

In/Sanity as a Means of Repoliticization for British “New Political Writing”

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Abstract

Within the tumultuous and pressing context of the new millennium, in Britain there has been an upsurge of “New Political Writing” and the revival of interest in writing plays with clearer political focus as regards specific ethical and socio-political issues. In other words, there is a movement towards explicit political engagement and many British playwrights demonstrate eagerness to resist the dehumanizing impositions of the current world and the British subculture of violence and immorality and to retrace ethical, social, ethnic and national values. This paper explores the striking conjunction of the new political agenda with mental illness in so many of the plays written in the significant decade of the 2000s and seeks to shed light into the ethical, and socio-political ramifications it entails both for the field of drama and for the field of psychopathology. The discussion will focus on how this body of new British writing which draws on the field of psychopathology constitutes a reflection of the pathology of contemporary British society as well as of the changed identity of political British theatre but also an effort to create room for pluralistic dialectics aiming at a change of the audience’s consciousness. The presentation will demonstrate how subversive representations of insanity on the contemporary stage become an aesthetically and theoretically rich and convenient tool for articulating political concerns and criticism and will highlight the use of the phenomenology and scientific discourse of mental illness as a means to articulate a differentiated political language, a middle ground of “repoliticization.”

Keywords: British political theatre, psychopathology, violence

Within the tumultuous and pressing context of the new millennium, there has been an upsurge of “New Political Writing” in Britain and a revival of interest in writing plays with a clear political focus as regards specific ethical and socio-political issues. Many British playwrights have demonstrated an eagerness to resist the dehumanizing impositions of contemporary world and the British subculture of violence and immorality in particular, in an effort to retrace ethical, social, ethnic and national values.

Delving into the factors that have changed the direction of the socio-cultural problematic at the threshold of the twenty-first century, Stanley Aronowitz refers to variables such as the change in Western ethics, the global ecological threat, the globalized, de-territorialized economy and production, and the inability of national politics to bring positive changes (46-50). Among other factors that have also contributed to this change are the feelings of fear and uncertainty that the emergence and development of the postmodern discourse and aesthetics have brought about. The relativism apparent in all aspects of subjectivity and the socio-cultural position of the individual, have led to the tendency to question and deconstruct well-established myths that have for long sustained human existence.

Fragmentation and ambiguity, cynicism, cruelty and violence – prevalent themes in the 1990s – still constitute the main thematic axis of many of the plays produced after 2000. Nevertheless, as Janelle G. Reinelt suggests, “their engagement with concrete government policy and current events places the plays closer to an earlier form of political theatre, one that sought to engage its audience with sociopolitical structures and problems” (314).

Political plays by David Edgar, David Hare, Simon Stephens, Tanika Gupta, Kay Adshear, Timberlake Wertenbaker, debbie tucker green, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Dennis Kelly, Roy Williams, Robin Soans and others, are indicative of the general political turn British theatre has taken since the dawn of the new millennium. One should not miss, however, the aesthetic variety contemporary theatre presents. For instance, debbie tucker green’s dramatic poetics in *Random* (2008), Fin Kennedy’s use of tragic elements and cinematic techniques in *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* (2005), Martin McDonagh’s gothic, fairy-tale enclaves in *The Pillowman* (2003), Victoria Brittain and Gilian Slovo’s use of journalism in *Guantanamo* (2004), and Tim Crouch’s radical and self-reflective open-endedness in *The Author* (2009), are all indicative of this stylistic plurality of contemporary British political drama. According to Martin Middeke, contemporary British drama exhibits an “oscillation between the traditional realist mode and the more experimental open forms of drama [and therefore] resists easy pigeonholing” (xx).

Within this multi-faceted tendency for repoliticization, what becomes strikingly evident in many of the plays written after 2000 is the conjunction of the new political agenda with mental illness. In fact, within the stylistic and thematic diversity of contemporary British drama, there is a significant body of plays heavily drawing on the field of psychopathology in an attempt to articulate a re-politicization that cannot be classified as militant left-wing drama. It is a re-politicization that employs the phenomenology and scientific discourse of mental illness in pluralistic and subversive ways, while remaining deeply-rooted in current socio-political reality. Indicative of this trend are Fin Kennedy’s *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found* (2005), Joe Penhall’s *Blue/Orange* (2000), Simon Stephens’s *Motortown* (2006), Shelagh Stephenson’s *Five Kinds of Silence* (2000), Martin McDonagh’s *The Pillowman* (2003), Gregory Burke’s *Black Watch* (2006), Philip Ridley’s *Leaves of Glass* (2007), Grace Fraser’s *Breakfast with Mugabe* (2005), and Winsome Pinnock’s *One Under* (2005).

These plays, among others, share a common interest in psychopathology and a common mode of politicization because they discuss issues like immigration, racial and family relations, war, terrorism, economic exploitation, national identity, unemployment, moral degeneracy, dystopian worlds, and the ethical responsibility of art through cases of psychic trauma, victimization, institutionalization, and so on. In other words, mental illness is variably employed by these playwrights to yield interesting and politically powerful plays that both reflect and criticize the contemporary political and social nosology of the British society and the Western world in general.

The reason why insanity proves to be a field of such infinite possibilities for the politics of contemporary British playwriting is because illness raises “ideological inconsistencies, oppositions or contradictions” (Billig 96). In the case of mental illness in particular, this effect is magnified due to its elusive nature: it combines deviance regarding social conduct

with bizarre elements,¹ evident both in the behavior and appearance of the mentally ill; it is characterized by a split between body and mind; it has repercussions not only on the suffering individual but also on the surrounding society that faces the impact of the peculiar mental state. In any individual case of mental illness, sociological criteria are taken into account for its definition and classification,² as well as ethical and scientific ones concerning the methods of treatment. Indeed, despite being invested with a range of medical definitions, diagnoses and images, social responses and stereotypes as well as abundant theoretical approaches in many fields, mental illness remains an obscure and ambiguous “phenomenon” of the human nature, it is “the sickness that breeds in the folds of [the] mind,” as Sarah Kane subtly describes in her play *4.48 Psychosis* (11).

It could be argued, then, that it is exactly this ambiguity and doubt surrounding mental illness that offers a fertile ground for the contemporary stage, which – still in the spirit of postmodernity – elicits often ambivalent ideas from various fields to raise psychological, existential and social issues, and generate a discussion around them. Employing the most obvious qualities in the language and appearance of the insane – deviance and the so-called “bizarre” elements – and adopting a specific socio-cultural perspective, each playwright deconstructs given discourses and draws attention to current reality, knowledge and science not as transcendental values and ways of conduct, but as socially-constructed concepts defined by the here and now.

Playwrights who choose to build their politics on psychopathology focus on a number of recognizable psychopathological stereotypes. In Kennedy’s *How to Disappear Completely and Never Be Found*, for instance, it is Charlie’s suffering, schizoid self which disengages from the world:

CHARLIE. ... this fucking guy is screaming in your face an you don’t even know how he got in cos the door’s locked and he’s screaming and screaming and you wanna punch it, just punch his fucking *face* in to make the noise stop this NOISE that’s inside your head and under your skin churning into your guts and THIS time THIS time THIS time you do it you do it you fucking DO IT.

The sound of breaking glass.

And his face breaks. As the mirror breaks. As your knuckles break. As the noise stops. And it was you. It was you all along. (*How to Disappear* 40)

Penhall’s *Blue/Orange* discusses a psychotic patient’s (Christopher’s) struggle to escape the normative function of the mental institution and reclaim subjectivity in a rigidly defined social space:

BRUCE. What did I tell you about Coke?

CHRISTOPHER. I’m going home tomorrow.

BRUCE. What’s wrong with drinking Coke?

CHRISTOPHER. But I’m going home.

BRUCE. Chris? Come on you know this, it’s important. What’s wrong with Coke?

¹ “*Bizarre* [emphasis by Gilman] is a term from the realm of the aesthetic. It limits the flux of madness to a definable world, that of the mad. The frame for this world is the frame of art” (Gilman, *Disease and Representation* 242).

² See Cockerham.

CHRISTOPHER. It rots your teeth.

BRUCE. No – well yes – and ... ? What else does it do to you? (*Blue/Orange 2*)

Simon Stephens in *Motortown* stages the discourse and phenomenology of a soldier's (Danny's) war trauma:

DANNY. I've seen boys with their faces blown off. Skin all puss'd up and melted. Eyeballs hanging out on the cartilage. Yer helmet holds it all together. Bits of yer skull held in. (*Motortown 51*)

Shelagh Stephenson in *Five Kinds of Silence* and Philip Ridley in *Leaves of Glass* draw on the impaired mental state and pain of victims of domestic abuse. Susan's (the daughter's) words in Stephenson's play, for instance, encapsulate all this:

SUSAN. He was sucking away at our lives, soon we'd be gone and the dust would settle. As if we'd never been. This, most frightening of all: as if we'd never been. (*Five Kinds of Silence 131*)

Another playwright, Martin McDonagh, bases *The Pillowman* on the image of the mentally ill artist (Katurian saved his brother by killing his parents but developed a tendency for the macabre having had to listen to his brother's torture for years) discussing the long-standing correlation between mental illness and artistic creativity.

In an effort to "handle" the phenomenon of mental illness, a kind of mythologization has long existed, one that transformed the suffering subject into an *Other*. In fact, as Gilman explains, within a historical context, social attitudes towards insanity – its institutionalization and its "exorcism" or acceptance - lie mainly behind the conceptualization of the insane as the Other, with various positive or negative connotations. More specifically, some of the more positive images attached to insanity have presented the insane as the "seer," the beholder of a deeper insight into the human psyche, or the "melancholic" who possesses a deeper, a more intuitive understanding of the world, in a rather romantic sense. Negative stereotypes, on the other hand, have presented the insane as the dangerous "criminal," the "promiscuous," the "animal" that lacks any shred of conscience, possessed by "racial madness and moral degeneracy" (active states of insanity), or the "catatonic," the "suicidal," the "non-creative, non-productive" individual (passive states of insanity).³

Recognizing the implications inherent in familiar, stereotypical images of the mentally ill, contemporary playwrights critically draw on the phenomenology of the disturbed individual and on the discourses associated with it in order to awaken audiences to an awareness of contemporary socio-political, ethical and artistic issues. Kennedy, for instance, in *How to Disappear* connects the schizoid self with an era that prioritizes fake identities and human relations in an attempt to disperse the illusion of true happiness.

CHARLIE. D'you ever feel like. Like everythin's sort of fake? Like you're hoverin over your own head watchin yourself act out your own life? An it's fake. All of it [...] There's too much stuff in the world, Mike. And none of it's real. (*How to Disappear 52*)

³ Gilman's studies, *Seeing the Insane* (1982), *Difference and Pathology* (1985), and *Disease and Representation* (1988), are highly informative on the conceptualization of insanity and its social reception diachronically.

Penhall, in *Blue/Orange*, attributes his protagonist's impaired mental state to his inability to adjust to a ghetto and to the dehumanizing impact of social structures such as institutional establishments and scientific discourse.

ROBERT. But you have your friends. Your community. People who care.

CHRISTOPHER. I don't have any friends. [...]

CHRISTOPHER. I want to go to Africa.

ROBERT. Back to your roots.

CHRISTOPHER. My 'roots'? (*Blue/Orange* 55-56)

ROBERT. Off you go. Go home and listen to some reggae music.

Christopher stares at Robert for some time. (*Blue/Orange* 108)

Stephens, in *Motortown*, demonstrates how the already impaired mental state of the traumatized soldier deteriorates due to social indifference and social marginalization, and conducts a national and cultural introspection of the pathogeny of contemporary British society:

DANNY. I saw, one time, a group of guys, at Pirbright, get another lad, a younger lad – no listen to this, this is right up your street. They get him. Hold him down. Get a broom handle. Fucking push it, right up his rectum. Right up there. (*He removes his thumb.*) And we all watched that. Joined in. That was funny, to be fair. (*Motortown* 64)

Stephenson and Ridley, on the other hand, in *Five Kinds of Silence* and *Leaves of Glass*, respectively, explore the weakened mental state of both abusers and abused in order to expose and denounce social indifference to the problem of domestic violence. For example, Billy the abuser in Stephenson's play, is presented as a traumatized child that turned into an abuser later on:

BILLY. She's pulling me, dragging me upstairs, I'm fighting back, bloody get off me, bloody get off. No don't shut me up in the dark, it's black in there, the black gets in my nose and mouth and eyes, I can't breathe, she says get in the cupboard, you'll have no light, you don't deserve it. Bloody bugger bastard, I shout, bloody damn bugger. Crack. She hits me. Crack. ... I won't cry, I shout, I bloody won't. (*Five Kinds of Silence* 112-113)

Finally, by exposing the negative repercussions of a psychically disturbed writer's work, McDonagh raises questions about the influence of a disturbed imagination on other people, the ethical responsibility of the artist and also the reception and evaluation of art. Katurian's dialogues with his brother, for instance, are typical of this questioning:

KATURIAN. What did you tell him?

MICHAL. Just the truth.

KATURIAN. What particular truth?

MICHAL. Just that, y'know, all the things I did to all the kids I got from stories you wrote and read out to me. [...]

KATURIAN. That isn't the truth, Michal.

MICHAL. Yes it is.

KATURIAN. No it isn't.

MICHAL. Well, *did* you write some stories with children getting murdered in them?

KATURIAN. Yes, but ...

MICHAL. Well, *did* you read them out to me?

KATURIAN. Yes ...

MICHAL. Well, *did* I go out and murder a bunch of children? (*Pause.*) "Yes, I did," is the answer to that one. So I don't see how the "That isn't the truth" comes into it. (*The Pillowman* 51-52)

It is important to note that the playwrights move beyond the limited framework of individual psychopathological cases and stereotypes and initiate a dialogue on issues of more general concern, drawing insightful correlations between the disease and the power structures and political phenomena of the millennium. This is achieved, on the one hand, by constantly raising questions about the social and scientific encoding of mental illness, and, on the other, by arguing that the imposition of involuntary commitment laws and institutionalization, far from safeguarding society, produce insurmountable obstacles to the achievement of personal happiness and questionable results as regards the disease itself. Moreover, the labeling of insanity as a "disease" is largely explored, as well as the socio-cultural and economic boundaries of the definition of "normalcy" as opposed to abnormal behavior. According to Ian Parker, psychiatric diagnosis is based on oppositions such as the individual versus the social world, reason versus unreason, pathology versus normality, form (symptoms) versus content (what they are about), clear categories of pathology versus messy real life, professional views versus the patients' own views about their condition (60-63).

These playwrights structure their plays and create a critical language and aesthetic devices based mainly on these oppositional parameters. For instance, the witty dialogues with the endless linguistic twists in *Blue/Orange* force the audience to question the sanity of both patients and doctors:

ROBERT. So ... fundamentally, you don't think you're *sick*? Am I right?

CHRISTOPHER. Yeah I'm sick. Sick and tired, man. Sick of everything. (*Blue/Orange* 62)

Danny's cry for help in *Motortown* as well as Charlie's in *How to Disappear* are heart-breaking, with social indifference constantly presented as the cause of their mental illness.

MARLEY. You're shivering.

DANNY. I'm sorry.

MARLEY. What are you sorry for?

DANNY. It's not me. It isn't me. [...]

MARLEY. Are you crying?

DANNY. Marley.

MARLEY. What, Danny? Jesus!

DANNY. Go back in. You should go back inside. I don't think I should see you anymore. (*Motortown* 43)

In *Five Kinds of Silence*, the discussions the victimized daughters have with the psychologists during treatment sessions are full of contradictions, making the audience question what is normal, how is normalcy defined and who defines it.

PSYCHIATRIST 2. You must feel very angry, Susan.

SUSAN. Pardon me?

PSYCHIATRIST 2. With your mother. She let it happen all those years. [...] Do you sometimes feel resentful towards her perhaps?

SUSAN. Why?

PSYCHIATRIST 2. Why d'you think?

SUSAN. We love her. She's our mother. Why d'you want us to be angry?

PSYCHIATRIST 2. I wonder if sometimes you deny what you feel. I think it's understandable.

SUSAN. I think we live on different planets. [...] Most of what you say we don't understand. [...] This getting angry, this feeling this and feeling that. It's not for us. It's not really our sort of thing. ... Best we deal with it ourselves. (*Five Kinds of Silence* 113-115)

In *The Pillowman*, the concept of normalcy is also questioned through the juxtaposition of the deviant imagination of a mentally disturbed writer and a totalitarian regime that imprisons, questions, and tortures him.

What becomes clear is the writers' effort to undermine socially fixed perceptions by tracing mental illness and deviance from normal behavior to specific forms of social pathology and oppression, such as domestic violence, war, moral degeneracy, scientific supremacy, and dehumanizing lifestyles. By reversing long-established ideas about mental illness, these playwrights seek to unveil society's powerful role in constructing psychopathological images/stereotypes. At the same time, they create an ontological uncertainty that leads to redefining one's socio-cultural identity and place in the world.⁴

Motortown, for example, is packed with authentic material drawn from the war on terror, the atrocities of war, the anti-war protests, and the media coverage from 2001 to 2005:

DANNY. We stayed in the airport. They turned the Basra international airport into our base. Had these big old statues and fountains and marble floors and everything. (*Motortown* 22)

LEE. When you were on television. I was incredulous ... "It's important to think that we're making a difference. People have no idea what life was like here under Saddam's regime." (*Motortown* 71)

DANNY. Did you go on the march?

JUSTIN. On the –

DANNY. On the anti-war march, up Hyde Park, did you two go on that?

JUSTIN. Yes. We did. (*Motortown* 64)

⁴ The choice of phenomenological aspects of the specific area of psychopathology as a theoretical framework acquires political dimensions, as in the case of trauma survivors in plays like *Five Kinds of Silence* and *Leaves of Glass*, or in the conceptual definition of mental illness as culturally constructed in plays like *Blue/Orange* and *Breakfast with Mugabe*. For information about traumatized psyche and its social ramifications, see Gelles; Herman; Leys; Luckhurst. For a socio-cultural approach of insanity, see Foucault; Goffman; Szasz; Scheff.

The play enhances the impression that this is not only a drama revolving around a traumatized soldier's horrible acts of violence, but a political statement that delineates a recognizable socio-cultural context the audience can relate to, in a rather disconcerting way, though.⁵ As Amelia Kritzer notes,

[t]he search for such a context implies the desire for political thought grounded in broad understanding of humans and their societies rather than narrowly instrumental in manipulating policies and problems. (153)

As the plays under discussion clearly demonstrate, change is sought in the synthesis of ideas, in the knowledge that comes from various fields. It is this synthesis that many young writers see in playwriting today, and not just an opportunity for aesthetic experimentation.⁶ One striking mode contemporary playwrights employ to involve the audience into the representations of politically-charged is by turning them into "performatively produced witnesses."⁷ This dramatic device is particularly evident in Stephenson's *Five Kinds of Silence*, where the audience is forced to take the position of the oppressed through the stalking presence of the dead oppressor. The dead father haunts the stage and constantly stalks both his family/victims and the audience, by being constantly present in an alarming and threatening way.

Cross-fade to MARY with PSYCHIATRIST 1 (male). Billy's face can be seen at the window. (Five Kinds of Silence 111)

MARY sits on the bed. BILLY is in the shadows behind her. (Five Kinds of Silence 119)

Cross-fade to SUSAN and LAWYER 1. BILLY stands above the set, listening. (Five Kinds of Silence 122)

Similarly, McDonagh's *The Pillowman* allows no detachment from the debate over the ethical assessment of art and the ethical responsibility of the artist. The playwright presents murder on stage, and especially the murders of children, as the unavoidable repercussions of "unethical" artwork,⁸ of the stories his protagonist, Katurian, has been writing. This overtly political section of drama evokes feelings of complicity and forces the audience to acknowledge a reality that was previously disregarded; it precludes passivity and indifference and calls for an informed, socially active audience.

⁵ This dramatic tendency to connect individual life stories to a wider social context and explore the various ramifications of political decisions and practices is a major trait of the new political drama in general. As Dennis Kelly says in an interview for the *Guardian*, "[o]ne of the great things about writing in this country is that we write about what happens now."

⁶ This is clearly reflected in Fin Kennedy's response to Alison Croggon: "I wanted to write plays because I always had an interest in politics, philosophy, sociology, language and poetry/literature. Playwriting seemed to combine all those, and in the most exciting way."

⁷ Tim Etchells introduces the notion of a "performatively produced witness" and explains that "to witness an event is to be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one's own place in them, even when that place is simply, for the moment, as an onlooker... The art-work that turns us into witnesses leaves us, above all, unable to stop thinking, talking and reporting what we've seen. We're left... borne on by our responsibility to events" (17-18).

⁸ As Phelan succinctly observes about such plays, "[p]erformance might be an arena in which to investigate a new political ethics" (10).

What, however, remains central in this dramatic trend is the painful reality of the mentally suffering individual. This is because “the palpable signs of illness, the pain and suffering of the patient, cannot be simply dismissed as a social construction” (Gilman, *Disease and Representation* 10). This suffering is the only undeniable truth about the disease whose representation on stage transcends the limits of mere scientific study on mental illness and becomes closely linked to traumatic experiences and agonizing moments. In the plays, mental illness functions as a fulcrum for the articulation of a more comprehensive socio-political perspective. For instance, in *Five Kinds of Silence*, the dissociative state of the mentally impaired victims becomes pivotal as the means through which the playwright’s multi-faceted argument on domestic abuse is presented. Likewise, in *How to Disappear*, Kennedy draws heavily on the phenomenology that Charlie’s disturbed mental state presents in order to stress the annihilating effect the nature of contemporary social existence has on the individual.

CHARLIE. Your skin crawls. Your skin itches. Not just your skin but your muscles. It’s like your muscles itch. You wanna rip them open and scratch at the sinews. You tense everything up and relax again. Tense, relax. Tense, relax. Clenching your teeth, your arms, stomach, legs, kneecaps, curling your feet. Feeling like your whole body might pop at any moment and that would be it. (*How to Disappear* 21)

Through access to Charlie’s schizoid mind, but also through his suffering body that externalizes his inner drama and makes his psychic pain more tangible, Kennedy creates a play whose form and dramatic techniques contribute to the philosophical and socio-political concerns of the piece.

Of course, all this psychosomatic suffering the plays are based on is enhanced by the corporeal representative dynamic of the medium of theatre itself and the stage as a space of embodied experience where the text is fleshed out. As Stanton B. Garner underlines, “[b]odied spatiality is at the heart of dramatic representation, for it is through the actor’s corporeal presence under the spectator’s gaze that the dramatic text actualizes itself in the field of performance” (1).

The question, however, as to what degree change can actually be effected through theatrical attempts to link the phenomenology of psychopathology with the emergent political discourse following the turn of the new millennium calls for a lengthier research into a plethora of parameters that have to do both with the production and reception of drama.⁹ As Reinelt comments, “[t]heatre cannot change the world by itself, but it can contribute its unique form of embodied and imaged knowledge to express and sustain the social imagination” (366). Certainly, research into the conjunction of psychopathology and the New Political Writing in Britain after 2000, shows that contemporary playwrights are particularly intrigued by the dramatic representation of mental illness as an expedient mode of politicization. Sander Gilman, in *Disease and Representation* (1988), claims that the way we talk about disease “is linked to the aesthetic discourses existing in our culture” (231). In the case of insanity, I suggest that the opposite is also the case. The representation of the painful experience of the mentally ill as a means to political ends forms a particular trend in textual

⁹ See Postlewait, especially the section “The Idea of the ‘Political’ in our Histories of Theatre,” 196-222.

and stage aesthetics today. By drawing on the field of psychopathology, playwrights create a distinctive, pluralistic language and stage aesthetics that aim at fulfilling their political agenda and critical stance through a dialogic relationship with their audiences. Michel Foucault has defined the intersection of art and mental illness as follows:

[B]y the madness which interrupts it, a work of art opens a void, a moment of silence, a question without answer, provokes a breach without reconciliation where the world is forced to question itself. (288)

It is exactly this dynamic that contemporary playwrights explore today, with plays that function as communicating vessels, as a meta-text that offers insights into contemporary British society, and the fields of contemporary British drama and mental illness, seeking to achieve change through the synthesis of ideas, the knowledge that comes from various fields.

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