

“Revolution and the End of History: Caryl Churchill’s *Mad Forest*”

Caryl Churchill is now recognized as one of the most significant contemporary playwrights. The acceptance of her work by a wide range of admirers has helped to secure her position in the mainstream of theatre. She is renowned for continually rejuvenating dramatic form, as each play she writes pushes dramaturgy in new directions. Yet her innovative approach to theatre has never been detached from an unswerving political commitment, a commitment that while channelled into interrogating *all* forms of political power, continues to reflect a principled acknowledgement of the impossibility of political neutrality. Churchill’s plays embrace the potential that the medium of drama offers, a medium by its nature characteristic of tension, conflict, and dynamism. Her plays are a testimony to the potentially seamless relationship between aesthetics and politics. These two discourses form one richly multi-layered language in Churchill’s plays, a language that seems especially capable of penetrating the political and social problems of the contemporary moment through the interpellation of the audience as imaginative and sensory as well as intellectual spectators.

Churchill’s *Mad Forest* was first performed by Central School of Speech and Drama students in London in June 1990, and then performed at the National Theatre, Bucharest, in September, finally opening at the Royal Court Theatre, London in October of the same year. It is a play that presents a staging of before and after the Romanian revolution seen predominantly from the perspectives of the middle-class Antonescu and working-class Vladu families. The revolution in Romania and the demise of communism in Eastern Europe more generally form part of a sequence of events that is reconstituted in neoliberal discourse as evidence proclaiming the failure

of the communist project and the endurance and ultimate success of free-market economics and liberal democracy.<sup>1</sup> *Mad Forest* powerfully intervenes in events that typify the economic and political milieu characteristic of the closure of the decade, a closure that is often considered to bear out Francis Fukuyama's earlier claims that the triumph of capitalist democracy signalled the end of history.

*Mad Forest* dramatizes the burgeoning frustration and growing articulacy of a population repressed under a totalitarian dictatorship, suffering economic hardship, political censorship and cultural stagnation. In the first scene, the audience is presented with both the normality of repression and economic hardship in the life of the Vladu family. The silence of the characters, punctuated by occasional exchanges unheard by the audience because of the blaring radio, indicates the presence of state surveillance, surveillance that has altered methods of communication between family members. Bogdan angrily smashes one of the eggs Lucia has managed to acquire due to her marriage to the American, Wayne. At the end of the scene, Lucia's sister, Florina scoops the egg off the floor with a cup, an action that reinforces the material paucity of the family's everyday context.<sup>2</sup> Later on in the play, in scene five, silence once more dominates the scene, with only momentary interjections of action, gesture and speech. Radu Antonescu, the young art student, is queuing for meat; "Down with Ceaușescu" (Churchill 111), he whispers. The stage directions read:

The woman in front of him starts to look round, then pretends she hasn't heard. The man behind pretends he hasn't heard and casually steps slightly away from Radu. Two people towards the head of the queue look round and Radu looks round as if wondering who spoke. They go on queuing (Churchill 111).

The collective familiarity with political censorship is underlined, although here in this transitory space of the queue, a quiet subversive act is indicative of the growing levels of non-cooperation.

The revolution in *Mad Forest*, like other Eastern European revolutions, is a crystallization of the yearning for the collapse of the repressive regime, an end to economic hardship, and the eradication of the autocratic administration. However, the play is enriched by the dramatization of revolution in an Eastern European country that is least typical in relation to these events.<sup>3</sup> George Galloway and Bob Wylie talk about it as “the most extraordinary end, through the most extraordinary revolution, of the most extraordinary dictatorship in all of Eastern Europe” (4). Unlike other Eastern European transformations where administrations in the main peacefully conceded the overwhelming demand for change, Romania was the site of bloody revolution with mass demonstrations, the shooting of protesters, and the taking up of arms by civilians against a resistant state;<sup>4</sup> hence the importance of the second part of the play, which forms its structural centre: the revolution, a part comprising quasi docudrama-style testimony spoken by a diverse range of unnamed characters, who do not appear in any other part of the play. Unlike other regimes, which responded to the escalating demands for change and would not risk the unpredictable outcome of mass uprisings, Ceaușescu clung firmly to power, condemned the actions of other Eastern European states, and in so doing, precipitated the uprising.

The extraordinary character of the Romanian revolution is articulated too in the theatrical nature of its expression. There is a brief but well-documented revelation on Romanian and world television that some of the crowd in the Ceaușescu-organized support rally on 21 December were heckling and booing Ceaușescu. The shock too that many television spectators experienced on observing the famously startled look on his face and the waving of his arms before the recording was prematurely cut, contributed to the sense of drama surrounding these remarkable events. This is intensified by the melodramatic exit of Nicolae and Elena Ceaușescu by helicopter from the roof of the Central Committee Building, the second helicopter dropping leaflets warning the Romanian people of the immediate danger to their country's autonomy and integrity, and the videotaped trial and execution of the Ceaușescus.

Interestingly though, *Mad Forest* chooses not to represent the support rally or the sensational departure of the Ceaușescus, other than in occasional references made during the revolutionary accounts of part two. Instead, the play punctures the realist vignettes so acutely entwined with the historiography of the revolutionary period with strange sketches of imagined Ceaușescus. Rodica “wearing a cloak and a big fur hat with dollars and flowers on it” (Churchill 148) dreams she is Elena Ceaușescu experiencing the betrayal of her soldiers. This surreal nightmare articulates the persisting presence of the Ceaușescus. Although gone, they continue to haunt the collective imagination. The Ceaușescus are represented again towards the end of the play when Gabriel returns home from hospital. He arrives back with Radu, Florina, Lucia, Ianoș and other friends after stopping off for drinks. They re-enact the trial and execution of the Ceaușescus, which increasingly degenerates into aggression – “we’ve all fucked your wife” (Churchill 163) – they shout at Radu (as Nicolae) just before

they shoot Florina (as Elena). The stage directions indicate that Gabriel “is particularly vicious throughout this” (Churchill 163). This viciousness culminates in Gabriel hitting Ianoş with his crutch and shouting “get your filthy hands off [Lucia] ... Just joking” (Churchill 164).<sup>5</sup>

This residual anger is, in part, an emotional expression of the revolutionary period as a site of intense contestation. *Mad Forest* articulates this contestation by dramatising incommensurate perspectives on the revolutionary events. While Gabriel is recovering in hospital having been shot during the uprising, a patient described by Florina as “a bit crazy” (Churchill 145), asks: “did we have a revolution or a putsch? And who was shooting on the 22<sup>nd</sup>? Was the army shooting on the 21<sup>st</sup> or did some shoot and some not shoot or were Securitate disguised in army uniforms?” (Churchill 143-144). Radu, too, thinks along similar lines: “the only real night was the 21<sup>st</sup>. After that, what was going on? It was all a show” (Churchill 146). The historian, Martyn Rady, claims:

The rapidity with which the new government of the National Salvation Front was formed, strongly suggests that close discussions between members of the party ‘old guard,’ the army and the *securitate* may already have been underway by the time of Ceauşescu’s flight (102).

However, the play does not endorse the view that the revolution was a *coup d’état*. “I’ve no time for all that nonsense” (Churchill 147), Irina says in response to this claim. Florina, too, expresses frustration with her partner, Radu’s, political position: “I don’t like what you think. You just want to go on playing hero” (Churchill 165).

Post-revolutionary Romania saw the National Salvation Front (NSF) gaining a huge majority in the election: Ion Iliescu gained 85.07% as the NSF candidate for the Presidency, and the NSF gained 66.3% in the Chamber of Deputies. Many of the NSF were members of the old bureaucracy, although several of the leaders had been dissident members (171). Explaining the election results from the right, Harry Barnes Jr. (United States Ambassador to Romania 1974-77) insists “there is a strong Romanian cultural tradition that the way to survive is to get out of the way of harm” (Nelson 3), a viewpoint that is poignantly countered in the revolutionary reports of part two of *Mad Forest*; a painter’s comment, “I saw a tank drive into the crowd, a man’s head was crushed. When people were killed like that more people came in front of the tanks” (Churchill 127) is just one of many examples. In contrast to Barnes Jr.’s evaluation, British Marxists propose that the NSF was the party standing on a platform least in favour of a rapid transfer to a free-market capitalist system, a system that in turn would inevitably lead to mass unemployment and economic hardship.<sup>6</sup> The play represents a multifaceted response to the aftermath of the revolution and to the election results. Irina responds positively to the economic improvements: “eggs in the shops. We’re getting the benefit already” (Churchill 140) but Rodica seems in shock and is “frightened to go out” (Churchill 141). Florina asks: “how many people were killed at Timișoara? Where are the bodies? There were bodies found in a sandpit for the longjump?” (Churchill 147) Radu takes the position that the NSF stole the revolution: “the Front tricked us” (Churchill 153), and that the new regime is a continuation of the old: “Ceașescu Ceașescu. Iliescu Iliescu” (Churchill 154).

Fukuyama's famous article that appeared in the North American journal *The National Interest* in the summer of 1989 was a cogently argued right-Hegelian (influenced by Alexandre Kojève) critique and development of such announcements as Daniel Bell's notion of the end of ideology and the postmodernist philosopher Richard Rorty's declaration that the grand narratives of human emancipation are now defunct.<sup>7</sup> Fukuyama argues:

The century that began full of self-confidence in the ultimate triumph of Western liberal democracy seems at its close to be returning full circle to where it started: not to an 'end of ideology' or a convergence between capitalism and socialism, as earlier predicted, but to an unabashed victory of economic and political liberalism ("The End of History" 3).

Fukuyama's thesis stipulates that history arises out of the conflict of ideologies, that liberalism has achieved a supreme and lasting victory; hence, this enduring victory brings with it the end of history. As well as referring to the decline of global communism, Fukuyama points to the demise of class struggle as an index to the collapse of liberal democracy and free-market capitalism's major competitor.<sup>8</sup> Five years after the article, Fukuyama reasserted his central thesis that "liberalism does not have many serious competitors" and that "there is only 'one language,' that of liberal democracy" (*Reflections* 257). Although dependent itself upon an engagement with a Hegelian idealist grand narrative, Fukuyama's argument can be placed in dialogue with postmodernist claims made earlier in the decade. The most high profile of these was Jean Baudrillard's (cynical) appropriation of Frankfurt School thinking concerning culture, politics and ideology, leading to his declaration that struggles

against oppression are now lost in mass consumerist society, a society that is dominated by simulacra and the hyper-real.<sup>9</sup>

*Mad Forest* certainly does not dramatize a tangible alternative to free-market capitalism. However, the play's narrative refuses to endorse the characteristics of Western political economy as the panacea to the Ceaușescu regime. In fact, it goes further; the play chooses to include specific and unmistakable signifiers of the United States (*the* emblematic capitalist power) only to expose them as undesirable, if not objectionable. The first of two weddings is between Lucia and the American, Wayne. Wayne's presence is limited to the wedding scene, and he has no lines, but he is significant as the encroaching presence of values represented by the centre of neoliberal power, a power gleefully awaiting the destruction of the Eastern European regimes. It is because of Wayne that the Vladu family benefit from extra produce such as eggs and American cigarettes. It is also because of Wayne's money that Lucia is able to bribe the doctor to illegally abort what we find out later is her Hungarian lover, Ianoș's baby. But most insidiously it is the marriage between Lucia and Wayne that has aroused suspicion and disapproval of the authorities. Bogdan is questioned by Securitate over his loyalty, demoted from the position of foreman, and warned that life will be made more difficult for his family; and indeed, Irina is moved to a workplace much further away from home. Association with this emblematic American figure, a figure that the audience never hears speak but whose impact is considerable, leads to a greater level of repression for the family. This clearly serves to intensify the indictment of the Ceaușescu regime; however, American "assistance" here is also subtly menacing; private American money is offered as the solution to an



unwanted pregnancy and to the shortage of family resources; an impinging neo-imperialism is an alternative reading of this assistance.

Notably, the marriage between Lucia and Wayne fails, as she prefers Ianoş. But she also ends up rejecting America: “I don’t like America” (Churchill 152) she replies to Ianoş when he says he would like to go there. Lucia’s fickle and self-centred disposition is suggested at several times – particularly in her insensitive response to Toma, a Romanian orphan who Ianoş’s family adopt – but also in her first words on returning from America after the revolution: “In America everyone’s thrilled” (Churchill 144). However, her description of American consumerism is laden with anxiety:

There are walls of fruit in America, five different kinds of apples, and oranges, grapes, pears, bananas, melons, different kinds of melon, and things I don’t know the name – and the vegetables, the aubergines are a purple they look as if they’ve been varnished, red yellow green peppers, white onions red onions, bright orange carrots somebody has shone every carrot, and the greens, cabbage spinach broad beans courgettes, I still stare every time I go shopping. And the garbage, everyone throws away great bags full of food and paper and tins, every day, huge bags, huge dustbins, people live out of them (Churchill 144).

The celebratory discourse of consumerism with its seductive promise of fulfilment is shown to be an illusion, an illusion signified through the somewhat futile access to “five different kinds of apples” and the lack of nutrition in the chemically vivid “bright orange carrots.” The last lines of Lucia’s speech reveal her shock at the

display of disparity between the needs and desires of middle-class Americans who discard bagfuls of food each week, the remains of which are taken by those who cannot afford to satisfy basic needs.<sup>10</sup> Lucia's rejection of Wayne and America is also in an important sense the play's articulation of antipathy towards the free-market as a desirable economy.

Predictably, Fukuyama's end of history argument caught the imagination of the establishment in the United States. In his searing critique of Fukuyama's arguments in *Spectres of Marx*, Jacques Derrida notes the importance of the end of history thesis in contributing to an attempt to establish "an unprecedented form of hegemony," part of this attempt consisting in "a great 'conjunction' against Marxism" (50). But as well as fuelling new attempts by the Right to neutralize socialist discourses, the end of history thesis also further increased the general malaise of the Left in Britain and elsewhere. The "post-isms" and "end-isms" were to a significant degree accommodated by the academic Left, *New Left Review*, and *Marxism Today*. Although Eric Hobsbawm recognizes the emptiness of Fukuyama's predictions ("few prophesies look like being more short-lived than that one" (23)), he nevertheless inadvertently buttresses some of the main tenets of Fukuyama's claims when he identifies the 1989 revolutions as the permanent closure of the revolutionary narrative initiated in 1917: "for over 70 years all Western governments and ruling classes were haunted by the spectre of social revolution and communism." For Hobsbawm, then, the Eastern European revolutions were "the end of the era in which world history was about the October Revolution" (18). However, as Jürgen Habermas rightly argues:

The presence of large masses gathering in squares and mobilizing on the streets managed, astoundingly, to disempower a regime that was armed to the teeth. It was, in other words, precisely the sort of spontaneous mass action that once provided so many revolutionary theorists with a model, but which had recently been presumed to be dead (7).

Vladimir Tismaneanu is, of course, persuasive in his assertion that “Ceașescu’s more than two decades of rule succeeded in compromising the very name of Marxist political and social doctrine” (135). Yet, during the Romanian revolution, huge numbers of young people, students and workers participated in revolutionary activities, some forming committees, temporarily taking control of key civic sites such as governmental buildings and radio and television stations, and engaging in armed conflict against a belligerently resistant political establishment. Indeed, in *Mad Forest* it is made clear that all three of the young men, Gabriel, Radu and Ianoș, took an active part in the revolutionary uprising. The ghosts of Marx and the spectre of the 1917 revolution (to borrow again from Derrida) are undoubtedly present in the 1989 revolutions, and particularly in the Romanian instance.

The political narrative of *Mad Forest* cautiously guards against the recuperation of the play as part of this neoliberal jubilatory discourse, a discourse that is both “very novel and so ancient” as well as “both powerful and, as always, worried, fragile, anxious” (Derrida 50). Derrida’s assertion - “never in history, has the horizon of the thing whose survival is being celebrated (namely, all the old models of the capitalist and liberal world) been as dark, threatening, and threatened” (52) - provides a useful illumination of the political coordinates within which *Mad Forest* locates itself.

Indeed it is the signifiers of the old models of capitalism in the play that are represented as fragile and stale, as well as threatening and undesirable. In addition to imbuing the Ceaușescu regime with a heavily outmoded significance, the play also indicates that the NSF's (capitalist) competitors are equally burdened with historical anachronism. The main parties to choose from in the election are the NSF, the Hungarian Democratic Union of Romania, the National Liberal Party and the National Peasants Party. The latter two are the NSF's main rivals and are led by veterans of the pre-communist period; thus significantly, there is nothing new to reflect the revolutionary spirit of the moment, only old-communist versus pre-communist parties, and a choice between gradual or rapid return to free-market capitalism. In part three, scene v, at Lucia's grandparents, the family discuss the murder of a man who put up posters for the National Peasants Party:

Grandfather. A lot of people didn't like him because he used to be a big landowner. The Peasants Party would give him back his land.

Florina. So was he killed because/the rest of the

Lucia. I thought the Peasants Party was for peasants.

Ianoș. No, they're millionaires the leaders of it.

Florina. village didn't want him to get all the land?

Lucia. He should get it/if it's his.

Florina. No after all this time working on it/everyone (Churchill 155).

The old pre-communist parties promote the rapid restoration of a capitalist economy with no rejuvenated thinking to reflect the newfound political agency that the revolution has inspired. Furthermore, overlaps between old parties, including the

communists, abound, as illustrated in the grandfather's assertion: "he was a party member. He was very big round here. He was a big Securitate man," to which Lucia responds, "so whose side was he on?" (Churchill 155)

Rather than conceding the ideological supremacy of neoliberalism, *Mad Forest* represents the revolution as an expression of a myriad of social and political impulses, none of which, however, are conterminous with Fukuyama's triumphant end of history discourse. As with the revolutionary hopes in Churchill's 1976 play *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, a dominating social class quickly appropriates the space for self-realization. But the anti-communist expressions of many of the characters are shown not to be equivalent to a desire for the restoration of capitalist economics; Flavia says: "black market prices have shot up" to which Irina responds with "it's not black market, it's free market" (Churchill 168). Bogdan worries about privatization: "private schools, private hospitals. I've seen what happens to old people. I want to buy my father a decent death" (Churchill 174). The play points towards the consciousness, activities, and relationships between ordinary people as the location of historical development, and these become fluid and dynamic, opening up sites of discussion usually closed or at least muted in communist and capitalist systems alike.

The social and political landscape dramatized in *Mad Forest* is full of ambiguity and uncertainty. The ideological hesitation of the play's perspective is reiterated in many aspects of the drama. A prime example of this is in the first act, which is characterized as including several long silences ("Bogdan and Irina Vladu sit in silence" (Churchill 107); "Mihai thinking and making notes, Flavia correcting exercise books, Radu drawing. They sit in silence for some time" (Churchill 108); and

“Flavia and Mihai sitting silently over their work” (Churchill 118)). The silences are certainly reflective of the stifling context of the Ceaușescu regime but they also mark the absence of narrative in the play, a narrative providing a coherent account of the plot, but also a political narrative *explaining* the revolutionary period. The lack of a clear sense of political direction in the play is both a purposeful depiction of the dearth of political options in revolutionary Romania as well as a reflection of the lack of clarity and weakening of confidence that exists on the British Left in relation to its response to the demise of the Eastern bloc. However, there is too, an attempt not to appropriate the revolution – not to speak *for* Romanians, but allow instead a cultural difference to remain, a difference articulated as well in the play’s refusal to be fully understood.

The characters develop sophisticated modes of negotiating and subverting the state’s system of repression, and in the process they repudiate the passive, complicit subject positions that constrain them. This reaches a high point when Gabriel moves beyond covert and defensive modes of resistance towards more open forms of non-cooperation. In scene ten he arrives at his parents’ house and excitedly starts to inform his family – without turning the radio on – of his dealings with Securitate. Irina’s response – “wait, stop, there’s no power” – indicates the perceived danger of doing this (Churchill 117). However, his newfound courage gives Gabriel the confidence to transgress what seem like immutable boundaries, and this triggers the same impulse in the others. Florina says: “no, what if they do hear, they know what he did”; the stage directions read, “after a while” Irina “starts to listen again” (Churchill 117). Bogdan too, expresses endorsement (“you’re a good boy”), although appreciation of Gabriel’s

defiance is not unanimous; Lucia asks, “what if I don’t get my passport?” (Churchill 118)

Gabriel cleverly manipulates dogmatic statutory code in order that he can be relieved of Securitate’s request of him to inform on his colleagues:

And I said, ‘Of course I’d like to help you,’ and then I actually remembered, listen to this, ‘As Comrade Ceaușescu says, “For each and every citizen work is an honorary fundamental duty. Each of us should demonstrate high professional probity, competence, creativity, devotion and passion in our work.” And because I’m a patriot I work so hard that I can’t think about anything else, I wouldn’t be able to listen to what my colleagues talk about because I have to concentrate” (Churchill 117).

Gabriel’s skilful process of deconstruction reveals weaknesses in the coherence of the state’s disciplinary codes; how can you dedicate yourself to your work and at the same time focus on the conversations and actions of others? Additionally, he openly divulges this information to his family in contravention of perceived surveillance. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, Gabriel’s action is one that refuses betrayal of his fellow workers and is therefore a thoroughly social and comradely action. His refusal recalls a politics that depends upon a sense of collectivism, solidarity, and unity. Gabriel gains a sense of agency and autonomy, “and I’m so happy because I’ve put myself on the other side, I hardly knew there was one” (Churchill 117). The other side, however, is fluid, embryonic, and in want of political and theoretical development, which is why the revolution is so swiftly expropriated.

The reports that make up the revolutionary narrative in part two form a dynamic mesh, a mesh that contains contradictory strands jostling in a state of flux. The painter's statement ("I had an empty soul. I didn't know who I was" (Churchill 127)) gestures as much towards the potential for change, towards transformed identities and a new sense of self-awareness, as it does towards the fear and terror prompted by violent confrontation. We hear from a student that "some workers from the People's Palace come with construction material to make barricades" (Churchill 125); he says a little later "we tried to make a barricade in Rosetti Place. We set fire to a truck" (Churchill 126). The following day the housepainter sees "thousands of workers from the Industrial Platforms ... more and more, two three kilometres" (Churchill 129). The translator says, "I've noticed in films people scatter away from gunfire but here people came out saying, 'What's that?' People were shouting, 'Come with us,' so we went in the courtyard and shouted too" (Churchill 129). A student describes the fear of seeing the "police in front of the Intercontinental Hotel" but adds "in a crowd you disappear and feel stronger" (Churchill 130). The translator, who states, "everyone was hugging and kissing each other, you were kissing a chap you'd never seen before" (Churchill 130) reinforces this sense of solidarity and comradeship. But this renewed feeling of commonality and shared sense of militancy sits alongside residual divisions; "we hadn't gone far when we saw a crowd of people with banners with Jos Ceaușescu, shouting, 'Come and join us.' They were low class men so we didn't know if we could trust them" (Churchill 130), asserts one of the students.

The most visible divisions in the play are those arising from racism, xenophobia and ethnic hatred. The fascism of the Iron Guard that resurfaces in post-revolutionary



Romania appears in scene nine where the angel tells the priest “the Iron Guard used to be rather charming and called themselves the League of the Archangel Michael and carried my picture about” (Churchill 116). Rady describes Iron Guard ideology as owing “much to the peasant populist movement of the nineteenth century, but with the rational element burnt out leaving only a malignant emotionalism” (24). The priest’s challenge to the angel over his flirtation with fascism places other instances in the play of racism and xenophobia in the context of an established history of fascism in Romania, a history formed out of complicity of the Orthodox Church with the Iron Guard and the pre-war pro-Nazi governments. Notably, the mode of representation of these fascist impulses is anti-realist. In the New York premiere the angel appeared “in resplendent Byzantine artifice under brilliant illumination and to the accompaniment of stirring ecclesiastical music” (Garner 399). Una Chaudhuri interprets the angel’s fantastical presence firstly as a joke, secondly as a manifestation of the priest’s conscience and thirdly, after rejecting both of these, as intentionally inexplicable: “it is recognition of the actual enigma of the supposedly familiar” (152). Yet the angel is undoubtedly spectral in nature, and as such its importance can be attributed to its haunting propensity. Like the radical currents of the October 1917 revolution, the presence of fascist predilection similarly lingers, threatening to resurface at any moment. In this way, the experience of contemporary events played out in the intensely realist nature of much of the scenes is supplemented by an alternative, anti-realist discourse that facilitates the representation of past and future histories.

Most racist incidents occur after the revolution. Pre-revolution, the characters operate in stifled conditions, speaking in code and repressing thoughts and desires. The gap of anticipation, created by revolution, provides them with the opportunity to

express their means of making sense of the past and present, including voicing beliefs steeped in reactionary and bigoted frameworks of thinking. Lucia, whose lover is Hungarian, seeks to reposition Hungarians in the ethno-political matrix: “Hungarians were fighting beside us they said on TV. And Ianoş wasn’t hurt, that’s good. I think Americans like Hungarians” (Churchill 135). In response to Gabriel’s xenophobia (“the poor Hungarians have a bad time because they’re not treated better than everyone else” (Churchill 145)) Lucia replies, “this is what we used to say before. Don’t we say something different?” (Churchill 145) But her desire to move away from anti-Hungarian sloganeering seems selfishly motivated and does not extend to a more enlightened anti-racism:

In America they even like the idea of gypsies, they think how quaint. But I said to them you don’t like blacks here, you don’t like hispanics, we’re talking about lazy greedy crazy people who drink too much and get rich on the black market. That shut them up (Churchill 146).

Fukuyama’s model of liberal democracy, America, is once again undermined as American racism is used by Lucia to justify discriminating against Romanian gypsies.

*Mad Forest* is often engaged with as a postmodern play that, in Tony Mitchell’s words, “eschews the ‘master narratives’ of totalising social-realist paradigms on the one hand and epic pageantry on the other for an open-ended, quasi-cinematic series of cryptic vignettes portraying everyday life in Romania” (500). Donna Soto-Morettini describes the play as “reinforcing neither a ‘meta-narrative’ of progress, nor the ideals of reason” (114) and Chaudhuri claims, “in the extreme, *Mad Forest* presents place

itself as a function of change, and change, in turn, as an effect of language, especially spoken language” (148). While the uncertainty expressed in the drama can be characterized as fractured and mosaic, the play is nonetheless more than a postmodern articulation of what Soto-Morettini describes as a “post-Enlightenment sphere” (114) where the examination of “political cynicism” (115) takes place. Although the play does not articulate coherent clarification of the revolutionary narrative or provide tangible political solutions, *Mad Forest* nevertheless communicates a faith in emancipatory goals. Notwithstanding the play’s ideological hesitation and its construction of a certain cultural untranslatability, there remains a strong commitment in the play to the potential of both individual and collective resistance, and a faith in the characters’ desire for self-empowerment and self-realization. Unlike other British Left plays on the break-up of the Eastern bloc such as David Edgar’s *The Shape of the Table* (on the subject of political negotiations in Czechoslovakia) and Howard Brenton and Tariq Ali’s *Moscow Gold* (concerning power struggles between Gorbachev and Yeltsin with three cleaners representing the mass of ordinary people), Churchill populates the stage with the lives of ordinary people. Through the play’s emphasis on and sympathy with figures, families and communities that lack official political agency, it intimates its interest and faith in cooperative and popular resistance. The political silences, then, in *Mad Forest* can be read as partly an objectification of the challenges confronting British Left engagement with the Eastern European revolutions and partly as an attempt to construct and contribute towards a certain Romanian self-determination. Indeed, these political silences can additionally be read as an interrogation into the process of history making, but they are less an insistence on privileging a representation of the world, that – in Terry Eagleton’s

description of postmodernism – is “contingent, ungrounded, diverse, unstable, indeterminate” (vii).

Churchill presents the characters’ far from simplistic and at times contradictory engagement with the Ceaușescus, communism, revolution, Western capitalism, and elections; nevertheless, this engagement is always materially contextualized. Radu’s vehement anti-communism, for example, continues with his attitude towards the NSF, and his middle-class identification with the opposition is made clear: “Ilescu’s going to get in because the workers and peasants are stupid” (Churchill 153). This class arrogance causes problems in his relationship with Florina, who feels “in a panic,” after the revolution since before she could “keep everything out” (Churchill 153). Radu says to her “but you didn’t have me then,” to which she replies, “no but I thought you were perfect;” “I am perfect,” he answers” (Churchill 153). Their relationship becomes more fraught when Radu joins the occupation of University Square; “so what have you done today? Sat in the square and talked?” (Churchill 165) says Florina. As their argument intensifies, Radu retorts, “let’s forget we know each other” and brands her “Communist” to which Florina replies, “you don’t know me” (Churchill 165).

Bogdan expresses frustration with the occupation of University Square (“we can’t have a traffic jam forever” (Churchill 170)) because of the persistent claim from the protesters that the revolution was hijacked by a coup: ““was it a revolution?” of course it was. /My son was shot for it” (Churchill 170). His old peasant aunt shouting ritual chants at Florina (“little bride, little bride, /you’re laughing, we’ve cried” (Churchill 169) provides a thematic connection with Bogdan’s assertion, “I support the Peasants

Party because my father's a peasant ... They should have their land because their feet are in the earth and they know things nobody else knows" (Churchill 175). Bogdan retreats into what he thinks he knows best; his roots in the peasantry, growing up in the countryside, folklore, the earth and nature provide a sense of security amidst the confusion, "CIA, KGB, we're all in the hands of foreign agents. That's one point where I'm right behind Ceaușescu" (Churchill 175).

Racist comments, violent incidents, and misunderstandings compete with moments of kindness, understanding, and unity. The exchanges at the wedding of Florina and Radu in part three over land ownership, the revolution, the occupation in University Square, the nature of the NSF and the other parties, the relationship between Romania and Hungary and the related Transylvanian question end up deteriorating into a drunken brawl. But the play does not end here, as the stage directions read, "they pick themselves up, see if they are all right ... They begin to enjoy themselves" (Churchill 178). Although initially disruptive, the fight also appears to be cathartic as they resume the wedding rituals, seemingly, or at least temporarily, reconciled.<sup>11</sup> In the final moments of the play, the characters "start to talk while they dance, sometimes to their partner and sometimes to one of the others, at first a sentence or two and finally all talking at once" (Churchill 178). They switch from speaking English to Romanian, which prevents English-speaking audiences from full comprehension of the conclusion to the play. Producing a certain indecipherability for audiences (readers are provided with translations) is a reminder too that, as the sub-title of the play designates, *Mad Forest* proposes to be "a play from Romania," and as such seeks to construct a sense of cultural specificity for the Romanian revolution. It is, of course, a play from Britain as well, and the intercultural

discourse that takes place seems to oscillate between different geopolitical as well as macro and micropolitical perspectives.

The political vision in *Mad Forest* seems to be dispersed gently through a commitment to the potential and desire of ordinary people for self-emancipation. Furthermore, there is a refusal in the play to perceive the revolutionary events as heralding the end of socialist paradigms. Of course, confidence in a clearly identifiable socialist solution is absent in the play, just as it is in much of British Left debate of the moment. At the same time, rather than welcoming the free-market, or positing postmodern relativity as a political impasse, the play seems to indicate the continuing importance of discussion, debate, individual and collective resistance. The drama was created out of “the company’s intense involvement” with “Romanian students and other people” when “emotions in Bucharest were still raw” (Churchill vii). This also contributes to the play’s political position; it reflects the continuing dynamic of political fluctuation and emotional engagement of Romanian participants. The play dramatizes the revolution as a utopian moment of possibility but also as a vulnerable space, a space of disputation, a space that is ultimately lost to forces of tradition and anachronism, most potently symbolized by the vampire who smells blood and comes to feed. The play implicitly acknowledges that the prospect of a democratic socialist movement emerging in Romania is unlikely in the near future, but the buoyant, self-realization of huge numbers of people dramatized in *Mad Forest* clearly demonstrates the potential for future collective resistance and upheaval. Rather than endorsing what Michael Evenden describes as “an apocalypse of stasis” (100) brought about by the end of history, *Mad Forest* suggests that political impulses extraneous to capitalist democracy continue to remain significant in their threat to

destabilize a fragile hegemony. *Mad Forest* tells us history has not ended; history's radical unpredictability, if anything, is its defining characteristic.

---

<sup>1</sup> I appreciate the debates surrounding the terms "revolution" and "Eastern Europe." However, I am retaining both. This article is partly concerned with placing *Mad Forest* in the context of British Left debate, thus the idiom of this debate is retained in order to explore the extent to which Churchill's play is illuminated through this context. Nevertheless, I agree with Ludmilla Kostova's discussion of the simplification and homogenization of identities that takes place when the term "Eastern Europe" is used, and therefore I use the term with hesitation.

<sup>2</sup> In the discussions that took place after the production of *Mad Forest* at the National Theatre Bucharest, some audience members expressed shame at the idea that a Romanian would do this. Another Romanian woman admitted doing it twice (Roberts 239).

<sup>3</sup> I say least typical because of Ceaușescu's hostility to Moscow and Romania's idiosyncratic Stalinist regime. I am using "Stalinism" in the same way that Alex Callinicos does: "By 'Stalinism' I mean, not one person's rule or even a body of beliefs, but the whole system of social power that crystallized in the USSR in the 1930s, was exported to Eastern Europe in the second half of the 1940s, and survived till the late 1980s when it began to collapse, a system characterized by the hierarchically organized control of all aspects of social life, political, economic, and cultural, by a narrow oligarchy seated at the apex of the party and state apparatuses, the *nomenklatura*" (Callinicos 15).

<sup>4</sup> While Moscow did not sanction the suppression of democracy movements and indeed entered into negotiations with pro-democracy campaigners who had previously been imprisoned, as Timothy Garton Ash remarks: "Romania was the exception that proves the rule. It is no accident that it was precisely in the state for so long the most independent of Moscow that the resistance of the security arm of the powers-that-were was most fierce, bloody and prolonged" (141).

<sup>5</sup> Stanton B. Garner, Jr.'s insightful review of New York Theatre Workshop's production of *Mad Forest* at Perry Street Theatre in December 1991 describes the set as dominated by portraits of the

---

Ceaușescu, “a visual manifestation of the personality cult that infused all areas of Romanian life under communism” (400). These are taken down in the third part of the play, leaving “conspicuously bare” wall spaces, spaces reflective of “a disturbing field of uncertainties, ambiguities, conflicts, and deprivations” (400).

<sup>6</sup> Alan Woods states: “first, the workers (and peasants) identify the Front with the revolution. They see attacks on Iliescu as attacks on the revolution itself, and this they are not prepared to tolerate. Secondly, unlike Poland and other countries in Eastern Europe, the masses have made substantial gains since the revolution. Life is still hard, with widespread shortages and queues, but compared to the Ceaușescu period, things are immeasurably better” (37). Ceaușescu’s regime was unique in paying off its national debt, and thus the NSF had a significant financial margin with which to appease poverty and hardship.

<sup>7</sup> See Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology* and Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*.

<sup>8</sup> Fukuyama’s article actually preceded the Eastern European revolutions; the demise of communism swiftly followed its publication and served to give the article further impact.

<sup>9</sup> See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations* and Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*.

<sup>10</sup> Churchill’s notes taken during the Bucharest production of *Mad Forest*, read: “long late-night talk about free market in which I mention the homeless in New York and London. ‘But only because they want. Yes, I read about a doctor who slept outside for two months in California’” (Roberts 239).

<sup>11</sup> The Birmingham School of Speech and Drama production of *Mad Forest* at The Crescent Studio, Birmingham, UK, which I saw 1 March 2003, closed with a strong sense of unity and celebration. Many audience members joined in with the dancing, by invitation of cast members.

#### Works cited:

Ash, Timothy Garton. *We the People: The Revolution of '89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*. Cambridge: Granta in association with Penguin, 1990. 141.

Barnes Jr, Harry. “Introduction.” *Romania After Tyranny*, Ed. Daniel N. Nelson. Oxford: Westview, 1992.

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext, 1983.



- 
- Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London: Sage, 1998.
- Bell, Daniel. *The End of Ideology*. Illinois: Free Press of Glencoe, 1960.
- Brenton, Howard and Tariq Ali. *Moscow Gold*. London: Nick Hern, 1990.
- Callinicos, Alex. *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the East European Revolutions*. Oxford: Polity Press. 1991.
- Chaudhuri, Una. *Staging Place: The Geography of Modern Drama*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Churchill, Caryl. *Mad Forest. Caryl Churchill Plays: 3*. London: Nick Hern, 1988. 103-1
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning, and the new international*. Trans. Peggy Kamuf. Intro. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg. Routledge: New York, 1994.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1996.
- Edgar, David. *The Shape of the Table*. London: Nick Hern, 1990.
- Evenden, Michael. “‘No Future without Marx’ Dramaturgies of ‘The End of History’ in Churchill, Brenton and Barker”. *Theatre* 29.3 (1999): 100-113
- Fukuyama, Francis. “The End of History.” *The National Interest* 16 (summer 1989): 3-18.
- Fukuyama, Francis. “Reflections on *End of History*, Five Years Later.” Ed. Timothy Burns. *After History?: Francis Fukuyama and His Critics*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994. 239-258.
- Galloway, George and Bob Wylie. *Downfall: The Ceausescus and the Romanian Revolution*. London: Futura, 1991.
- Garner, Jr., Stanton. B. Review of *Mad Forest*. *Theatre Review* (1992): 399-401.

- 
- Habermas, Jürgen. "What Does Socialism Mean Today? The Rectifying Revolution and the Need for New Thinking on the Left." *New Left Review* 183 (Sept/Oct 1990): 3-22.
- Hobsbawm, Eric. "Goodbye To All That." *Marxism Today* (October 1990): 18-23.
- Kostova, Ludmilla. "Inventing Post-Wall Europe: Visions of the 'Old' Continent in Contemporary British Fiction and Drama." *Beyond Boundaries – Textual Representations of European Identity*. Ed. Andy Hollis. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 83-84.
- Mitchell, Tony. "Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest*: Polyphonic Representations of Southeastern Europe," *Modern Drama* 36.2 (1993): 499-511.
- Nelson, Daniel N, ed. *Romania After Tyranny*. Oxford: Westview, 1992
- Rady, Martyn. *Romania in Turmoil: A Contemporary History*. London: IB Tauris, 1992.
- Roberts, Philip. *About Churchill: the Playwright and the Work*. London: Faber, 2008.
- Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989.
- Soto-Morettini, Donna. "Revolution and the Fatally Clever Smile: Caryl Churchill's *Mad Forest*." *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 9.1 (Fall 1994): 105-118.
- Tismaneanu, Vladimir. "From Arrogance to Irrelevance: Avatars of Marxism in Romania." *The Road to Disillusion: From Critical Marxism to Postcommunism in Eastern Europe*. Ed. Raymond Taras. London: M. E. Sharpe, 1992. 135-150.
- Woods, Alan. "Romania: A difficult road to restoration." *Militant International Review* 44 (summer 1990): 32-40.