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The Cold Facts? Caryl Churchill's Mad Forest, Truth and the Demise of the Cold War

Geoff Willcocks

At the end of their explanatory note for their 1990 play *Moscow Gold*, a play which concerns the political and social transitions that the Soviet Union experienced at the end of the 1980s, Howard Brenton and Tarqi Ali state that it is "impossible to compete with history" (Brenton and Ali 1990, iii) and, indeed, a number of contemporary reviewers of the play not only agreed with this sentiment, but also went further by questioning the validity of even attempting to do so. For in a culture that is so highly mediatised, one is forced to question the purpose of a play that recounts a recent history that the Western world has seen unfold in real time on its television screens and in its newspapers. As the Guardian's theatre critic Michael Billington noted:

> . . . you start to wonder how theatre can compete with documentary reality. The short answer is it can't . . . . Theatre cannot compete with history: what it can do is illuminate specific moments in time and the burden of decision. (Billington 1990, 44)

It is precisely this idea which would seemed to have been the driving impetus behind Caryl Churchill's play *Mad Forest*, which was first performed in June 1990 at The Central School of Speech and Drama in London. With *Mad Forest*, Churchill seeks to explore the events that occurred in Romania at the very end of 1989, through the lives of two unremarkable families, allowing these events to be viewed, very much, from the perspective of how they affected the everyday lives of those living in Bucharest. As such the purpose of this chapter is two-fold. Firstly, it aims to consider the nature of Churchill's rapid response to the events of late 1989 in Romania, and secondly, and almost implicitly, how the nature of this response was facilitated by Churchill's relative distance from the actual events themselves—culturally, politically and

geographically. However, as is the way with most theatrical output concerning historical events, Churchill's play does not aim to be an holistic account of the end of the Cold War, this is not a *process play* as typified by the recent plays of David Edgar. Yet, it is undeniable that within *Mad Forest,* Churchill does express concerns and experiences that were common to many Eastern European populations during and following the collapse of the communist governments of the Eastern Bloc. The demise of the Cold War, although perceived and celebrated in the West as victory for democracy and indeed even humanity over tyranny, was a deeply traumatic event for those that experienced it first hand. The rapidity of change desired by the new governments of Eastern Europe often outstripped the capacity for change inherent within ordinary individuals and the tensions generated from this form a central tenet of Churchill's play.

Having been asked by Mark Wing-Davey to provide a play concerning the events in Romania for his students at The Central School of Speech and Drama, Churchill's approach, as it had been in the past with her work for Joint Stock, with plays such as *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976), *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Fen* (1983), was to use the actors in the company to help generate the material for the play. This necessitated a visit to Romania where the students, aided by fellow students from the Caragiale Theatre Institute in Bucharest, who acted as translators, interviewed a range of people about their experiences during the events of late 1989 and early 1990. As a result, as Sotto-Morettini notes, the play focuses on the "small vicissitudes of family life . . . the 'micro-politics' of everyday life" (Sotto-Morettini 1994, 105). This approach, by its very nature, generates a play that is concerned to reveal these large-scale socio-political proceedings through personal, domestic and familial events. Within *Mad Forest*, as opposed to the large-scale, historical events being a backdrop for a personal moment or encounter occurring on the stage, the large-scale events and the small-scale personal moments are woven together so as to draw the members of the audience into a position where, potentially, they are not objective viewers of historical events, but viewers who have sympathy and perhaps even an empathy for those who are participating, on whatever level, in these events.

The play is divided into three acts, offering, as Mitchell highlights, a "before-during-after idea" (Mitchell 1993, 503) or as Jeremy Kingston expresses it, "Ceausescu; exit Ceausescu, *après* Ceausescu" (Kingston 1990, 26). Acts One and Three predominantly follow the lives of two families, the working class Vladus and the more middle class Antonescus, and sandwiched between these is Act Two, which discusses the event of

the "revolution" itself through a series of inter-cutting, direct address monologues from the people who witnessed it first-hand. Both Act One and Two operate within an episodic structure, with each scene being prefaced by a sentence, read in both Romanian and English from a Romanian phrase book. In his article on *Mad Forest*, Tony Mitchell considers a number of approaches to this prefacing device. Initially citing Ceridwen Thomas's notion that these prefaces are similar to Brecht's placards (Thomas 1990, 18), Mitchell goes on to examine how this device was employed to acknowledge the impossibility of representing the people and situation of Romania naturalistically (Mitchell 1993, 502), and points to the words of Wing-Davey, who has said, "The phrase-book passages that open the scenes . . . are there as a reminder that this is simply a partial view it's not *the* truth" (original emphasis) (Mitchell 1993, 502). This would seemingly extend the use of these prefacing phrases away from a simple Brechtian motivation of alienation and towards a more complex formulation in which these phrases are being employed as a signifier of artifice, an engagingly ironic position given that the events of the play are real and that the performance material has been generated out of accounts given by those who were actually there. It is, therefore, interesting that on a number of occasions Mitchell employs the words "grain" and "grainy" to describe the performative qualities of *Mad Forest*. Although Mitchell never explicitly states that his use of these words is intended to evoke Baudrillard's notion of the "grain" within the context of photography, certain parallels can be drawn between the manner in which Churchill portrays reality within *Mad Forest* and the manner in which Baudrillard employs this word to consider the construction of a work so as to comment upon its position relative to "reality." In considering what Baudrillard himself has written on this subject it is worthwhile noting the wider implications that this has, not just for the prefacing phrases, but for the play as a whole. As Baudrillard writes:

> If something wants to be photographed, that is precisely because it does not want to yield up its meaning; it does not want to be reflected upon . . . . [but] be seized directly, violated on the spot, illuminated in its detail . . . . It falls to the very grain of the details of the object, the play of lines and light, to signify [the] interruption of the subject—and hence the interruption of the world—which gives the photograph its quality of suspense. Through the image the world asserts its discontinuity, its fragmentation, its artificial instantaneousness. In this sense, the photographic image is the purest, because it does not simulate time or movement and keeps to the most rigorous unrealism . . . . The degree of intensity of the image matches the degree of its denial of the real, its invention of another scene. To make an

> image of an object is to strip the object of all its dimensions one by one: weight, relief, smell, depth, time, continuity and, of course, meaning. This disembodiment is the price to be paid for that power of fascination which the image acquires . . . . To add back all these dimensions one by one—relief, movement, emotion, ideas, meaning and desire—in order to produce something better, more real—in other words, something more effectively simulated—is, where images are concerned, utter nonsense. (Baudrillard and Weibel 1999, 129-130)

Within *Mad Forest*, Churchill constructs a work that runs conceptually parallel to the sentiments that Baudrillard outlines above. The photomontage structure of *Mad Forest* indicates directly that the style of the work is not naturalistic. Thus, like Baudrillard's notion of photography, the "artificial instantaneousness" of the work is assured. Churchill seemingly acknowledges that, in the process of moving the event from the real to the stage, it is impossible to put back that which made it real. Once this move has taken place, the work cannot be made "more real" by adding back those elements that have been removed by this transition. Moreover, the "snapshots" that Churchill presents to the audience are not designed to offer an insight into the overarching, dominant political forces that were at work during the removal of the Ceausescu regime, but rather the play offers its audience a range of voices that speak of an event, an experience, which while collective in nature is composed of a plethora of individual contributions. Given that the play was written very soon after the event itself (rehearsals started the day after Illiescu was elected the new President of Romania, see Churchill 1990, 4), this indicates that there had been very little time for reflection and contextualisation, both for Churchill herself and for those Romanians whose interviews constitute the voices of the play. Therefore, the "snap-shots" that Churchill employs, potentially deny the subject of the work the reflection that Baudrillard discusses; rather, it generates an instantaneous response, which is "seized directly . . . and illuminated in its detail" (Baudrillard and Weibel 1999, 129), thereby constructing a work that seeks to consider the details which constitute the "larger picture" and in doing so reveals a picture that is both fragmented and representative of a discontinuous world. A world which has been fragmented and made discontinuous by the rapid demise of the Cold War, its precepts and attendant political structures, structures which, over the fifty years of the Cold War, came to govern and control much of people's lives in the Eastern Bloc.

Although Baudrillard's notion of a discontinuous world is being employed by him to consider a very broad set of assumptions and

interrogations of the world and contemporary existence within that world, it functions just as adequately on the micro-scale, specifically here with the Romanian "revolution" of 1989, the end of the Cold War and Churchill's exploration of these conjoined events. *Mad Forest*'s examination of the discontinuity of life in Romania during this period operates on a number of levels. Indeed, given the manner in which the personality cult of the Ceausescus invaded all aspects of daily life it is hard to imagine an area of Romanian life that was not disrupted by the removal of the old regime. The play embraces this discontinuity and disruption. The viewer's interaction with the play is fragmented, in that the audience's view of the events and the work itself is broken into scenes that operate internally only as glimpsed moments into the lives of the characters and then taken collectively progress in a non-linear sequence. Simultaneously, therefore, the play holds central both the discontinuity of the structure of the play and of the events themselves. The end game of the Cold War and the events in Romania in late 1989 had not yet experienced historical closure, and as a result neither do the events in the play. In this way the play is an attempt to capture that which cannot be captured, in that its structure, composition and generative processes have all been located in dislocation, or rather in the fragmentation of an event that would seem to have been chaotic in the sense, at least within the play, that it was not a centrally planned and co-ordinated uprising. Churchill's composition of *Mad Forest* gives the spectator not merely a record of an incident, but a performative event that embodies the processes at work during the original incident. This is of course not only true of the events in Romania, but also for the events across Eastern Europe that constituted the demise of the Cold War. The play embraces the splintered nature of the *experience* of these incidents as its central means of attempting to re-tell their occurrences and implications.

Mitchell's "grainy" quality, that which Baudrillard posits as the signifier of the subject's interruption, therefore, reveals to the audience the fact that while the event itself is a truth, the portrayal, as Wing-Davey points out, is not a whole truth. Indeed, Wing-Davey's notion of considering the partial truth can be extended and enhanced to consider *Mad Forest*, in a pluralistic sense, as play which simultaneously holds many truths. This may well have been exactly what Michael Bloom was referring to when he described *Mad Forest* as employing a "prismatic technique" (Bloom 1990, 64), one in which the concept of truth as a singularity is fragmented into a spectrum of truths. As alluded to previously while not seeking to encapsulate the whole experience that was the demise of the Cold War this aspect of the play does resonate with the

broader experience in Eastern Europe during the late 1980s and the early 1990s, with each of the former Soviet satellite states now having to reconcile the "truth" of their previous experience—socially and politically—with the competing "truths"—both regional and global—with which they were now faced. Moreover, what is most interesting about this notion and the end of the Cold War is how the perceived freedom to negotiate relative truths was not the liberating experience that many had hoped it would be.

This is significant in a play that seeks to engage with a country in which, for the past forty years or so, truth had been a state controlled commodity policed by Soviet Cold War hegemony. Finally, people are allowed to speak their truths and the result is a multiplicity of competing realities. Vladimir Tismaneanu, in an article written only two months after the Christmas Day executions of the Ceausescus, considers the issue of truth within the context of the Romanian uprising. In his article he charts and interrogates the changes that took place immediately following the events of December 1989 and posits the notion that the Romanian people had been deceived into thinking that their revolution was similar to those of other Eastern European countries, when in fact all they had facilitated, unbeknownst to them, was a reshuffle of the existing government. As he notes within the context of Romania during the latter part of 1989 and the early months of 1990, truth is a problematic concept:

> A stylization of history can be essentially true without being true to every detail. But it also can be essentially false, and that is the danger looming in Romania today: that the lineaments of revolutionary change will be used to disguise ideological continuity. (Tismaneanu 1990, 17)

In essence, the changes which occurred in Romania during this time, and the debate that Tismaneanu outlines above, are embodied within the play through the consideration of truth, the ability to speak freely and openly, to question and to attempt to reconcile the differences between that which was considered the truth under the old regime and that which is now revealed and/or constructed within the play to be the truth under the new embryonic leadership. As Peacock suggests:

> The discourse of *Mad Forest*, following the progression of the "revolution," moves from long silences and fear of speaking out, to everyone speaking together in a cacophony of opinions. (Peacock 1999, 110)

In many respects, the trajectory that truth takes through the course of the

play is its central unifying thematic. Due to its fragmented structure the play does lack what Mitchell terms a "master-narrative" (Mitchell 1993, 500). However, the central tenet of the play is not related to storytelling, but to the exploration of a situation. Because of its chronological proximity to its subject matter, *Mad Forest* cannot employ a traditional or conventional narrative structure, as the situation in Romania at the time the play was written had not yet ended, indeed post-Cold War Europe would remain in flux for a considerable period after 1989. The event was ongoing and, as mentioned above, this denies the work the potential for narrative closure. Thus, the play's development is driven thematically rather than by a narrative and it is the notion of truth and free speech that afford the play its central thematic strand.

The inability to speak openly is demonstrated in the very first scene. In order to argue, Bogdan and Irina Vladu have to turn the radio up very loud, presumably so that the bugging device, which may or may not exist in their home, cannot pick up their conversation. The audience are excluded from the argument, which reinforces our concentration on the act of having to turn the radio up loud in order to, quite clearly, speak one's mind. The nature of the argument is irrelevant, the fact that it needs to be disguised is what is important here. Therefore, the play begins with an act of subterfuge, an act of deception that is necessary to undertake an everyday action such as arguing with a spouse. In the following scenes of the Act, a Securitate man blackmails Bogdan into becoming an informant, a meat queue is momentarily disturbed by the whisper of "Down with Ceausescu," jokes are told until one ends with a punch line about the start of an uprising and the scene ends in an uneasy silence and a young woman arranges, through the passing of notes and an envelope of cash, an illegal abortion. Act One is dominated by an atmosphere of tension, mistrust and an inability to speak freely for fear of being overheard by the communist authorities. The counterpoint to this inability to speak truthfully is offered by two significant scenes within the Act. Both move the play, momentarily, outside the "snapshot" composition that Churchill employs and into a world that is balanced between dream sequence and surrealist fantasy. In the first of these scenes, Flavia Antonescu talks to the ghost of her dead grandmother. In this conversation, Flavia's grandmother warns her of living an unfulfilled life, or at least living a life in which she is not allowed to be herself. When Flavia claims that this is how everyone feels, her grandmother tellingly replies that Flavia could not possibly know this as she never speaks to anybody, the implication being that she never speaks to anyone about her true thoughts and feelings. Significantly, Flavia's grandmother had lived in a time before the Cold War era and the

establishment of Romania as a satellite country of the Soviet Union, a fact that allows her a greater insight into Flavia's position:

> Grandmother: You're pretending this isn't your life. You think it's going to happen some other time. When you're dead you'll realise you were alive now. When I was your age the war was starting. I welcomed the Nazis because I thought they'd protect us from the Russians and I welcomed the Communists because I thought they'd protect us from the Germans. I had no principles. My husband was killed. But at least I knew that was what happened to me. There were things I did. I did them. Or sometimes I did nothing. It was me doing nothing. (Churchill 1990, 30)

When Flavia's grandmother chides her for not living, Flavia responds that to do so would hurt too much, confirming the hopeless position that Flavia feels that she is in.

Scene nine of Act One also contains a similar exchange, which takes place between a priest and the Archangel Michael. The very first few lines of this scene encapsulate the thematic thread of freedom of thought and speech or, more specifically, the need to maintain an external artifice that disguises the true feelings and thoughts of the individual. Although meant to comfort the priest, the Angel's words are chillingly reactionary:

> Angel: Don't be ashamed. When people come into church they are free. Even if they know there are Securitate in church with them. Even if some churches are demolished, so long as there are some churches standing. Even if you say Ceauşescu, Ceauşescu, because the Romanian church is a church of freedom. Not of outer freedom of course but inner freedom. (Churchill 1990, 25)

The priest's response is to thank the Angel for being there for him and a discussion ensues in which the Angel gently persuades the priest not to think about politics, to leave it alone and not take any action, as Sotto-Morettini notes, that in Ceausescu's Romania even fantasy is infected by the regime's hegemony (Sotto-Morettini 1994, 108). At the end of the scene the priest finally asks the Angel to comfort him, which is seemingly an acceptance of defeat as much as a desire for reassurance.

Both of these surreal scenes counterpoint the more realistic moments of the Act, a device that underscores the inability of any of the characters to speak the truth. Indeed, the only truth spoken outside of these scenes is by Gabriel when he tells his family how he outwitted two Securitate men who were trying to recruit him as an informant. However, far from being a moment of vainglorious defiance, Gabriel's confession of the event to his family has to be quickly stopped when they realise he signed a document

binding him to secrecy, a contract which having now been broken may affect the chances of his sister getting the passport that she needs in order to marry her American boyfriend. The significance of Act One is clear: telling the truth is a dangerous and indeed punishable act in Ceausescu's Romania. The truth is not a subjective personal possession; it is a collectively agreed, objective "reality," which can only be sanctioned by the state.

The theme of truth is extended into Act Two, in which those who witnessed the events of the revolution first hand are allowed to speak freely. On the page, the structure of Act Two is very simple. Some twelve characters narrate their own stories and give their opinions directly to the audience. However, as Wing-Davey insists, these "reports" were never intended to replicate the news reports that had been shown on the television (Thomas 1990, 19). The factors contained within this Act that deny this type of interpretation are, firstly, its poly-vocality—the range of voices and opinions that it facilitates and, secondly, the time each character is permitted to express these views. The "voices" of this Act do not feel as if they have been heavily edited, as is the news. The characters do not talk in sound bites, nor are they reduced to desperate or crying faces. Indeed, the voices of this scene offer sober recollections of the events and, although at times these recollections are emotionally charged, there is no obvious authorial political agenda or specific perspective behind the selection and presentation of the narratives within this Act. Ultimately, the Act is highly democratic and pluralistic. Each character is of equal value and their voice and opinion of comparable worth. The Securitate officer's story is as important as the Flowerseller's, or the Student's as significant as the Doctor's. This produces a contrast to Act One. Gone are the fears of not speaking one's thoughts, gone are the hierarchies of rank and authority and gone is the universal party line that dictated that which was truth and that which was not. This last point gives the final Act of the play its impetus.

Act Three begins with another surreal scene, in which a vampire begrudgingly befriends a starving dog. The vampire claims he has been attracted to the chaos of the city by the smell of the revolution and the fact that at times like this no one notices who is doing the killing (Churchill 1990, 49). Positioned at the beginning of Act Three this scene serves a number of purposes. Firstly, it acts as a signal that the play has returned to the structure of Act One, breaking the strict direct address style of Act Two. Secondly, the arrival of the vampire casts a shadow over the beginning of the Act. Even though Ceausescu has been deposed, the introduction of a figure that represents blood, death and depravity does not

indicate a situation that is positively optimistic, and the succeeding scenes demonstrate that the joyful scenes in post-communist East Germany, Poland and Czechoslovakia were not to be replicated in Romania. It is within Act Three that the complexities of the concept of truth are revealed. In post-revolution Romania, having lost the strict party directive, the notion of truth becomes a malleable concept, something that is left to the subjective interpretations of individuals. The difficulty of establishing the truth is demonstrated very quickly in Act Three, scene two, section iii, by a ranting patient with head injuries, who comes to talk to Gabriel as he lies injured in hospital:

> Patient: Did we have a revolution or a putsch? Who was shooting on the 21st? And who was shooting on the 22nd? Was the army shooting on the 21st or did some shoot and some not shoot or were the Securitate disguised in army uniforms? If the army were shooting, why haven't they been brought to justice? And were they still shooting on the 22nd? Were they now disguised as Securitate? Most important of all, were the terrorists and the army really fighting or were they only pretending to fight? And for whose benefit? And by whose orders? Where did the flags come from? Who put the loudhailers in the square? How could they publish a newspaper so soon? Why did no one turn off the power at the TV? Who got Ceausescu to call everyone together? And is he really dead? How many people died at Timisoara? And where are the bodies? Who mutilated the bodies? And were they mutilated after they'd been killed specially to provoke a revolution? By whom? For whose benefit? Or was there a drug in the food and water at Timisoara to make people more aggressive? Who poisoned the water in Bucharest? (Churchill 1990, 58)

With the character of the patient, Churchill would seem to evoke a classical tradition, in which only the blind can see and articulate the truth, although, in this instance blindness has been replaced by mental instability. In this way, the patient is portrayed as the only person capable of thinking beyond that which can be countenanced by "reasonable" people, potentially still imbued with the Cold War political mindset instilled by the old regime. However, the doubt about the validity of the revolution is clear.

Within Act Three the victory that has been won is displayed, if not totally then at least partially, as a Pyrrhic one. Soon racial hatreds emerge, with prejudice being shown against gypsies, the rural peasantry and principally the Hungarians, a hatred that erupts in the last scene of the play in a drunken brawl at a wedding. Also, in this final scene there is a return to the poly-vocality demonstrated earlier in the work. Having been finally allowed to speak their minds, a circumstance that has led to open displays

of racial hatred, emotional bitterness, political uncertainty and a fight generated out of the fear and frustrations that this has produced, the characters dance at Florina and Radu's wedding. While they dance, the characters, speaking in untranslated Romanian, reiterate and embellish the sentiments they expressed during the play. Significantly, none of these sentiments are optimistic. Radu still questions the validity of the revolution, Flavia implicitly questions the benefits of writing and re-writing history and Gabriel and Ianos express their racial prejudices (Churchill 1990, 89-91). Finally, the vampire, who is chillingly dancing harmoniously with the angel, reiterates his thoughts from earlier, that once you begin to want blood you have to seek it out with an increasingly desperate desire that is not fulfilled until your bloodlust has been satisfied. Churchill's closing image is a starkly realistic one, depicting in the most graphic terms, a people whose vision of a free, open and democratic future has been revealed to be a complex set of irreversible racial animosities, irreconcilable political difficulties and an unachievable desire to find a definitive and meaningful truth.

Churchill's *Mad Forest* would seem to be a play that ultimately produces a pessimistic view of what occurred. This is not to say that Churchill believes that life for Romanians before the 1989 revolution was better than it was after, but she is acutely aware of the difficulties that this change brought to the lives of ordinary Romanians. As Ivan Sanders reminds us, "when everything is infused with a sense of history there are no neutral subjects" (Sanders 1990, 32). This resonates with the fact that *Mad Forest* deals intensely with the impact that these events had on the most intimate of personal relationships. This is a significant feature of Churchill's work, as Howe Kritzer notes:

> Though her works testify to a belief in the capacity for change on both personal and societal levels, Churchill also acknowledges the difficulties and potential painfulness of such change. (Howe Kritzer 1993, 204)

The change that Churchill depicts in *Mad Forest* is such a painful change. Ultimately, it is a change that leaves the characters of the play traumatised by the event itself, confused and bewildered by its rapidity, fearful of its potential implications and deeply worried about the uncertainty it has generated for the future. This uncertainty has been created in part, as Sotto-Morettini points out, because *Mad Forest* posits the notion that history is ultimately unknowable (Sotto-Moretinni 1994, 115) and this "unknowablity" was not only true for Romania and its people, but rapidly as the early years of the 1990s unfolded it became starkly apparent that this was also true for Europe as a whole. Churchill's play, viewed from the

distance of two decades has proved itself to be, not only an important play of its time, but is also a chillingly prescient play, which foreshadowed the often difficult period of transition that post Cold War Europe would experience over the coming two decades.

Notes

1. See Shulman 1990, 39; Billington 1990, 44; Nightingale 1990, 22; Talyor 1990, 16.

2. For a detailed examination of the events that generated the Romanian revolt in 1989 see Beck 1991, 7-31.

3. Mitchell's initial use of the these words may owe something to Geraldine Cousins' use of them in her discussion of Churchill's earlier work *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976). See Cousins 1989, 20-21.

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