role originated by Bertie Carvel and played in every subsequent production by a generously padded male actor – whose tyrannical enforcement of order and discipline involves sustained verbal and physical punishment. Miss Trunchbull articulates early on her fetishistic obsession with rules when she muses about her Olympic career as a hammer thrower: "If you want to throw the hammer for your country, / You have to stay inside the circle all the time, / And if you want to make the team, / You don't need happiness or self-esteem, / You just need to keep your feet inside the line" (37). Standing in for an almost Foucauldian governmentality, Miss Trunchbull advocates for a rigid discipline that divides the world into "two types of human being: the winners and the losers. I am a winner – I play by the rules and I win" (99), and she ruthlessly stamps out dissent among her students by subjecting them to relentless insults and humiliations, to say nothing of the infamous chokey, "a cupboard in her office that she throws children into…. They say she's lined it with nails, and spikes, and bits of broken glass" (43).

What Matilda manages to articulate more clearly than her classmates is that Miss Trunchbull's disciplinary campaign amounts to the despotism of an autocrat, and she marshals the support of the other children to bring down the oppressive injustice personified by their headmistress. Matilda's opposition to Miss Trunchbull calls back to her solo number near the start of the play, "Naughty," which advocates for righteous mischief in the face of unjust order:

Just because you find that life's not fair, it

Doesn't mean that you just have to grin and bear it. If you always take it on the chin and wear it, Nothing will change.

Even if you're little you can do a lot, you Mustn't let a little thing like "little" stop you. If you sit around and let them get on top, you Might as well be saying you think that it's OK, And that's not right.

And if it's not right, you have to put it right. (17–18)

Matilda inspires a similar spirit of resistance among her classmates, uniting them in an effort to face down their oppressor's regime of terror and abuse. When Miss Trunchbull holds a surprise spelling bee – misspelled words punished with time in the chokey – she instructs the first child in line to "spell the one thing you all are: revolting" (99). What follows is precisely the kind of uprising Miss Trunchbull has tried to suppress all along: one by one, "[*a*]*ll the children begin to stand up and spell words wrong*," with one classmate crowing victoriously, "You can't put us all in the chokey!" (101). And their final number reclaims the slur used against them in order to articulate a call to revolt against injustice: "We are revolting children… / Living in revolting times… / We sing revolting songs / Using revolting rhymes. / We'll be revolting children, / 'Til our revolting's done, / And we'll have the Trunchbull vaulting. / We're revolting!" (103).

Kelly explained that, in writing the musical's book, he "wanted to try and pull off the same trick" that Dahl accomplished in the novel: that is, to craft a protagonist who is "in love with the medium we are receiving the story though" – though he playfully conceded that "a character that went around saying they were in love with musical theatre seemed too irritating for words" (Kelly and Minchin, "Books"). The show largely succeeds in engendering love for the medium among the children in the audience, who are directly addressed by the politics of the

play and hailed as agents in their own stories: "Just because I find myself in this story, / It doesn't mean that everything is written for me" (71). The political potential of *Matilda* resides in its capacity to interpellate its spectators as active subjects with the ability to challenge and disrupt oppressive structures of power – while simultaneously inspiring a fascination with the stage and thus producing a new generation of theatregoers. Maybe this explains my own unexpected affection for the show, for it communicates an unequivocal love for the theatre that I felt palpably resonating with the spectators around me. But that such heartening political potential is contained within what has become an explicitly commercial artistic endeavour illustrates precisely the contradiction that animates *Matilda* in the West End: just as the show inspires revolt against autocratic tyranny and the injustices of our hegemonic power structures, its political message is neutered by an international commercial culture industry that has marketed and sold it as merely family-friendly entertainment.<sup>4</sup>

There is, finally, no sure way to reconcile the two faces of the theatre with which I have engaged in this dissertation. Britain's neoliberal theatre continues to interrogate, both in content and in form, the implications of neoliberal hegemony and its revisions of social life, even as it reveals itself at every turn to be thoroughly bound up in the machinations of global capitalism. And such an acknowledgment need not preclude the genuine feeling that performance can effect in its audiences. If the neoliberal stage is everywhere structured by political and economic forces that marketize cultural life, it too remains a site of both rigorous social engagement and profound affective experience, offering glimpses of utopic, resistant hope amid far more sinister realities.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> As a consolation, Kelly explains that, unlike on Broadway, where "a large portion of the money *Matilda* makes finds its way back into investors' pockets," the show's West End profits are largely returned to the subsidizes arts: "here in the UK nearly 90% of the profits go to the RSC, a company with charitable status, where it has to go back into the work. I'm told it's going a long way to supporting their education and outreach work, which seems about right to me" (Kelly).

But to apprehend the theatre's insidious political imbrications is a necessary, if disheartening, endeavour, for we ought to shake off those romanticisms that surrogate the necessity for active political engagement: journalist Molly Flatt reflects, "I'm one of the most idealistic and passionate defenders of theatre I know. I have been moved to self-improvement by many excoriatingly honest shows. But I also suspect that I frequently use theatre as a proxy rather than an agent of change." For what resistance can the theatre offer when its lessons are confined to a playgoing public and not readily transferrable into the political sphere? Even when the theatre manages to articulate the most withering critiques of our cultural moment, its limits are always circumscribed by the institutional realities that produce it in the first place – from the exigencies of arts funding criteria to the forced entanglement of cultural production and corporate finance.

Four decades of neoliberal consensus politics have so fundamentally reconfigured the British stage that to conceive of a theatre divorced from the material realities of global capitalism constitutes a mental exercise that is anachronistic at best. Miss Trunchbull's number about competing at the Olympics – a worldwide market for commodified performance of another kind – thus offers a telling metaphor for theatre production in Britain: "If you want to throw the hammer for your country, / You have to stay inside the circle all the time" (37). British theatre, in order to exist, is compelled either to model the aims of an increasingly politicized Arts Council, thereby aligning itself with the political agenda of the state, or to rely on private sector sponsorship, thus entrenching its capitalist commodification and embrace with big business. Maybe Miss Trunchbull, despite being driven away at play's end by the children's revolt, reveals a sick joke at the heart of her song: that is, perhaps there is no outside to the circle at all. The neoliberal consensus has so revised the theatre – and social life in general – that even to imagine the stage without it has become impossible.

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## APPENDIX

## LIST OF PRODUCTIONS DISCUSSED

[Productions are arranged alphabetically by title. Where multiple productions of a play are listed, they are arranged chronologically. Transfers are listed as separate productions. Opening dates refer to press nights and do not include preview performances.]

Attempts on Her Life, by Martin Crimp, directed by Tim Albery. Royal Court Theatre Upstairs

(at the Ambassadors Theatre), London. Opened 12 March 1997.

Attempts on Her Life, by Martin Crimp, directed by Katie Mitchell. Lyttelton Theatre, National

Theatre, London. Opened 14 March 2007.

*The Author*, by Tim Crouch, directed by Karl James and Andy Smith. Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London. Opened 29 September 2009.

- *Enron*, by Lucy Prebble, directed by Rupert Goold. Minerva Studio, Chichester Festival Theatre, Chichester. Opened 22 July 2009.
- *Enron*, by Lucy Prebble, directed by Rupert Goold. Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, London. Opened 22 September 2009.
- *Enron*, by Lucy Prebble, directed by Rupert Goold. Noël Coward Theatre, London. Opened 16 January 2010.
- *Enron*, by Lucy Prebble, directed by Rupert Goold. Broadhurst Theatre, New York. Opened 27 April 2010.
- If You Don't Let Us Dream, We Won't Let You Sleep, by Anders Lustgarten, directed by Simon Godwin. Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, London. Opened 15 February 2013.
- *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh. Opened 7 September 1976.

- *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London. Opened 27 September 1976.
- *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Lyndsey Turner. Lyttleton Theatre, National Theatre, London. Opened 15 April 2015.
- *Love*, by Alexander Zeldin, directed by Alexander Zeldin. Dorfman Theatre, National Theatre, London. Opened 13 December 2016.
- *Love and Information*, by Caryl Churchill, directed by James Macdonald. Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, London. Opened 6 September 2012.
- *Love and Information*, by Caryl Churchill, directed by James Macdonald. Minetta Lane Theatre, New York. Opened 19 February 2014.
- *Love and Information*, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Tanja Jacobs and Alistair Newton. Berkeley Street Theatre, Toronto. Opened 10 April 2018.
- *Matilda the Musical*, book by Dennis Kelly, music and lyrics by Tim Minchin, directed by Matthew Warchus. Courtyard Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon. Opened 9 December 2010.
- *Matilda the Musical*, book by Dennis Kelly, music and lyrics by Tim Minchin, directed by Matthew Warchus. Cambridge Theatre, London. Opened 24 November 2011.
- *Mercury Fur*, by Philip Ridley, directed by John Tiffany. Drum Theatre, Theatre Royal, Plymouth. Opened 10 February 2005.
- *Mercury Fur*, by Philip Ridley, directed by John Tiffany. Menier Chocolate Factory, London. Opened 2 March 2005.
- *Mercury Fur*, by Philip Ridley, directed by Scott Elliott. Romulus Linney Courtyard Theatre, Pershing Square Signature Center, New York. Opened 19 August 2015.

Mules, by Winsome Pinnock, directed by Roxana Silbert. Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, London.

Opened 30 April 1996.

- *The Power of Yes*, by David Hare, directed by Angus Jackson. Lyttelton Theatre, National Theatre, London. Opened 6 October 2009.
- Serious Money, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, London. Opened 27 March 1987.
- Serious Money, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Wyndham's Theatre, London. Opened 6 July 1987.
- Serious Money, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Newman Theater, Joseph Papp Public Theater, New York. Opened 3 December 1987.
- Serious Money, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Max Stafford-Clark. Royale Theatre, New York. Opened 9 February 1988.
- Serious Money, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Eda Holmes. Shaw Festival Studio Theatre, Niagara-on-the-Lake. Opened 14 August 2010.
- *The Skriker*, by Caryl Churchill, directed by Les Waters. Cottesloe Theatre, National Theatre, London. Opened 20 January 1994.
- *Stanley*, by Pam Gems, directed by John Caird. Cottesloe Theatre, National Theatre, London. Opened 1 February 1996.
- Stanley, by Pam Gems, directed by John Caird. Circle in the Square Theatre, New York. Opened 20 February 1997.
- *Three Kingdoms*, by Simon Stephens, directed by Sebastian Nübling. Teater NO99, Tallinn. Opened 17 September 2011.
- *Three Kingdoms*, by Simon Stephens, directed by Sebastian Nübling. Kammerspiele Schauspielhaus, Munich. Opened 15 October 2011.

- *Three Kingdoms*, by Simon Stephens, directed by Sebastian Nübling. Lyric Theatre, London. Opened 3 May 2012.
- *X*, by Alistair McDowall, directed by Vicky Featherstone. Royal Court Theatre Downstairs, London. Opened 30 March 2016.