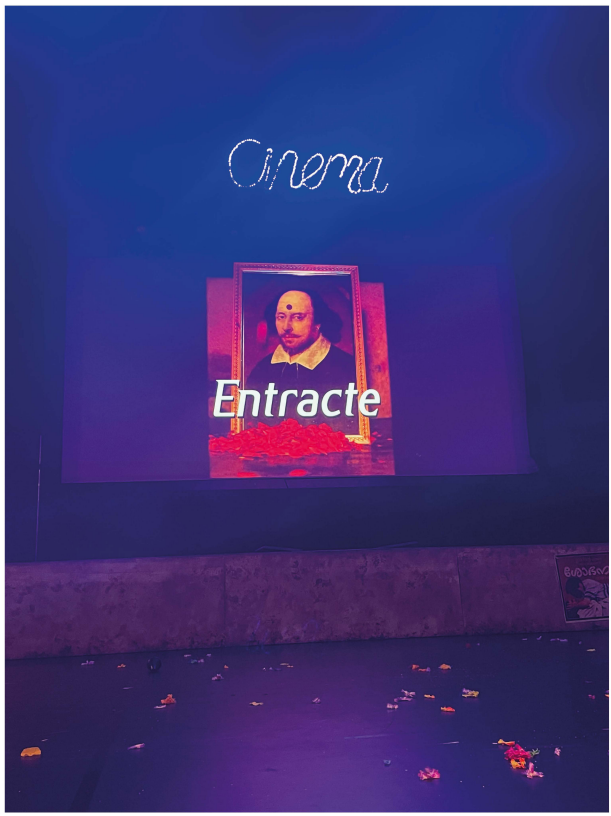
COUP DE THÉÂTRE

PUBLICATION DU GROUPE DE RECHERCHES SUR
LES ARTS DRAMATIQUES ANGLOPHONES CONTEMPORAINS

Seriality, Reboots and Iterability on the Anglophone Contemporary Stage



RADAC n°38 – 2024
Sous la direction d'Anouk Bottero (Institut National Universitaire Champollion), Marianne Drugeon (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3) et Claire Hélie (Université de Lille)
https://radac.hypotheses.org/

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Edited by Anouk Bottero, Marianne Drugeon and Claire Hélie

This issue of *Coup de Théâtre* explores the transformative and performative power of seriality, reboots and iterability on the contemporary Anglophone stage and seeks to highlight contemporary performance's constant poetic, formal and political reinventions. This volume's contributions explore a vast body of plays from all corners of the English-speaking world that adapt past forms, past texts and/or past myths. As they uncover theatre's capacity to adapt to or resist socio-cultural changes, all the articles in this volume explore how adaptation aims at bridging gaps between distant time periods, geographical spaces, cultural and linguistic differences, and participate in the creation of a community of audiences, united in their enjoyment of the reiteration of a well-known work of art. Included in this issue, two interviews of artists, British director Joe Douglas and Indian playwright Koumarane Valavane, are a token of the variety of standpoints from which aesthetics and political questions are asked - whether to adapt a text to the contemporary stage, why, how, where and for whom. The volume also includes a short story and a play as yet unpublished by Koumarane Valavane, the RADAC's Master's Prize and a book review.

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n°38-2024 de la revue annuelle Coup de Théâtre

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Avant-Propos - Foreword

This new issue of *Coup de Théâtre* adds a stimulating chapter to the long-term commitment of the French Society for Contemporary Anglophone Theatre: RADAC (Recherche sur les Arts Dramatiques Anglophones Contemporains). This collective of theater researchers and practitioners has been dedicated for over 40 years to investigating English-speaking drama and performance. RADAC's journal has consistently aimed at exploring contemporary issues that are vital to academic and artistic debates to break new aesthetic and epistemological grounds. The editorial team of this volume, Anouk Bottero (INU Champollion, Albi), Marianne Drugeon (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier III), and Claire Hélie (Université de Lille) have accomplished an amazing feat in putting together such a great collection of articles and artistic writings. Why is it a feat to have picked up the gauntlet of providing a fresh and cutting-edge volume on the issue of "Seriality, reboots and iterability on the Anglophone contemporary stage"? First, because it is both a burning issue and a timeless one, forcing editors and contributors to bridge the impossible gap between past and present, myths and actuality, canons and counter-canons. Secondly, because this leading trio has shown compellingly how drama cannot exist outside the parameters of variations without turning theater and performance into dust. Finally, the rigor of the editors shines through their ability to have transformed the RADAC adventure of a group expedition to an international conference that took place shortly after the COVID-19 crisis into a solid, inventive, and well-researched volume.

Indeed, the spark for this volume came from RADAC's double panel called "Seriality, reboots and iterability on the Contemporary Stage". As the panel organizer, I was honored on behalf of RADAC to learn that we were accepted at the 6th International Conference

on American Drama and Theatre "Game Over!: U.S. Drama and Theater and the End(s) of an American Idea(l)" organized in Madrid from May 31st to June 3rd, 2022. The organizers, Noelia Hernando Real (Universidad Autónoma de Madrid), John S. Bak (Université de Lorraine), Alfonso Ceballos Muñoz (Universidad de Cádiz), Ramón Espejo Romero (Universidad de Sevilla), and Josefa Fernández Martin (Universidad de Sevilla) were thrilled to meet the members of RADAC in the flesh. Similarly, the RADAC participants were enthralled by the challenging topics discussed, the high scientific standards met, and the very convivial gathering marshaled by the Spanish team and their benevolent President Noelia Hernando Real. RADAC President Emeline Jouve fully supported this initiative to promote French research in US theater and performance by chairing one panel and joining the conference. Finally yet importantly, the flyer designed by Anouk Bottero allowed for the circulation of the new RADAC logo and the promotion of the new RADAC team, maybe even set off a reboot of RADAC US research with the many encounters and (re) discoveries triggered by the event.

In keeping with the transformative power of iterability, the editorial scholars in charge of this issue came up with a reboot of their own by convincingly expanding the US perspective into a global one, selecting a significant British contingent of plays and performances to discuss further the implications of seriality. Meanwhile Hernando, Real and Bak published a sister volume in *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos* (vol. 27, 2023) solely dedicated to US productions. Importantly, "Seriality, reboots and iterability on the Anglophone contemporary stage" further contributes to nourishing a primarily European network dedicated to Anglophone drama and performance. Many European theater societies renewed this collaborative spirit at the 2018 RADAC's 40th anniversary Conference yielding special issues (*Coup de Théâtre* special issue #5), conferences and international publications as with the German sister society CDE (*Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, vol. 11, 2023). Similarly, *Coup de Théâtre* 38 accrues on the constellation of European and international scholarship firmament of performance

and research thanks to its diversity. I especially command Bottero, Drugeon and Hélie for their subtle and meticulous attention to the formal and political dimensions resulting from tackling the issues linked to seriality and variations on the current Anglophone stage.

A final word to thank all my colleagues on the RADAC board, past and present, and all the members of RADAC who have been so loyal to our society and its journal since 1978. Thanks to their dedication, we can collectively boast being a major voice in the field of French Anglophone theater and performance studies. Enjoy this read that will, no doubt, reboot drama once again. Reset, reload and rejoice!

Xavier Lemoine, Director of Publication, Paris August 12, 2024.

Introduction

Seriality, reboots and iterability on the Anglophone contemporary stage: an introduction

Anouk Bottero (INU Champollion), Marianne Drugeon (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier III) and Claire Hélie (Université de Lille)

The COVID-19 pandemic might have felt like a reboot in the theatre world. As the pandemic shut down theatres and productions, it forced theatre-makers and institutions to *adapt* to this unprecedented halt: though many of them had already ventured into the realm of online and virtual performance pre-lockdown, the pandemic accelerated a re-thinking of the essence of live performance and a reassessment of the place (and spaces) of theatre in our contemporary societies. As Margherita Laera writes, theatre's constant returns, rewritings and repetitions are the markers of its capacity to "[adapt] itself to present contingencies and situations, like an animal species struggling to survive through evolution" (1). Theatre is subject to a paradox anchored in its very nature as live spectacle. It is a repetitive, re-iterable and rehearsed act, a (more or less) scripted performance that occurs several nights a week, as Richard Schechner explains: "Performance means: never for the first time. It means: for the second to the nth time. Performance is 'twice-behaved behavior'" (37). Yet, no performance is ever a complete replica of the previous one: "Existing as 'second nature,' restored behavior is always subject to revision" (Schechner 38). Theatre is an art of variations, each performance a slight tweaking of the text, the staging or the audience reception. Therefore, the serial and iterable nature of theatre inherently points to the transformative power of adaptation, which Linda Hutcheon defines as "repetition without replication, bringing together the comfort of ritual and recognition with the delight of surprise and novelty" (173). The audience's

pleasure therefore lies in the tense point of balance between returns and defamiliarization, understood as a process of transformation. This process does not simply deal with the poetics of iteration: as Laera suggests, "[t]heatre […] does not reshape its coordinates simply to remain alive or to remain itself through time, but also to change the world around it" (1). Assimilating theatre's capacity to transform with its potential to "change the world" alludes to a possible *politics* of iteration, hinting at the social and cultural reboots these (re)iterations might reflect and/or bring about.

It is precisely the transformative and performative power of these reboots and (re)iterations that this issue of *Coup de Théâtre* explores through the contributions that constitute this volume on seriality, reboots and iterability on the contemporary Anglophone stage. Envisioning contemporary theatre through its "returns" ("Theatre returns, it always does." [Laera 1]) more than its break with past texts, performances and dramatic models might appear counterintuitive. Yet, in keeping with Agamben's definition of the contemporary, these dynamics of continuity and rupture, returns and departures are precisely what makes theatre's true contemporaneity:

> The one who truly belongs to his time, the true contemporary, does not perfectly coincide with his time nor does he adhere to its pretensions – in that sense, the true contemporary may be defined as untimely. But precisely for that reason, precisely because of this discrepancy and anachronism, he is more capable than others of perceiving and seizing his time.[1] (our translation)

What Agamben's vision of the contemporary implicitly reveals is the political weight of these dynamics of return and departure: envisioning contemporary theatre as anchored in past texts, performances and motifs also allows for a better grappling of the contemporary political, social and cultural contexts in which plays are created and performed. The reiteration of history onstage can therefore reboot historical episodes to question their continuing impact on contemporary societies, such as in Suzan Lori-Parks' *Topdog/Underdog* (2001): as the play stages the reenactment of Abraham Lincoln's assassination by two

Black brothers (Lincoln and Booth), reenactment becomes a theatrical practice that allows for layers of time to coexist on stage. Those reiterations of History, as Rebecca Schneider theorizes in *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011), are variations through which the multifaceted dimension of History can emerge and lead us to question our relation to the "now" (Schneider 87).

The choice of terms as varied as seriality, reboots and iterability alludes to the number of formal and thematic means through which these transformations occur. The contributions of this volume deal with a heterogeneous body of plays, which highlights the centrality of reinventions in contemporary Anglophone drama, and the multiple reboots (formal, poetic or political) they offer.

Over the years, literal re-performances, multimedia performances based on repetitions and variations, have been developed, most notably for the US stage, by the Wooster Group and its many *bricolages* (*Vieux Carré*, 2009, or *The Town Hall Affair*, 2016) or the repetitive reboots of plots and modes of staging suggested by the Real Time Editing of the Big Art Group (Lemoine 2013, 2020a). In terms of dramatic texts, repetitive motifs and iterations might both suggest the redundancy of the cliché or signal a reboot of the signifier – its meaning visually (on the page) and aurally (on the stage) distorted, made strange, and ultimately, perhaps, redefined. One aspect that is particularly telling of the aesthetic resetting of theatre is perhaps the reboot of older dramatic models or old myths. This resetting has either favored their rejuvenation or complete explosion, such as in Sarah Kane's *Phaedra's Love* (1996), which drastically uses mythology to blast open the codes of the tragedy and marshal the obscene onto the stage, "in-yer-face" (Sierz 107-112). Twenty years later, In-Yer-Face theatre has itself become a canon to be reiterated (Angel-Perez 2021) or refashioned to become In-Yer-Ear (Angel-Perez 2022), while the Greek myths are still constantly being reworked and rebooted. Branden Jacob-Jenkins' *Girls* (2019), a rewrite of Euripides' *The Bacchae*, transforms the menacing chorus into a celebratory and liberating polyphony (Lemoine

2020b), while in *Paradise* (2021), Kae Tempest offers a renewed feminist perspective on the Trojan War, thus forging "an epic new take on the Greek legend" (National Theatre). Myths are especially prone to being rebooted and therefore transformed since, as Barthes reminds us in *Mythologies*, "[m]ythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on" (108). If the classical material of tragedy is malleable, dramatic forms also become pliant and subject to reinventions. Myths permeate literary and theatrical histories – each time retold, with small variations, making them the most tractable of source materials. As a result, this adaptability contaminates the dramatic forms that enabled the circulation of myth: dramatic codes and generic conventions, often envisioned as serving a rigid continuity, are therefore twisted, reinvented – made tensile through slight variations. Contemporary plays that consist in a variation on myth therefore emphasize that reboots are constantly caught in a dialogue with past dramatic forms and themes. A similar dialogue occurs with rewritings of canonical dramatic texts. The Shakespearean canon is an especially fertile terrain to study under the lens of its transformations, prolongations and iterations, either to pay homage to it or to reject it (Saunders 2017, Angel-Perez 2017). Because the text of Shakespeare's plays is often envisioned as "a fixed point against which theatrical production can be monitored" (Kidnie 2), adaptations of Shakespearean works are often considered an alteration, even a defacing of the original text and of the work's authenticity. On the other hand, the vast number of new, actualized productions and rewritings that recontextualize the performance or alter Shakespeare's text seems to signal that these transformations are to be envisioned "in a reciprocal relation to the Shakespearean 'work'" (Kidnie 5). Moving past issues of (in)fidelity to the original, the questions raised by the notions of seriality, reboots and iterability poke at the malleable nature of texts and performances, and at theatre's capacity to adapt to or resist socio-cultural and political changes. Each new iteration or reboot of the Shakespearean canon is "an ongoing process" that "reshapes in significant ways the politics of reception" (Kidnie 6).

Indeed, the notion of reception is key if we are to understand the issues raised in this volume. As these (re)iterations and reboots reveal theatre's capacity to adapt to the context in which plays are produced, they often strive to correct a dramatic material seen as old-fashioned, dated and out of touch with the changing concerns of its audiences. Several contributions in this volume focus on the ways reiterations of the Shakespearean canon unearth gender or racial issues that were only ghostly traces in Shakespeare's texts: far from simply pointing out the supposed "flaws" of the source material, these iterations enrich and expand the hypotext. This enrichment, because it re-integrates voices and bodies that were previously obfuscated or "otherized", such as those of women, often appears as an attempt to re-politicize the canon, potentially countering its tendency to conservativism, and echoing audiences' collective concerns surrounding issues of gender and/or race. Similarly, Golden Age musicals from the 1920s until the 1960s are especially prone to being "revived", resuscitated, as they are often embedded in dated conservative discourses and practices. Revivals of such musicals not only aim to correct the dramatic text (such as Suzan Lori-Parks' rewriting of the 1935 Gershwin opera *Porgy and Bess* in 2012 or Lin-Manuel Miranda's translation and adaptation of certain lyrics of *West Side Story* into Spanish in 2009) but they also are a terrain of experimentation in casting practices (see for instance the nontraditional casting of the 1943 musical *Oklahoma!* in 2019, in which Ali Stroker became the first wheelchair-user to be awarded a Tony for her performance as Ado Annie). But those corrective intents are often selective, necessarily incomplete or insufficient, precisely because they often generate hybrid works that negotiate the dated dimension of the original text while using performance as a counter-discourse. By superimposing layers of meaning that are often contradictory, those plays shed light on issues of representation and identity as political terrains of contestation.

Transcultural adaptations and transpositions are especially fruitful examples when it comes to showing the way "context conditions meaning" (Hutcheon 145). When theatre crosses its national borders and is iterated in cultural environments far removed from its original

context of production, issues of reception intersect with political discourse. This act of "transculturation" or "indigenization," as Linda Hutcheon calls it, borrowing the latter term from Susan Stanford Friedman (Hutcheon 150), once again takes many different shapes. Translations, rewritings or adaptations to specific local genres or practices dis-locate (and re-locate) plays and performances within a specific cultural context: "Local particularities become transplanted to new ground, and something new and hybrid results" (Hutcheon 150). The circulation of plays in a globalized world therefore engages in a complex interplay between audiences, the source material that is transformed, and the form of said transformation that often resonates with local cultural and/or theatrical practices. Processes of "indigenization," more specifically those that relocate Western drama in different cultural contexts (like Monadhil Daoud Albayati's *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* [2012], or Koumarane Valavane's adaptation of the same play, set this time in the context of the Indian castes in *Chandala* [2019]), entail a political project – one that counters dominant discourses and representations and that "implies agency" (Hutcheon 150): "Adapters of traveling stories exert power over what they adapt" (Hutcheon 150).

Therefore, when thinking about seriality, reboots and iterability, issues of power always resurface. The delicate intersection between text and context, performance and audiences, becomes a conflictual space in which the tensions and debates surrounding identity and issues of (in)visibility can be expressed. This is mirrored in the three parts that structure this issue. The first part of the volume, entitled "Furious echoes of a cry out: Rewriting the Shakespearean and Greek classics from a feminist perspective" broaches on issues related to adaptation of the canon.

The first two articles focus on the Shakespearean canon and how its adaptations may or may not facilitate feminist interpretations.

Juliette MÉZERGUES' article on Howard Barker's 2002, *Gertrude - The Cry* adapted from *Hamlet* focuses on the repetition of the Cry, a character in itself. It shows that even a play written by a

"white middle-aged man" can perform a "female gaze" and interrogate categories such as passive / active, pairs such as Eros and Thanatos, or concepts like identification since, according to Iris Brey, what matters is the decentering of the gaze and not the gender of the creator. The article, written in French, also compares the dramaturgical choices made by The Wrestling School in England in 2002 and Giorgio Barberio Cordetti at the Odéon in Paris in 2009.

Estelle RIVIER-ARNAUD claims with Hutcheon (2006) that adaptation is necessary to make original works relevant for the contemporary context. To prove the continuing relevance of that statement, she focuses on four adaptations of *Othello* and *King Lear* written and performed by/for/with women. By comparing the Shakespearean hypotexts and their contemporary hypertexts, RIVIER-ARNAUD wonders whether the feminist plays in her transgenerational and transnational corpus (Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* (1987), Paula Vogel's *Desdemona, a Play About a Handkerchief* (1994), Marina Carr's *The Cordelia Dream* (2008) and Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* (2012)) are "revisionings" (Iyengard 59) or aim at "exorcising the past" (Kidnie 70).

The next two articles focus on adapting classical Greek tragedies.

Sara SONCINI analyses the reprisal of a specific theatrical device, namely the chorus, in two plays performed in 2021 – Kae Tempest's *Paradise* (National Theatre) and Lucy Kirkwood's *Maryland* (Royal Court Theatre). Both were prompted by the refugee crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced playwrights to interrogate the notion of "being-in-common" from a political and aesthetic perspective. By entrusting a specifically female chorus to speak (and shout or cry, as in MÉZERGUES' article), Tempest and Kirkwood try to elicit "an ethical and empathetic response" meant to fill the civic function of healing the community through the "echo-chamber of the female voice".

Like RIVIER-ARNAUD, ROMAN refers to Hutcheon's definition of adaptation and links it to the framework of precarity as developed by Judith Butler (2012) so as to analyse Gary Owen's transfer of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* into modern day Splott, a district in the

South of Cardiff in Wales. The mythological sacrifice of a woman against the socio-political ethos as impacted by the Trojan War becomes the very real sacrifice of a mother from the *lumpenprecariat* because of the 2010 cuts that destroyed the NHS. If a cry is once again at the heart of the play, Owen's *Iphigenia in Splott* (2015) raises issues of resilience and responsibility and nods back at the civic and ethical functions of theatrical adaptations delineated by ROMAN through Aragay and Middeke's concept of "Being-with" (2017).

The second part of this volume also tackles the idea of theatre as the expression of a community through rebooting plays or reiterating social events that question the making of the nation.

In her article on the 2019 Broadway revival of the musical *Oklahoma!* (1943), Anouk BOTTERO explores the idea that "nostalgia involves collective revisionism" (Knapp et al. 122) through visibility politics. She shows how director Daniel Fish integrated colored and disabled bodies in an otherwise white-centered narrative so as to interrogate the representation of nation-making. Focusing on scenography and choreography, she shows that while a performance is a means of integration that can redeem national myths and repair the musicals of the canon, iteration may show the limits of such a process.

In her article on Hannah Lavery's *Lament for Sheku Bayoh* (Lyceum Theatre & National Theatre Scotland 2020), Jeanne SCHAAF deals with how theatre can tackle the age-old issue of police violence against racialized citizens in the context of a mythical post-racial Scotland, and shows the extent to which iteration can work against trauma and towards change. The play focuses on the 2015 death by asphyxiation of Sheku Bayoh, who was on drugs and perceived as a threat to social order by police forces. Since the play is a verbatim choral piece for three performers and one singer, the "words of real people" are "creatively edited" (Garson 28). The elegy for Sheku Bayoh is performed through the verbal re-enactment of the scene, which is incrementally repeated onstage so as to enhance the deadening lack of closure in the procedure. The play itself is doubled up into a film due to COVID-19

and comes with a teacher's pack, leading to further discussion on racial discrimination in real life and on stage.

Dominic CHAMAYOU-DOUGLAS's contribution consists in an interview with Joe Douglas, who directed the reboot of John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*. First performed in 1973 with his 7:84 theatre company, the *ceilidh*, which tackles issues of land (dis)possession in Scotland over several centuries, was a commercial and critical success for being socially engaged, truly Scottish and definitely theatrical. Yet, when Joe Douglas revived the play at the Dundee Repertory Theatre in 2015, more than forty years after its first production, the play had to be updated so as to better fit the *zeitgeist* and political agenda. This was done through collaboration among actors and across productions, and involved rewriting the text to criticize the governments, letting the audience onto the stage so they feel represented, finding a new place for Gaelic, among many other devices.

The next section focuses on audience reception across time and space with plays that adapt the Shakespearean canon i.e. adapt it with variation or without repetition.

Méline DUMOT's article deals with two recent and radically different performances of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, one at Shakespeare's Globe (London, 2022) and the other at the Baltimore Shakespeare Factory (Baltimore, 2023). While the former is an adaptation that reconfigures the text through a feminist perspective that prioritizes female voices, the latter is a low-budget production that seems to be much closer to the original script. After presenting the performance history of the play, which is hardly ever staged nowadays because it suffers from a bad reputation, at least compared to other plays from the Shakespearean canon, the author uses audience data collected through surveys and interviews and draws on mixed methods research so as to analyse the audience's perception of "la fabrique de l'histoire" (Teulade) and how spectators choose and prepare for a Shakespeare play.

Marion COSTE also addresses the question of the adaptation of the Shakespearean canon in Monadhil Daoud Albayati's *Romeo and Juliet*

in Baghdad (2012), a play that focuses on the war on terror, and more specifically the aftermath of the invasion of Iraq in 2003. To do so, she uses Linda Hutcheon's concept of "transculturation" (xvi) and wonders whether the play, meant for an Iraqi audience, can speak to a European audience, especially since it is presented in Arabic with English surtitles. Shakespeare's hypotext, "deployed as a tool of empire" (Sanders 52), becomes a space of conflict that leads not just to a decentering of the canon but to what Coste calls, after Deleuze, a rhizomatic conception of the canon that integrates subsequent adaptations.

The special issue on "Seriality, reboots and iterability on the Anglophone contemporary stage" ends with an interview by Marianne DRUGEON of stage director and playwright Koumarane VALAVANE, who also rewrote *Romeo and Juliet* in the context of the Indian caste system today. The interview was conducted in French as VALAVANE is from Pondicherry where French is one of the three official languages. The adaptation of Shakespeare's play he wrote and staged toured in India, France, Belgium and Tunisia and an English version of the text, which was originally written in Tamil and also exists in French, is included in this volume, accompanied by a short story centering on a terrible ritual which lies at the heart of the play. The play and the short story can thus be considered as part of the rhizomatic canon (Lanier 28-29) surrounding Shakespeare's famous tragedy, overlapping space and time, but also languages and literary genres.

All the articles in this volume explore how adaptation aims at bridging gaps between distant time periods, geographical spaces, cultural and linguistic differences, and participate in the creation of a community of audiences, united in their enjoyment of the reiteration of a well-known work of art. This is what Jill Dolan calls the "utopian performative":

> Utopian performatives describe small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense. (Dolan 5)

Seriality, reboots and iterability enact this communal idea(l) in which performance and audience create a unique and joyful moment.

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1 « Celui qui appartient véritablement à son temps, le vrai contemporain, est celui qui ne coïncide pas parfaitement avec lui ni n'adhère à ses prétentions, et se définit, en ce sens, comme inactuel ; mais précisément pour cette raison, précisément par cet écart et cet anachronisme, il est plus apte que les autres à percevoir et à saisir son temps. » (Agamben 19)

I - Furious echoes of a cry out: Rewriting the Shakespearean and Greek classics from a feminist perspective

Réitération du Cri à Elseneur. Relire *Gertrude – The Cry.*

Juliette Mézergues (chercheuse indépendante)

Abstract: When Howard Barker rewrote and staged *Hamlet* in 2002, he offered a different take on the Danish tragedy. Some of the characters are similar to those in Shakespeare's play, but the decision to eliminate the investigation, or inquest, and replace it with a quest, and thus to put Hamlet away from the limelights, enabled him to present a free and liberated female character. The murder of the King, the founding event of the tragedy, is replaced by the Queen's Cry. Gertrude, who gives her name to the play, utters a cry that combines Eros and Thanatos. It becomes the palpable sign of the characters' quest for the absolute. It punctuates the play like so many expressions of the kingdom's disintegration. Yet with each Cry, Gertrude becomes a little more liberated. The language, at once repetitive and constantly evolving, with free verse which dictates the actors' breathing and inhabits their bodies, with aposiopeses allowing meaning to unfold and multiply, refutes any naturalistic temptation.

Where Heiner Müller asserts the political intent of his rewriting of *Hamlet* in *Hamletmachine*, Barker, as always, denies it, or rather, is not interested. Yet he has produced a work that questions contemporary society and invites us to reflect on the meaning of individual freedom and power. Rereading *Gertrude the Cry* in 2024 raises new questions. The objectified woman who claims this status, the eroticized and desiring woman that is Gertrude, is first and foremost a free character who stops at nothing to satisfy her desires, which she also assumes in the eyes of the world and the court. This article looks at how the repetition of the Cry is part of the author's repetitive poetics, and then analyses how the crime contaminates the fable as the various murders are committed.

Résumé : Lorsque Howard Barker réécrit et met en scène *Hamlet* en 2002, il propose un point de vue différent sur la tragédie danoise. Les personnages sont pour une partie similaires à la pièce shakespearienne,

mais le choix d'éliminer l'enquête au profit d'une quête, et ainsi de reléguer Hamlet au second plan, lui permet de proposer un personnage féminin libre et affranchi. Au meurtre du Roi, événement fondateur de la tragédie, se substitue le Cri de la Reine. Gertrude, qui donne son nom à la pièce, pousse donc un Cri qui mêle Eros et Thanatos. Il devient le signe palpable de la quête d'absolu des personnages. Il rythme la pièce comme autant d'expressions du délitement du royaume. Pourtant, à chaque Cri, Gertrude s'affranchit un peu plus. La langue, à la fois répétitive et évolutive, où les vers libres écrivent les respirations des acteurs et habitent leurs corps, où l'aposiopèse permet au sens de se dévoiler et de se multiplier, réfute toute tentation naturaliste.

Là où Heiner Müller affirme la visée politique de sa réécriture d'*Hamlet* dans *Hamlet-machine*, comme toujours, Barker s'en défend ou plutôt, n'est pas intéressé. Il livre pourtant une œuvre qui interroge la société contemporaine, propose de réfléchir au sens de la liberté individuelle et du pouvoir. Relire *Gertrude le Cri* en 2024 pose de nouvelles questions. La femme objectivée et qui revendique ce statut, la femme érotisée et désirante qu'est Gertrude est, avant tout, un personnage libre, qui n'hésite devant rien pour assouvir ses désirs, qu'elle assume d'ailleurs aux yeux du monde et de la cour. Cet article propose de voir comment la réitération du Cri s'inscrit dans la poétique répétitive de l'auteur, puis d'analyser comment le crime contamine la fable à mesure que les différents meurtres sont commis.

Keywords: Female gaze; Gertrude; Hamlet; Barker, Howard; Shakespeare, William; rewriting; reiteration; savage ego

Mots clés : *Female gaze* ; Gertrude ; Hamlet ; Barker, Howard ; Shakespeare, William ; réécriture ; reiteration ; *savage ego*

> Le texte, on le sait aujourd'hui plus qu'autrefois, n'existe pas par son auteur. Il a des destinataires – les lecteurs, les metteurs en scène, les spectateurs – qui participent à l'actualisation de ses significations virtuelles. La compétence du lecteur implicite intervient dans la stratégie du texte, elle y est inscrite. Réécrire un texte permet de faire émerger, en partie au moins, la « charpente profonde » de ce texte, les intentions virtuellement contenues par le récit. La manipulation créatrice dudit texte n'annule, ni n'efface rien, elle instaure un dialogue. Quand Müller retraduit *Macbeth* pour une nouvelle mise en scène et ne peut s'empêcher de modifier certains passages et d'ajouter quelques vers, il signe sa présence et impose une réflexion nouvelle à la fois sur Shakespeare et sur les conflits qui le préoccupent aujourd'hui. La réécriture est toujours scandaleuse. Elle bouscule des schémas de pensée et pose de nouvelles questions. (Klein 6-7)

Après d'autres, Howard Barker décide de réécrire *Hamlet* de Shakespeare en 2002 et d'en assurer la mise en scène, avec une première à Elseneur même pour le « Elsinor Hamlet Summer Festival ». Christian Klein affirme qu'une réécriture est toujours scandaleuse. Celle de Barker ne déçoit pas. Si l'auteur britannique a pu être perçu comme un provocateur à une certaine époque, il est surtout l'inventeur et le théoricien du théâtre de la Catastrophe, concept tragique contemporain qui vise à décevoir les attentes du spectateur et à lui montrer l'inimaginable. De cette façon, Barker s'assure de la réception active de son théâtre par le public. Il place ses personnages dans un moment de chaos de façon à ce que la morale sociale soit en crise et que les protagonistes puissent suivre leurs pulsions. La fable shakespearienne agit ici comme un point de départ, une histoire sur laquelle le public croit pouvoir s'appuyer, puis l'auteur la dynamite. Fait-il émerger la « charpente profonde » de la pièce shakespearienne ? Nous n'en sommes pas certains, tellement la fiction est modifiée et la trajectoire des personnages différente. Dans la brochure, The Wrestling School écrit d'ailleurs : « Gertrude is Howard Barker's startling and revealing response to Hamlet. This entirely new story exposes the sexual nature of the crime at the heart of Shakespeare's play ». Il s'agit bien de proposer une nouvelle version. Il déplace le prisme de lecture en faisant de Gertrude son personnage central, ce que nous comprenons

dès le titre de la pièce. Au commencement, nous savons qui a tué et pourquoi puisque nous y assistons : en montrant le hors scène de la pièce de Shakespeare et en en donnant sa version, Barker rend l'enquête superflue. Le meurtre est une conspiration qui prend sa source dans l'Éros. Il montre Gertrude et Claudius comme des amants qui se débarrassent d'une entrave, le mari, pour jouir de leur relation. Barker ne s'intéresse pas à la situation politique d'Elseneur et se concentre sur les relations entre ses personnages. Il écrit une tragédie en vers libres, à la rythmique aiguisée et aux propositions culottées. Les personnages sont habités par une force supérieure qui les guide, mais ça n'est pas celle des Dieux ou du destin, seulement leur désir profond, archaïque, dangereux, que chacun laissera s'exprimer ou réprimera. Le sexe, la mort et le regard deviennent les éléments nécessaires à l'expression de l'égo sauvage des protagonistes, qui, cette fois, se matérialise par le Cri de Gertrude. Nous faisons le choix de l'écrire avec une majuscule car il est à la fois concept et protagoniste de la pièce. Barker affirme :

> The drama which I practise creates its own world, it does not require validation from external sources, either of ideology or spurious realism, which is itself an ideology. It is compellingly imaginative and without responsibility to historical or political convention. […] What is signalled is the appearance of different dramatic values and the witnessed is not the reiteration of common knowledge but a dislocation of perceptions – in other words, it is engaging with a work of art in which the normal criteria of offence and empathy are abolished. (1997 : 29)

D'une certaine manière, Barker disloque la pièce shakespearienne. L'apparition du Cri devient un marqueur de l'avancée des événements. En cela, il rythme le récit. Barker conserve la violence et le meurtre shakespeariens mais les complète par une affirmation frontale de la sexualité et du désir, ce qui n'était pas le cas dans la tragédie élisabéthaine. La question du passage à l'acte et de sa justesse ne se pose pas car les pulsions surpassent la raison. La réécriture barkérienne use de la répétition pour faire avancer la fable et pour y creuser « les fissures de la morale » (Barker 2006 : 234).

Cet article propose d'explorer la mise en place de cette réécriture dans la poétique barkérienne, puis de se concentrer sur le personnage

de Gertrude. Nous nous intéresserons ensuite à la réitération du Cri et à la façon dont le crime contamine la fable à mesure que les différents meurtres sont commis.

L'espace de la parole

En faisant de Gertrude son personnage principal, Barker déplace la question posée par Shakespeare : *Hamlet* est une tragédie de vengeance au cours de laquelle le héros se demande s'il doit ou non passer à l'acte. Thomas Ostermeier préfère dire que la question est « agir ou ne pas agir » plutôt qu'« être ou ne pas être ». Chez Barker, la question pourrait être « désirer ou renoncer ». Il réinvente la fable : il met en scène des personnages qui acceptent et vivent leurs désirs et d'autres qui y renoncent. Dans cet Elseneur d'une période non définie, les jeux de pouvoir ne se font plus au nom de la couronne mais au prétexte d'une entière satisfaction de l'Eros. Le temps reste volontairement imprécis mais le train a déjà été inventé. Le Danemark est aujourd'hui encore un royaume, bien que le monarque exerce un rôle symbolique, car le pays est une démocratie constitutionnelle. On ne peut donc pas affirmer avec certitude quand la pièce se déroule. Lors de sa création par la Wrestling School en 2002, les costumes étaient contemporains, bien que sobres et stylisés. Les lignes pures et les couleurs franches et unies étaient privilégiées. Cependant, les coupes, travaillées et marquant l'appartenance à une classe supérieure, restaient actuelles. Le décor était minimaliste. Quelques accessoires venaient compléter l'ensemble. Rien, dans la scénographie ne pouvait s'apparenter à l'affirmation d'une époque ou d'une autre. Mais on pourrait tout à fait faire de même avec la tragédie originelle. Toute la place, comme souvent chez Barker, était laissée aux acteurs et à la langue. Au théâtre de la Catastrophe, la parole est reine. Les relations entre ces figures tissent des scènes où la parole est porteuse de violence. Howard Barker a fait un choix de mise en scène tout en sobriété, où l'équilibre du plateau racontait les relations des uns avec les autres, où la violence passait par l'énergie et la posture de l'acteur, mais évitait l'écueil d'une violence trop littérale. Ainsi sexe et meurtre étaient des images, des

états des acteurs, évitant le naturalisme tout en préservant l'intensité. La nudité était portée comme un costume remarquable. La mise en scène visait à sublimer la puissance des acteurs, jamais à avilir les corps. Gertrude, figure centrale, arpentait la scène. Elle était maîtresse des lieux et libre. Elle était à la fois avec chacun de ses partenaires, et la figure indépendante. Sa position, en termes d'équilibre du plateau, valait bien souvent le poids de tous les autres protagonistes, renforçant son statut d'héroïne tragique.

Le public de Liverpool, et surtout les scolaires conviés à la première en Angleterre, étaient au départ surpris car Barker ne fait pas de détour et plonge dès la première scène dans ce qu'il déroulera par la suite : le désir et la destruction, le sexe et le meurtre. Passé le premier effroi, l'écoute fut concentrée. Le texte ne traversait pas que le corps des acteurs, il ébranlait la salle de l'Everyman & Playhouse.

Giorgio Barberio Corsetti a fait, quant à lui, un choix très différent lors de sa mise en scène à l'Odéon Théâtre de l'Europe à Paris en 2009. Une fausse sobriété, qui ne datait pas spécialement le spectacle, préservait des effets spectaculaires (un arbre qui jaillit sur scène, un immense miroir qui double le plateau et inverse les perspectives). Le décor, de fait plus imposant, faisait paraître les personnages plus petits, comme dominés par le destin. Lors de la première scène, ça n'était pas simplement Gertrude qui se déshabillait, mais Claudius. Il choisit ainsi de décrire une relation plus horizontale. Nous y reviendrons dans la dernière partie. Les personnages semblaient davantage happés par leur destin. Fabrice Chêne écrivait à l'époque dans les *Trois coups* :

> La mise en scène de Giorgio Barberio Corsetti est audacieuse. L'originalité du décor mobile monté sur rails est indéniable. Peut-être construit-il une géométrie un peu trop rigide et un peu répétitive, mais cette insistance est bien sûr voulue. [...] Le dispositif final, un miroir géant incliné qui redouble l'espace de la scène, est d'une grande beauté visuelle. Facilite-t-il pour autant la compréhension de la dernière partie de la pièce ? Ne fait-il pas un peu trop radicalement le choix de l'esthétisme ?

Philippe Chevilley affirmait dans *Les Échos* : « [o]n peut ne pas être convaincu entièrement par la pièce, et goûter cependant un superbe moment de théâtre. » Le public français goûta peut-être plus la mise en scène que le texte, dont il déplora parfois la confusion ou l'obscénité.

Le dramaturge joue avec la connaissance présupposée de l'histoire. *Hamlet* étant une des pièces les plus connues, elle évoque au moins une image d'Épinal chez le spectateur. Barker ne cherche pas la complicité avec son public. Il déçoit ses attentes et, suivant la perception et la connaissance de chacun de la pièce shakespearienne, la singularité de cette proposition apparaîtra à des degrés différents.

La parole, résolument poétique, joue sur l'alternance de différents langages. Parfois ordurier, le tragique barkérien ne renonce à rien, si ce n'est au quotidien. La suspension de la parole, à travers les aposiopèses récurrentes, permet de proposer à l'acteur un rythme, une respiration. Les dialogues s'imbriquent régulièrement :

> HAMLET. The skirt's too short
>
> *GERTRUDE stops.*
>
> However excellent your legs might be
>
> ISOLA. Shup up
>
> HAMLET. The skirt's
>
> ISOLA. Shut up
>
> HAMLET. Too short
>
> How long has he been dead my father seven weeks and
>
> ISOLA. Shut up you are a bore and a prude (97)

C'est comme si deux discours étaient énoncés en parallèle ou comme si l'un voulait faire taire l'autre. La répétition – « SHUT UP » dans le cas de la scène 5 et de « SLAP » dans le cas de la scène 13 (132-135) par exemple – pourrait agir comme une ponctuation presque musicale, une interférence dissonante du discours. La répétition de phrases courtes (« Yes », « No ») donne à percevoir l'évolution intérieure du personnage, comme si la répétition agissait parfois telle une affirmation, ou un questionnement, parfois un martèlement. Nous

nous rappelons le « dog » de la première scène, qui se répète pour chercher à appréhender le sens et la raison même de son emploi et Claudius finissant par dire :

> CLAUDIUS. If anyone's a dog
>
> GERTRUDE. DO IT NOW
>
> CLAUDIUS. It's me (84)

Ce qui est intéressant ici est que l'énonciation, qui fait passer le mot d'insulte à statut, est interrompue par une autre répétition, celle de Gertrude : « Do it now » (84). La répétition qui vise à affiner la pensée est perturbée par la répétition de sommation, ici Gertrude qui demande le passage à l'acte. Un personnage suspend le temps, tandis que l'autre cherche sa poursuite, voire son accélération.

Nous comprenons que les procédés employés par l'auteur cherchent une répercussion dans les corps des interprètes mais aussi dans ceux du public. Le théâtre de la Catastrophe s'adresse aux sens. La musicalité et la rythmique sont deux outils majeurs, sans pour autant que la pièce s'apparente jamais à un théâtre musical. Chaque mot est porté et proféré par le corps entier de l'interprète. Les acteurs de la Wrestling School sont remarquables, notamment par leur engagement physique et émotionnel, tout en évitant l'écueil d'un jeu psychologisant.

Gertrude, objet ou sujet ?

> La psychologie de l'orgiasme, conçu comme sentiment débordant de vie et de force, à l'intérieur duquel la douleur même produit l'effet d'un « stimulant » me donna la clé de la notion du sentiment tragique, qui n'a été comprise ni par Aristote, ni, encore moins, par nos pessimistes. [...] L'acquiescement à la vie, jusque dans ses problèmes les plus éloignés et les plus ardus ; le vouloir-vivre sacrifiant allègrement ses types les plus accomplis à sa propre inépuisable fécondité – c'est tout cela que j'ai appelé dionysien. (Nietzsche 316)

Le dionysien permet au personnage de la Catastrophe, grâce à l'avènement du chaos, de se libérer des conventions et d'explorer son être profond, y compris dans ce qu'il peut avoir de contradictoire ou

de destructeur. Barker nomme cela le « savage ego », l'égo sauvage du personnage, dont l'expression est possible puisque les conditions d'abolition de la morale sont réunies dans ce théâtre. Un contexte extraordinaire plante un espace favorable à la libération des pulsions. Dans *Gertrude – Le Cri*, le contexte de chaos naît du meurtre et de ce qu'il libère comme désirs. Si l'auteur travaille sur l'inimaginable, les tréfonds de l'âme humaine et les possibles de l'indicible, l'écriture par réitération du signe permet de matérialiser, en scène, une évolution par vague des pulsions du personnage. La pièce de la Catastrophe ne juge pas ses protagonistes :

> My obscurity is precisely the result of sacrificing these claims to attention, and an act of pure irresponsibility, and I justify my theatre not by its contribution to a humanist culture – a celebration of the essential goodness of the man animal – but precisely by its suspension of morality. (Barker 1997 : 89-90)

Il fait dire à Isola que Gertrude est sans honte (95) et à Gertrude que c'est la honte qui a tué son mari. C'est une vision inconcevable qui terrasse le roi et non le poison, comme nous l'avons vu précédemment. Par ce truchement, Gertrude n'est coupable que de vivre son désir. L'importance du regard est soulignée une fois de plus lorsque Isola affirme : « I could not tolerate your gaze » (95). Le regard, n'est donc pas uniquement érotique, il peut aussi être un affront, voire un affront par sa charge érotique.

Dans la première scène, Claudius demande à Gertrude de se déshabiller. On pourrait considérer qu'elle est objectifiée. Mais c'est elle qui réclame le sexe. Elle est donc aussi sujet de son désir et Claudius en est l'objet. Elle et lui sont à la fois sujet et objet, désirant et désirés. C'est l'homme qui réclame la nudité et la femme qui s'exécute. Elle accepte à ce moment précis de se laisser voir, nue. Est-ce pour autant Claudius qui a le pouvoir ? Nous n'en sommes pas certains. Victoria Wicks était la seule à se déshabiller dans la production de la Wrestling School. Cette nudité, portée comme un costume, lui donnait un statut différent des autres protagonistes. Le théâtre de la Catastrophe joue les situations de domination et

s'intéresse au pouvoir. Dans la mise en scène de Corsetti, Anne Alvaro et Christophe Maltot se déshabillaient tous les deux. Lors d'un bord plateau, ils expliquaient que c'était venu naturellement en répétition. Cependant, celle horizontalité, qui n'existe pas dans le texte, change la perspective de la pièce. Ni Claudius, ni Gertrude ne cherchent l'égalité. En copulant nus tous les deux, ils reproduisent un schéma quotidien et domestique, un cliché du couple qui résiste à l'objectivation d'autrui, et nous raconte deux êtres emportés par la passion. Ça n'est pas parce que Gertrude accepte de se déshabiller qu'elle obéit aux hommes, ni à Claudius (106).

« Si nous devions définir le *female gaze*, ce serait donc un regard qui donne une subjectivité au personnage féminin, permettant ainsi au spectateur et à la spectatrice de ressentir l'expérience de l'héroïne sans pour autant s'identifier à elle », écrit Iris Brey (39). Le concept de *gaze*, théorisé par les études cinématographiques d'abord, puis questionné par les études de genre, est actuellement interrogé par les études théâtrales. Si on suit l'idée de Brey, un *male gaze* rendrait le spectateur passif à la différence d'un *female gaze* qui le rendrait actif, quel que soit l'objet du regard. Si on pense au théâtre de la Catastrophe et particulièrement au texte dont il est question, il semble que Barker cherche à rendre le spectateur actif sans lui imposer un point de vue. Dans le théâtre de la Catastrophe, on ne cherche pas l'identification, on cherche à faire l'expérience du texte. Cascan dit à propos de Gertrude : « she changes she is not identical even a sunset might profoundly alter her a passing cloud perhaps » (87), remarque que nous rapprocherons de cette réflexion de Brey : « En reprenant Butler, la phénoménologie féministe perçoit le corps qui regarde comme un sujet qui n'est pas fixe mais fluide » (49). Le personnage du théâtre de la Catastrophe est en mouvement, et Gertrude, à travers ses différents Cris, poursuit une trajectoire non linéaire. Le fait que le texte soit écrit par un auteur britannique blanc de plus de cinquante ans nous amène à nous demander s'il ne décrit pas un fantasme masculin : une héroïne qui s'émancipe par sa sexualité, le fantasme de celui qui souhaite que la femme assouvisse ses désirs comme s'ils émanaient d'elle-même. Gertrude

est écrite par un homme qui se met à la place d'une femme. Les allusions à la prostitution (scène 6 : « A PROSTITUTE WITH WRINKLED STOCKINGS », « I think when you urged prostitution upon me », « You little knew my instinct and my inclination […] for the […] profession » (110-115), le fait qu'elle la désigne comme un métier et endosse le rôle de la prostituée comme le ferait une actrice, opérant une mise en abîme qu'on pourrait lire comme une allusion au *Charme discret de la bourgeoisie* de Luis Buñuel, par exemple, peuvent-elles être perçues comme émancipatrices ou au contraire comme se conformant au fantasme masculin ? Gertrude va pourtant, quand elle le décide, à l'encontre des désirs des hommes et ils apparaissent alors comme à sa merci et non l'inverse. Brey affirme : « le *female gaze* n'est pas lié à l'identité du créateur ou de la créatrice, mais au regard généré » (39). Bien entendu, le regard du spectateur est par essence moins dirigé qu'au cinéma et, dans les mises en scènes vues, les procédés cinématographiques étaient inexistants. Cependant, l'idée que l'important est ce que l'œuvre produit et provoque chez autrui et non le genre et le statut de son créateur est intéressante.

Le désir est une arme pour Gertrude. Dès la scène 5 (97-110), Barker suggère qu'il est peut-être plus important et intense que sa réalisation. Gertrude laisse Claudius endurer sa peine : il veut faire l'amour, elle sort et le laisse dans cet état (« Suffer it » [106]), ce qui préfigure la scène 14 avec Albert où il est question de l'exquise tension du désir (135-141). En ne lui accordant pas ce qu'il demande, elle permet à Claudius de rester « désirant ». Le désir est puissant, il faut l'entretenir. Gertrude a du pouvoir sur les hommes et en use. Objet de toutes les convoitises, elle peut mener la danse. Cascan explique : « We prefer the wounds of women to the women » (135). Gertrude sait. C'est cette connaissance qui lui permet de s'affranchir. Elle aussi cherche l'extase et, comme nous l'avons vu, tous les moyens sont bons car la quête en justifie l'usage. Le langage révèle le personnage catastrophiste à lui-même. Par l'action du langage, il se découvre et se transforme.

Réitération du Cri, réitération du meurtre

Le Cri, tout d'abord poussé par Gertrude, surgit à la fin de la première scène. Il marque le caractère exceptionnel du coït. Cascan, qui l'a entendu, dit : « supremely beautiful […] But unrepeatable surely » (85). Pour Claudius, il devient la chose à posséder au-delà de la femme. Il affirme « I must drag that cry from you again if it weighs fifty bells or one thousand carcasses I must » (97). Nous comprenons que Barker déplace l'instinct de possession du mâle. Claudius n'est pas un chef de guerre, il ne deviendra pas chef d'État. Il périra pour Gertrude, fait notable qui renverse encore une fois l'idée de la possession. Ici, on ne tue pas lorsqu'on ne peut plus posséder, on meurt.

Au-delà de la femme, Claudius objective son Cri, élément qui surgit malgré elle et qu'elle refuse de simuler. Son caractère exceptionnel ne le rend que plus désirable. Gertrude et son Cri sont deux entités qui au départ se confondent pour finalement se différencier, s'autonomiser, comme nous le verrons.

Le Cri a besoin de plusieurs facteurs pour naître, ce que les personnages vont découvrir en même temps que les spectateurs. Tout d'abord, les amants pensent qu'il est lié à la puissance de l'acte sexuel, puis ils découvrent qu'il faut plus : la mort et le regard. Les moments dans lesquels le Cri retentit peuvent s'apparenter aux différents *climax* du récit. Le mot en anglais signifie apogée, point culminant, et est souvent utilisé à propos de l'orgasme. Le Cri naît avec le meurtre. Le meurtre est fondateur du récit, tout comme le sexe. Le Cri en devient l'expression quasi palpable et un marqueur de l'avancée de la fable. Il gagne en intensité et souligne le temps qui passe. À mesure qu'il retentit, la pièce est allégée de différents personnages. Le schéma se répète, s'affine, s'affirme et se complète pour atteindre le délitement de la tragédie.

Le premier Cri est donc celui du meurtre du roi et du premier acte sexuel auquel nous assistons. Gertrude pousse son Cri alors que son mari agonise et que son amant la « baise » sur le cadavre. La puissance de l'acte sexuel est liée à l'acte de donner la mort. Une excitation morbide stimule les amants. C'est un acte libérateur. Les amants se

débarrassent d'un obstacle, sans animosité. Leur relation érotique est plus importante que la vie de cet homme, tout aimable soit-il. Cascan affirme à propos de son mari : « He could not meet her » (86). Voilà tout. Si Gertrude semble avoir été objectivée dans cette scène, comme nous le verrons plus tard, Claudius devient d'une certaine manière son chien. Elle quitte un chien pour un autre (84). Claudius se transforme grâce à Gertrude. Il devient un nouvel homme lorsqu'il entend le Cri. Ce même Cri sonnera l'heure de sa mort (173-175). Après avoir tué pour l'entendre, il mourra pour lui. En ce sens, la répétition du Cri permet au récit d'avancer et à Claudius de boucler la boucle.

Le deuxième Cri retentit lors de l'accouchement de Gertrude (143-145). Certaines femmes ont des orgasmes en donnant la vie, ce qui indique une décontraction et un lâcher prise assez rares (Groskop). On ne peut donc affirmer avec certitude que ce Cri est une expression de douleur. Une nouvelle fois, Barker propose des possibles. L'orgasme est souvent nommé petite mort. Alors que le Cri se confondait avec le râle du mourant et la jouissance des amants, il se mêle maintenant aux pleurs du nouveau-né. Il est lié à autrui, autrui le prolonge et le complète. Il est la manifestation de sa liberté. Claudius est troublé par la similitude des deux cris, même s'ils retentissent par salves. Une fois l'enfant mise au monde, Gertrude choisit son amant : « Drink me Claudius / Let my daughter queue » (148). Elle affirme sa préférence pour l'Eros. À la suite de ce Cri, d'autres meurtres ont lieu : Cascan tente de tuer Hamlet pour protéger sa maîtresse (150-152) mais c'est lui qui succombe. Le meurtre du roi n'a pas été puni, celui de Cascan non plus.

Claudius et Gertrude décident d'empoisonner Hamlet. Le même procédé de répétition, avec l'affirmation du verbe « Drink » donne le rythme de la scène, jusqu'à ce que Hamlet se saisisse du verre. Il sait que ce dernier le conduira à la mort. Pourtant, il le vide (156-158). Le troisième Cri retentit, alors que rien ni personne ne touche la reine. Il est déclenché par la mort du fils, par la vue de l'agonie, et se répète en plusieurs vagues extatiques. La notion d'être vue et de voir dans cette scène rappelle la remarque d'Hamlet à propos du

meurtre de son père : « You / Choked / Him / With / A / View / *(He stares at her)* » (91). En réitérant le Cri, Barker interroge sa source. La vision, alliée à la mort, semble supplanter le sexe. Le fils regarde sa mère lorsqu'il succombe, Claudius regarde Gertrude qui regarde son fils mourir, puis qui pousse son cri. Encore une fois, il n'y a pas une version, mais des possibles. Cette scopophilie n'est pas dénuée d'objectivation, mais qui accepte de voir et qui accepte d'être vu ? Qui accepte d'être vu en position de voyeur ? Les combinaisons sont multiples, et ce, depuis la première scène. Chacun est à la fois sujet et objet de cette triangulation. La situation est démultipliée alors que le cri dépasse la reine (159-161).

> GERTRUDE. The cry […]
>
> BIGGER THAN MY BODY […]
>
> CLAUDIUS. […] And you were not fucked
>
> *(Pause)*
>
> GERTRUDE. Your eyes
>
> CLAUDIUS. My eyes yes
>
> GERTRUDE. I was eyed
>
> EYED WAS ENOUGH. (160-161)

On note à nouveau la répétition et la transformation : « Your eyes » pour finir avec « EYED WAS ENOUGH », comme un jeu de ping-pong entre les protagonistes, qui se fait plus précis et plus pertinent. Alors, Gertrude demande à Claudius de ne plus le réclamer. Le Cri est devenu trop puissant. Gertrude affirme : « CLAUDIUS YOUR DEATH IS NEXT » et il répond « Yes » (163). Le Cri scelle son destin. Entre-temps, Isola et Jane périssent. Les meurtres peuvent se multiplier puisqu'aucun système ne s'y oppose. Claudius sait sa mort prochaine et préfère assassiner sa mère avant (171). Jane est noyée par Ragusa (172-173). Gertrude a perdu ses enfants. Elle va perdre son amant. Le dernier Cri peut retentir. L'ami d'Hamlet, Albert, Duc de Mecklenbourg, assiège Elseneur car il veut la femme. Gertrude, dont il est déjà l'amant, accepte le mariage. Claudius comprend que le Cri est hors de Gertrude et elle lui demande de l'appeler maintenant :

CLAUDIUS. Always I thought the cry was in you

But it's not

It's outside

It waits

It walks

Some long hound pacing the perimeter

Frost clinging to it

Clouds of breath

GERTRUDE. CALL IT

CALL IT (168)

Gertrude raconte à Claudius sa trahison avec Albert, ce qui renvoie et confirme son affirmation : « The cry's betrayal » (121). Puis, « *(GERTRUDE slips off the chair and goes to him, to take his head in her hands. As she does so, her great cry comes, not from herself, but from the land. She is seized by it. CLAUDIUS is dead* [...]) ». Ainsi, le Cri retentit une dernière fois à Elseneur, terrassant Claudius. Devenu ou redevenu autonome, prenant tout l'espace, il a rythmé les étapes de destruction du royaume. Gertrude part vers une nouvelle vie. Elle a peut-être évité la guerre, mais rien n'est certain, puisque la dernière réplique d'Albert sonne comme une fin de non-retour : « BURN THESE / BURN AND SCATTER THESE » (174).

Barker utilise le Cri comme ponctuation. Chaque fois, il amène une ère nouvelle dans la dramaturgie. On distingue trois périodes, dont les durées sont variables, car l'action se resserre et s'accélère à mesure qu'on approche du coup de grâce. La première période marque l'avènement du couple Gertrude / Claudius et du nouveau roi Hamlet. C'est une nouvelle vie qui s'offre à chacun des protagonistes. C'est aussi le temps des découvertes et des complots. La deuxième période, marquée par l'accouchement de Gertrude, va voir les frustrations et la violence prendre le pas sur le royaume. Le meurtre redevient nécessaire. La troisième période est scellée par la mort du roi Hamlet. Aucun retour en arrière n'est alors possible.

D'autres meurtres seront perpétrés. Chacun doit faire face à son destin… Jusqu'au délitement du Royaume, célébré par l'ultime cri de Gertrude.

Conclusion

La répétition, dans le théâtre de la Catastrophe et particulièrement dans cette réinvention de *La Tragique histoire d'Hamlet* de Shakespeare, se manifeste sous des formes diverses qui permettent une multiplication des schémas et des possibles. Il n'y a pas une vérité, mais une proposition de fables dont les différents signes se répondent comme autant d'échos. On note les répétitions évidentes de mots ou de structures de phrase, les répétitions de schémas relationnels, les répétitions de références à l'œuvre originale. Le Cri apparaît comme une métaphore qui se répète, se transforme jusqu'au délitement total de la tragédie. Cependant, « […] the Theatre of Catastrophe is more painful than tragedy, since tragedy consoles with restoration, the reassertion of existing moral values. The audience is not flattered with hope, but rather lent pain. » (Barker 1997 : 70) En effet, il n'y a pas de résolution, juste un écho qui résonne intimement en chacun.

Howard Barker, par ses choix rythmiques et poétiques, écrit l'acteur. Il s'adresse directement à son corps, il propose une manière de respirer qui influe sur la façon dont le texte sera dit. La poésie de la Catastrophe est engageante et convoque chez son interprète des énergies souterraines. Ainsi la réitération devient une autre voie pour mobiliser l'interprète.

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Shakespeare Retold by and with Women

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Abstract: Recent seasons on the British stage have shown the increase of adaptations of Shakespeare's plays that are not merely aesthetic revisions nor textual reductions but full and innovative rewritings by contemporary playwrights, though what is striking in the post-noughties is that most of them enhance the female roles in a radical way. This has been the case of *Emilia* by Morgan Lloyd Malcolm, a play starring the Sonnets' Dark Lady. When it was produced at the Globe in 2019, three black actresses shared the main part while another one performed Shakespeare. The play was also directed by a woman, Nicole Charles. As for *The Cordelia Dream* written by Marina Carr, it was produced by the RSC in 2008 and, more recently, at the Irish Repertory Theatre in July 2021 (dir. Joe O'Byrne), illustrating the conflictual relationship between a father and his favourite but too neglected daughter. If the attraction for Shakespeare's background as well as for the reinvention of his plays are not new, the motivations underlying the recent rewritings and the impact they generate on Shakespearean scholars, readers and audiences should be questioned. This article proposes to investigate on the way four authors have recently reworked two of the playwright's direst plays—*King Lear* and *Othello*—from a feminine (and feminist?) point of view. While studying Marina Carr's *The Cordelia Dream*, Toni Morrison's *Desdemona*, Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* and Paula Vogel's *Desdemona, a Play with a Handkerchief*, we shall interrogate the notion of adaptation that makes repetition and renewal cohabit, so that we better remember and forget Shakespeare all at one time.

Résumé : Récemment les théâtres britanniques ont programmé un grand nombre d'adaptations de pièces de Shakespeare qui ne sont pas simplement des révisions esthétiques ou des réductions textuelles, mais des réécritures complètes et novatrices par des dramaturges contemporains, mais ce qui frappe depuis les années 2000, c'est que la plupart d'entre elles mettent sur le devant de la scène les rôles féminins de

manière radicale. C'est le cas *d'Emilia* de Morgan Lloyd Malcolm, une pièce qui met en scène la Dame noire des Sonnets. Lors de sa création au Globe en 2019, sous la direction d'une femme, Nicole Charles, trois actrices noires se sont partagé le rôle principal tandis qu'une autre interprétait Shakespeare. *The Cordelia Dream*, écrite par Marina Carr, a quant à elle été créée par la RSC en 2008 et, plus récemment, a été montée à l'Irish Repertory Theatre en juillet 2021 sous la direction de Joe O'Byrne, illustrant la relation conflictuelle entre un père et sa fille préférée mais trop négligée. Si l'attrait pour la vie de Shakespeare et pour la réinvention de ses pièces n'a rien de nouveau, il convient de s'interroger sur les motivations qui sous-tendent les récentes réécritures et sur l'impact qu'elles produisent sur les spécialistes de Shakespeare, les lecteurs et le public. Cet article se propose d'étudier la manière dont quatre auteurs ont récemment retravaillé deux des pièces les plus funestes du dramaturge - *Le Roi Lear* et *Othello* - d'un point de vue féminin (et féministe ?). En étudiant *The Cordelia Dream* de Marina Carr, *Desdemona* de Toni Morrison, *Lear's Daughters* d'Elaine Feinstein et *Desdemona, a Play with a Handkerchief* de Paula Vogel, nous interrogerons la notion d'adaptation qui fait cohabiter répétition et renouvellement, pour mieux nous souvenir et oublier Shakespeare tout à la fois.

Keywords: feminist adaptation; women on stage; Shakespeare; *King Lear*; *Othello*

Mots-clés : adaptation féministe ; femmes au théâtre ; Shakespeare ; *King lear* ; *Othello*

Theoretical approaches to Shakespeare's drama have exponentially tackled reflexions on adaptation over the past decades, taking into account not only scenographic and cinematic adaptations – two categories we could range in the field of 'visual' adaptations – but also 'textual' adaptations involving rewritings such as screenplays, novels,

scripts for VR and immersive experiences. We should however here recall that adaptation is essential to theatre as Margherita Laera states in her introduction:

> Theatre returns, it always does. […] It refashions beliefs, **recycles** old and used objects and reassembles them into new embodied experiences. Above all, theatre **repeats** […] and the act of returning and rewriting, as though it were struck by a compulsive compulsion to **re-iterate** and **re-enact**, again and again, the vestiges of its past. […] Theatre never stops adapting its features to the world and the world to its features. (Laera 1, emphasis mine)

Thus, as Margherita Laera points out, theatre is a fertile material for *re*-invention, *re*-newal, *re*-production, the 're' being included in the word 'rehearsal' that is central in the dramatic process. Theatre is intrinsically based on a repetitive *modus operandi*. Furthermore, the etymology of the word 'rehearsal' is particularly relevant in Shakespearean studies because its meaning of "practice (a play, part, etc.) in private for a public performance" (Etymonline) dates from the 1570s in England, which is a period contemporary to Shakespeare's early career. In Shakespeare's time, regular performances came with professional practice as well as with the development of editing initiatives. Theatre progressively ceased to be an ephemeral process whereby a play vanished in oblivion just after having been produced once or twice. Thereafter it became a commercial industry that could evolve and be amended over time.[1]

Hence, the history of Shakespeare's canon is a story of adaptation. As some scholars have highlighted in book collections and essays,[2] from the Renaissance to the Restoration and then from Romantic to Modern settings, plays have gone through multiple transformations. Even the Royal Shakespeare Company's recent policy has been encouraging directors to produce new plays based on Shakespeare's life and work.[3] This may seem quite paradoxical because it is a way of maintaining a form of tradition whereby a former play is kept alive thanks to its performance but not its original script. In other words, institutional companies such as the RSC encourage their authors to remember the past of the Shakespearean text the better to offer it a

new language, a new aesthetics and a new meaning. In the section "New Plays and Writers" on their website, Erica Whyman, the RSC deputy artistic director writes:

> Our job is to connect contemporary writers and audiences to the spirit of Shakespeare. […] He and his contemporaries had a strong sense of the world in which they were living and how it was changing. That's something we inherit directly from them. By including writers and new plays we keep our work new and daring, just as Shakespeare's work was in his own time. ("New Plays and Writers.")

It is therefore a challenging experience for a scholar to investigate this new theatrical material that takes Shakespeare's canon as a reference while transforming and reinventing it. It fits one of Linda Hutcheon's defining principles of the adaptation, that is "repetition with variation" (4) or "without replication" (7). In the present study, we shall use the word 'adaptation' in its broader sense, which is "the action or process of adapting one thing to fit with another, or suit specified conditions […]"' (*OED*, 1610). Each time another equivalent term will be mentioned, we shall justify why. Finally, adaptation also interrogates the method used by contemporary playwrights who rewrite iconic texts, and their purpose in doing so.

To reflect on those questions, this article focuses on four plays that have offered new approaches to Shakespeare's *King Lear* and *Othello* over the past decades. In their chronological order, these are Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* (1987), Paula Vogel's *Desdemona, a Play About a Handkerchief* (1994), Marina Carr's *The Cordelia Dream* (2008) and Toni Morrison's *Desdemona* (2012). If one of their common features is to retell famous tragedies (and not comedies or romances), the reasons for their being part of this corpus that excludes other adaptations of the same plays[4] are first to focus on one adaptation per decade, and second to offer a representative set of samples highlighting the evolution of Shakespearean adaptation on stage. Another argument will be to consider these rewritings from a feminine/feminist perspective since they have all been written *by* women, *about* women, and predominantly *with* women on stage. Finally, it is interesting to wonder why women from different countries and backgrounds come

back to William Shakespeare and to these two works – *King Lear* and *Othello* – specifically.

We shall reflect on the key features and the structure of these compositions that have triggered either controversy or laudatory criticism. Can we consider them as "appropriations" and mere "revisionings" alongside with Sujata Iyengar (59)? Or is the purpose of adaptation to "writ[e] the present [in order to] exorcise the past" as Margaret Jane Kidnie states (70)? This is what we endeavour to discover in the following study.

Context of composition and structure of the plays

More than a single female artist's rewriting, *Lear's Daughters* is presented as a "co-creation" of Elaine Feinstein and the Women's Theatre Group (the WTG now called the Sphynx), a feminist theatre company[5] born in England in the 1970s. Apart from triggering problems of authorship due to its collective authorial penname, *Lear's Daughters* also questions the way an adaptation comes into being and what has stimulated its main features. Some of the strategies of the WTG have been to pay particular attention to feminist content (excluding male-dominant implications), and extensively use improvisation as well as multi-racial casting. In the play, the father, Lear, is absent as well as all the other male characters except the Fool, who is however named "she". *Lear's Daughters* is a prequel to Shakespeare's play: composed in fourteen scenes and casting five women – Cordelia, Regan, Goneril, the Fool and the nurse – it recounts the past of King Lear, his wife and their daughters' childhood. The prose is elliptic; cues are brief, often monosyllabic, and the tone is humorous despite darker undertones. It recounts the frustrations of Regan and Goneril whose sister Cordelia has always been their father's favourite. The story is interspersed with anecdotes and tales that shed light on more psychological traits in order to prepare Lear's downfall and the elder daughters' rebellion later, in Shakespeare's play.

Paula Vogel's *Desdemona, a Play with a Handkerchief* also focuses on the story of the women of Shakespeare's play: Emilia, Bianca and of

course, Desdemona. As a note for the directors states in the incipit of the script: "Desdemona was written in thirty cinematic 'takes'. [Therefore] the director is encouraged to create different pictures to stimulate the process of filming […]" (Vogel *in* Fischlin and Fortier 236). The plot is expected to unfold in a backroom of the palace of Cyprus, in an indeterminate time ("ages ago"), one day before Desdemona's death. Contrary to Shakespeare's heroine, Vogel's Desdemona is unfaithful to her husband with the entire garrison, and when she learns that Othello is informed about it, desperately looks for her handkerchief. The plot revolves around the place of women in a male society: Bianca, the prostitute, and Desdemona have become friends and delight in recounting their sexual infidelities while Emilia abhors such behaviour. As in Shakespeare's play, Iago (Emilia's husband) plots against Othello, and the handkerchief is the agent for both his and Desdemona's destruction. Beyond this parallel motif, however, Vogel addresses the Shakespearean play's gaps and silences: "*Desdemona* provides us with everything that Shakespeare denies us: full portraits of three women… high spirits which do not willingly suffer their men's foolishness, no easy acquiescence to being victimized, even a lusty frank sexuality" (Dace 253).

A similar treatment can be observed in Toni Morrison's adaptation. Her *Desdemona* is also the product of a collaboration: it is a literary and musical play composed with Rokia Traoré, a Malian singer and musician. Both of them have imagined what happened before *Othello* and more specifically what inhabited the past of the female characters. For example, what the "Willow song" refers to or who Barbary (mentioned in Shakespeare's play) was, become central subjects of the adaptation. Alternating dialogues with songs, this short play explores the secrets of the source-text, its misinformation and innuendoes, while questioning its gender and racial issues. It leads us to consider whether Shakespeare cared about African people's concerns when he composed *Othello* and, in fact, why he wrote on a black man confronted to the Western civilization while having scarce historical knowledge about the subject-matter. Other mysteries pervade the play: why are Othello and Iago mutually dependent? Why does Emilia – who is present in almost all the scenes and knows the importance of the handkerchief – remain

silent? Morrison and Traoré "[offer] some missing pieces and wider perspectives," Peter Sellars writes. "Women now have the scope to speak their minds and their hearts, and Africa is real, not just imagined" (11).

I purposefully break the chronology to conclude on Marina Carr's *Cordelia Dream* though it was published and performed before Morrison's *Desdemona.* Being the product of a woman-writer, the point of view is here undoubtedly gender-focused. Two unnamed characters – "Man" and "Woman" – are alone on stage. A grand piano is the essential prop for music, which is fundamental to give the play its frame. At the beginning of Act One, stage directions announce: "*The Old Man sits at the grand piano playing a beautiful melody*" (Carr 7) and at the end "*Music. Light down*" (27); the same occurs in Act Two: "*We hear it. Piano and strings*" (28); "*Man plays a beautiful, haunting sonata. Lights fade. End*" (52). Man is a pianist and Woman's father. As the characters converse within the two-act-long plot, we learn that their tense relationship has led the woman to commit suicide. She used to be a musician too, yet was considered as a rival in her art by her father whose authority eventually silenced her (we also learn that he locked the piano for his wife not to play either). The link with Shakespeare's *King Lear* is explicit through a few cues and allusions, and obviously because of the title. Early in the play, the woman justifies her presence saying she had a dream in which she heard "the four howls in *King Lear*" (Carr 17). If Marina Carr later implies that the woman reflects Shakespeare's Cordelia – "In the dream Lear comes on with the dead Cordelia and it's you and I" (19) – her play is not a rewriting of *King Lear*'s plot. It is anchored in a contemporary context and, apart from the allusions to Shakespearean names, the considerations lead the audience/reader to ponder about filial bonds threatened by ambition and pride whatever the context and age. Carr's play does not shed a light on Shakespeare's possible implicit issues. It is the opposite: *King Lear* stirs contemporary debates. When for instance Man claims that "[Cordelia's] death was necessary for her father's salvation" (Carr 18), it foreshadows the reconciliation in death that occurs at the end of the play between him and Woman, thus alluding to a topical human reality: we acknowledge our flaws (such as defective communication and missed love) too late.

As in the other adaptations, Carr's play also highlights women's debased condition and, as a female playwright, she tries to give them a new voice. In her two previous retakes of Shakespeare, *Portia Coughlan* (1996) and *Ariel* (2002) respectively inspired by *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Tempest*, "[h]er focus [was] on female figures who are silent, sidelined or stifled" (Maley and Van der Ziel 8), but there too she drastically departed from the original narrative and structure. Such considerations may lead us to moderate the way we have used the word 'adaptation' so far and to question whether we can indifferently categorize a play adapted from another as such. Walking in Ruby Cohn's steps, shouldn't we, instead, name them "offshoots", or like Julie Sanders "appropriations"?[6]

"Appropriation as revisioning" (Iyengar 59)

Despite their distinct features, the four plays maintain an obvious link with their hypotexts, whether *Lear* or *Othello,* and trigger key questions about the process of adaptation: how can we explore the meaning of such canonical works further (by a prequel, a sequel or a retelling)? How can the author be inspired from them without being restricted in her choices? In other words, is it possible for contemporary playwrights to reinvent and appropriate world-famous tales successfully? As Julie Sanders defines them, adaptations that tend to be radical, adopting "a posture of critique, even assault" should instead be called "appropriations" (4). In her definition of the term, she highlights the necessity that writers find of taking "a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain" (Sanders 26). Additionally, in the third chapter of her analysis, she concentrates on Shakespeare's oeuvre as the privileged material that is, as Ben Jonson put it "not of an age but of all time", and that can be "adapt[ed]" and "adopt[ed]" by all generations (48).

One of the motivations that led Paula Vogel to write a new version of *Othello* is that in a post-colonial, post-slavery historical context, she found it impossible to represent Othello and Desdemona together (Savran in Fischlin and Fortier 233-234). Complicating the three

women's characterizations – Bianca, Desdemona and Emilia – and involving multiple and antinomic emotions like bitterness, sexual voracity, hope for independence, class-consciousness and religious concerns, Vogel both departed from and enhanced her source. As Sujata Iyengar sums it up:

> Othello still suspects Desdemona with Cassio, Cassio still gives the handkerchief to Bianca, and Desdemona still dies strangled in her bed. Even without the men on stage, and even with their individuality on full display, Vogel's heroines cannot escape the ritualized marital violence of Shakespeare's play (59).

Therefore, Iyengar considers such an appropriation as a "revisioning" (59) because, as in Morrison's adaptation of the same play, Vogel uses the structure of the adaptation (what Linda Hutcheon names "repetition with a difference", 20 and 36) to 'revise' *Othello* with a deeper conscience of Black people, their traditions, alienation and painful history.

Likewise, in Morrison's *Desdemona,* the eponymous character, an "incandescent" Desdemona, "[…] minimizes the lost handkerchief," Iyengar remarks. "She acknowledges that her obliviousness to her race and rank blinded her to the truth about her own life" (61). Henceforth, she fails to understand Emilia adequately. She is accused of treating her black maid as an inferior, and is also required to name Barbary, her nurse, "Sa'ran" which is her true name and status as a slave:

> Desdemona. Listen to me.
>
> Saran. No, you listen. **I have no rank in your world**. I do what I am told. I brought you what you wanted before you knew you wanted it. I kissed your every cut and bruise. I held you when fever made you tremble, and when your parents made you weep. You never had to wash your hands or feet or face. I did that for you.
>
> Desdemona. You blame?
>
> Saran. **I clarify**! (Morrison 48, *my emphasis.*)

We should probably consider this last word as being metafictional because the way Morrison appropriates *Othello* enables her to "clarify"

some hidden facets embedded in Shakespeare's play. In other words, she makes them clearer in both senses of the term. Similarly, Elaine Feinstein's *Lear's Daughters* "takes its shape from the 'gaps' in Shakespeare's *King Lear*" (Griffin and Aston *in* Fischlin and Fortier 216). It is a means of challenging Shakespeare's authority and of commenting on the way the latter is traditionally understood. For instance, in their analysis of the play, Gabriele Griffin and Elaine Aston suggest that the Fool "details the fictions, myths, and structures which are deployed by men to imprison women in patriarchal ideology, to separate them from themselves, their bodies and their desires so that they are only ever daughters, wives and mothers" (11-12). Feinstein and the WTG also question race concerns in their revision of the play. The first production used a white actress to perform Cordelia and two black women in the roles of her sisters (215);[7] the second had all three performed by black women while the nanny and the Fool were white (216). Ethnicity and class-consciousness were therefore emphasized through skin colour. According to Fischlin and Fortier, such choices tend to complicate the story of the daughters just as they pinpoint some absent motifs that might have fuelled Shakespeare's own tale. Indeed, class and race involve conflictual relationship, jealousy and resentment. Shakespeare does not densify his characters' portrayals, especially when it deals with women. For instance, we do not really know why Goneril and Regan are so cruel towards their father and younger sister in *King Lear*, except for their extreme ambition and probable affective frustration. But like Morrison, Feinstein does not intend to judge Shakespeare's source as "a flawed, inferior, or politically incorrect" text, Fischlin and Fortier note before adding that her play rather leads us to value "narrative alternatives that disrupt the sedimentation of convention gathered round [its] source" (216).

Marina Carr's intention in adapting *King Lear* responds to the same principles: to write *after* Shakespeare and not *against* him. Carr's relationship with Shakespeare is a long and documented story: it illustrates the influence of the one on the other in a tormented, paradoxical love-hate relationship, as possibly reflected in the complex communication between Man and Woman in *The Cordelia Dream*. *King Lear* as well as *The Tempest* have attracted by far the most attention from Carr "because

of the centrality […] of the father-daughter relationship which 'make[s] it possible to criticize patriarchal heritage as well as colonial heritage'" (Novy quoted *in* Maley and Van der Ziel 6). Carr gives an Irish angle on Shakespeare's tragedy when approaching the tough confrontation opposing a father's authority and a daughter who longs for her independence both as an artist and as a woman. As Brian Singleton acknowledges, "Carr's commission from the Royal Shakespeare Company, homes in on […] an approach that […] steers clear of the cult of Cordelia as voiceless victim in Shakespeare criticism [...]" (Maley and Van der Ziel 9). Such a remark reassesses that one of the key motors leading contemporary playwrights to adapt a Shakespeare play is to question – and often overturn – convictions, prejudices and preconceived beliefs. In some interviews, like the one conducted by Paddock, Marina Carr has reflected on 'the ghost' of Shakespeare whom she often refers to as her own father figure. Her role has been to challenge him. To re-invent Shakespeare and even subvert him is like answering Lear's question: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most,/That we our largest bounty may extend/Where nature doth with merit challenge" (1.1.51-53 *in* Shakespeare 161). From Carr's point of view, Lear's asking his daughters who loves him most is comparable to Shakespeare. In that sense, to write her own *Lear* is to continue her mentor's tale while taking, in so doing, ample liberties to fill in the 'nothing' left by Cordelia.[8] Therefore, her adaptation of Shakespeare's play could be seen as a literal exemplum of a gap-filler.

"Writing the present, exorcising the past" (Kidnie 70)

Despite an overt attempt at detaching their plots from Shakespeare's, the authors of the four plays we are considering have all claimed their filiation and reverence to Shakespeare.[9] As Linda Hutcheon develops thoroughly in her theoretical analysis, adaptation is "inherently palimpsestous" (6); the ghost of a prior text is omnipresent, which most authors do not deny. If adaptation is "repetition with variation", it is because it provides for "the comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise" (Hutcheon 4): the adaptation is no inferior literary work as some critics listed by Hutcheon have professed.[10]

The palimpsest predominates in *Desdemona, a Play About a Handkerchief* composed both "[…] as a 'tribute' (i.e., 'rip-off') to the infamous play, *Shakespeare the Sadist* by Wolfgang Bauer" (Fischlin and Fortier 236) and as a response to Shakespeare's play. If Bauer's radical adaptation is neither the rewriting of *Othello* nor of any other play by Shakespeare, it links the name of the playwright with a Swedish pornographic film that is embedded in the plot and where violence against women is enacted. As in Vogel's play, Bauer's script is divided into 'takes' that, when dealing with Shakespeare's part, convey the narcissistic nature of the poet as well as his extreme brutality towards the female protagonists. Obviously, Vogel does not use a similar aggressiveness in tone, but she retains the demeaning view towards women that Shakespeare may have conveyed in his tragedy, and overturns it. In her play, women challenge male omnipotence: men are silenced, negated, excluded from the stage, and are depicted as mere objects in the service of female sexual satisfaction and possible escape from a degrading life. Hence, from Desdemona's point of view, Bianca represents women's emancipation and personal fulfilment as expressed in her reaction to Emilia's rebuff:

> Desdemona. […] She and I share something common in our blood – the desire to know the world. I lie in the blackness of the room at her establishment… on sheets that are stained and torn by countless nights. And the men come into that pitch-dark room – men of different sizes and smells and shapes, with smooth skin, with rouge skin, with scarred skin. And they spill their seed into me, Emilia – seed from a thousand lands, passed down through generations of ancestors, with genealogies that cover the surface of the globe. And I simply lie still there in the darkness, taking them all into me. **I close my eyes and in the dark of my mind – oh, how I travel!** (scene 12, *emphasis mine*)

The stress on sombre colours through words like "blackness", "pitch-dark" and "dark" hints at one of the most present motifs in Shakespeare's *Othello*: the peculiarity and fear that the Moor's black skin conveys is attractive to Desdemona. In Vogel's adaptation, it also stimulates the bride's desire to go beyond the boundaries of her secluded and restricted space. Darkness is not an element of exclusion

or rejection, but the expression of female thirst for empowerment as the last line underlined above highlights. Here, the palimpsest superimposing 16th-century women's social expectations and their modern counterparts sustains the dialogue between the ages. When Vogel's play was being written, feminist movements were extremely active in both the United States and England where the play had a great impact. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discriminations against Women was signed in 1981 and then ratified in 1986 in England, not in the United States. Hence, a step forward was partly taken, and things still needed to be done: liberating Shakespeare's female voices was a way for artists like Vogel to maintain the protest alive, audible and topical.

Anchoring Shakespearean themes in topicality is nothing new, however. As Hutcheon recalls, thematic persistence is an essential part of the adapting process: "The form changes with adaptation […], the content persists. […] Themes are perhaps the easiest story elements to see adaptable across media and even genres or framing contexts" (10). According to Iyengar, some adaptations like Morrison's *Desdemona* reconcile the past and the present because such plays "foregroun[d] international, intercultural, and intergenerational connections among women" (60). Indeed, women in Morrison's script and Traoré's songs "meet, converse and reconcile" (*ibid.*); whether Barbary (Saran) or Emilia, Othello's mother or Desdemona, and even Brabantio's mother (named Soun), they all express their resentment, love, sorrow and regret in death so that they eventually sing and speak in unison. But of course, the message of Morrison and Traoré goes beyond the thematic level: the adaptation not only conveys gender and race issues but also encapsulates the history of humanity, its recurring tragedy and the hope for its salvation:

> Desdemona. The world is alive and even if we kill it, it returns fresh, full-throated and hungry for time and space in which it thrives. And if we haven't secured the passionate peace we yearn for, it is because we haven't imagined it. Is it still available, this human peace? In our privileged position in timelessness, our answer is a roar. (Morrison 56)

As exemplified by Morrison's play, "timelessness" is precisely what adaptation feeds on and breeds. It is the memory of past (feminist) fights and the present (feminist) voice that continues them. In *Lear's Daughters*, the intention is alike although it is expressed differently as explained in Annamária Fábián's article "The 'Unfinished Business': The Avoidance of King Lear by the Prequel *Lear's Daughters*" in which she describes how the adaptation, in its "attempts […] to *avoid* the origins", results in "a complete redefinition [of them and provokes] new and quite drastic interpretations to [the source-text]" (§3). In writing a prequel, Feinstein and the WTG do not superimpose the hypotext and the hypertext but propose to anticipate Shakespeare's play though writing *after* it. Thus, it justifies the women's cause in *King Lear* where the three daughters rebel each in her own way. As Fischlin and Fortier explain, it is not because of his elder daughters' failing to express their true love and protection that Lear is driven to a tragic end, but because they have suffered from his own unfair treatment and imperfect affection in their childhood (216). The past justifies the present of the text, but the new play is also an attempt to overshadow the source-text and be put in the forestage together with the women's voices. As Stanley Cavell notes, "[w]e are not in Shakespeare's confidence. Now tragedy grows from the fortunes we choose to interpret, to accept, as inevitable [...]" (89 quoted *in* Fábián). The "fortunes" chosen by Feinstein and the WTG, Annamária Fábián explains, are aspects of *King Lear* "out of which" they have produced "a feminist play" that problematizes "the effects of the oppression" of the patriarchal society and the "dominating" fatherly position within the family (§ 4). The movement backward (i.e., *before* Shakespeare's play) enables the movement forward (i.e., Feinstein and the WTG's contemporary play). Ages confront each other, which enables the adaptation to fight even further against women's ill-treatment, a customary doom in 16th-century England that has remained latent until the present days. For example, the extract below, taken from scene 14, highlights an aspect that is absent from *Lear*'s play: the nurse's redundancy as well as Lear's wife's repudiation. These features also explain Goneril and Regan's feelings of ostracism voiced earlier in scene 12 (229):

> NURSE. (*opening letter, finds money inside*) My services are no longer required. Who does he think he is? Who is he to throw me aside when he no longer wants me to do the job he chose for me in the first place! […] Just like the Queen when she didn't make the right sort of boy-child for him – finished. […] (231)

Finally, we can venture to say that Marina Carr's *Cordelia Dream* is a way of "exorcising the past". As we have seen, the play does not retell Shakespeare's *King Lear:* the plot has nothing in common, structurally at least. Through the troubled relationship between father and daughter, it mainly illustrates the impossible reconciliation with the past as though Shakespeare's play had cast a spell on filial love forever. "Like her other tangential takes, on Shakespeare […]," Willy Maley and Stanley Van der Ziel write, "*The Cordelia Dream* offers no neat solutions to intractable problems, just a profound meditation on influence and independence that doubles as an allegory of art and patriarchy" (7-8). In *The Cordelia Dream,* woman feels a need to emancipate and free herself from her father's egocentric omnipotence. As the reflection of Cordelia but also of Lear's elder daughters, Woman encapsulates the feminine condition as a whole: "It's not a good time to be a woman right now. It hasn't been a good time to be a woman since the Bronze Age," Woman says (20) and through her words we feel we hear Carr's own convictions. As a female writer, can she get rid of the shadowy presence of a national poet, the Stratfordian 'ghost' who haunts every writer? Therefore, many cues can be read as meta-comments on the art of writing, and the impossibility for it to be pure invention. Every composition results from a previous one, consciously or not, willingly or not. For example, Woman claims that art is mere plagiarism: "[…] Plagiarism and cunning disguise, a snapping up of unconsidered trifles" (24). Exorcising the past seems a vain quest in Carr's perception of creation. Such a painful observation (the artist's irremediable interwoven link with bygone oeuvres) does not however contribute to Carr's believing in Shakespeare as a sacred reference not to be contradicted, even despite her admiration for his work. Her behaviour as a writer is challenging. As pointed out by Siobhán O'Gorman: "Carr achieves this by deliberately revealing within [her]

works the inevitable links and borrowings between diverse texts, as well as by rereading (or wilfully misreading) Shakespeare's Cordelia […] as confrontational rather than passive" (501).

Conclusion: #AdaptationWhatFor?

> "Stoytelling is always the art of repeating stories"
> (Walter Benjamin 90)

Coming back to Ruby Cohn's terminology about adaptation, we read at the beginning of her first chapter:

> Rewriting of Shakespeare is known by an array of names—abridgments, adaptations, additions, alterations, ameliorations, amplifications, augmentations, conversions, distortions, emendations, interpolations, metamorphoses, modifications, mutilations, revisions, transformations, versions. In contrast, I use a loose and more neutral word, 'offshoot,' […] (3).

In her list of words, some are far more positively connoted than others, and when in turn we try to qualify the plays of our corpus, we definitely hesitate. Referring to Cohn, Margaret Jane Kidnie asserts that "an adaptation involves the 'addition' of new material 'alongside substantial cutting' and 'rearrangements with a transformation' […]" (3); hence, it is never a 'reduction' or an 'emendation' (*ibid.*). This is I think what Feinstein's work as well as Morrison's, Carr's and Vogel's have highlighted: even if a text stems from a preceding one, it is not a pale copy of the original nor the result of a lack of inspiration. They have all written in response to one of the most famous writers of all times, and in so doing have committed a daring act just like the characters of their stories who have all, as erstwhile voiceless women, risen from the ashes and claimed their worth. Not surprisingly then, in some of the heroines' cues, do we think to hear their authors' own beliefs and complaints. But concomitantly, we also hear them claim their precious heritage and the assumption that a text always echoes another. For instance, one of Traoré's final songs in *Desdemona* reads:

> When two beings meet,
> Each brings to the other a bit of themselves.
> So we learn, we construct our selves, we evolve. […] (55)

And we sense we are hearing: "when Shakespeare and *I writer*, meet, we construct our selves, we evolve." Likewise, in *Lear's Daughters,* Cordelia eventually acknowledges: "I love words. I like their roughness and their smoothness, and when I'm silent I'm trying to get them right. I shall be silent now, weighing these words, and when I choose to speak, I shall choose the right one" (232). Taken out of their context, these lines can be analysed as a comment on the act of adapting a text and choosing the right way and time to do so. Authors weigh their words and may decide either to keep them for themselves or to let the cry get out when they are convinced it will fairly bespeak the(ir) truth.

All in all, as Kidnie later writes, referring to D.C. Greetham's *Theories*:[11] "[…] the conventions of drama permit performance to take exception, perhaps even unwarranted freedoms with the work of art defined specifically by its text" (19-20). We might go further in saying that the entire dramatic text allows creative authors to take "unwarranted" or rather unexpected yet blissful "freedoms." Such considerations strikingly resonate with the very recent preamble to the Comédie-Française programme announcing the 2024 theatrical season when its director, Éric Ruf, very poetically compared theatre to a pebble repeatedly bouncing on water, just as a rehearsal is the constant though imperfect reproduction of the same:[12]

> Répéter, refaire, réactiver, représenter. Le « re » est un mystère qu'aucune connaissance ne peut circonscrire. Le « re » lui-même a vocation à se réinventer. Le théâtre a maille à partager avec ces paris joyeusement perdus car il en va ainsi du sens, qui court et rebondit involontairement de spectacle en spectacle au cours d'une saison théâtrale (3).[13]

And so, appropriating Éric Ruf's words, I believe that adaptation is an inexhaustible means to better remember and challenge Shakespeare all at one time.

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1 See on this aspect: Smith, Emma. *The Making of Shakespeare's First Folio*, Bodleian Library, 2015. And also: Gurr, Andrew. *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642,* Cambridge University Press, 2009 (4th edition), in particular Chapter 2.1"The companies / The Laws of playing, p. 38-45 and by the same author: *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, Cambridge University Press, 1987 (more on the evolution of playgoers' tastes and practices.)

[2] See for instance Wells, Stanley and Sarah Stanton. *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Stage,* Cambridge University Press, 2002; Schoch, Richard. *A Short History of Shakespeare in Performance,* Cambridge University Press, 2021; Ritchie, Fiona and Peter Sabor. *Shakespeare in the Eighteenth Century*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

[3] See the very recent adaptation of *Hamnet* by Lolita Chakrabarti for the 2023 Summer Season in Stratford-Upon-Avon, and in London from September to February at least.

[4] For example, Edward Bond's *Lear* (1971) and Howard Barker's *Seven Lears* (1990). Djanet Sears's *Harlem Duet* (1997) and The Q brothers, O*thello: The Remix* (2016), both based on *Othello,* removed Desdemona from their adaptations.

[5] Their website is under the name The Sphinx Theatre Company: https://sphinxtheatre.co.uk/

[6] See the titles of their respective monographies in the bibliography.

[7] Feinstein worked with the Women's Theatre Group "in devising some ideas, and then went away to write the script independently." The company used a revised script and toured in 1987.

[8] Cordelia's answer to Lear's question in I.1.87/89 *in* Shakespeare, William. *King Lear,* edited by R.A. Foakes, The Arden Shakespeare, 1997, p. 164.

[9] See for instance W. Maley and S. Van der Ziel. "Filial ingratitude: Marina Carr's bond with Shakespeare", *in* Collins, N. and Van der Ziel, S. (eds.). *Shakespeare and Contemporary Irish Literature*. Palgrave: London, 2018.

[10] "Nevertheless, in both academic criticism and journalistic reviewing, contemporary popular adaptations are most often put down as secondary, derivative, « belated, middlebrow, or culturally inferior" (as noted by Naremore 202b:6" *in* Hutcheon 2).

[11] Greetham, D.C. *Theories of the Text,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 35 quoted in M. J. Kidnie, *op. cit.* p. 20.

[12] These remarks come full circle with those in our introduction.

[13] "To repeat, to redo, to reactivate, to represent. The 're' is a mystery that no science can delimit. The 're' has full authority on its own reinvention. Drama can hardly share the challenges that it has joyfully lost because here is how meaning goes: it runs away and bounces back, unwillingly, from one performance to another within a theatrical season." (Ruf, *my translation*.)

Women front and centre: Revisiting the Greek chorus in Kae Tempest's *Paradise* and Lucy Kirkwood's *Maryland*

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Abstract: As they grapple with the devastating impact of events such as the refugee crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic on our very sense of a human collectivity, writers are turning with growing frequency to chorus and choric practices in order to reflect on the meaning of 'being-in-common'. This article looks at the way the ancient Greek chorus has been refunctioned and politicised in Kae Tempest's *Paradise* and Lucy Kirkwood's *Maryland*. Both plays were produced in 2021, in the immediate wake of the lockdowns. Tempest's *Paradise* is a full-blown adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* which was presented at the Olivier, the largest stage at the National Theatre in London, in a high-profile production directed by Ian Rickson. *Maryland* is a contemporary play about violence against women hosting a modern-day chorus of Furies: Kirkwood wrote her short protest piece in two days only and sent it to the Royal Court Theatre for a snap production as a script-in-hand performance. Beyond their evident differences, both projects place a female chorus centre stage and use it to examine the contradictory poles of individuality and communality in our increasingly fragmented civic space. Through their dialogue with the Greeks, Tempest and Kirkwood revive and expand the form of the community chorus in order to explore its possibilities as an instrument of personal and political empowerment, thereby rising to what they clearly see as a social as much as a theatrical challenge.

Résumé : Alors qu'ils sont confrontés à l'impact dévastateur que peuvent avoir des événements tels que la crise des réfugiés et les pandémies de Covid-19 sur notre sens même de la collectivité humaine, les écrivains se tournent de plus en plus souvent vers le chœur et les pratiques choriques afin de réfléchir à la signification de l' « être-en-commun ». Cet article examine la manière dont le chœur grec antique a acquis une nouvelle fonction et s'est trouvé à nouveau politisé dans *Paradise* de Kae Tempest et *Maryland* de Lucy Kirkwood. Les deux

pièces ont été produites en 2021, juste après la fin des confinements imposés au Royaume-Uni. *Paradise* est une adaptation du *Philoctète* de Sophocle, elle se revendique comme telle. La pièce a été créée à l'Olivier, la plus grande scène du National Theatre de Londres, dans une mise en scène très remarquée de Ian Rickson. *Maryland* est une pièce contemporaine sur les violences faites aux femmes, qui met en scène un chœur de furies des temps modernes ; Kirkwood a écrit cette courte pièce de théâtre contestataire en deux jours seulement et l'a envoyée au Royal Court Theatre afin qu'elle soit montée très rapidement, les acteurs jouant le texte à la main. Au-delà de leurs différences évidentes, les deux projets placent un chœur de femmes au centre de la scène et l'utilisent pour examiner les pôles contradictoires de l'individualité et de la communauté dans notre espace civique de plus en plus fragmenté. Grâce à leur dialogue avec les Grecs, Tempest et Kirkwood font revivre la forme du chœur communautaire en la développant afin d'explorer ses potentialités en tant qu'instrument d'autonomisation personnelle et politique, relevant ainsi ce qu'iels considèrent clairement comme un défi social autant que théâtral.

Keywords: Kirkwood, Lucy; *Maryland*; Tempest, Kae; *Paradise*; adaptation; chorus; Greek drama; community theatre; feminist theatre; interventionist theatre

Mots clés : Kirkwood, Lucy ; *Maryland* ; Tempest, Kae ; *Paradise* ; adaptation ; chœur ; théâtre antique ; théâtre communautaire ; théâtre féministe ; théâtre d'intervention

Over the last few decades or so, choruses have emerged as a central formal feature of contemporary theatre practice in Britain and elsewhere. While partly traceable to the exploration of ancient Greek dramaturgical structures, chorus techniques and processes are now common in non-Greek productions and they have come to epitomise the paradigm shift towards devised physical theatre in contemporary

theatre-making (Eastman). On the new writing front, too, the appropriation of choric structures has risen to a chief instrument of (post-) dramatic innovation, providing playwrights with a viable alternative to the representational model grounded in intersubjective dialogue – a move typified, to mention but one prominent case, by Sarah Kane's last two plays, *Crave* (1998) and *4.48 Psychosis* (2000). By contrast, and somewhat paradoxically, the role and space of chorus have considerably shrunk in modern-day revivals of Greek drama. With its growing sense of precariousness, vulnerability and impending catastrophe, our current age of permacrisis may well have turned into a "golden age" (Wallace 2) for creative engagements with the tragic canon; yet with a few notable exceptions, contemporary productions of Greek plays often appear at a loss to accommodate this most distinctive dramaturgical element of the tragic tradition. When they are not omitted altogether, choric interventions are ordinarily treated as little more than interludes (Meineck 356), or in fact inconvenient interruptions, between the 'core' scenes played by the principal actors. With writers and adaptors, likewise, there has been a distinct tendency in the UK to treat this "most unfamiliar feature of Greek tragedy" (Laera 64) as a cumbersome presence to be replaced or outright removed in order to suit changing aesthetic and ideological concerns. In this context, the 'problem' of the chorus has been typically ascribed to a perceived "absence of communality in Western European culture" (Eastman 372)[1] and the attendant discomfort with a formal device that nowadays feels like an obsolete and fundamentally inert historical residue.

The new work considered in this paper attests to a significant departure from this general trend, perhaps showing that the time is ripe for a return of the chorus to its original conceptual as well as civic centrality. This development has arguably been driven by the impact of events such as the refugee crisis and the coronavirus pandemic on our very notion of 'community', and is informed by choric practices evolved within a broad spectrum of participatory and/or interventionist theatre projects, sometimes specifically as a way of addressing those crises. In particular, this paper discusses two plays produced in 2021, in the immediate wake of the Covid-19 lockdowns, and highlights a

set of discursive tools deployed by their authors in order to refunction and politicise the Greek chorus. Kae Tempest's *Paradise* is a full-blown adaptation of Sophocles' *Philoctetes* that was presented at the Olivier, the largest stage at the National Theatre in London, in a high-profile production directed by Ian Rickson. Lucy Kirkwood's *Maryland* is a contemporary play about violence against women hosting a modernised chorus of Furies; the dramatist wrote her short protest piece in two days only and sent it to the Royal Court Theatre for a snap production as a script-in-hand performance. Beyond their evident differences, both projects seek to infuse new life into the tragic chorus by refiguring it as a female community chorus and exploring its possibilities as a means of personal as well as political empowerment. Through their dialogue with the Greeks, Tempest and Kirkwood place the chorus centre stage and use it to reflect on the contradictory poles of individuality and communality in our increasingly fragmented civic space, thereby rising to what they clearly see as a social as much as a theatrical challenge.

No (wo)man is an island

Unlike her earlier 'epic' takes on Greek myth – best exemplified by her award-winning 'spoken story', *Brand New Ancients* (2012), and the poetry collection *Hold Your Own* (2013) – Kae Tempest's first foray into classical culture as a playwright originated from a commission by Ian Rickson to adapt Sophocles' *Philoctetes* for a production at the National Theatre. Implicit in the director's invitation to provide a "cover version" of this seldom-performed tragedy was his confidence in Tempest's rare and distinctive talent as a poet, spoken-word performer and recording artist to creatively confront the challenges involved in bringing Greek tragedy to a modern audience. Though his work has been prevalently defined by his productions of modern and contemporary drama, Rickson had already tried his hand at Sophocles by staging Frank McGuinness's adaptation of *Electra* at the Young Vic in 2014, and was by his own account aware of the chorus as a major pitfall with present-day revivals ("Ian Rickson and Kae Tempest").

One common difficulty, that of "finding an authentic British voice for writing and translating chorus" (Eastman 372), was easily overcome thanks to the powerful orality of Tempest's unique poetic style; but it is especially the writer's *dramaturgical* solution to the 'problem' of the chorus that holds special significance for my discussion. Tempest's bold way of dealing with the issue is to feminise Sophocles' chorus, put it front and centre, and give it primacy over the main play as the structural and conceptual heart of *Paradise*.

Sophocles' tale of war, militarism and trauma has no space for women: the play features a central male trio – Philoctetes, the famed archer, and Odysseus and Neoptolemus, on a mission to Lemnos in order to bring back to battle the marooned soldier so the Greeks can capture Troy – and a male chorus of Neoptolemus' crewmembers. As a way of redressing the balance, Tempest's version of *Philoctetes* has an all-female cast. Whereas the decision to have women play the three male principals only emerged during rehearsals, Tempest ruled from the very start that the chorus of Greek sailors was to be replaced by a group of local women who live in a camp adjacent to Philoctetes' cave. The play does not make it clear whether the women – nine in all – are native to the island or just its long-time residents; what matters is that they exist as a community prior to the arrival of Sophocles' characters. Subverting the common perception of the chorus as a foreign body on the contemporary stage, *Paradise* repositions the choral group as the play's insiders and demotes the tragic heroes to their uninvited guests.[2] While it takes a while for the mythical heroes to arrive, the women are on stage even before the performance formally begins, going about their daily chores, making tea, or simply hanging around in what is clearly marked as *their* space. By the time Odysseus and Neoptolemus enter and the tragic plot starts to unravel, the audience have long been acquainted with the community of women who have made this place their home. The island on which the chorus and the titular character are stuck, apparently since time immemorial, is a far cry from the "paradise" announced by the play's title: "*a bleak beach, rubbish-strewn, still in chaos from a huge wave that broke some years before*" (*Paradise*: 1), according to the opening stage direction. Both setting and dialogue

concur in characterising the female chorus as survivors from various calamities, past and present: the seemingly endless Trojan war and the permanent state of belligerence that has come to mark our current global age; literal as well as metaphorical tsunamis – conflicts, poverty, climate change – resulting in forced displacement. Expanding on the mythical story, where Philoctetes' comrades-in-arms have left him on a desert island to get rid of the stench from his festering wound, *Paradise* refigures Lemnos as a dumping ground for a whole array of exported waste: household rubbish alongside prisoners, war victims and forgotten refugees.

Tempest's dramaturgy heightens the tension between individuality and chorality by adding a gender dimension to Philoctetes' segregation. The women who inhabit the camp have managed to reconstruct a community based on new alliances of care out of the "landfill life" (11) they have been forced into. The chorus's resilient communality finds a symbolic correlative, on stage, in the salvaged and beachcombed props that have gone into making the women's new home: objects that have been washed ashore and that they have recycled, rebooted and repurposed to create a space of shared domesticity. Although he, too, shares the women's fate as dislocated, displaced 'rubbish' stranded on the island, Philoctetes remains stubbornly locked in his toxic isolation, rejecting their offer of food and medicine and even refusing to talk to them. Cross-gender casting throws into sharp relief the hero's tragic imprisonment in a performance of masculinity and his ironic failure to perceive himself as united in a common plight with the female refugees. The other male characters similarly antagonise the chorus on gender grounds, also to ironic effect. Upon their arrival on the beach, Odysseus instructs young Neoptolemus to ignore the women who live there and stare at the newly arrived strangers, lest his acknowledgement of the chorus be taken for a sign of "weakness" (13). Initially, and in keeping with tragic convention, the women reposition themselves as spectators. Having ruled out the option of giving place to the scene initiated by the two intruders – "Why should *I* move? Why can't they move?" (20) – the chorus have no choice but to listen to their "tedious" (20) expository dialogue. Soon enough, however,

the female onlookers begin to encroach upon the heroes' inset drama and, indeed, to actively author it by feeding lines to the actors in the form of an echo that Neoptolemus and Odysseus unwittingly pick up and repeat. In addition to assuming authorial prerogatives, Tempest's chorus shows from the very start a clear metadramatic awareness of its flagrant trespass of the boundaries prescribed by the role, thereby leaving no doubt about its structural as well as ontological primacy over the play's male principals.

Tempest's female ensemble is indeed defined by this refusal to stay tied to its conventional position as a framing device. Throughout the performance, the women prove a remarkably multi-tasking chorus, variously acting as spectators, commentators, narrators and prompters, as well as characters in their own right. Among the various barriers they cross, the latter in particular signals a radical discontinuity with the classical model. As Renaud Gagné and Marianne Govers Hopman observe, the Greek chorus is "never just one chorus" but has a remarkably fluid status, constantly shifting between "an intra-dramatic identity as a fictional group of slaves, soldiers, or captive women, and an extra-dramatic identity as a ritual, civic, and institutionalised collective performing at the festival of Dionysos" (1, 27). For all its oscillations, however, the ancient chorus invariably embodies a collective voice that remains clearly distinct from the emphatically individual voice of the characters; indeed, "no member of the audience would ever confuse the choral ensemble and the cast of characters" (ibid. 6-7). In *Paradise*, by contrast, this distinction no longer obtains. Each member of the female chorus has a name, a unique identity and, most importantly, a story to tell; although we see them acting, and re-acting, as a community, in Tempest's own words "each of those characters has as much of a hero's quest" (Wyver) as Philoctetes, Odysseus and Neoptolemus. The women's narratives of war, suffering and displacement are implanted into the central drama, offering a discursive equivalent for their physical takeover of stage space while, in parallel, stretching the boundaries of choral identity to accommodate both a collective and an individual voice.

With its concomitant feminisation, centralisation and individuation of the chorus, Tempest's version of *Philoctetes* appears aligned with the growing number of participatory theatre projects that have mobilised Greek drama as a vehicle for giving voice to refugees and granting them a form of representational citizenship on stage and in the public sphere. The fictional chorus of female refugees in *Paradise* proclaims on more than one level its kinship with the actual community choruses that have come to hallmark this new breed of civically and politically minded reproductions of classical tragedies.[3] While the condition of uprootedness is often thematised in the Greek canon, the recent spate of refugee-centred productions show a distinct preference for plays that entrust a *female* chorus with eliciting an ethical and empathetic response to the plight of displaced people seeking protection: with their choruses of women who have been driven into homelessness by war or tyranny, Aeschylus' *Supplices* and Euripides' *Hecuba* and *Troades* have been by far the most frequently revived plays to date in this context. In keeping with their community-oriented approach, these theatrical interventions embrace the centrality of chorus and more often than not expand its ranks as a way of signifying representativeness, civic participation and social empowerment. To mention but two paradigmatic examples, *Syria Trojan Women*, a version of the Euripidean tragedy produced in Amman, Jordan in 2013, accommodated as many as fifty women refugees from nearby Za'atari camp;[4] and the same number of female chorus members crowded the Edinburgh Lyceum stage when David Greig's adaptation of *The Suppliant Women* opened there in 2016. Taking inspiration from Greek original practices, in Greig's version the dark-skinned strangers that make up Aeschylus' chorus of Danaids were recruited from the local community in Edinburgh and, later, in each city of the UK tour, resulting in a significant broadening of citizen participation. For participants and spectators alike, the meaning was quite clear: the refugee crisis implicated them all and it was ethically and politically imperative that they confront it as a community.

In general, however, it has been more common to reserve the chorus for refugee participation, and use it to encourage healing and

recognition for those involved: the fictional community chorus in *Paradise* celebrates precisely this twofold potentiality. This also goes some way towards accounting for the overall prevalence of all-female collectives in these projects. In the ancient Greek canon, it is typically female choruses that are tasked with "offer[ing] a broader vision of cultural commonalities" as well as "reconstitut[ing] a kind of fragile and beleaguered community, often a community based on ritual, in the face of physical threats, slavery, or a shattered world that makes little sense" (Foley 2003: 23). In *Syria Trojan Women*, the chorus is envisaged as a means for overcoming the isolation that comes with displacement, and as a much-needed public platform to ensure that refugee voices are no longer silenced or ignored: "I have a scream I want the whole world to hear", as one cast member pithily stated.[5]

While clearly placing value on the choral ensemble as a source of empowerment and enhanced resonance, however, the individuality of the performers is also of vital importance in these grassroots engagements with classical tragedy. In her discussion of "the problem of the chorus", Laera ventures a political explanation for the perceived discomfort of contemporary directors with a collective voice or body that, in her view, is susceptible to "raise the all too familiar spectres of Europe's totalitarian past" (64). Within the community projects that *Paradise* appears to reference, however, the concerns raised by this otherwise strategic force multiplier are arguably of a more pressing and current nature. Today, the representation of refugees as a large, visually imposing and homogeneous group is potentially at risk of replicating, or even validating, their prevalent framing as an indistinct mass in public and media discourse. In other words, the very same choric device that enables participants to make their voice heard could actually end up undermining the ethical and political rationale for the theatre-makers' mobilisation of narrative performativity in these reworkings of ancient Greek drama, namely, that of asserting the right of refugees to be acknowledged and respected as human beings. As a consequence, the choric practices evolved within this context are very careful to balance commonality with individuality; in *Syria Trojan Women*, to return to this highly representative example, the women's

personal stories of war and involuntary exile are incorporated into the Euripidean chorus, with the manifest intention of spotlighting the unique identity of each chorus member.

As discussed above, the same gesture informs the dramaturgy of *Paradise*. The members of its female refugee chorus are elevated to the status of characters for whom storytelling is both a community-building ritual and a way of countering the displacement as well as disposability of their bodies, lives and memories, as clearly evidenced by Tempest's refiguring of the desert island as a dumping site. In the play, the task of weaving the women's individual stories into a common tapestry rests with Auntie, the elderly of the chorus and the guardian of collective memory. Tempest lends her unmistakable poetic voice to this visionary, shamanic matriarch whose rhapsodic chant fills the opening and closing moments of the performance. For this incarnation of the chorus as the expression of collective identity, the National Theatre production relied on the special participation of Zimbabwe-born singer and songwriter Eska. When her riveting vocalisation of Auntie's 'state-of-the-nation' narratives filled the vastness of the Olivier auditorium, the line between the participatory act dramatised in the play and the audience who had gathered to watch it became visibly and purposefully blurred. As the *representation* of a community chorus, however, Tempest's reworking clearly lacks the authenticity which is instead an essential component of the participatory practices it reproduces. Unlike *Paradise*, the theatrical interventions detailed above are marked by an ethico-political investment in the presence of real refugee voices and bodies: "For once, we will not have a mediator; we will stand there in front of an audience and tell it", as a member of the *Syria Trojan Women* collective announced in a blog entry on the project's website ("The Trojan Women Project"). Still, when *Paradise* opened at the National in August 2021, after a long delay due to the Covid-19 pandemic, one could not fail to see some striking continuities between the experience of refuge that is fictionally mediated by the play's female chorus and the reality of the audience attending the performance. Tempest's adaptation of *Philoctetes* was the first

full capacity show at the National after almost two years, marking a return to normal that, as is well known to theatregoers everywhere, felt at once exhilarating and awkward after those long months of social distancing. Philoctetes' tale of segregation, woundedness and difficult healing resonated powerfully with the post-lockdown moment. Beyond all-important distinctions to be made, the image of a group of individuals hit by a tsunami and slowly learning to come to terms with a whole new sense of precarity and vulnerability also inevitably struck a chord with Tempest's audience. In the wake of two lockdowns, it seemed strange, but incredibly important, to be once more able to gather at a live performance in a public space and participate in what felt, in such a heightened, palpable way, a civic ritual. That this was happening in order to watch a play that portrayed the symbolic occupation of the National Theatre's largest stage by a group of female refugees, and used that very central cultural institution to denounce Britain as a "Hell" (116) mired in violence, racism and austerity, further added to the perception of theatre as a vital participatory act whereby we define, and potentially redefine, our human community. By reimagining the Greek chorus in order to draw attention to this possibility, Tempest has offered a template for a task that continues to feel more urgent than ever.

The sound of Fury

A howl, more than a play: this is how Lucy Kirkwood defined the 30-minute protest piece in which she gave vent to the mounting horror, disbelief and rage shared by many as story after story of shocking violence against women came to light during 2021 (Akbar 2021). The brutal killings of Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry, Sarah Everard, and Sabina Nessa – all of which are alluded to in *Maryland* – removed any extant doubt about a seemingly unshakable culture of gender-based violence abetted by systemic sexism and, in more than one case, racism.[6] Kirkwood banged out the script in two days in late September 2021, after Nessa's body was found covered with leaves in the park where she had been killed by a stranger nearly 24 hours

earlier. By early October, *Maryland* was already playing at the Royal Court Theatre as a script-in-hand performance; after a sold-out three-week run, the text was licensed free of charge to any theatre company or drama training organisation that wished to stage their own reading, resulting in forty different productions of *Maryland* being presented across the UK throughout the autumn. These methods of staging and dissemination reflected the deep-felt urgency of a collective response to what was beginning to look like a veritable epidemic of violence against women.[7] In some respects *Maryland* is not, properly speaking, a rapid-response play: Kirkwood herself, pointing to the vast collection of lived experiences gathered in it – partly her own, partly known via direct acquaintance or through the news media – has confirmed that the idea had been in her head for years. The play's form, however, was directly catalysed by the rage-filled cultural moment in which the play was produced, and by a concomitant, pressing need to harness that anger for political resistance and social change. As the dramatist has explained,

> The play came from a desire to make a space to protest these atrocities, and a crucible to hold my abject horror and exhaustion that women are a) not safe on our streets and b) cannot rely on the forces of law and order to protect or even give their dead bodies the most basic levels of respect, and allow an audience to bring their own protest, their own horror, their own exhaustion, into that crucible, rather than sitting alone and atomised with it. (Angel-Perez and Rousseau 243)

With *Maryland*, Kirkwood wanted to carry into the theatre the feeling shared by the thousands of women who grieved and protested together at Sarah Everard's vigil and similar events that followed in its wake; significantly, her method of choice was to place a modern-day chorus of Furies at the heart of the play and task it with extending and amplifying this empowering moment of emotional outburst.

The tension between individuality and communality constitutes the thematic and structural mainstay of *Maryland*. The play develops along two axes: a narrative action consisting of realistic scenes set in a police station where two rape victims go through the process of reporting the crime; and an accompanying commentary by a chorus

of Furies. The first storyline spotlights systemic violence and the way it thrives on women's isolation and actively enforces it. For DC Moody, the chief preoccupation is not to bring the perpetrators to justice but to keep the two women apart and prevent them from sharing their experience. The practical reason for this is that the putative representative of law and order is the actual rapist and he is trying to avoid identification; but the policeman's behaviour takes on paradigmatic meaning with regard to the mechanism that the play denounces. Along the same lines, the coincidence whereby both rape victims are called Mary becomes the target of repeated inappropriate jokes by DC Moody, perhaps betraying a nervousness about the potential consequences for the system he stands for if these Marys were to break their isolation and start acting as a group. On leaving the police station late at night, the second Mary is forced into the police car by her aggressor; the next time we see her, after a very short blackout, she has gone to fill the ranks of the Furies – leading us to conclude that the members of the chorus are also dead, that they have suffered the same fate (after all, the avenging goddesses of Greek drama were originally conceived as the ghosts of the murdered), and in all probability they go by the same name of Mary, like every other female character seen or mentioned in the play. For the audience, the message could not be clearer: the time for women to come together is now.

This call to arms is framed, dramaturgically, as the process of the chorus taking possession of the play's discursive as well as physical space. The Furies quickly move from the role of onlookers described in the initial stage direction, to ever more frequent and substantial interloping in the action, down to exclusive ownership of the narrative in the final section, where the performance fully departs from the representational mode to become a collective protest chant. With mounting anger, the Furies reel off facts and figures about gender-based violence in direct audience address, counterpointing individual with unison delivery in a rallying cry that closes with the provocative question "What fresh hell do you need? / Before you are as angry as we are?" (*Maryland*: 18). In the Royal Court production,

the dramatist's mobilisation of chorus as a space for empowerment and activism was sustained through a number of strategic moves aimed at maximising resonance and representativeness. The communal nature of the project was highlighted by having a trio of female directors share responsibility for the play's staging. On the same principle, the chorus of Furies was played on a rotating basis by seven distinct ensembles of women from the community. The rolling cast was a step towards fulfilling Kirkwood's dream of having a mob-sized female chorus on stage: "*at least 3, 100 is better*" (2), is the writer's indication about the number of Furies. For the producers, this was a way of involving as many women as possible and thereby ensure diversity (Akbar). The chorus's ranks, moreover, were further and considerably swelled thanks to the broad dissemination favoured by licensing policies: each of the 40 local productions of *Maryland* UK-wide had a different, and often quite numerous, cast of community players. Through these multiplying female ensembles, *Maryland* paid homage to the original civic function of the ancient Greek chorus, externalising the principle of rotation which is at the heart of democratic participation, and in this case bespoke cycles of violence as well as the possibility of transcending them through forms of collective resistance.

The fact that the members of this expanding community chorus are specifically characterised as Furies, however, has significance beyond the play's more obvious acknowledgement of a long and ongoing history of violence against women. Seizing on the transformative power inherent in the reboot of past models, Kirkwood's chorus of contemporary Furies references its original Greek incarnation in order to bring added firepower to the play's attempt at reshaping an ethos of violence. The weaponisation of voice is central to Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, where the eponymous hero is tormented for his murder of Clytemnestra by the piercing scream of the vengeful Erinyes. In *Maryland*, the goddesses' scream finds an equivalent in the loud noise that, with growing frequency and intensity, replaces the words "raped" or "killed" in the chorus's lines:

FURIES. **and one in forty women have been [UNBEARABLE SOUND]**

and by [UNBEARABLE SOUND] we do not mean

a fumbled flirt

a misguided chat up

an unwanted hug

an overly familiar text message

being watched while we eat our icecream

a builder using us to demonstrate his heterosexuality to his work mates

all that snowflake shit

we mean

The [UNBEARABLE SOUND] *plays for 10 times its normal length.* (*Maryland*: 13-14; bold in original to indicate unison delivery)

On the page, the voice of women screaming in anger and pain and crying out for justice is textualised as an omission. The square brackets and capital letters in the script allude to a twofold process of redaction that is shown to be operative in the police scenes. On the one hand, the narrative involving the two Marys points the finger at a twisted system that protects perpetrators while putting victims in the dock. Since both women have reported a scar on the rapist's forehead, they are asked to identify the suspect in a photo array of nine men wearing identical beany hats: as DC Moody candidly admits, "if there was something distinctive about one of the suspects, we cover it up" (8), allegedly because an innocent man with the same distinguishing mark could be identified by mistake. The one physical feature that might help bring the culprit to justice is treated as sensitive information and conveniently obscured; conversely, victims must agree to bare their body and have photographs taken of their bruises in order to prove their trauma. Meanwhile, their voices are contained, trivialised, ignored, and more or less forcefully muted or censored: at

the same time as he warns the two Marys to refrain from talking to each other in order not to prejudice a trial, the police officer is quick to add "if it gets that far" (3). Indeed, *Maryland* insists, there can be little chance of justice for women in a culture that continues to place responsibility for sexual violence on the victims: on how they behave, or fail to behave, to secure that they 'stay safe'.

In performance, though, the Furies' unbearable sound tells a quite different story, and one that departs sharply from the classical source. The last play in Aeschylus' tragic cycle stages the taming of the vengeful Erinyes into the benign Eumenides, resulting in their effective silencing. Through Athena's intervention, Orestes is put to trial in Athens, but is finally acquitted of his crime of matricide thanks to the goddess's tie-breaking vote. The Furies' outrage at the verdict is placated through the offer of a home and a cult in the city they would otherwise have destroyed in retaliation; the chorus of Furies is solemnly conducted to a cave beneath the Aeropagus, and their place on stage is taken by a civic chorus of Athena's attendants who celebrate the onset of a new social order based on the rule of law. Knowing all too well that the gods have spectacularly failed to deliver upon their promise of justice, the modern-day Furies of *Maryland* are determined instead to remain front and centre and scream on. In performance, the very same blank that in the text indicates the Furies' obliteration creates a space for their collective howl to erupt: the repressed cry of female outrage returns, literally, with a vengeance.[8] The script offers multiple possibilities for realizing the Furies' terrifying scream on stage: "*The* [UNBEARABLE SOUND] *could be a recording that is played by an operator, or operated onstage by one of the* FURIES. *It could be the sound made by a physical action. It could be every* FURY *speaking in unison*." (10) The Royal Court production opted for a layered sound effect, a jolting, chilling crossover between a piercing metal screech, an ear-bleeding static noise, and a distorted human shriek: a choral scream that translated the omitted words "raped" and "killed" into a powerful, visceral sensation for those who listened.[9] With its penetrating, persisting vibration, the unbearable sound established an intense physical connection among the members of the audience as they processed the second implication of the textual

omission: we do not need to hear the words because we all know what they are. With each iteration of the sound, this shared knowledge about the magnitude of gender-based violence became an embodied experience, felt collectively. Through the Furies' wordless scream, *Maryland* creates an affective community that can turn redaction into reaction, counter politically crippling atomization, and promote solidarity, resistance and change.

Though in many respects traceable to a well-established tradition of feminist takes on ancient Greek drama (see Babbage), Kirkwood's and Tempest's very recent reboots are marked by their distinctive focus on the chorus as a tool for invigorating and politicising the temporary community that theatre makes possible. Through the female refugee ensemble that replaces Sophocles' crew of sailors, *Paradise* emphasises narrative performativity as a community-building ritual, in an evident attempt at blurring the divide between the participatory act fictionalised on stage and the spectators who have gathered to watch it. *Maryland* refunctions the ancient chorus as an echo chamber for the female voice, turning what others have seen as an obsolete formal device into a strategic theatrical weapon for liberating the Furies from their confinement in the cave and urging them to carry on the struggle. While significantly diverging in concept, form, and mode of production, these theatrical interventions into the classical canon project a common and deep-felt need to imagine new forms of collective response to the man-made hells in our world.

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1 This comment was made by Martin Crimp during a talk at the University of Oxford while accounting for his replacement of the chorus with three individual characters in *Cruel and Tender* (Young Vic, 2004), an adaptation of Sophocles' *Trachiniae* set during the War on Terror. Considering her extensive engagement with the Greek tragic tradition across her entire oeuvre, Marina Carr's view of the chorus as an intractable problem is even more indicative of a deeply rooted attitude among contemporary writers: "I have never seen a chorus work on stage, so I just get rid of them, or everyone is their own chorus" ("Marina Carr and Caitríona McLaughlin"). The ban has remained in place even after Carr broke with the customary relocation of her Greek-inspired plays to a contemporary Irish setting with *Hecuba* (RSC, 2015), where the story remains rooted in ancient times.

2 Discussing her choice, Tempest has specified that it was important for her "to have the citizens of the island, or the residents of the island, speaking out, rather than just (...) this great old play arriving on this stage and (...) doing its thing. I just thought it was kind of inexcusable to not have the residents of this place where this action is taking place also be acknowledged as being there." ("Ian Rickson and Kae Tempest")

3 See Wilmer 11-49 for a wide-ranging survey of productions and adaptations of this kind across Europe and beyond.

[4] Initially conceived as a therapeutic drama workshop and "an advocacy tool to highlight the plight of Syrian refugees" ("The Trojan Women Project"), the project soon gained considerable international resonance, especially thanks to Yasmin Fedda's award-winning documentary film, *Queens of Syria* (2014). With this new title and a much-reduced cast, the original stage production toured through the UK for a three-week run during the summer of 2016. As the then artistic director of London's Young Vic, where *Queens of Syria* made its first stop, Ian Rickson was instrumental in bringing off the British tour of the Syrian collective; shortly afterwards, the Young Vic went on to host *Now We Are Here*, a piece created by refugee writers in workshops with Rickson and other collaborators.

[5] This quotation appears as the central epigram of the production in the trailer of the film version ("Queens of Syria Trailer").

[6] Sarah Everard was raped and killed in Brixton in March 2021 by a Met police officer who abducted her under the guise of a fake arrest for breaking coronavirus restrictions. Sabina Nessa was sexually assaulted and murdered in September of the same year as she walked to meet a friend at a pub; her killer had a history of violence and had been flagged to police three days before the attack, but no action was taken. Sisters Nicole Smallman and Bibaa Henry were stabbed to death in Wembley in June 2020, during the first lockdown; police officers tasked with guarding the crime scene took selfies with the women's dead bodies and shared them with colleagues via WhatsApp. According to the victims' family, their ethnicity was a factor in the Met's slow search when the two sisters were reported missing. Inquiries into both types of police misconduct were still underway in 2021, when *Maryland* opened in London.

[7] Unlike what is mercifully happening with Covid-19, the death toll of this deeply ingrained virus shows no sign of abating. As I write this paper, in Italy, where I am based, we are reeling from the brutal killing of 22-year-old Giulia Cecchettin at the hands of her former boyfriend; while femicide cases continue to hit the headlines, the call to invest in prophylaxis continues to go largely unheeded.

[8] A similar notion of the age-long compression of the female voice and body eventually leading to a massive bang informs Ellie Kendrick's brilliant take on the Furies in her mutinous feminist cabaret, *Hole* (Royal Court Theatre Upstairs, 2018).

[9] This description is based on my personal recollection of the script-in-hand performance presented by the Royal Court Theatre at WOW (Women of the World) Festival in London in March 2022. It chimes with the details offered in Isabelle Stuart's very helpful account of the original run (Stuart).

Revisiting Mythology through Precarity and Resilience: *Iphigenia in Splott* (2015) by Gary Owen

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Abstract: *Iphigenia in Splott,* the winner of Best New Play at the UK Theatre Awards in 2015, finds inspiration in real experiences and autobiographical events that stretch between realism and imagination. This retelling of the Greek myth of Iphigenia subverts the depiction of the innocent classic heroine killed for the sake of her nation's war effort by making of her the spokeswoman of precarity in 21st-century England. In the form of experimental political drama, the play vindicates socioeconomic concerns that ostracize vulnerable elements of society, subverting the fatality of myths and its associated position of victimhood.

Precarity and its consequently generated vulnerability to society may activate forms of individual or collective resilience. Effie, the fierce young woman in Gary Owen's play, speaks up the silenced voice of an entire neglected layer of Welsh society. Her world of contemporary outcasts in a continuous spiral of unemployment, drinking and doping is confronted through an understated revision of the most barbaric human sacrifices in Greek mythology. This paper explores the intersections between gendered forms of resilience and other factors inherent to social and economic precarity present in the play. The *lumpen-precariat*, defined by Guy Standing in 2012 as a detached class of victims out of any system falling into social illnesses, drug addiction and passivity, shapes this analysis offering a panorama of responses to structural forms of vulnerability. Through Effie, this paper argues that gender performativity presupposes a complex convergence of social norms and interplays of obligation and desire within the general spectrum of precarious conditions. These gendered norms have everything to do with how women can appear in public space, how the public / private divide is enforced, and how that distinction is enacted at the service of sexual politics (Butler 2009).

Résumé : *Iphigénie à Splott*, Meilleure Nouvelle Pièce et Prix du Théâtre du Royaume-Uni en 2016, trouve son inspiration dans des expériences réelles et des souvenirs autobiographiques qui se situent entre réalisme et imagination. Cette relecture du mythe grec d'Iphigénie subvertit la représentation de l'héroïne classique innocente tuée au nom de l'effort de guerre de sa nation en faisant d'elle la porte-parole de la précarité dans l'Angleterre du XXIe siècle. Sous la forme d'un drame politique expérimental, la pièce présente des inégalités socio-économiques qui mettent à l'écart les éléments vulnérables de la société, subvertissant ainsi la fatalité des mythes et les figures de victimes qui y sont généralement associées.

La précarité, qui implique une vulnérabilité face à la société, peut activer des formes de résilience individuelle ou collective. Effie, la jeune femme farouche de la pièce de Gary Owen, fait entendre la voix silencieuse de toute une couche négligée de la société galloise. Son monde de parias contemporains, englué dans une spirale continue de chômage, d'alcoolisme et de drogue, est défié à travers une critique acerbe des sacrifices humains les plus barbares de la mythologie grecque. Cet article explore les intersections entre les formes de résilience genrées et d'autres facteurs inhérents à la précarité sociale et économique présents dans la pièce. Le *lumpen-precariat*, que Guy Standing définit en 2012 comme une classe de victimes détachées de tout système, associée aux maladies sociales, à la toxicomanie et à la passivité, façonne cette analyse en offrant un panorama des réponses aux formes structurelles de vulnérabilité. À travers Effie, cet article soutient que la performativité du genre présuppose une convergence complexe de normes sociales ainsi que des interactions entre obligation et désir, qui innervent tout le spectre de la précarité. Ces normes genrées ont tout à voir avec la manière dont les femmes peuvent apparaître dans l'espace public, la façon dont le public et le privé sont délimités, et la façon dont cette distinction est mise en œuvre au service d'une politique sexuelle (Butler 2009).

Keywords: adaptation; Greek mythology; *Iphigenia in Splott*; resilience; precarity

Mots-clés : adaptation ; mythologie grecque ; *Iphigénie à Splott* ; résilience ; précarité

The contemporary English-speaking stage has recently drawn on the transformative potential of Greek mythology to powerfully reflect upon the invisibility of marginalized subjects.[1] Over the years, the taste for Greek theatre has largely influenced British culture due to its universal topics and the particular emphasis on the association between politics and drama. An immense array of adaptations, revisions and translations clearly proves the relevance of Classics on the contemporary British stage. Mythical retellings have proliferated in recent decades. 2015 was particularly referred to as "the year of the Greeks", since the Greek tragedies seemed to accurately mirror "the world of austerity economics" by expressing the archetypal conflict of "human beings against the Gods, and against destiny and against their own fundamental weaknesses" (Rebellato 2015). Yet, this interest is not totally new. In the history of contemporary British theatre, we find playwrights such as Edward Bond, who highlighted the relevance of Classics through plays like *The Short Electra* (2003) or *Dea* (2016), recently produced at the Secombe Theatre in London. In the nineties, the explosion of "in-yer-face" theatre also traced back to the Greeks to revive the combativeness of political drama and radical aesthetics with iconic playwrights such as Sarah Kane and her play *Phaedra's Love* (1996) or Tony Harrison and *Prometheus* (1998). On the Welsh stage, Gary Owen emerges as a new dramatic voice inscribed within this tradition of confrontational drama revisiting a Greek myth in his awarded play *Iphigenia in Splott* (2015). Thus, the creation of a continuum in contemporary dramatic discourse seems to deliberately reconfigure ancient mythology as a constant source of inspiration.

Both ancient Greek and contemporary British drama share the focus on profound reflection upon the tragedies of society and a critical approach for the audience (Komporaly 2017; Rodosthenous, 2017).

Theatre has been urgently responding to the human questions fueled by the perception of "an event which presents a perspective on and of the world" (Postlewait 2009: 12). As Rebecca Schneider postulates in *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (2011), the historical returns of time on stage exhibit variations that reveal the multifaceted nature of History. Theatre's long obsession with the anthropos, with expressing the human psyche in dialogue form, offers a challenging medium to question the audience's ethics. As Patrick Duggan (2017) explains: "theatre and performance bring 'us' (makers/thinkers/audiences) into an ethical relationship with one another, both with the 'staged' images and those represented in them, as well as with the concerns raised by those representations" (43).

This article therefore begins by delineating arguments about adaptation and precarity addressing particularly the role of social responsibility and resilience articulated by a representative number of authors. The potential for resistance that I contend is that the possibility of enlarging the concept of the precarious might produce a shared acknowledgement of social vulnerability. In the second part of this article, I turn to the example of *Iphigenia in Splott* by Gary Owen to throw light on the potential of the text to elucidate and illuminate the complexity of precarity/resilience duality displayed in the theoretical framework. Conclusively, the play will be examined as the embodiment of gender performativity attached to the general spectrum of precarious conditions in contemporary British society.

Adaptation, Precarity and Resilience

The field of reception studies is defined, in William Brockliss's words, as "an inherently interdisciplinary field in its encompassing of a variety of departments and disciplines, each with its own canons, practices, and shared working assumptions" (2012: 11). Clearly, reception studies establish a continuous dialogue between the past and the present and also require some 'lateral' dialogue in crossing boundaries of place, language, genre or time (Hardwick). Indeed, as Maarten De Pourcq, Nathalie de Haan and David Rijser contend,

classical reception studies address plural forms as it consists of various attempts to engage with classical reception from the perspective of different fields of study.

Linda Hutcheon defined adaptation as repetition with variation in an extensive transposition that always involves both (re-)interpretation and (re-)creation. Adaptation is therefore a necessary process which alters/rewrites the original work to make it applicable and relevant within the contemporary context. Inevitably, artistic experimentation cannot exclude the socio-political dimension of plays that provide "destabilising and deconstructive readings" and obey "a genuine desire for recontextualisation" (Komporaly 5). Owen's play adapts the myth and exploits it to denounce the violence of austerity and the objectification of the young people in relation to their living conditions. Adaptations are engendered primarily from association: we approach the new interpretation in terms of the source, or model. That is, we are challenged to think of these two separate texts as simultaneously different and the same and authors are evoked in order to create distinction or identification.

From this view, adaptations set up a dramatic strategy that helps tie together theatre and political action by providing reinventions and recreations of well-known stories that offer new approaches, often aggressive and dissident, that demand the interrogation of traditional meanings and that might involve the transgression of boundaries (Komporaly). It also entails an authentic recontextualization with the specificities of the contemporary moment. Therefore, this article also examines the concept of precarity within this recontextualized consciousness. This connection emerges out of a desire to expand the way in which contemporary British drama engages adaptation with 'precariousness' in a convivial approach of contemporariness.

When it comes to describing "precarious", it is necessary to consider the different approaches of this concept. This term, defined by Johnson (1968) as "dependent; uncertain, because depending on the will of another; [...] changeable or alienable at the pleasure of another" is closely related to the human condition, since anything that

is precarious, whether it affects economic circumstances, emotional stability or an environment respectively, directly impacts individuals. Human beings are receptive and susceptible to external conditions. Hence, as Judith Butler states:

> We are moved to act when we are moved by something that affects us from the outside, from elsewhere, from the lives of others, imposing a surfeit that we act from and upon. According to such a view of ethical obligation, receptivity is not only a precondition for action but one of its constituent features (2012: 136).

I suggest that an explicit approach to precarity as a social ecology preconfigures a broad spectrum of spaces, people and sociopolitical conditions. It also draws attention to the similarities between 'ecology' and 'precarity' as the latter "exposes our sociality" and the dimensions of "our interdependency" (Puar et al. 170; Fragkou 6). The analysis of precarization in middle-class labour is not new but later elaborations on the phenomenon identify a more ontological condition encapsulating both political and intellectual terms and across different institutional, governmental, inter/disciplinary, and bodily contexts relevant for the application in literary texts. This particular understanding that precarity is present in our lives threads my connection with contemporariness and recontextuzalizations in drama just because "everyone is precarious, given our existence as bodily beings who depend upon one another for shelter and sustenance" (Butler 148).

In brief, this view resembles the reality of precarity when it comes to finding similarities between human beings resonating with the "Being-with" which "aporetically, means to be singular and plural at the same time" (Aragay and Middeke 5). In their volume *Of Precariousness: Vulnerability, Responsibilities, Communities in 21st-Century British Drama and Theatre* (2017), Mireya Aragay and Martin Middeke postulate that, although "Being-with" enables dual possibilities to occur simultaneously, every human being is different and unique with respect to others because of its personal nature and essence and also, partly because of its own immanence. This indicates that the possible similarities originated among people may vary since

the individuality of the human being is an inherent fact of life. For this reason, "what human beings ultimately share is their mortality, their finitude, their temporality, their transitoriness in time. Here lies the fundamental precariousness and the fundamental vulnerability of being and existence" (Aragay and Middeke 5).

Certainly, precarity is part of our lives but the marginalization of individuals associated to the term must be confronted. The integration of diverse social groups configured in societies is due to multiple factors including the economic incomes and political ideals. The very idea of group distinction can already be considered precarious, since it anticipates that this social structure will be made up of people who will be privileged with a 'good life' while others will suffer more unfavourable circumstances. In her lecture "Can One Lead a Good Life in a Bad Life?" (2012), Butler queries the theory of Theodor Adorno by asking about the relation of moral conduct to social conditions and how the broader operations of power and domination enter, or disrupt, our individual reflections on how to live at maximum level. Social categories and morality issues are inextricably related to this questioning as Gary Owen will explore in his precarious Iphigenia.

This disruption is also explored in Guy Standing's essay "The Precariat: From Denizens to Citizens?" (2012), in which he defines the group of the unprivileged as "the global precariat, consisting of millions of people scattered around the world, living and working in insecure jobs and conditions of life" (589). Those who belong to the precariat, referred to as precarians or denizens, are considered to be people "who have a more limited range of rights, and weaker entitlement to them, than the citizen" (590). This social structure has been continuously growing over time, mainly due to the influence of capitalism and globalization, with the inclusion of a vast number of different people with specific personal situations, from the young to the elderly, who either have no other choice, or who choose to be part of it. Nevertheless, arguably, the majority of precarians share a common feeling of uncertainty, due to the internalization of the phenomenon by assuming this state as permanent and irreversible,

together with the idea of considering it irredeemable. More specifically, Standing defined the *lumpen-precariat* as a "victim of being in the precariat who [has] fallen out of even that group into social illnesses, drug addiction and chronic anomie, listless, passive, waiting to die" (589). In short, experiencing precarious events leads to a particular understanding of life that forces to confront precarity itself.

In addition, the question of the problematic nature of precarity underlies the concept of resilience as a potential performative configuration. Resilience can be defined as "an individual's capabilities and resourcefulness to respond to problems, or people's ability to generate active solutions" (Aranda et al 549). The idea of being 'resilient' goes further to describe someone who embodies these characteristics as part of his/her inherent essence and identity. As Kay Aranda, Laetitia Zeeman and Julie Scholes state:

> The normal resilient subject reflects these capabilities or potentialities; to be resilient is to be independent, exercising rational choices, acting in one's own best interests and whose internal states are reflected in external behaviours (551).

Thus, resilience is perceived to be a natural condition of human beings, awakening towards certain events or circumstances. The benefits that can be obtained from this capability may eventually vary according to each individual, since it is possible to assume that each one acquires and exercises resilience differently. This conception places special emphasis on young people as they are more susceptible to all kinds of changes or, in other words, they become more vulnerable in terms of assimilating and facing adversities.

The younger generations are the ones subjected to intertwine precarity and resilience more frequently in the neoliberal era. The contemporary *Iphigenia* of Gary Owen clearly exemplifies this nexus by providing a broad spectrum of social and cultural conventions that problematize the daily life of the young precariat. Environment, family, school or social aids and resources are appointed as some of the factors to be involved in this process. As Dorothy Bottrell acknowledges, young people are forced "to refer to positive outcomes, not only

as normatively defined but also on their own terms, which in specific contexts of adversity may include and require resistances" (323). Instead of further pursuing an ontological acceptance of the inherent nature of resilience in young people, *Iphigenia* directly addresses the singularities of the precariat posing ethical questions of obligation and responsibility.

Iphigenia in Splott: A Resilient Heroine?

Winner of the George Devine, Meyer Whitworth and Pearson best play awards, Gary Owen represents one of the most unique voices on the contemporary British stage. Some of his titles include *The Shadow of a Boy* (2002), *Crazy Gary's Mobile Disco* (2014), *The Drowned World* (2014), *Mrs Reynolds and the Ruffian* (2010) and *Love Steals Us from Loneliness* (2010). He was also the co-writer and creator of the BBC Wales series *Baker Boys*. In June 2015, he made his Royal Court debut with *Violence and Son*, directed by Hamish Pirie.

Iphigenia in Splott— an innovative adaptation of the sacrifice of the resentful and angry Iphigenia against the dominant social ethos— looks back to Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* by navigating the mythical and literary background. The play was promoted as an adaptation of the classical Greek myth that narrates the sacrifices of a young girl demanded by the policies of austerity in Britain after the economic crisis of 2008. The play premiered at the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff on May 8, 2015. It earned the acclaim of critics and audiences and won the James Tait Black Prize for Drama at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and the UK Theatre Award for Best New Play in 2016. In a review for *The Guardian*, Andrew Haydon stated, "By any measure going, this is perfect theatre: intelligent, moving, and horribly, horribly relevant. Most of all, though, in those final moments, it feels like the start of a revolution" (Haydon). Most reviewers acknowledge the play's use of Euripidean sources, its participation in the tradition of British political theatre as well as the very strong effect achieved at the close of the play. As Rebeca Gualberto notes: "Owen's adaptation is overtly political, but quite significantly, so too is the myth

of Iphigenia" (123). Structurally, Owen's alterations of the original text are transitional and less abrupt than expected considering the reinvented codes to the contemporary recontextualization and specific engagements with the issue of precarity. For this purpose, Owen constructs a profoundly shattering monologue that adopts the fast-paced rhythms of performance poetry in his rewrite of the classical myth, which critically denounces the austerity measures in Britain, particularly their influence on the precariat's life and the access to the National Health System (NHS).

As Gualberto points out, the text looks back to Euripides' Iphigenia, recreating the story of the tragic Greek princess—the daughter of Agamemnon who was sacrificed to the gods for the sake of Greece—by reflecting upon the capriciousness of the ancient divinities and the legitimation of violence. Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis* was first produced posthumously at the Great Dionysian festival in 405 BCE. Critically, this play is also a rewriting that had been previously narrated and exploited in at least two poems from the Epic Cycle (Michelakis 21-26). Euripides effectively maps and concentrates on a single episode: the sacrifice of Iphigenia, which is dramatized "with a distinctive mixture of psychological intensity, pathos, irony, and astonishing reversals" (Grene and Lattimore 89). The relevance of this myth for the contemporary stage is not new. The cruelty of the plot and the psychology of the character constitute a perfect ground for a case of adaptation and reinterpretation.

Gary Owen's *Iphigenia in Splott* is set in Splott, a suburb in the south of Cardiff, Wales, characterised by constant decadence and influenced by vandalism, lack of civic education, poverty and violence. Effie's long monologue on a bare stage opens with her disdainful agitation giving the finger to the audience: "Yeah I know it's a shock. / But you lot, every single one / You're in my debt. / And tonight – boys and girls, ladies and gents – / I've come to collect" (Owen 1). Her accusations initiate the play with an implicit call for action as an "ethical solicitation" (Butler 2012a: 135) transgressing the boundaries between the actor and the audience. This defiant and aggressive atti-

tude holds up an unconventional mirror to one's living conditions as intrinsically entwined with the political and social dynamics of the system. This approach fosters a position of interpretation in spectators who are therefore urged to pose uncomfortable ethical and political questions.

As I argued in the theoretical framework of this article, Effie illustrates the collective of the *lumpen-precariat*: a group that may easily become *supplicants*, pleading for benefits or social services, relying on random decisions of bureaucrats making moralistic judgments on whether their behavior or attitude is deserving (Standing 2011). In the play, Effie performs the role which public media and discourse have prescribed for her; she enacts the precariat's (self-)destructive anger that makes the 'safe' middle class and 'respectable' working class fear her and her class, seeing her as unpredictable and guided by primitive and self-destructive instincts (Simonsen 65).

In a setting of *denizens*, Owen builds a character that could seem unrelated to a middle-class audience but focused—at the same time—on a Greek heroine as a potential 'one of us' rather than a member of the dangerous and self-destructive precariat. This contemporary adaptation suggests the possibility of the precariat's anger in socially transformative interpretations. In the classical text, Iphigenia is sacrificed for the benefit of the nation without replication, whereas Effie moves from 'fury' to 'anger' by addressing a transition of resilience towards an increasingly meaningful and justified anger.

Effie's chaotic and destructive lifestyle is totally transformed when she discovers her pregnancy after a one-night stand with Lee. The brief romantic encounter results in more triggering events for Effie's complex life: Lee is married, has a child and is not interested in her. Yet, the resilient subject emerges and decides to give birth to the baby, experiencing the decision positively as a hopeful and transformative experience which could help her out of her precarity.

The experience of being a single mother provides a wide horizon to the protagonist who feels now less alone. Her grandmother, Nan, helps Effie get a room of her own and her friend, Kevin, offers to

help her with the baby. This combination conjures up the image of a resilient heroine throwing before the audience's eyes a portrait of heightened empowerment in line with a renewed acknowledgement of herself and her identity. For some moments, the possibility of the Butlerian "good life" becomes a reality rather than an impossibility. Hence, "wellbeing and resilience are therefore argued to result from the ongoing iterative and interactive navigations between selves, communities and environments" (Aranda et al. 552).

Nevertheless, this moment of communion and hope futilely disappears to throw light on one of the main criticisms of Owen's production. The social and economic contexts of the play are the post-2010 cuts implemented by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition government as part of their austerity programme building the neoliberal commitment to minimized state benefits and social services. As Owen himself argues, the most vulnerable are "the ones that face the worst cuts even though they're the least able to take them" (Bano para. 17). Faced with pain, Effie goes to the hospital, where, after a series of tests, she waits in agony for the results to be positive while repeating to herself: "On my own. And not alone. And me and my little girl wait" (Owen 52). The absence of medical assistance in these decisive moments is conceived as the main motive for her desperation, which is quite noticeable in the repetition of "No one comes. No one comes. No one comes" (Owen 53). This scene scrutinizes the impact of the violence of austerity on the life of the precariat in a poignant attack on the British National Health system. As Iphigenia in Euripides' play must die for the global benefit of the war—boats must sail and Troy must fall—, Effie's daughter must be sacrificed for the sake of austerity which makes the system endure. As Gualberto notices, Effie is "sucked" into the dynamics of the myth because austerity economics (the myth) "is the ethical framework that legitimizes her suffering" (137).

Her daughter's death challenges her newly acquired strategies for resilience. Resonating with her initial *lumpen-precariat* fury, Effie's monologue affects the audience while addressing her appalling nar-

ration of the death of her premature daughter: "I hear my baby girl cry——and I hear her stop" (Owen 58). At the other end of this dramaturgic spectrum, Effie's resilience opens the gates toward a paradigm of overcoming all painful circumstances. Moreover, precariats are often depicted as an acknowledged class of the social dynamics whereby they are forced to accept their condition, often in the form of "unwarranted paternalism and coercion of individuals and groups identified as vulnerable" (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2).

To redress the ghostly haunting of her vulnerability, Effie becomes more poetical and less aggressive at the end of the play. The interpellations to the audience— "Your baby gets sick, she gets well because of me. Your mum gets ill, she gets healed because of me" (Owen 306)—explore the discrimination of the National Health system and the "economy of abandonment" for the less privileged (Povinelli). The embodiment of precarity captured in the desolation about the death of her baby operates a multiform dispossession that embraces again the myth of Iphigenia and her final subjugation.

Like in Euripides' play, Effie faces a choice. When the baby dies in an ill-equipped ambulance while they are being transferred to another hospital because there are not enough beds in special care, Effie is guaranteed several hundred thousand pounds in compensation (Nicolás). For her, that economic reparation could imply abandoning her precarious conditions of living: "Get me a house. / Get me a car. / Get me by; for years and years" (Owen 61). However, the resilient heroine once more sacrifices herself for her ethical disposition and asserts that there is no effective compensation for her loss. As Gualberto argues: "Effie becomes Iphigenia at this moment. As in Euripides's tragedy, she chooses to surrender to myth" (134). The legitimization of her sacrifice is deeply grounded on her recognition of belonging to the precariat class, the excluded one, the irrelevant and 'willing' to sustain the neoliberal system.

Iphigenia's acceptance of death reconciles dramatic fiction and mythical tradition. Both texts raise the possibility of modifying mythical tradition from the prism of fate, acceptance and resilience. In

doing so, Owen's play in effect reshapes the myth by adopting it to denounce "the inherently violent ethics which, in the myth, objectify and condemn the most vulnerable among us" (Gualberto 125). The theatrical space of the play attests ethical responsibility in the light of precarity. Effie's experience indirectly addresses the "task for politics" (Butler 2012a) signaling the nexus between resilience and precarity argued in this article. The audience is left to reflect on a more collective and institutionally shared notion of responsibility by reinterpreting fate, "good life" or dependency while placing some obligation on state institutions and economic measures of the British government.

Conclusion

Since the performative turn in the 1980s, performance has been largely viewed as a progressive force - an activity that supposedly produces a more democratic world by stressing the iterability and contingent nature of all identity and reality (Lavery). The formation of identity is dependent on multiple self-recognitions and the need for the other's recognition. Asking for recognition "is to solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future always in relation to the Other" (Butler 2004: 44). *Iphigenia in Splott* assumes the existence of the Other in the form of the audience to be instigated and claimed. The demand for recognition is reinterpreted as the demand to be the object of certain addresses, and establishing a scene of interlocution becomes the object of a struggle for recognition (Ferrarese 770). Theatre calls for a strong performance to prove itself, to confirm its claims by adhering to a mode of showing that prevents the audience from mistaking a theatrical event for an actual one.

Mythological adaptations definitely contribute to exploring a world of decadence and pessimism from a contemporary perspective. *Iphigenia in Splott* provides a starting point to analyze how Owen incorporates and transforms elements from classical mythology in his work, to the extent of forming a significant part of a hybrid narrative. Classical culture offers the author diverse elements that he modified and converted into transcendental social discussions. For example, the

Agamemnon figure in the play responsible for the human sacrifice is not just depicted as representative of neoliberal austerity in public welfare, but as any spectator who watches this tragedy instead of actively acting against. As Effie concludes, society should thank her: "Christ Effie, thanks. You took the cut for us" (Owen 306).

Furthermore, the motifs from classical mythology that Owen incorporates are reshaped to suit his own perspective, resulting in a unique kind of writing through a combination of slang language, poetry and soliloquy. The irreverent tone of the heroine is typical of the *lumpen-precariat* class, a group with no privileges and often dependent on state subsidies. Owen also decides to discuss the stereotypical view of Effie as representative of her class by suggesting how we tend to blame it for being the cause of the destruction of the welfare system.

This article has attempted to demonstrate the resilient nature of the character of Effie, who is able to overcome her precarious conditions. Through the adaptation of the myth, Owen emphasizes how the protagonist extracts from the audience an ethical response stemming from empathetic emotions and a consequent need for urgent action. Effie's story is just one of the many tragic lives that seem somehow to navigate between fate and reality. Thus, the play makes us see contemporary social suffering in the tragic light of Euripides. It shows how we still sacrifice vulnerable humans to sustain a system that is making a whole social group feel trapped and powerless in a desperate position. Therefore, readers and audiences can question their awareness of situations of vulnerability that further perpetuate precarity in society and thence agencially respond to such phenomena.

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[1] This article offers a new direction to some conclusions presented in my pedagogical application "Exploring Angry Vulnerability Through the Performance of *Iphigenia in Splott* by Gary Owen (2015)", included in the volume *What's Hecuba to Me? Personajes Míticos y Monólogos Dramáticos Contemporáneros para la Enseñanza Universitaria en Humanidades* edited by L. Romero and R. Gutiérrez. Universidade de Coimbra Press, 2023.

II - Rebooting the nation: racial, social and theatrical communities in revivals and verbatim plays

"We belong to the land": iteration as (dis)integration in Daniel Fish's 2019 revival of *Oklahoma!*

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Abstract: In *Directors and the New Musical Drama. British and American Musical Theatre in the 1980s and 1990s* (2008), Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen notes that "[t]he very term 'musical revival' reveals a significant difference between how we treat the musical theatre canon and other performing arts: classic operas and plays receive new 'productions' but musicals are 'revived.'" (111) Because of their supposed conformist discourse and aesthetic, musical plays, especially those belonging to the canon of the Golden Age (1943-1966), are conceived as dated theatrical works that would need to be "resuscitated" in order to survive. Because of that perception, revivals of musical works have often been much concerned with identity politics and visibility politics, as the 2019 revival of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* demonstrates. In this dark production directed by Daniel Fish at Circle in the Square Theatre, Ado Annie is interpreted by an actress in a wheelchair (Ali Stroker, who became the first wheelchair user to ever win a Tony Award for her performance), whereas the dream ballet choreographed by Agnes de Mille in 1943 is replaced by "a dance about outsiders" (Kourlas 2019a) interpreted by a Black dancer, Gabrielle Hamilton. The choice of *Oklahoma!* also signifies a more general questioning of the genre. A formal and aesthetic landmark in the history of American musical theatre, *Oklahoma!* implemented the principles of "integration" as the dominant formal conventions of the genre, all the while solidifying the overarching motif of the "marriage trope", analyzed by Raymond Knapp in *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (2005) as a symbol of national unity. This paper looks at Fish's revival's reinvestment of the musical's founding principle of *integration*: while reintegrating Oklahoma! into contemporary issues dealing with visibility, the revival also disintegrates many of the musical's founding myths and unifying principles.

Résumé : Dans *Directors and the New Musical Drama. British and American Musical Theatre in the 1980s and 1990s* (2008), Miranda Lundskaer-Nielsen note : "[t]he very term 'musical revival' reveals a significant difference between how we treat the musical theatre canon and other performing arts: classic operas and plays receive new 'productions' but musicals are 'revived.'". (111) En raison de leur discours et de leur esthétique supposés conformistes, les pièces appartenant au genre du *musical*, en particulier celles qui appartiennent au canon de l'âge d'or (1943-1966), sont conçues comme des œuvres théâtrales dépassées qui devraient être "ressuscitées" pour survivre. En raison de cette perception, les nouvelles itérations de ces *musicals* sont souvent scrutées au prisme des politiques d'identité et de visibilité, comme le montre la nouvelle production d'*Oklahoma!* de Rodgers et Hammerstein mise en scène par Daniel Fish en 2019 au Circle in the Square Theatre à Broadway. Dans ce *revival*, Ado Annie est interprétée par une actrice en fauteuil roulant (Ali Stroker, qui est devenue la première personne en fauteuil à remporter un Tony Award pour sa performance), tandis que le *dream ballet* chorégraphié par Agnes de Mille en 1943 est remplacé par un solo mettant en scène un corps habituellement relégué aux marges de la société ("a dance about outsiders", Kourlas 2019a), celui d'une danseuse noire, Gabrielle Hamilton. Le choix d'*Oklahoma!* signale également une remise en question plus générale du genre. *Oklahoma!* constitue un jalon formel et esthétique primordial dans l'histoire de la comédie musicale américaine : cette pièce a acté la mise en œuvre des principes d'"intégration" en tant que conventions formelles dominantes du genre, tout en insistant sur le motif du mariage analysé par Raymond Knapp dans *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity* (2005) comme symbole d'unité nationale. Cet article se penche sur la façon dont le *revival* de Daniel Fish, qui ouvre à Broadway dans un climat culturel centré sur la visibilisation des corps et expériences marginalisées, joue avec la notion même d'intégration si centrale pour comprendre l'héritage d'*Oklahoma!*: Fish réintègre le *musical* dans des questionnements contemporains, tout en "désintégrant" bon nombre

des mythes fondateurs, notamment autour de la question de l'union, que le *musical* avait contribué à entériner.

Keywords: contemporary American musical theatre; race and the musical; gender and the musical; revivals

Mots-clés : comédie musicale américaine contemporaine ; comédie musicale et race ; comédie musicale et genre ; *revivals*

Reiterating *Oklahoma!*, Redefining Integration

"How is it that the coolest new show on Broadway in 2019 is a 1943 musical usually regarded as a very square slice of American pie?" This is how *New York Times* critic Ben Brantley opens his review of Daniel Fish's 2019 production of the beloved Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *Oklahoma!*. First produced in 1943, adapted to the screen by Fred Zinnemann in 1955, and the product of countless productions,[1] *Oklahoma!* occupies a particular place in the pantheon of musical theater. The musical was immensely successful upon its opening,[2] and so was the original cast album,[3] which sold over 1 million copies and contributed to spreading the musical's popularity beyond Broadway theaters (Carter 228-229). Moreover, *Oklahoma!* redefined the contours of the American musical through "its refusal to conform to Broadway stereotypes" of the era (Carter xiv). Gone were the high-kick lines of scantily-clad chorus girls and the vaudeville-inspired composite acts that made up "musical comedies" at the time. Instead, composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II adapted Lynn Riggs's 1937 play, *Green Grow the Lilacs*, and turned it into what was heralded as a new, typically American theatrical genre (Carter xv).

In 1943, *Oklahoma!* was therefore heralded as a groundbreaking play. But, to quote Brantley's words again, its subsequent pantheonization seems to have turned it into "a very square slice of American pie" – a sweet, undisturbing family entertainment focusing on the courtship between the young Laurey and her cowboy love interest Curly, only disturbed by the menacing presence of Jud Fry, the brood-

ing farmhand. The courtship between the two lovers (mostly hinging on Laurey's accepting that Curly take her to the box social) and their subsequent union (that integrates them into the community through the ritual of marriage) foregrounds the integration of Oklahoma into the American nation through the acquiring of statehood (Knapp 120), celebrated by the ensemble at the beginning of Act II: "We know we belong to the land / And the land we belong to is great!" (Rodgers and Hammerstein 119) In the tense political context of the Trump presidency, reviving a musical that celebrates the "great" American land and the glorious days of the founding of the nation might appear as a manifestation of conservative, even "revisionist" nostalgia – erasing the violence at the roots of the nation-making process.[4]

However, Fish's production, which transferred from St Ann's Warehouse to Broadway in March 2019, is anything but rooted in nostalgia. In the aforementioned *New York Times* article, Brantley interprets Fish's production "as a mirror for our age of doubt and anxiety." In *The New Yorker*, Cynthia Zarin titled her interview with Fish about the production "An 'Oklahoma!' For Today." Both critiques highlight the modernization and reassertion of *Oklahoma!*'s contemporary relevance that Fish's production offers, far removed from a sepia-toned nostalgic outlook. A plethora of other critiques heavily insist on the production's "darkness"[5], echoing Agamben's equation of darkness with contemporaneity:

> le contemporain est celui qui fixe le regard sur son temps pour en percevoir non les lumières, mais l'obscurité. Tous les temps sont obscurs pour ceux qui en éprouvent la contemporanéité. Le contemporain est donc celui qui sait voir cette obscurité, qui est en mesure d'écrire en trempant la plume dans les ténèbres du présent.[6] (26)

The darkening of *Oklahoma!*'s bright landscapes and romantic story therefore seems to signal a desire to anchor the play in contemporary issues, dealing with the collective anxieties structuring contemporary America. Beyond the production's overall modernization of the original sound, setting and costumes, this desire is especially manifest through Fish's choice of a nontraditional cast.[7] Not only is Laurey

a Black woman, but Fish also cast Ali Stoker, who became the first wheelchair-user to ever be nominated and win a Tony Award, as Laurey's comically promiscuous foil, Ado Annie. Fish's *Oklahoma!* echoes a more general effort to revive Golden Age musicals while putting visibility and nontraditional casting at the forefront – for instance, the 2022 gender-bending revival of *1776* by Roundabout Theatre Company, with women, nonbinary and trans actors cast as the forefathers, or the 2022 West End production of *My Fair Lady* with Amara Okereke as the first Black Eliza Doolittle. Precisely, the (re)integration of performers that were excluded from the original conception of *Oklahoma!* seems to perform a similar process of integration as the one narratively performed by the play – i.e. the integration of the territory of Oklahoma within the US nation *and* the integration of the married couple, Laurey and Curly, into the community at the end. In *Oklahoma!*, therefore, integration is a multi-layered notion that has both thematic, performative and formal resonances.

Indeed, the motif of integration and "assimilation" (Most) that structures the musical is also the product of its wartime context – the debated involvement of the US in WW2,[8] the final years of Franklin Delano Roosevelt's second mandate and the heated implementation of his New Deal measures. Bruce Kirle comments: "In *Oklahoma!*, the writers provided reconciliation and resolution by retaining a vision of rural America that appealed to conservatives and populists, while inserting a New Deal message that even grassroots America could be a model of assimilation and tolerance" (251-252). Following Kirle's comment, the symbolic integration (both of the land and of the couple) participates in the construction of America's "inclusionist ideology" (Knapp 120). Integration in *Oklahoma!* is therefore a strong thematic current that aims at reconciling a fractured America and depicting a utopian community that would supersede differences, conflicts, and violence.

Yet it is as a formal notion that the term "integration" has most regularly been associated with the play. Indeed, *Oklahoma!* has often been called the first "integrated musical", a formal appraisal of the

musical that was publicized as early as the original production by the creative team (O'Leary) and that still generates commentaries from formal specialists as well as historians of musical theater. Closer to a Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* (literally, "total artwork"), the term "integrated musical" alludes to the way in which song, dance, music and dialogue form a whole that serves to advance the plot, giving the audience deeper insights into the characters' emotional states and psyche. Agnes de Mille's groundbreaking choreography for the dream ballet "Laurey Makes Up Her Mind" also asserted the role of dance as a storytelling tool – and de Mille is often credited for having ushered in the era of "director-choreographers" such as Jerome Robbins or Bob Fosse who reigned over Broadway in the 1960s. For all these reasons, *Oklahoma!* is widely acknowledged today as the first full-fledged modern musical:

> While the demonstration of the Principles of Integration may be the exception rather than the norm before the 1940s, the principles appeared regularly and increasingly in shows from the 1910s through the late 1930s before the integrated ideal became the law from post-*Oklahoma!* aspirant musicals of the 1940s. (Knapp et al. 103)

Carter also notes that "accounts of the Broadway musical often divide into pre- and post-*Oklahoma!* phases" (xi). However, many scholars and critics have long remarked that *Oklahoma!* was not the first musical to present the characteristics of an integrated musical: for instance, *Show Boat* (1927) is regularly used as an earlier example of integration (Block; Knapp et al. 136; Savran 215; O'Leary 142). Some scholars even question the validity of integration as a relevant notion to determine a musical play's formal superiority. For Scott McMillin for instance, the specific pleasure of musical theater is drawn from "the crackle of difference" (2) between the musical number and the dialogues – debunking, as a result, the vision of integration as a formal standard to be followed for musicals to be successful and provide spectators with pleasure. James O'Leary, through his study of the original production's publicity, also nuances the status of *Oklahoma!* as the formal example by which subsequent plays had to abide: "Integration was never simply a formal principle to begin with. It was a performative

act of cultural positioning" (180). For O'Leary, heralding integration as the only way to make musicals (through the mythical positioning of *Oklahoma!* as a formal model) risks "[reaffirming] highbrow mores while obscuring other traditions and values" (181) and therefore, preventing other stories and performances from being told and seen.

In the chapter dedicated to "integration" in *The Oxford Handbook to the American Musical*, Geoffrey Block points out that "[d]espite […] forays into racial politics, however, 'integration' on Broadway was, at least until the 1960s, an aesthetic aspiration largely unconcerned with racial politics" (Knapp et al. 97). Interestingly, he links the formal reinventions of the musical that occurred in the 1960s with a new understanding of integration as linked with politics of identity and questions of inclusivity. Circling back to Fish's *Oklahoma!*, I argue that his contemporary, dark and nontraditionally-cast revival also concurs with a formal disintegration of *Oklahoma!*'s integrative aesthetic. Paradoxically, the elements that reintegrate *Oklahoma!* into 21st-century America become the tools that undo the play's myths of formal *and* thematic integration. Analyzing the 2010 multiracial revival of *Oklahoma!* performed at the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., Donatella Galella points out the contradictory pulls multiracial productions of *Oklahoma!* necessarily navigate. Using Jill Dolan's concept of "utopian performatives"[9], she argues that these nontraditional casting practices both signal change while perpetuating the illusion of a post-racial world: "[…] the multiracial production of this particular musical staged a utopian performative and keyed into the age of a black president residing in the White House, which is only a few miles from the theater; it signals a step forward in representation, but also a continuation in structure" (233). I argue that Fish's production, though being faced with similar risks, uses these "utopian performatives" as contemporary performances of disintegration.

This article will first focus on the way Fish's production reboots the folk essence of *Oklahoma!* in order to expose the cracks beneath the polished surface of the pastoral world upon which the world of the play is built. Another element of disintegration comes from the dou-

ble-edged nature of performance in this production: they are both the markers of the play's desire to include and integrate "othered" bodies but also the instruments of a formal disintegration. Performance becomes the trigger that prompts formal changes – changes that accompany and shape the genre's grappling with contemporary issues surrounding race and gender.

Rebooting the folk musical: disintegrating the pastoral of *Oklahoma!*

In his seminal study *The American Film Musical,* Rick Altman identified the folk musical as one of the dominant subcategories of the film musical and includes *Oklahoma!* as one of the textbook examples of the subgenre. Altman first exposes the idea that "the folk musical projects the audience into a mythicized version of the cultural past" (272). This "mythicized […] cultural past" evokes a somewhat fossilized vision of American cultural traditions, usually encapsulated in the term "Americana." Yet, Altman also adds: "This mythical vision of the folk musical is in many ways more complex, because it must grapple more seriously with a lived reality" (272). This "lived reality" points to the folk musical's anchoring into the mundane and daily activities of the nuclear family that Altman identifies as one of the standard elements of the folk musical (273-277). The phrase "lived reality" also signals that this "cultural past" is not necessarily always frozen in myth, but follows the cultural transformations that Americans witness and actively engage with. The folk musical therefore hinges on spectators' reconstruction of this cultural past as well as their own, new cultural references that are now part of contemporary American culture. Fish's production does not shy away from embracing *Oklahoma!*'s status as a decidedly American musical, while inserting more contemporary elements of Americana. His recreation precisely navigates the "more complex" dimension of the folk musical as the elements of American culture are used to better deconstruct the polished exterior of the pastoral world of *Oklahoma!* and directly confronting the audience to the fractures at the foundation of the United States.

Fish's decision to stage *Oklahoma!* is linked to the director's feeling that "his [previous, more experimental] work and the audience were parting ways" (Schuessler). The musical's status as a popular form of entertainment hints at a desire to connect the theatrical material and the audience. Through his reinterpretation of the musical's vernacular aesthetic as a participatory experience, Fish's revival proposes a new reading of integration, one that is also aimed at the audience. The integrative power at the core of Fish's *Oklahoma!* is especially highlighted through the setting of the theater housing the production. First-row spectators, benefitting from the intimate setting of the theater-in-the-round at Circle in the Square Theatre, sit at the tables along with the other farmers, and the chili pots laid on the rustic wooden tables are to be consumed at intermission.[10] As a result, spectators are included in folk traditions that are part of the American vernacular, like the churning of butter, the shucking of the corn or typical events of rural life, like the box social in Act II. The production's costume design enabled the audience to identify more easily with the characters: getting rid of the period outfits that were privileged in the original production, in the 1955 film and even in more recent revivals (like Trevor Nunn's 1999 production), Fish's production offers a contemporary take on typical cowboy-style attires – Levi's jeans and denim skirts, leather cowboy boots and chaps, checkered shirts and crop tops. Whereas Rodgers and Hammerstein's original orchestration and score still bore the trace of European operettas, the revival's music is anchored in the typically Southern and Midwestern sounds of bluegrass and country music: the rattling twang of the banjo and the mandolin replaces the lushness of strings. Curly's singing style heavily relies on distinctive country singing techniques, like the yodels, growls and nasal falsetto which are very far from the brightness and cleanness of the classical interpretations of the songs. This quintessentially American music is therefore more gritty and less "pretty", but also more familiar.

The familiarity of these typical American sounds accompanies a depiction of the territories that is very much akin to a pastoral. Both the opening number, "Oh What A Beautiful Morning," and the eponymous opening number of Act II, when the ensemble gathers

onstage to celebrate Oklahoma's newly acquired statehood, depict a land of plenty, a vast space for all agricultural dreams to come true. While Curly opens the play by singing "There's a bright golden haze on the meadow" (Rodgers and Hammerstein 11), the ensemble opens Act II by singing of "Flowers on the prairie where the June bugs zoom, / Plen'y of air and plen'y of room, / Plen'y of room to swing a rope!" (119). The welcoming vastness of these bountiful plains comes to be associated with soaring feelings of hope and endless possibilities. But far from a sentimental outlook on the rural life of frontier communities, Fish's production uses a specific color palette to deconstruct the pastoral world of the Midwestern prairies. As mentioned in the introduction, reviewers unanimously insisted on the dark tone of the production. This darkness is indeed at the center of the play's marketing strategy: the posters for the Broadway production display a very minimalistic black-and-white design. The top half of the poster is painted white, whereas the bottom half is painted black. The title, in black capital letters, is simply poised on the brink of this color divide. Interestingly, this divide and the positioning of the black section at the bottom of the poster hint at the subterranean menace contained within every pastoral. Indeed, if the pastoral traditionally posits "a world innocent of politics" (Gray and Robinson 58), it is one that remains "continually endangered by a surrounding world of political and economic corruption" (58). Fish's production unearths the threat and darkness that accompany every pastoral, not by contrasting it with an urban environment, but by transforming the pastoral itself into a darkened environment. The luminous blue skies and golden cornfields that have characterized a lot of the revivals of *Oklahoma!* are here replaced by a flat drawing of the prairie painted on a plywood paneling at the back of the stage, in grayish tones. This palette and the flatness of the landscape are reminiscent of Dorothea Lange's iconic photographs, commissioned by the Farm Security Administration to document the migration of Oklahoma workers during the Dust Bowl in the 1930s. The desolate gray house adorning the paneling therefore subverts the image of the "land of plenty," turning this land into a sterile, fruitless and potentially hostile environment. Danger has al-

ready surfaced within the community – the wall of guns ("racks upon racks upon racks of shotguns" [Reed and Blank 129]) that adorns one side of the stage, more specifically, is a frontal reference to the muted violence seeping in the community. To a certain extent, Fish's production goes back to the roots of the myth of the frontier as it was developed by Frederic Jackson Turner at the end of the 19th century, unearthing its inherently violent dimension. Turner conceptualized the constitution of the "American type" as inherently linked to a form of violence: "It was his [the pioneer's] task to fight with nature for the chance to exist. […] The rifle and the ax are the symbols of the backwoods pioneer. They meant a training in aggressive courage, in domination, in directness of action, in destructiveness" (269-270). In Fish's production, the wall lined with racks of shotguns is a constant reminder of the underlying violence structuring the pioneer community, as well as contemporary America.

Interestingly enough, the enactment of this violence triggers the disintegration of one of the structuring motifs of Golden Age musicals, a dramatic device Raymond Knapp calls "the marriage trope." For Knapp, "the success or failure of [the characters'] relationship(s) might serve as a marker for the resolution or continuation of conflicts between larger antagonistic forces" (10). Just after the company's celebratory number, "Oklahoma", and as they celebrate the wedding of Laurey and Curly, Jud enters, menacing to disrupt their wedding by forcefully kissing Laurey. Considered the "villain" of the play, Jud is also the "Other" in the community – the menace repressed by the pastoral. In the original production, Jud then attempts to kill Curly before falling on his own knife. But in Fish's version, as soon as Jud starts to move towards Curly, the latter "shoots him with shocking swiftness from several feet away, blood splattering all over the bride and groom's white clothes" (Larson). The gorey, vivid touches of red on white materialize the violence of prairie justice, revealing the blood at the root of the foundation of the state of Oklahoma. It is also a reinterpretation of Curly's responsibility: in most productions, Curly accidentally kills Jud after they physically struggle (Jud falling onto his knife or Curly defending himself and killing Jud accidentally). Fish's

production chooses to consciously present Curly as another source of violence threatening the peace of the community. The critic's mention of a "shocking swiftness" hints at the impactful and blunt confrontation to violence experienced by audience members: the shock value of this final scene directly points to Fish's Brechtian wish to confront the audience to the disintegration of the many myths contained within *Oklahoma!*. The production plays on the sense of familiarity provided by the integration of the audience and the sudden feeling of alienation audience members might feel when brutally confronted to the hidden violence and darkness of the pastoral. In the production, light acts as a tool of exposition that brutally and even crudely reveals the dark side of the pastoral. Indeed, as critic Soraya MacDonald recalls: "The first thing one notices upon entering Circle in the Square is the aggressive brightness of the room's lighting (more than a few members of the audience wore sunglasses through the performance)" (in Reed and Blank 129). Scott Zielinski's lighting design is built on this black and white alternation, "[going] from blindingly bright (…) to dead dark" (Brantley and Green). Such use of light is highly reminiscent of Harold "Hal" Prince's original staging of *Cabaret* in 1966, in which he used a lighting rod to temporarily blind the audience (Garebian 42) – linking the characters' indifference towards the rise of Nazism in 1930s Germany with 1960s American spectators' passivity towards the racist underpinnings of the US society in the context of the fight for civil rights led by Black Americans (Garebian 102).

Similarly to Prince, Fish's integration of the audience into the show therefore serves a Brechtian goal of alienation: confronting the audience to their own horizon of expectations, and suddenly creating a disturbing effect that acts as a jarring note that tarnishes their vision of the utopian ideal of *Oklahoma!*. In that respect, Fish's production is not so much about presenting a new utopia, but more about unearthing the inherent threat and corruption contained in every pastoral – in that case, the violence of prairie justice and frontier communities, a violence that also echoes the formation of the American nation in those Western territories. The ending of Fish's production, which I earlier analyzed as a disintegration of the marriage trope, could also

be interpreted as the impossible repair of the fracture between Black and white Americans. It is also the failure of a mixed-race marriage, a failure that recalls the anti-miscegenation laws that many US states implemented as late as 1967. The indelible red trace of violence imprinted on these wedding outfits disintegrates this performative union of contraries, which is symbolically shown here as inherently tainted. Therefore, despite a nontraditional casting initially construed as an inclusive promise, the production addresses the potentially illusory and unrealizable nature of such promise.

Double-sided performances

Forgoing the utopia contained within the pastoral of *Oklahoma!*, the production nonetheless seems to offer a different kind of utopia, one that is embodied and performed by the nontraditional cast. As Warren Hoffman writes: "*Oklahoma!* rewrites history by expunging the painful aspects of frontier history while celebrating the rewards of white American pioneer spirit, features that have helped solidify *Oklahoma!*'s place in the pantheon of beloved American musicals" (66). It is precisely *Oklahoma!*'s white-centered narrative that once permitted its elevation to the status of model musical – but it is that same narrative that widens the discrepancy with 21st-century plays, and seemingly relegates the musical to obsolescence. Far from capitalizing on the immutability conferred by such canonization, the casting practices of Fish's iteration of *Oklahoma!* therefore seem to have a double impact: they re-solidify "*Oklahoma!*'s place in the pantheon of beloved American musicals" by presenting a vision of a diverse America more adapted to 21st-century concerns with identity, but they also comparatively remind the audience of the traditionally white narrative that supports motifs of reconciliation and unity.

Daniel Fish is not the first director to revise and correct *Oklahoma!*'s all-white community with a racially diverse casting. William A. Everett mentions three other productions (in 2010, 2012 and 2018) that include Black American actors in leading roles and/or gender-bending casting practices (most notably, the 2018 version at the

Oregon Shakespeare Festival). Interestingly enough, new productions of *Oklahoma!* should be more concerned with the absence of Native Americans. And yet, none of the different revivals listed by Everett nor Fish's production cast Native American actors or actors with Native American ancestry or heritage. Other bodies bear the weight of these productions' corrective intent – in Fish's *Oklahoma!*, those of women, Black and/or disabled. In other iterations of the play, as mentioned in the introduction, casting choices always hinged on symbolic representations. As Galella reminds us, choosing to cast Jud as a black man is a decision that has symbolic implications, something that Everett also explains when looking at the 2012 production at Seattle's 5th Avenue Theater.[11] In a post-racial world, a Black actor could portray a villain as much as a brown or white actor. But in the wake of Black Lives Matter, US spectators will be extremely sensitive to the stereotypical association of Black men with otherized characters, outcasts who deserve to be outcasts because they are associated with filth (suggested by the repelling "smokehouse" where Jud lives: "It is a dark, dirty building where the meat was once kept" [Rodgers and Hammerstein 59]), too sexual (Jud has pictures of naked girls on his wall, as Curly remarks: "That there pink picture—now that's a naked woman, ain't it?" [Rodgers and Hammerstein 60]) and violent (when asked by Curly what he does with his gun, Jud curtly replies: "Shoot things" [Rodgers and Hammerstein 60]). Fish chose the strikingly pale and blonde-haired actor Patrick Vaill in a clear rebuttal of such stereotypes, also signaling "an apparent unmarked-ness to whiteness that can be safely laughed at or villainized", as Galella remarks (221). Therefore, as the introduction underlined, it is the play's most prominent female characters, Laurey and her comical foil, Ado Annie, that bear the weight of reintegrating the ostracized bodies. This highlights the role of female bodies as central points of intersection between gender, race and disability: because the female body has been so celebrated throughout the history of musical theater,[12] they become semaphores that lead the audience to go beyond the characters and look at *who* performs them. This phenomenon is not limited to Fish's production, of course. The intense focus that musical numbers put on

the physical and vocal prowess of the performers embodying the characters is also at the source of the pleasure and applause of spectators of every musical. As McMillin remarks: "We do not think of real people while we watch the performance. We think of performance people, people who can sing and dance, numbers people" (59). Spectators rarely only applaud the characters' emotional journey in itself – they applaud the performance that musically and/or choreographically signifies this evolution, and therefore the performer. But because nontraditional casting adds layers of significance to the performance, it also shapes and reconfigures the expectations we have of a musical theater performance.

This is especially visible in the number "I Cain't Say No", performed by Ali Stroker as Ado Annie, in which she explains that she "cain't say no" to men and is overwhelmed by her sexual desire: "Soon as I sit on their laps / Somethin' inside of me snaps / I cain't say no!" (Rodgers and Hammerstein 32-33). If this number initially aims at poking fun at the self-consciously promiscuous behavior of Ado Annie, Ali Stroker's powerful and dynamic interpretation enacts the sincere and exhilarating pleasure she derives from this yielding to her desires, as she explains to Laurey: "Other girls are coy and hard to catch / But other girls ain't havin' any fun!" (Rodgers and Hammerstein 33). The evocation of a body that suddenly takes control over reason evokes a powerful physicality that subverts the immobility associated with disability. This is signified through her circulation on stage: she moves flirtatiously from one character to the other, easily turning her wheelchair around while holding a microphone. Her expressions (from winks to exhilarated grins) convey the pleasure and excitement she takes in singing as akin to the sexual pleasure the text alludes to. Vocally, the performance is especially virtuosic insofar as the number is to be sung in a mixed belt, requiring the fullness and warm resonance of chest voice while moving across the singer's passaggio on several occasions. The display of vocal mastery culminates in the final word, "No," which Stroker stretches across more than one octave in one breath, ending with a joyful and climactic cheer. The powerful dimension of the performance is the occasion for the audience to admire

the performer's ability, all the more so since belting while sitting in a wheelchair is an especially complex technical feat as it is a style of singing that engages the entire body and demands a strong core support. Her sitting position subverts the traditional image of the Broadway diva who usually stands tall, arms outstretched and feet firmly planted on the ground. As Stroker explains, beyond the different techniques she resorts to to comply with the physical demands of belting, singing somehow allows for movement:

> I wear a brace that supports my core, and I do all my movement from my neck and my shoulders. I sing from my upper back — these muscles are what I engage to get power to sing. But singing for me is not technical, it's spiritual. It is a cry. It is a source of expression. It is where I don't have limits. I feel like I can fly when I sing. One of the crazy parts about being paralyzed is you have such a specific relationship to your body. You know the parts that you cannot use, you cannot feel. So the parts that you can, sometimes you feel like you have superpowers. (Paulson 2019b)

The mention of "flying" points to soaring movements of elevation: voice is no longer just a transmitter of emotion, but it becomes an agent and conduct of movement. The motif of elevation is here especially powerful as the audience might be more used to viewing the disabled body as static and irretrievably linked to the ground. The number's soaring force and energy – an energy that is all the more physical since Ado Annie defends a sexuality that hinges entirely on joyful willingness and pleasure – contradicts the visual signs of immobility usually associated with disability. Not only does this reshape spectators' preconceived notion of what "Broadway bodies" are, but it also transforms the way movement is traditionally viewed on the Broadway stage.

The revival's take on the character of Laurey also highlights these deconstructions. Vocally, Rebecca Naomi Jones' interpretation of Laurey is interesting as it does not really conform to the traditional soprano range associated with Golden Age ingénues. Analyzing the 2019 cast album recording of "People Will Say We're in Love" (a duet between Curly and Laurey), Jesse Green comments in *The New York Times*:

> […] for the current revival, Laurey's chorus has been transposed to the key of A Major, taking her into a smoky belt range that starts low and never gets above a C sharp.
>
> In the lowered version, Ms. Jones never goes all-out soprano.
>
> Without the high notes, and the singing tone that comes with them, all traces of operetta are gone. There's no more showing off for the audience, or even for Curly; it's as if Laurey has other things on her mind than making pretty sounds. She's playful, but worried.

As much as this vocal range deconstructs the standard vocal register associated with the role of the ingénue and the character of the ingénue itself, Jones's vocal performance also subverts the traditional numbers performed and associated with Black female performers and characters in musical theater, i.e. showstopping numbers known as "the big black lady song" (Dinero 30) that usually feature resonant and powerful belting, much like the character of Effie in *Dreamgirls* (1980). Jones's understated performance ("There's no more showing off for the audience") goes against the stereotypical excess usually associated with Black female performance in musical theater. The deconstruction of such a stereotype as well as Jones's authentic, simpler vocal performance, deprived of any virtuosic demonstrations, once again disrupt audience expectations as to what a Black female performer sounds like in a musical number.

This disintegration of recurring tropes associated with female Black performances in musical theater is furthered through the dream ballet sequence in which Laurey "makes up her mind" between Jud and Curly. Choreographed by John Heginbotham, this version of the dream ballet presents the originality of doubling Laurey's character: Rebecca Naomi Jones is not the one performing the dance number; another Black dancer (Gabrielle Hamilton), who does not appear in the ensemble, stars in this solo. The number emphasizes aesthetic circulations between the commercial art of musical theater and more experimental forms of modern dance, referencing for instance Alvin Ailey's athletic style and work on lower-body extensions.[13] The choreography is a jubilant and explosive display of athleticism, a symbol of Laurey's sexual awakening. The doubling of Laurey's role is especially

interesting as it hinges on the double-sided nature of these performances – as both inclusive and marking an aesthetic dislocation in the smooth passage from dialogue to musical or dance numbers. In a *New York Times* article, Justin Heginbotham gives a very telling anecdote:

> At one point during its creation, Mr. Heginbotham questioned a choice Ms. Hamilton had made and asked Mr. Fish, "Is that how that character would behave?"
>
> Mr. Heginbotham winced at the memory. "He looked at me incredulously, and he said my name — which I knew was really serious: 'John, what's the difference?' But what he meant was, what do you mean, *character*? It's Gabbie. We're watching Gabrielle dance. (Kourlas 2019a)

The dancer is not just a mere incarnation of the character of Laurey. The close-ups of her face projected on the back wall, the sound of her breath (which is audible to the audience) create an intimate and authentic encounter with the performer, which seems to disrupt the project of the integrated musical. The performer emerges out of the character as Heginbotham's anecdote reveals, and momentarily draws the spectators out of the enveloping world of the show. In the dream ballet, the music to which the choreography is set also explores this sense of discontinuity: the first part of the choreography is set to a reprise of "Oh What A Beautiful Mornin'" rife with electric guitars, culminating in a jarring and discordant cacophony of sounds, while the second part turns back to strings, more typical of the instrumentation of Rodgers and Hammerstein's musicals. Even the dancer's costume creates a rupture with the rest of the production: her sequined black and white tee-shirt is more reminiscent of 21st-century ready wear than the cowboy attires evoked earlier. These elements purposefully detach the dream ballet from the rest of the play, creating a tear in the tight-knit fabric of the integrated musical. Of course, the number still moves the action forward, as it choreographically suggests that Laurey chooses Curly. And yet, because the audience is actively meeting the performer more than just the character, it is also temporarily removed from the narrative of the musical.

The central visibility of this Black body *demands* that we look at it as a distinct body, and therefore unsettles the cohesive principles of

the musical. In that respect, the number echoes Scott McMillin's interpretation of musical numbers as interruptions that generate layered understandings of the performance:

> The numbers in the Rodgers and Hammerstein version do not advance the characters or further the book so much as they change the characters and the book into new versions of themselves that play against our normal sense of identity and story. The numbers interrupt our normal sense of character and plot with song and dance, and what we are left with is not the "one" but the "multiple." (21)

For McMillin, the musical numbers dislocate a sense of continuity more than they perpetuate it. But more than this, what the audience is confronted to is "the 'multiple'." The term is significant insofar as it not only points to the multiple versions of the characters (who operate on different modes depending on whether they sing and dance or whether they don't), but also to their doubling as both characters *and* performers, and to the diversity of the bodies present on stage. Symbolically, the fragmentation of the "one" into the "multiple" also signifies the deconstruction of the exclusively white-centered (and ableist) narrative of *Oklahoma!* – a deconstruction that can only be efficiently brought forward by *formal* disintegrations as well.

Conclusion

The nontraditional casting of bodies usually excluded from Golden Age musicals in a canonized play such as *Oklahoma!* therefore seems irretrievably linked to a formal disintegration of the model of the "integrated musical", or at least to the necessity to look for formal reinventions accompanying more diverse and inclusive castings. The fact that Fish's production first had a run off-Broadway (a trajectory usually undertaken by newly created shows or by revivals of shows that are not considered as popular as *Oklahoma!*) shows that the avant-garde aesthetics of non-commercial theater are perhaps one way of circumventing the continuation of power structures associated with nontraditional casting on Broadway that Galella underlines. Indeed, in an article from *The New York Times*, Jennifer Schuessler writes: "Mr.

Fish's arrival on Broadway […] might seem like a remarkable turn of events for an artist who has spent much of his career running in the opposite direction of American commercial theater." The revival's journey off-Broadway and its foray into more avant-garde or experimental aesthetics metaphorically represents the necessity for *Oklahoma!* to be reinvented further away from the capitalist frame of commercial theater that dictates its aesthetic and thematic components in order to be reiterated as a decidedly contemporary musical.

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1 "It still receives more than six hundred productions per year" (Carter xi).

2 "[…] after a triumphant opening, *Oklahoma!* stayed on Broadway for five years and (beginning in 1947) in London's West End for three" (Carter xii). Compared with the thirty-five-year run of *Phantom of the Opera* on Broadway (from 1988 until April 2023), *Oklahoma!*'s run might seem relatively short but in 1943, it signaled unprecedented success, and was a record only bested by *My Fair Lady* in 1954 (Hischak 202).

3 *Oklahoma!* was the first musical to record the cast with full orchestrations. This definitely set a precedent for subsequent original cast recordings of musicals (Hischak 202).

4 Oklahoma marked the final stop of the infamous Trail of Tears that forcefully relocated 60,000 Native American West of the Mississippi river between 1830 and 1850.

5 *New York Times* critics Ben Brantley and Jesse Green mention the "dark golden haze in this reclaimed *Oklahoma!*;" *New Yorker* critic Sarah Larson mentions "Daniel Fish's Dark Take on *Oklahoma!*," while *The Atlantic*'s Tom S. Purdum entitles his review of the play "'Oklahoma!' Gets a Dark, Brilliant Revival." *The Independent* did the same for its preview of the production's West End transfer: "Daniel Fish on his dark new *Oklahoma!*: 'We're trying to deal with violence, injustice and community" (Crompton).

6 "The contemporary is the one who stares at his time – not to catch sight of its lights, but its obscurity. All times are dark for those who feel their contemporaneity. The contemporary is he who can see this obscurity, and who is able to write by dipping his quill in the darkness of the present." (my translation)

7 In *No Safe Space: Re-Casting Race, Ethnicity and Nationality in American Theatre,* Angela C. Pao explains that the term "nontraditional casting" exists along several other terms (multiracial, multiethnic, multicultural, diverse, innovative or experimental) to designate "the rich array of casting practices […] that have burgeoned in the United States since the 1960s" (2). She explains

that, though "widely adopted among theater professionals and the mass media," "dissatisfaction with this designation surfaced along with questions as to whether it is always clear when race, ethnicity, or gender is central to the development of a particular character or play." However, the choice of the word *nontraditional* to designate the production's casting practices has been prioritized in this article because, as Pao underlines, "[i]t is inclusive in terms of both the people affected and the approaches developed. Perhaps even more importantly, it foregrounds the fact that what American audiences were accustomed to seeing on the stage before the era of multiracial casting was not a truthful correspondence to reality, as one might think from hearing many of the objections, but the application of historical conventions" (4-5).

8 As Carter underlines, the promotional material and the reviews that attest for the reception of Oklahoma! reveal that "*Oklahoma!* was easily construed as a morale-boosting part of the war effort" (xv).

9 In *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at Theatre*, Dolan coins the term "utopian performatives" to define "small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense" (20). Donatella Galella envisions the 2010 Arena Stage multiracial production of *Oklahoma!* as a "utopian performative of inclusion" insofar as it "illustrated how exhortations for togetherness can map onto calls for racial diversity, equality, and eradication of identity lines that alienate individuals" (214).

10 Daniel Fish initially envisioned his production under the label of "dinner theater" (Schuessler).

11 Everett remarks that, however well-intentioned the creative team might have been, casting a Black man as Jud was read as a way of confining Black actors to tropes of violence, therefore reinforcing negative stereotypes: "the creators, who were striving for a multiracial production in the best sense of the idea, according to several reviewers instead ended up inscribing negative stereotypes of African American men as violent and abusive. When the white Curly suggests that Jud hang himself – something that happens in the original libretto – he now, in a literal sense, would be seen as perpetrating white-on-black violence in the form of lynching, as the *Seattle Times* reviewer Nicole Brodeur noted" (366). Galella notes that the Arena Stage creative team was sensitive to this issue, deciding that "Jud should not be played by a black or Native American actor so as to avoid stereotypes of drunk, sexually threatening, working-class male villains of color" (221). However, the team also "briefly considered casting a Native American actor as Jud because his outsider status and death would resonate with the violent treatment of indigenous peoples by the federal state. The team

ultimately claimed that it did not find a suitable singing actor and expressed concerns about offending audiences with such a portrayal. White actors were cast […], suggesting an apparent unmarked-ness to whiteness that can be safely laughed at or villainized" (221).

12 As Stacy Wolf remarks in *A Problem Like Maria*, "The very action of singing and dancing—the foundation of performance in musicals—requires an athleticism that demonstrates women's physical and vocal strength. The female principal in most musicals is visually and aurally dominant. She stands center stage, the story is built around her, and the songs are written for her as solo presentations" (22).

13 Demetia Hopkins-Greene, a former dancer at the Alvin Ailey Company, who undertook Gabrielle Hamilton's *Oklahoma!* solo in December 2019, explains that her work at the company greatly inspired and "prepared" her for this number (Kourlas 2019b).

"Blind to it. Until you're not": Repetitions in *Lament for Sheku Bayoh* by Hannah Lavery

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Abstract: Hannah Lavery confronts the Scottish post-racial national myth with its construction and legacy through the voices of racialised people. In *Lament for Sheku Bayoh* the motif of repetition and re-iterability is key to the theme and structure of the play. It features in the use of verbatim aesthetic, relying on the recycling of real words; in the musical variations and echoes that puts rhythm into the performance; and in the intermedial quality of the work that makes its reception duplicable. All three aspects serve the tragic narrative of the death of Sheku Bayoh, a black Scots engineer, killed by police force in 2015 and seek to create a space for change.

Résumé : Hannah Lavery confronte le mythe national d'une Écosse post-raciale à sa construction et à son héritage à travers les voix de personnes racialisées. Dans *Lament for Sheku Bayoh*, le motif de la répétition et de la réitérabilité est essentiel sur les plans thématiquess et structurel. Il se retrouve dans l'utilisation de l'esthétique verbatim, qui repose sur le recyclage de mots réels, dans les variations musicales et les échos qui rythment la représentation, et dans la qualité intermédiale de l'œuvre qui rend sa réception duplicable. Ces trois aspects servent le récit tragique de la mort de Sheku Bayoh, un ingénieur écossais noir, tué par les forces de police en 2015, et cherchent à créer un espace pour faire advenir la prise de conscience et le changement.

Keywords: Scottish theatre; National Theatre of Scotland; race; racism; injustice; intermediality; performance; ethics; relational theatre

Mots clés : Théâtre écossais ; National Theatre of Scotland ; race ; racism ; injustice ; intermedialité ; performance ; éthique ; théâtre relationnel

On the 3rd of May 2015, Sheku Bayoh, a 31-year-old Black Scottish engineer, died following a confrontation with law enforcement in the town of Kirkcaldy (Fife, East Coast Scotland). In November 2019, as Bayoh's family launched a campaign seeking justice, the Scottish Government Justice Secretary, Humza Yousaf, requested a public inquiry into the circumstances of Sheku Bayoh's death. By June 2024, the inquiry was still ongoing[1] with repeated mass vigils organised over the last years. Following the death of George Floyd and the surge of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, Sheku Bayoh has been called "Scotland's George Floyd" (Gilmour) and this case epitomises one of the main anti-racist battles Scotland has seen in the last decades.

Hannah Lavery is a playwright, poet, performer, and director. She was appointed poet laureate, or "Makar", of Edinburgh in 2021 and is an associate artist with the National Theatre of Scotland where she creates intermedial works at the crossroads of theatre, spoken word and performance, addressing issues around identity, race, and belonging. *Lament for Sheku Bayoh*[2] (2020) is her artistic response to this event. It was co-produced by the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh, the National Theatre of Scotland, and the Edinburgh International festival. The play was first introduced as a work-in-progress at the Lyceum Theatre in 2019 and subsequently recorded as a film during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. It resumed live performances for the Edinburgh International Festival in 2021. The performance was led by an all-female cast of three Black performers (Courtney Stoddart, Scottish-Caribbean poet and performer, Scottish actress Saskia Ashdown, and Glaswegian composer, singer, and performer Patricia Panther) and one singer: Beldina Odenyo, Kenyan-born Scottish musician and poet. This "lament" is built in the tradition of "keenings" or "caoineadh"– defined by Angela Bourke as a collective graveside vocal lamentation for the dead typically performed by women in the Celtic Gaelic tradition, and sometimes also including invective (1395-96). As such, it occupies a public space to perform the pain of the bereaved. "Lament" in its verbal form, also means "to complain", and many complaints are indeed levelled in the play as the use of documentary and verbatim techniques unveil the shortcomings of the approach adopted by the

police, the failure to bring criminal charges, the lack of closure in the case, as well as the nation's inability to have a conversation about racial tensions. The legal complaint merges with the elegiac lament in a play structurally and aesthetically inspired both by verbatim or documentary theatre and by spoken word performance.

In her foreword, Hannah Lavery described the play as a "provocation": "we're not the country we promote to others and more importantly to ourselves [...]. The provocation within this play is a challenge to that devastating lie we tell ourselves – there's nae problem here. There is and we all deserve better, Sheku Bayoh deserved better" (6). "There's nae problem here" echoes the title of Neil Davidson's recent publication *No Problem Here: Understanding Racism in Scotland* (2018), which questions the common assumption that Scotland is relatively free of structural and institutional racism and contends that, for decades, the lack of public discussion around the structuring power of racism and the resulting silence have come to "be interpreted as an indication of its absence" and helped "consolidat[e] a now powerful myth that there is no problem here" (10). Hannah Lavery's play seeks to confront the construction and legacy of this collective Scottish national representation by performatively giving voice and visibility to the Black Scottish experiences.

Characterised by its generic hybridity, *Lament* is a variation around the mourning of a Scots engineer. In an act of re-iteration, reconstruction, and re-mediation, it occupies an aesthetically and politically confrontational space for a performative recognition of a personal and national injustice. Various structures and movements of repetition are crucial to the performance's poetical and political claims. Repetition is at the heart of the play through the theme addressed, as it echoes a too-long list of names of people of colour killed during confrontations with the police. The chronic reiteration of these cases over the last decades is often left with no resolution. In the play, the repetition trope is used thematically, poetically, and structurally to both re-humanize the victim and performatively seek a way out of this tragic iterative loop.

When it comes to addressing theatre's capacity to transform and be transformed, performance and performativity are paradoxically at the crossroads of repetition and difference, of iterability and variation. As Colbert points out, "repetition is axiomatic in performance studies" (2020: 6), and "performance" accounts for the repetition embedded in action and the power such repetition wields" (2022: 22). Indeed, repetition is inscribed in the conception of performance as Schechner defines it: performance is "never for the first time. It means: for the second to the nth time. Performance is 'twice-behaved behavior'" (29). He calls such a process of re-iteration "restored behavior" (28). Drawing on this definition, Colbert argues that performance can also be informed by another meaning of restore: to make amends for, to repair, to give back. Hence performance can be analysed "not only as restored behavior but also as behaved restoration" (2020: 5). This understanding of behaved restoration shows that beyond the repetition of familiar or dominant narratives and states of being, performance also has the capacity to twist these very discourses through restorations (as mending) of what has been forgotten, misremembered or misrepresented (Colbert 2020: 8). This productive tension between repetition and difference is crucial – both structurally and poetically – in *Lament*.

Indeed, the play, the curatorial practice of the performance includes verbatim and documentary elements and thus relies on the structural and performative power of repetition as it re-cycles testimonies, newspapers, pictures and judicial reports about the case on stage. One of the functions of the performance is to review the available evidence and bring forward as repetition the elements that seem more relevant to the case. Additional emphasis through repetition of this documentary material is part of the creative method and performative efficiency.

However, rather than adopting a linear structure, or a realistic framework, often present in verbatim and documentary theatre, the performance adopts a more fluid approach in which the re-cycled elements are one dramaturgical element amongst others. In *Lament*, the

testimonies and documents are used rather like an orchestral score. They emerge as one of many other performative elements of the play, combining and dialoguing with the body and voice of the performers on stage as well as literary rewritings, poetic refrains, and musical elements. Through a "behaved restoration", this oratorio attests to the visceral experience of grief on stage.

Lastly as *Lament* was turned into an intermedial filmed version the ephemeral and "live" quality of the performance was paradoxically lost in the process: the performance being turned into a reproducible, mediated work. However, the intermedial film questions the ethical and relational quality of the play with a focus on re-mediation, recovery, and reception.

History of Repetitions: Documentary/Verbatim Re-iteration

For the creative process of the play, Hannah Lavery borrows from two dramaturgical aesthetics (verbatim and documentary theatre). To clarify the distinction between documentary and verbatim theatre, Derek Paget points out that in verbatim theatre an interview and more generally, an "aural testimony constitutes the basis for theatrical representation" (234), whereas documentary theatre is more broadly based on archive documents, as it is "created from a specific body of archived material: interviews, documents, hearings, records, video, film, photographs, and the like" (Martin 2015: 17). In both cases, this type of theatre revises and reinvents a specific event as it strategically deploys a degree of facticity, while inventing its own performative narrative, through elaborate structural and aesthetic devices. Such practices fall under the category of a "dramaturgy of the real", which, according to Carol Martin, questions "the ways in which "the real", a category that is both asserted and challenged in relation to claims of verisimilitude and truth, is being theatricalized on world stages" (Martin 2015: 1). The performance becomes an additional repetition, narrative, and trace of the original event, since "how events are remembered, written, archived, staged and performed helps determine the history they become" (Martin 2015: 17).



Dir. by Hannah Lavery, still image from *Lament for Sheku Bayoh* a National Theatre of Scotland, Edinburgh International Festival and Royal Lyceum Theatre Edinburgh co-production, 2020. (31:17)

In *Lament*, pictures of Sheku Bayoh and his family, excerpts from interviews and newspapers, footage from television news programmes that covered the tragedy and the investigation that followed are used as material for the play. At the end of the published script, Hannah Lavery lists the sources she used, ranging from The BBC, The Fife *Courier, The Daily Record, The Guardian* to excerpts from official documents from hearings at the Scottish Court of Justice. The exact words from various protagonists of the tragedy are thus quoted in the play: we can hear excerpts from the testimonies of Eric Baskind (a leading authority on police restraint and use of force of Liverpool John Moore University), Aamer Anwar (the lawyer of Sheku Bayoh's family, who is in charge of the investigation), PC Short (Police Constable Nicole Short – who claims Sheku was about to assault her) as well as a witness to the assault. The play thus partly falls under "practices and styles that recycle reality, whether that reality is personal, social, political, or historical" (Martin 2013: 5), in a type of representation which fos-

ters alternative or revised versions of an event for its own record and survival. In *Lament*, the use of archived documents as dramaturgic material is the result of a process that reveals a desire to expose, repeat and reprocess the available narration and evidence surrounding the tragedy as well as the lack of coherence and justice. Hannah Lavery states in her foreword to the play "The lament comes out of all that research and all those silences too – all that turning away" (6). The re-production of the documents on stage, whether through verbatim re-iteration voiced out by the performers or through the projection onto the screen in the backstage, cannot be taken for the signal of an unmediated access to truth; however, as Janelle Reinelt argues in her chapter "The promise of the documentary", they reinforce facticity: "the indexical value of the documents is the corroboration that something happened, that events took place" (10). Participating in the creation of such a factual frame for the narrative, photos from Sheku Bayoh's family archives (also published in the press), as well as videos of the town of Kirkcaldy, of the victim's funeral and of the demonstrations that followed his death, are projected against the backdrop of the stage. Drawing on Schechner's definition of performance, such a creative process falls under the category of restoration of behaviour: "documentary theatre takes the archive and turns it into repertory, following a sequence from behavior to archived records of behavior to the restoration of behavior as public performance" (Martin 2015: 17).

In the play, additional emphasis through repetition of this documentary material is part of the creative method and performative efficiency. Indeed, the curatorial process and creative editing of the material are key to the precarious epistemology of the play. Janelle Reinelt contends that "the tension between objective shards or fragments of reality and subjective treatments of it forms a structuring fault-line of all such representations" (8). Hannah Lavery breaks away from a more conventional dramaturgy of realism that characterised the theatre of the real in the late twentieth century (Martin 2015: 1) as she adopts a cyclical rather than linear narrative structure and re-iterates the fragments of documentary material in loops. The scenes are entitled either "Lament" (One to Nine), "The Photograph" (One

to Three) or "Thirty Seconds" (One and Two). The short fragments alternate and resurface in the general structure of the play. Most of the "laments" contain verbatim excerpts from newspapers and testimonies, fragments of which are redistributed between the three performers (referred to as FIRST, SECOND, THIRD in the script), who share the "official" words like a musical score, gradually deconstructing it through repetition and re-arrangement:

> The Three are playing the BBC unless otherwise indicated.
>
> (…)
>
> SECOND. A leading authority on police restraint and use of force, Eric Baskind, of Liverpool John Moore University says –
>
> FIRST. (*playing Eric Baskind*) What strikes me from the evidence of the officers is that they approach the scene with the intention of using force. He's not running away, he's not, at that moment in time, creating a danger to anyone. They get there, they screech to a halt, they get out of the cars with irritant sprays and batons. That to me doesn't seem measured. That is not best practice. And all of those actions were very escalatory.
>
> SECOND. The BBC understands at least four and up to six officers were immediately involved in the encounter. That CS spray and police batons were used and within about thirty seconds Mr Bayoh was brought to the ground, face down. Handcuffs and leg restraints were applied.
>
> THIRD. The BBC understands PC Paton and a colleague known as officer B – who were two of the first on the scene – had a combined weight of about 43 stones.
>
> FIRST. Eyewitnesses understand that the officers were kneeling and lying on Mr Bayoh in order to restrain him.
>
> SECOND. A civilian witness told investigators, officers were lying across Mr Bayoh for several minutes.
>
> FIRST. (*playing civilian witness*) I heard him screaming. It sent chills through me. I heard the man shout to get the police off him. They never moved. (14-15)

This example, taken from "Lament, Part Two", is then reproduced and scattered again throughout other scenes of "Laments". The words

of the civilian witness, for example, are repeated identically on pages 15, 16, 51 and then atomised in various fragments throughout in the "Thirty Second, Part One". These loops of repetition and echoes in the discourse, and more generally in the structure of the play, mimic the flow of 24-hour news that tirelessly repeats the accounts of the same facts, but they also create a form of ostinato, a specific pace, rhythm and repetition which generates a distance from the initial reference. For instance, the connotative words and phrases used by PC Short are repeated several times in the first sections of the play to account for the police's intervention: "Mr Bayoh's muscles were bulging and he looked aggressive" is repeated on pages 18, 21, 22 and 54; "he looked very intimidating" (18, 21, 22); "he was like a zombie" (19, 21); "he appeared out of control and dangerous" (19, 21); "given the reports of him chasing people with a knife" (20). These opening statements are then meticulously debunked through the repetition of an alternative narrative of the event portraying a different man. Aamer Anwar's and the BBC's iterative accounts spread like a refrain throughout the rest of the play: "It is said that no knife was found in his possession (13), "The BBC understands the pictures show he did not have a knife" (15, 18); "He wasn't brandishing a knife at a police officer. (…) In fact, he wasn't carrying a knife when the police officers attended" (18, 19, 47). These repetitions of the elements that seem more relevant to the case also underline the way a certain version of the truth can artificially be built through aesthetic choices and iterative narration.

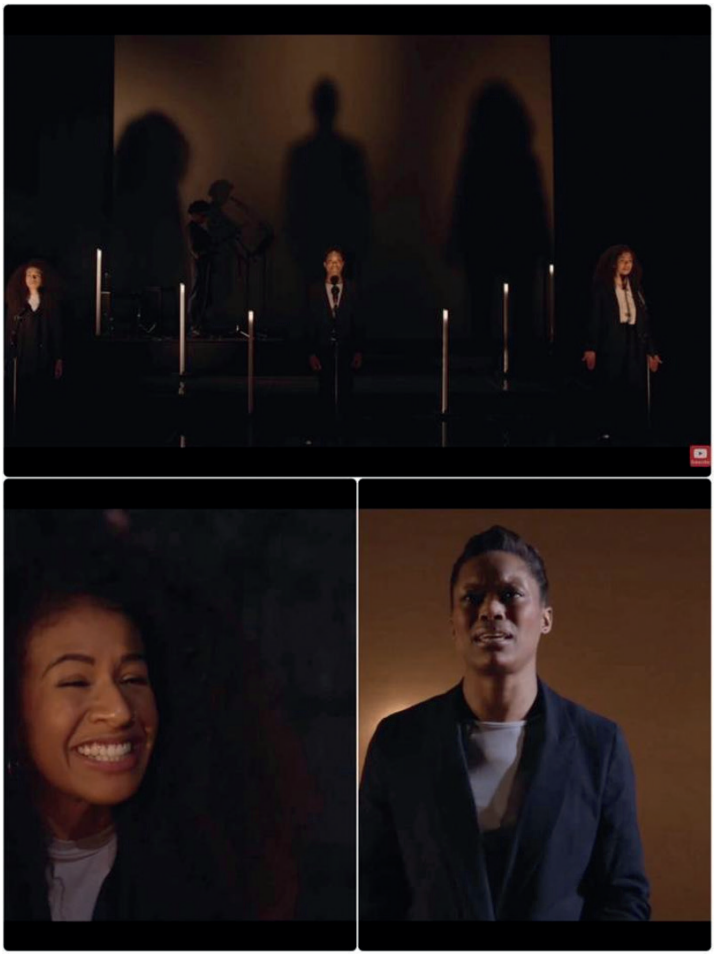
Orchestrated like a dissonant polyphonic funeral, with fragmented, non-linear scenes, the process of repetition and reorganisation of the verbatim/documentary material thus productively combines verbatim aesthetic with the structure of a musical score. Cyrielle Garson argues that in such hybrid creations of verbatim theatre, "the documentary component tends to be disavowed and evaporates into a complex and constant dispossessing aesthetic reformulation, as if driven by an unabating and roaring compulsion to exceed verbatim reality, to deconstruct once and for all the very last emanations of the referent" (420). The referent is indeed gradually estranged in a

dramatic playtext interspersed with poetic fragments, fictional scenes, and music. However, this practice of fragmenting, atomizing and repeating the verbatim or documentary testimony does not diminish its place or scope, but rather invites the audience to engage in a more active reception. Spectators listen more attentively to find meaning in this repetitive loop of similar-sounding statements, where fragments overlap, are superimposed, and are shared by the three performers. This gives the audience the impetus to want to make sense of the dissonances, and somehow, find closure. Their experience as spectators echoes the family's struggle during the investigation and prosecution process as they are left without closure. Indeed, Hannah Lavery wrote the play as the trial was still ongoing, and it is mentioned in those terms at the end of the play:

> VOICE OVER. In November 2019, The Scottish Government confirmed a public enquiry will be held into the death of Sheku Bayoh after the Lord Advocate's announcement in 2018 that none of the police officers involved in Sheku's death will be prosecuted. (…)
>
> SECOND. In 2020, a Scottish Government advert for a media manager to handle the hearing's press inquiries, says the inquiry "will be based in central Edinburgh and is expected to last around three to four years".
>
> THIRD. Sheku's sister Kadi, forty-two, a nurse, in Edinburgh, said the predicted length of the inquiry had dismayed his family. (64)

In the case of *Lament*, arguably, choosing verbatim and documentary aesthetics as one of the formal frameworks for the representation of police violence against Black citizens becomes an act in which structural recycling emphasises thematic repetition: the performance, repeating repetition, amplifies its historical resonance in the echo chamber of the auditorium. The performance however adopts a fluid approach of a "dramaturgy of the real". In *Lament*, the testimonies and documents are used rather like an orchestral score that emerges as one of many other performative elements of the play, combining and dialoguing with the bodily presence of the performers, other literary rewritings and palimpsestic echoes to the Scottish canon, poetic refrains, and live music on stage. The resulting hybrid aesthetic confers

its performative efficiency to the play as a "Lament", "a behaved restoration" (Colbert 2020, 5): a voice that simultaneously sings the trauma of loss and attests to a visceral grief and anger on the stage of the National Theatre of Scotland.



Dir by Hannah Lavery, still images from *Lament for Sheku Bayoh*, a National Theatre of Scotland, Edinburgh International Festival, and Royal Lyceum Theatre co-production, 2020. (26:18/36:10/46:50)

Visceral Experience of Loss: Rewritings, Repetitions and Musicality

The play is not a mere retrieval of a past event through a renewed dramatic form; instead, the documentary quality is interwoven with fictional scenes and more importantly with the presence of the performer's body: all elements dialogically work together to explore the issue of the experience of racism for Black Scots. In her recent book *Performing the Testimonial, Rethink Verbatim Dramaturgies*, Amanda Stuart Fisher analyses new forms of testimonial theatre foregrounding identity politics in which, according to her, the incorporation of music and song generates a new "corporeal witnessing" where the presence of actors' bodies combines with the story being told to performatively account for the experience of the subject on stage (180). Indeed, in the play the verbatim accounts and the technology of backstage projections operate with the performers' bodily and vocal presence on stage. Besides, the cast and the approach to embodiment in *Lament* play a key role in the performative power. The dismantling of the linear narration of the verbatim account is further amplified by the fact that their re-iteration is not allocated to one actress embodying a specific character, but rather they circulate through the three Black performers whose voices and presence in space are in focus rather than their personification of a single character. The three women, plunged in semi-darkness, dressed in black, stand or sit statically as they recite the verbatim testimonies. The accounts of the facts and the different family members' grief are shared, swapped and repeated by the performers, therefore, for the audience there is no possible empathic identification. This could be read as a focus on the perceived interchangeability of Black bodies within a history of miscarriage of justice. In other sections of the play, the words of the performers are made up of fictional scenes in which they embody different fictional characters. Throughout the play, their presence is characterised by their emotionally resonant vocal performance, reminiscent of a Greek chorus when their statements are uttered simultaneously.

In her book *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment*, Rebecca Schneider questions the dialectical opposition

between the performance (usually perceived as that which disappears in its ephemeral quality) and the "remains" (usually conceived as the document or the object). She considers instead that performance is "the act of remaining and a means of re-appearance and 'reparticipation'" (102). She argues that the body given to performance is thus engaged "chiasmically – not only disappearing but resiliently eruptive, remaining through performance" (102). As such she concludes that "approached in this way, performance challenges loss" (102). The ephemeral embodied performance of the three actresses and one singer is superimposed on the material and ghostly presence (through photography) of Sheku Bayoh. To quote from Schneider, "the performance plays 'the sedimented acts' and spectral meanings that haunt material" and the remains of such performance are the "immaterial of live embodied acts" (102). Key to the performative power of the lament is this dialectical interaction between facts, document, archive with fiction, poetry, presence and voice; all aspects constitute the new testimony, the multilayered account of racial injustice.

In whole sections of the play, the verbatim re-iteration of facts is immediately followed by an alternative re-writing of the statement characterised by its highly poetic quality. Hannah Lavery claims a renewed authority over the narrative of the events, as her own poetic voice enters into dialogue with the archived documents. For instance, in this evocative excerpt where the imagery is built around the metaphor of poison, the author reflects on the time that was allocated to the police involved in the incident before they had to share a statement:

> FIRST. (*Playing Fife* Courier *with notebook*) The police involved were left alone, immediately after the incident, for eight hours together in the police canteen. They were given thirty-two days to make any formal statements. They had one lawyer representing them.
>
> SECOND. Was it? Was it like this?
>
> THIRD. Poison sipped in the police canteen – for eight hours – the nine drank from the same urn. Truth brewing to dust in their mouths. A dog whistle blown to bring the paddy vans to circle. Poison seeping out – sliding past the brass – button holing – shaping the story for thirty-two days.

> Lies leaking out and staining the front pages. Knocking insistent – hack – ratta tat – on the closed front door – knocking at the window wi its blinds pulled down in mourning. Pulling at the pain to shed more blood to be washed from their front step. Och what do I know? What do I know? (*Pause*.) And this not a new story – it's an old one. We would do well to hear it this time. No? Is it no time after all? (28)

The initial verbatim account of the Fife *Courier* is doubled or echoed with a poetic and political account of the consequences of such a procedure on the emergence of the truth. The language and words exchanged in the span of a few hours during this reunion held in-camera become a shared liquid poison in the rewriting process, seeping into and contaminating the narrative until they drown out the truth, which has now turned to dust. The political image of the dog whistle (understood as a coded or suggestive image used to garner support without opposition) stresses the extent to which a given narrative is framed to be heard a certain way by certain people: the liquid poison is also the "dog whistle" catered to racist ears. The ongoing, irreparable character of this machine is represented by the succession of verbs in their present continuous form as well as the prepositions "in", "from", "out", "past" mimicking the active contamination of "the front pages". The tragic iterative quality of history is also rendered by the repetition of the question "Och what do I know?" translating the feeling of powerlessness in the face of a story that's "an old one".

This palimpsest-like layering of meaning through strong images and sounds is also found in several other poetic scenes which borrow their aural and rhythmic quality from the tradition of spoken word poetry or performance. Indeed, beyond the plain, almost automated iteration of media language, the display of a poetic language stands in contrast, perhaps even in rivalry, providing an alternative and more imaginative style and scope to the narration of the event. In this example taken from "Lament, Part Three", language is punctuated by repetitions, interruptions and assonances that make it explosive in rhythm and delivery on stage. The harrowing metaphors conjure up the imagery of slavery and its violence:

THIRD. Broken bones – in broken system –

FIRST. – make safe space –

SECOND. – make that ol cage – made of rope.

THIRD. Rope of twisted threads-twisted.

FIRST. Twisting thread. Twisting of truth bound wi – we work to make rope.

SECOND. Hold the line for the good drying day.

THIRD. Hanging out to dry. Turning. Blowing in.

FIRST. Blow in.

SECOND. Blow in. Wind ye neck in pal.

FIRST. It's a good drying day. Get the rope out.

SECOND. Hang it all out to dry. The white wash – on twisting truth. Twisted fibres make rope –

THIRD. noose – (Pause – Break.)

FIRST. – to hang.

SECOND. Let's just hang here. (Pause.) Till they're dried out. Till they're tired out.

THIRD. Tired. Dried out – twisting.

FIRST. Twisted. Making space. Made out of broken bone. Dark memory heart. Beating that old drum to bring them out wi white wash. Hang it out – it's a good day for drying. But the sun is too bright. It shows the marks. Burns through the magnifying glass – that wi have to look out for what is crawling beneath – the rocks we're gathering for him. Gathered by those that marched for him. Stood for two minutes in silence for him. The light through magnification creates a fire to burn – to set a light and we cannae bring in the wash now. It's full of smoke. The neighbours have been burning and we're all choking. Blind to it. Until you're not.

THIRD. Aye. (*Pause – Break.*)

ALL. Until we're not. (23, 24)

The violence of slavery, lynching, and the invisibility of the Black experience in a White-dominated society are obvious in this excerpt,

and they reach far beyond the reference to a specifically Scottish experience, towards a shared global history of racism. The central metaphor is built around the image of a rope – the thread of a truth woven and twisted from lies – a truth whose neck is wrung by this very rope. The words – like the rope – are arranged with a series of repetitions and polyptotons which mimic the web of lies being woven "twisted threads-twisted. Twisting thread". Echoing history repeating itself and stumbling, the excerpt reads like a sad refrain of a tragic song, like the beat of a "dark memory heart [...] Beating that old drum" with the proliferation of dashes marking both the rhythm and the incapacity to articulate language in the face of injustice. The image of blindness is also central to these lines. "The sun is too bright", "the light through magnification creates a fire to burn", "blind to it": these quotes evoke the shared global Black experience of the failure of a fair system, even in the Scottish nation that sees itself as tolerant. Light is conceived as an oxymoron: it makes things visible, reveals scandal and ignites debate, or it blinds. Hence, this extended metaphor may also refer to the representation of the news story on stage, making it visible and audible, and in a way igniting the powder keg of social anger. The image of the "magnifying glass" becomes a metaphor for the theatrical stage which dissects an individual story to show its universal resonance, thus revealing the flaws in the narrative of national history. This stage poem is delivered collectively by the performers to the sound of live singing of Beldina Odenyo - turning the performance into a form of oratorio.

With its series of repetitive echoes and overlapping statements like a canon, an inner rhythm or beat is created by the poetic excerpts and their spoken word-like orality. The contrapuntal logic of the musical canon therefore allows the introduction of new alternative voices to the allegedly univocal literary canon. As live singing is part of the performance, in the tradition of keeners, it participates in the expression of pain as well as the affirmation of a political power of creation and possible remediation. Providing a palimpsestic layer of intertextuality, the play convokes a national

poetic heritage and canon on stage, with a selection of Robert Burns' poems that are revisited by composer and musician Beldina Odenyo and turned into live songs with gospel overtones. The play opens with a sung version of Robert Burns' poem "A Man's A Man For A' That" (also known as "Is There for Honest Poverty") written in 1795. This poem was instrumental in shaping a national literary canon on the political stage as it was sung by Sheena Wellington on July the 1st 1999 at the opening ceremony of the Scottish parliament. Although Nigel Leaks points to some possible ambivalent interpretations of the poem in his chapter "Burns and the Poetics of Abolition" (47-60) it is seen as a celebration of the universal values of equality and fraternity, in which the final stanza appeals to the audience in a prayer that all men "shall brothers be for a' that." On stage, as the opening note of *Lament*, the poem in its sung version sounds like the death knell of a Scottish national ideal of tolerance and inclusiveness. The rewriting with a gospel-tinged vocal score also brings a whole new layer of meaning to the poem, as it resonates with a revised musical influence, and a supranational melody of the Black experience of suffering. Two other poems by Robert Burns inspire the musical score of the play ("Ae fond kiss" and "Auld Lang Syne"): the process of rewriting and re-adaptation inscribes the play in the Scottish national myth to better deconstruct it. In their sung versions, the poems add a semantic layer to the narrative: the hybrid voice brings back ghosts of the past to mourn the present tragedy. Through this intricate game of echoes, repetitions and variations, *Lament* shines a spotlight on the blank spaces, dark areas and silences that are often overlooked in a patriotic narrative of national tolerance.

To move from mimesis to historical recovery, all aspects of the performance are shaped by necessary layers of repetition and exhumed past. The superimposition of personal and political narrative scales, as well as the use of various modes of expression and representation, allow the inherited national vision to be performatively updated and re-imagined.

Forms of Re-mediation: Intermediality and Reception

> Do we have to be on the right side
> of every story we tell of ourselves
> – is that belonging?
>
> What would it cost us
> to lift him broken from a Kirkcaldy street
> to cradle him as our own? (Lavery 2020: 9)

This quote epitomises the desire for re-mediation and recovery that lies at the heart of the performance. In various addresses to the audience, the play takes the spectators to task and raises the question of collective responsibility and spectatorial ethics. This ambition is part of a wider movement in the humanities and social sciences, the ethical or relational turn, characterised by an increasing focus on relationality: the notion that as relational beings we are part of a larger community in which we are involved and share a responsibility towards the others. To define the relational quality of art Nicolas Bourriaud considers the artwork as "social interstice" (14), in which the work is "taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of social interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space" (14).

In an act of strong indictment, "Lament, Part Five" (40) lists all the members of a community who say racist things and the exact same list is reproduced in "Lament, Part Eight" (56) with a slight modification: the verb is no longer to say, but to do.

> THIRD. The black cab driver says racist things.
> The kids on the street are saying racist things.
> The men on the train say racist things.(…)
> My prime minister is saying racist things.
> My police are saying racist things.
> My friends are saying racist things.
> My family are saying racist things.
> My lover is saying racist things.
>
> FIRST. (…) The fog so thick –
> it slips under the mat – under my door – into my home.

> Comes to me at the bathroom mirror – where I stand looking for myself and seeing nothing of myself there. I walk out of my home, increasingly at odds with myself here. (40)

The rhythm of the epiphora together with the movement from distance to proximity from "the black cab driver" to "my lover" mimic the all-encompassing and pervading scope of racist comments issued by everyone. This bleak depiction of a society fractured by racist statements and actions results in the blurring of one's sense of belonging and identity ("seeing nothing of myself there", "at odds with myself here".) Through the repetition of this assessment, the play thus urges the audience to hear and see this reality and to become first witnesses and then actors for social and political change.

Beyond the thematic confrontation with collective and common responsibility, the intermedial quality of the play accentuates its relational ambition, specifically regarding reception. The shift in medium – illustrating the re-iterability of theatre turned into a film – raises questions of accessibility, distribution, and reception. The play, originally intended to be performed live before an audience was turned into an online video because of the Covid 19 pandemic. Therefore, the reception of the resulting digital object is no longer akin to that of a theatre audience. It changes the way we look at the initial theatrical object, as our gaze as spectator is mediated through the camera's action and editing choices. For instance, there are framing effects that direct the viewer's gaze, altering the vision of the chorus formed by the actresses and the singer as an "ensemble". By framing on the face or focusing on certain actresses, the video assigns speech to "a subject", whereas the original script and staging made speech almost anonymous, like a material that is attributed to no one in particular, that emanates from no specific source but floods and invades the stage. The camera work modifies this aspect by visually identifying the speaker, and thus giving a new embodied "authority" to the discourse, as if the enunciator was responsible for their part of the speech, while the staging seemed to favour a collective, shared lament. However, those close-ups, through an increased sense of proximity, possibly amplify the identification and empathy of the viewer, who is put face to face

with the performer's emotional delivery, gazing into their eyes in a way the theatre stage cannot reproduce.



Dir by Hannah Lavery, still images from *Lament for Sheku Bayoh*, a National Theatre of Scotland, Edinburgh International Festival and Royal Lyceum Theatre co-production, 2020. (57:50)

The final scene was originally played against a backdrop of archive photos and video extracts (from Sheku Bayoh, and from the protests after his death) scrolling across the background behind the three actresses and the singer in the foreground. In the film version, however, after a few seconds, the camera zooms in and fades out, so that the actresses are no longer visible, and the screen is gradually invaded by photos and videos of the actual events. It is as if the theatre were being contaminated, absorbed, or dissolved by the video medium on the one hand, and by the real events on the other. These two minutes of the film towards the end, if viewed on their own, are no longer identifiable as theatre and resemble news footage or a documentary homage. The performers are back in the frame only for the last image where they raise their fists in salute in front of a backstage image of a BLM banner on Usher Hall Edinburgh. These slight modifications

do not alter radically the object, yet they question the "live" essence of the theatrical object when subjected to a form of mediation. The recording of the play indeed implies a radical change in the paradigms of presence, in the 'live' aspect of the (theatrical) performance, and in the relationship between immediacy and mediation[3] on stage – a series of formal mutations that Cormac Power sums up as follows:

> To suggest that theatre is "live" and distinct from performances mediated by technology is to ignore the fact that much theatre explores today's technological landscape, both in form and content. (…) The question here however, is whether notions of making-present, having-present, and being-present (or a play between all three), are in a way bypassed by the technologies of reproduction and more generally the way in which these technologies mediate and colour all our experiences and interactions within a "mediatized" frame. (159)

Lament for Sheku Bayoh bears witness to the way Scottish theatre is seizing on the relationship between theatre and digital culture to deploy new possibilities for increased participation and reception, in a transformation of theatricality which dissociates un-mediated ephemeral presence and representation. Therefore, it seems possible to no longer think of theatricality as the physical and ephemeral presence of actors and spectators in the same place. What makes for theatre could possibly lie in the "construction of objects of attention", and in the devices for "presenting" these objects. This is what Cormac Power defends:

> a discussion on presence in the theatre should focus on the particular ways in which the theatrical medium constructs objects of attention, and how these objects of attention are presented to an audience. In other words, presence may best be seen as a function of theatre—theatre is a place where different levels of presence are manipulated and played with—rather than an (essential) attribute. (175)

The interplay of different layers of presence/absence of body and voice in the play create an "object of attention" whose political resonance and impact is multiplied.

In his review of the show, entitled "A stark critique of Scotland's self-image", Mark Fisher writes that "as a production, it is too static,

caught uncertainly between theatre and film, but as a voice in the dark it is impassioned, poetic and alive with political import." Indeed, the filmed version of the play serves its relational and political ambition of remediation and recovery as it radically alters the conditions of its distribution and reception. Instead of being limited to a specific space/time of representation in a theatre – thereby limiting access to a restricted audience – the digital object has been distributed much more widely. For example, it has been shown in cinemas in Edinburgh and Leven, reaching an audience that is sociologically different from theatregoers. The filmed version is also available online on the NTS website, in the "educational portal", for free access in schools, along with a "Teacher's resource" dossier analysing the issues raised by the play and suggesting activities around key facts and figures of the History of Black Scots. The description reads: "Discussions of racism and racial violence when handled sensitively can lead to shifts in understanding. The material in this resource aims to support educators to more safely explore in mixed racial groups the wider social, historical and political aspects of Scottish identity" (NTS website). While the play might not initially have reached such a wide audience, through its reiterative quality, the filmed version goes one step further in addressing the social problem it seeks to denounce. The multi-media version of *Lament for Sheku Bayoh* embraces the notion of cultural connectivity, echoing the ways digital technologies open up pathways and reach out to a generation who belong to a primarily visual age.

Conclusion

In their "Editorial: On Repetition", Schmidt and Kartsaki state that:

> We might think of performance as the art of the 're': from the labour of rehearsal and systems for remembering to the broad spectrum of restored behaviours that are 'not for the first time'; from tragic scenes of recognition and reversal to conventions of citation and recitation; from the dream of representation without reproduction to the ethics of reenactment and the care for what remains. (1)

In the play, repetition indeed plays a vital role in staging the tragic event and its resonance with racial injustice in Scotland. The thematic and structural explorations around the repetitive words, images, or sounds and the return to and rewriting of past references revived on stage serve a purpose of recovery, reparation, and remediation. Through its intermedial quality and hybridity, the play "remains" as a new archived version of the story and addresses the transformative power of this work. Re-shaping preconceived or essentialist conceptions of the theatrical genre, it exemplifies the mutation of a dramaturgy in which the re-iterability seeks to actively produce social and political change. In her review of the streamed performance for *The Scotsman*, Joyce MacMillan states that "Lavery's production […] is both painfully familiar, and new in its insistence that here too, in bonnie Scotland, Black people sometimes cannot breathe, purely because of the colour of their skin." The play is also part of a wider racial awakening in Scotland in which other cultural productions participate in changing conceptions of the Scottish canon and addressing key questions around the representation of race throughout Scottish history. Plays like Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* (initially a radio play for BBC Radio in 2007, published in 2020), or May Sumbwanyambe's *Enough of Him* (2022), or Rona Munro's *James IV: Queen of the Fight* (2022) have similar encoded messages as they address the history of slave trade or systemic racism no longer as "Black history" but as history of Scotland, and even a post-national history of the western world – calling for a reconsideration of how questions of identity, race and belonging should be recognized, represented, restored or remembered to avert tragic repetitions.

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1 See official website of the inquiry: https://www.shekubayohinquiry.scot/

2 For a better readability now referred to as *Lament* in the article.

3 Echoing Philip Auslander's conclusions, Cormac Power points out that the term 'immediateness' is itself derived from the root 'media,' which implies that, from an etymological point of view, mediation precedes immediacy rather than the other way round. See POWER, Cormac. *Presence in Play: A Critique of Theories of Presence in the Theatre*. Rodopi, 2008, p. 155.

The people still don't own the Land: An interview with director Joe Douglas on rebooting *The Cheviot*

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Abstract: The original 1973 production of *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* by 7:84 Scotland was a landmark production in Scottish theatre-making, combining formal inventiveness, local history, socialist politics and community engagement. The popular and critical success of the piece established a working model which 7:84 adopted in subsequent productions as well as inspiring multiple socially engaged theatre companies throughout Britain. The play's theme of long-term subjugation to foreign investment and power reinforced the arguments of the nascent Scottish nationalist movement who sought to co-opt the play into a wider political discourse.

In 2019, the National Theatre of Scotland reproduced the show with an updated version which toured established urban theatre venues throughout the country. Being the first production of the play in over forty years, significant popular, cultural and political interest accompanied the presentation of a work which had, in the intervening years, become a theatrical touchstone. In the wake of increased engagement with the independence debate, the play again highlighted the contested ownership of the country's land and natural resources.

This article compares the two productions of *The Cheviot* by analysing the aesthetic choices, textual updates and political message of the 2019 reboot. Featuring original interview material with the play's director Joe Douglas, the article highlights the challenges of adapting a piece whose style, politics and production history were firmly rooted in the social-economy of 1970s Britain and the difficulty in remaining faithful to original material while making work appropriate to contemporary sensibilities and expectations. The scaled down version of the piece, prepared for an unfulfilled tour of small venues in the Highlands much like the original 1973 production, is also discussed.

Résumé : La création de *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* en 1973 par la compagnie 7:84 Scotland a fait date dans l'histoire du théâtre écossais, alliant inventivité formelle, histoire locale, politique socialiste et engagement communautaire. Le succès populaire et critique de la pièce a établi un modèle de travail que 7:84 a adopté dans ses productions ultérieures et qui a inspiré de nombreuses compagnies théâtrales politiquement engagées dans toute la Grande-Bretagne. Le thème de la pièce, l'assujettissement à long terme aux investissements et au pouvoir étrangers, a renforcé les arguments du mouvement nationaliste écossais naissant, qui a cherché à coopter la pièce pour l'intégrer à un discours politique plus large.

En 2019, le National Theatre of Scotland a reproduit le spectacle dans une version actualisée qui a fait le tour des théâtres urbains établis dans tout le pays. Comme il s'agissait de la première production de la pièce depuis plus de quarante ans, un intérêt populaire, culturel et politique important a accompagné la présentation d'une œuvre qui, depuis lors, est devenue une référence incontournable. Dans le contexte d'un engagement accru dans le débat sur l'indépendance, la pièce a de nouveau mis en lumière le contrôle contesté des terres et des ressources naturelles du pays.

Cet article compare les deux productions de *The Cheviot* en analysant les choix esthétiques, les mises à jour textuelles et le message politique de la reprise de 2019. S'appuyant sur des entretiens inédits avec le metteur en scène Joe Douglas, l'article met en lumière les défis posés par l'adaptation d'une pièce dont le style, la politique et l'histoire de la production sont fermement ancrés dans l'économie sociale des années 1970 au Royaume-Uni, ainsi que la difficulté de rester fidèle au matériau d'origine tout en adaptant le travail aux sensibilités et aux attentes contemporaines. La version réduite de la pièce, préparée pour une tournée dans de petites salles des Highlands, tout comme la production originale de 1973, est également abordée.

Keywords: John McGrath; *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*; interview; Scottish Theatre; political theatre; socialist theatre; reboot

Mots clés : John McGrath ; *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* ; entretien ; théâtre écossaise ; théâtre engagé ; théâtre socialiste ; reprise

John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil*

In the history of Scottish theatre, John McGrath's *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* holds a singular, rarefied place. The impact of the original production on the theatrical landscape cannot be underestimated, with the words "legendary" and "mythical" often being used to describe society's collective memory of the first tour around the Highlands of Scotland in 1973 (Nelson 1; Mackenney 352; DiCenzo 152). The success of the play launched the newly formed 7:84 (Scotland) theatre company, established McGrath as a key voice in popular-socialist playwrighting and set a template for touring work in Scotland which explicitly sought to reflect the concerns of ordinary people. Perhaps more importantly the work appeared to touch a chord with audiences in remote areas of the country, sought to highlight local people's history and called attention to the often-neglected Scottish Gaelic culture and language (Mackenney 360). Known simply as *The Cheviot,* this abbreviation became a byword for socially engaged, genuinely Scottish theatre and a symbol for what theatre could hope, and perhaps should aim, to achieve.

How then is one to attempt a reboot of this theatrical touchstone for the 21st century considering the accumulated cultural weight of the work? The question is fraught with the usual artistic and practical choices involved in mounting any play with the additional issues of widespread public investment in the artwork's meaning and value, and a sense of common ownership felt by many, some with only slight connections to the original production. In the intervening years, the play and original tour had established an aura that could have dis-

couraged theatre makers from endeavouring to adapt the work for a contemporary audience, the risk of sullying the memory and upsetting still living original cast members too great. In addition, the play was developed in the politically charged period of the early 1970s when left-wing ideas, socialist movements and the challenging of cultural norms were highly prevalent in the UK, both onstage and in society more generally (Leach 224). Contemporaries of McGrath, such as David Hare and David Edgar, were advancing left-wing concepts on English stages, while agitprop theatre could be seen in the work of companies like Red Ladder, CAST and Portable Theatre (Kershaw 166). The original *Cheviot* production therefore dovetailed with a British movement of socialist theatre which sought to educate, challenge and inspire audiences to agitate for widescale social change.

The challenges facing Joe Douglas in remounting the work in September 2015 at the Dundee Repertory Theatre were thus diverse and multifaceted. Since the original tour in 1973, the only other production not headed up by John McGrath occurred in 1993 and involved many of the initial cast. Douglas was therefore the first director to remake *The Cheviot* with an entirely new team, unconnected to the original creators. For a relatively inexperienced director, the stakes were high in terms of the scale of the production as well as the level of expectation, especially in the wake of the Scottish Independence referendum which occurred in June 2014. The ensuing critical and commercial success of the reboot were far from predictable, while the subsequent tours of the work, in 2016 and 2019 in slightly altered form, allowed the play to be seen more widely by a new generation of theatre goers, at times in venues and settings similar to those in which the original 1973 production were first experienced. This article features an extended interview with Joe Douglas that seeks to track the production from inception to stage as well as exploring the reaction of audiences, critics and former cast members. The semi-structured interview is used as a methodological tool for gathering primary evidence on the practicalities and the process of creating the reboot as well as to access insight from the play's director on the wider cultural and social significance of the work.

The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil broadly recounts a history of the Highlands of Scotland from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries in three parts by focussing on the economic use of the land and the consequences for the people living there. Beginning with agriculture, the play describes how often absentee landowners forcibly removed people from the land in order to make space for the cheviot, a highly profitable breed of sheep. During the Highland Clearances, entire villages were emptied and at times destroyed with villagers migrating to British colonies or relocating to purpose-built settlements on the coast without access to farmland. The second section of the play focuses on the nineteenth century, a period in which the land was often repurposed for the hunting of stag, deer and game bird while the clearing of the land of crofters continued with many men joining the British army to fight in the Empire. The final section describes the transfer of control of the land from the aristocracy to domestic and foreign corporations in order to exploit new industries in mining, fishing, farming and especially oil, only discovered in Scottish coastal waters in the 1960s. The narrative emphasises how both ownership and control of the Scottish Highlands has always rested in the hands of a wealthy elite who, being culturally, socially and often physically unconnected to the area, have managed the land in their own economic self-interest often at the expense of and in direct opposition to the interests of the local population.

The play is based on the format of a *ceilidh:* a social gathering traditional to the Highlands in which Gaelic music, song and dance are an integral part, but which also serves to unite disparate agricultural communities for discussion, poetry and storytelling in a celebration of common cultural heritage. *The Cheviot* celebrates Gaelic culture, incorporating many traditional ballads and adapting well-known melodies to create new songs in a mixture of English, Gaelic and Scots. The tone is often light-hearted and ironic, the humour abundant and unambiguous, with many skits and short sketches of historical or believable figures drawn with broad characterisation, consciously following a form common in Scottish popular theatre and recognisable in pantomime, revues and cabaret (Brown and Innes 205). The text consciously incor-

porates considerable historical information, using direct address and forthright exposition to convey evidence to the audience in a mode associated with agitprop theatre. Although the lineage of elements in the work may be seen in various theatrical forms, the combination of political messaging, cultural narrative, historical fact and multilingual music is somewhat unique to *The Cheviot* and was an original proposition when first performed. The initial tour of the Highlands was ecstatically received by the local population. Mainly playing in village halls and social clubs, the band in the play would transform into an actual *ceilidh* band after the show, playing long into the night and emphasising the wider social purpose of 7:84's work beyond the stage (Hamilton and Scullion 61). The adventure of touring to remote, rural and beautiful parts of Scotland added to the mystique for all theatre companies who hoped to follow in their footsteps.

Interview with director Joe Douglas

This interview was conducted on 19th October 2023. The text has been edited for reasons of coherence and clarity and approved by Joe Douglas.

DOMINIC CHAMAYOU-DOUGLAS: *Where did you first hear about* The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil *and what were your initial impressions of the work?*

JOE DOUGLAS: I think I first heard about it at drama school. We had a teacher from Glasgow who was a director and lecturer in cultural theory who mentioned it in passing. I remember reading Howard Brenton, David Hare and Joan Littlewood and had a bit of an understanding of political theatre but more agitprop work. It was only when I moved to Scotland when I was selected as a trainee director for the National Theatre of Scotland that I became much more aware of it. So many conversations when you talk about Scottish theatre refer to that play, to 7:84's work and the cultural impact and aspirations they

had. They offered a theatre culture to a popular audience and to people in Scotland who were in general quite solidly left-wing amongst the working class and who wanted to see their own lives reflected on their stages. I'm not sure I'd ever read it in great detail until the independence referendum in 2014 but in the weeks after I returned to *The Cheviot* and I realised that it was really vibrant. I thought I knew a way of doing it that would make it resonate with a modern audience through what it said about Scotland's place politically, particularly in relation to socialism and nationalism.

DCD: *So it was primarily the Scottish Independence referendum in September 2014 which brought the idea of remounting* The Cheviot *to your mind and made you think that "this is the moment" for the play?*

JD: It encouraged me to return to it politically as, though it's not overtly necessarily a nationalistic text, there are absolute resonances within it about who owns the people's story and who is responsible for your future. I think it's partly a generational thing. The people who I was assisting at the time, like John Tiffany, would have known John McGrath and were probably around when it was revived in the early 90s. They were a generation that came of age in New Labour and that's very much a time when agitprop hard left theatre was not very trendy and not very cool. There was a sense that it's old hat. I think the play is probably dated now, but after the referendum and also given the state of society, due to the austerity policies of the Cameron government and the horrible effect they were having on our society, I felt that a simple clarion call had a place on our stage.

DCD: *What were some of the hurdles in the preparation process for the piece? How was the reaction when you said you wanted to remount such a well-known text, not just from people you were hoping to work with, but also from other people in Scottish theatre?*

JD: I was going through quite a close collaborative process with the estate. It began with Elizabeth McClellan, who was an original company member and the widow of John McGrath. I'd been given permission to do the play and I had two very long conversations on the phone with her. She was basically sounding me out more for my politics. She wanted to make sure it was coming from an authentic place as well as to check my level of expertise and experience, that she felt she could trust me with this play. Then I visited her once in the spring before where I was able to have a really good conversation with her in detail about it and then she died just before we went into rehearsals. Her funeral was literally the day before we started rehearsing.

In the prep period I got a great big map of Scotland because there's so many references to these places in the Highlands, many of which I tried to visit ahead of time. I took a trip up to Fortrose on the Black Isle and went around visiting a lot of the sites of the Clearances and got my bearings. I went to the museum at Betty Hill, which is right at the top of Sutherland, and saw the pulpit which I think is the pulpit that the preacher scene was based on that appears in *The Cheviot.*

I didn't engage that much with people in the run up, I was too anxious to be honest but there was a real excitement about it, about just being able to see it and that's why I wanted to do it – to see it. Myself and Jemima Levick, who was the artistic director of the Dundee Rep, had an inkling it would have a big audience and people would really come out for it but I think the impact it made that first time we did it in 2015 exceeded our expectations in terms of how it seemed to touch a nerve among audiences. Subsequently talking to playwright Douglas Maxwell, I remember him saying "I just thought it was going to be terrible."

DCD: *Once you got the green light for the production to take place, what was the initial starting point for reimagining this new version?*

JD: Your first decision as a director often is "What's it gonna look like?". There's such an iconic design associated with that original production, with John Byrne's pop-up book. I am one of those directors whose first instinct is usually to put lines through most of the stage directions and interrogate the play, what it is, the text. I was a bit anxious about taking it on culturally and in terms of the scale of the production, so I turned to Graham McLaren who was a more experienced director than me. He would often design his own work and design for other people and he was like "oh I hate the play but I like you. There are much better McGrath plays that you should direct but because I don't want to direct it, I'll help you out."

The show is a *ceilidh*, so we decided to take out the front seats and floor the whole theatre in reclaimed wood to make it a village hall with big light fixtures hanging down to kind of bring the space in a bit, make it feel homely, all second-hand, all found objects that have all got a history of their own. The audience sat at the tables on the stage and there was a space in the middle which is where the *ceilidh* and the show took place. I remember Graham saying he needed one big intervention in terms of his design, and it needed to be Landseer's *Monarch of the Glen*[1]. He blew it right up, so a deer just filled the backstage of Dundee Rep Theatre and that was the backdrop on which we played – this Victorian image of Scotland, an image which is still playing out today across much of Scotland in terms of the power structures in place.

DCD: *During the initial development process you focused primarily on the design elements so at what point did you look at script changes?*

JD: Me and Graham, we kind of went through the script together. We watched the film[2] together and saw what John McGraw had done differently in the film to his book. The film actually spills out and becomes a documentary at the end, the whole section on the oil industry in Aberdeen bears no resemblance to the actual play script as published.

Then I spent a period of maybe six weeks playing with the structure of the text and taking it apart and I thought that I'd made a structure that read better and worked better. I was talking to Elizabeth initially and then with Luke Holbrook, who was working for Casarotto Ramsey, on the dramaturgy. He read what I'd done and said "Yeah, great. But it's not the play. So you need to do the play." And I was like, "OK, you're right. I do need to do the play." But it was a helpful process for me. Some things I still wanted to change and then I had to work closely with Luke.

DCD: *What was the nature of the alterations that you made to the text? Did you have a particular approach when looking at the play as a whole piece?*

JD: Just make it relevant for a contemporary audience. Are people going to understand it? Is it going to speak to people? Is it truthful? It was often about cultural context and frames of reference. For example, Edward Heath is mentioned as a contemporary politician who everyone in the audience would have known as the Prime Minister. In Dundee in 2015, who in the audience is going to know who that is, that he was a conservative and that he was seen as quite aloof and hostile to union activity?

There were many cultural tropes and elements to update in terms of political correctness. You don't want the audience to be focusing on something incidental when actually they need to be listening to a political point. For example, there was a portrayal of Native Americans and in the 1970s, probably even in the early 90s production, I imagine it was just seen as a little comedic interlude that no one gave a thought about. There's a call and response in what's called "The Sturdy Highlander" scene where the audience are encouraged to shout "Walla Walla Wooskie" then some "Red Indians" come on stage with Tomahawks raised and attack the sturdy Highlander. It felt like it had racialized undertones, so I offered to change it to a more pantomimic call and response, "it's behind you", which is in effect the game that

was being played on the stage. It wasn't working theatrically in a way that was satisfying, that didn't feel like it was potentially offensive and problematic to an audience. So then the cut spoke for itself.

Don't get me wrong, it has a political point to it. McGrath's talking about the cycle of violence and colonial violence that was perpetrated on different sides between different oppressed peoples, both the cleared communities who had been sent to Canada, Nova Scotia and to the local native population. I remember Kate (McGrath) saying that her dad wasn't politically correct, and he did enjoy challenging some of those levels of comfort usually preserved for the middle-class audience. But you've potentially got all these audience members distracted by questioning your representation of a Native American on stage.

In "We are the men who own your Glen", I was conscious that not everyone knew that David Cameron, who was the Prime Minister during the first production in 2015, would go on holiday to the Isle of Jura, most of which was owned by his father-in-law, and shoot stags during the summer. We gave John Macauley a face of David Cameron and I can't remember why but he was running around with his top off with David Cameron's face on wearing Union Jack boxer shorts and waving these flags, doing some Morris dancing and it was just so ridiculous. Then during the run of the show the story emerged about David Cameron having sex with a pig so John went out of his own volition one day and bought a stuffed pig and took it onstage with him that night and of course got an absolute roar of laughter.

When we took it to Aberdeen, we projected the words "Make Balmedie Great Again" because Trump was already starting his MAGA rhetoric and Balmedie is the Site of Special Scientific Interest that he purchased and then bulldozed to make his golf course and the roar that went up from the audience in Aberdeen when they saw that was like nothing I'd ever heard to be honest because it was just such a sense of recognition.

DCD: *In the production I saw at the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh in 2016, as had happened with the film of* The Cheviot*, the final section on the oil industry was significantly updated to take the story through to the present day.*

JD: We both shortened it and extended it so if you read the original text, there are reams of references to oil companies and landowners, many of whom had changed hands or had mergers. What it ultimately became was a sense of the potential of other things like renewable energy. Many of the wind farms that are being built, some of them are community-owned but increasingly less and less communities get anything or very small fractions of support from these developments. It was a way of rounding off the energy journey.

A former Labour MP got quite angry with me after a performance he came to see in Dundee as he thought I had hijacked the narrative to suit a nationalist agenda, particularly with this new bit. I thought it was unfair but he was really angry as he felt very close to the play and was a personal friend of John McGrath. I did subsequently update it and maybe ameliorated it. Like any new work if something doesn't feel like it's landing right, then you adapt it. Not everyone does that but I think you should never feel like it's ever finished.

DCD: *In what ways did you try to maintain continuity between the past performances and this production? Did you talk to anyone from the older shows? Also, I suppose conversely, were there any moments when you tried to stamp your own identity on to your production?*

JD: I had spoken to Elizabeth MacLellan when she was alive and John Bett who had directed the revival in the 90s and I spoke to others who came in to visit the show once it was on. The ownership of that production is an issue because it's so iconic. It's like being in a band in a way, everyone's like, "who's who?", "who owns the narrative?"

Ultimately, it's John McGrath's play. There was a collaborative approach to the creative process but he was the writer.

I was very keen not to open our process to any other influences from the original production because you're trying to make it live for a new audience and that felt it'd be unhelpful to be honest, because they're not going to be objective. The approach had to feel our own. We had to empower the actors who also felt the cultural weight of it because that play hung over Scottish theatre. It was a weird exorcism that I wanted to perform which was to stop everyone comparing everything to *The Cheviot* because it's just another play and I felt like I wanted to lift that hoodoo a bit. We were a new generation of artists. The revival in the 90s was also done by people who were involved with it in the 70s, whereas this was a whole bunch of new people coming to it afresh.

But I was really keen to pay homage to them, so there were seven tables on stage and every table we named after a member of the original company so the audience would say "I'm sitting at John's table", for example. That's like a little Easter egg. But I consciously wanted to increase the amount that women had to do in the show and so I repurposed the MC role, mostly to Irene McDougal, who is a stalwart of the Dundee Rep ensemble. I was really aware that this is an ensemble play and I was taking it to a theatre that has a culture of ensemble theatre making.

Jo Freer, who played the Andy McChuckemup character (played by Bill Paterson in the original production), we made sure he had quite long dark hair with a moustache like Bill Patterson had so people who are familiar with the play would see the reference. I do remember on the first night looking along the row to see Johnny Bett digging Bill Patterson in the ribs and being like "look that's you".

DCD: *How did you deal with the linguistic challenges as Gaelic is at the heart of the story and the ethos of the play?*

JD: For the Gaelic we needed to find a native speaker to be in the company. In the 70s they had Dolina McLennan who was so iconic as a singer and a performer in Gaelic culture and if I got another female Gaelic singer, whoever played that part in our production would feel like they're doing a direct comparison, so I wanted to change that up. We all learnt some Gaelic in rehearsals so that it wasn't just the preserve of the native Gaelic speaker to hold that but something that we all shared within the company, especially as it's now an official language of Scotland. It doesn't hold much intrinsic commercial value but it's not actively oppressed in the way that it was when people were discouraged from speaking it. I wanted to make the audience aware of their lack of Gaelic rather than just treating it as an aesthetic aspect of the production, so we added a bit where, in Gaelic, Callum McGregor would call out "does anybody here speak Gaelic?" At pretty much every show there was another Gaelic speaker and then they would have a short conversation. There was this moment that was just for them in a way, a live moment. It's a play that only really works with an audience. A bit like rehearsing a pantomime, you can only half rehearse it, you need an audience to create it. There's a ritualistic aspect to that show about the audience needing to be there.

DCD: *In terms of the first run at the Dundee Rep, was it smooth sailing from beginning or was it still developing because as you said you're creating it live with the audience?*

JD: The show should never feel smooth. It's quite a rough show, you're playing with rough theatre. I wanted it to have that authenticity of maybe not quite being finished. This is a show about land, about who owns the land. There was a bit towards the end of the play which becomes a bit of an anthem. It reiterates all these themes and facts about land that has been purchased. In the smaller scale version, we did it in a more percussive way but in these large-scale spaces, I thought there could be something interesting, especially

in the aftermath of the referendum, in allowing the audience the chance to come on stage and to say a line and to own that space for a little bit. What that was doing, philosophically as a show, was trying to empower and enable and encourage the audience to push themselves out of their comfort zone. And to see if people had been moved, to see if they could hold the space. And every night people did, loads of people did.

DCD: *Do you think it will be revived again, either your version or can you imagine that it will be taken up by another generation after you in 10- or 20-years' time? Can you still see it having that relevance?*

JD: I don't know. I hope not. I was always like, "perform this play until you don't have to because hopefully the politics change." It's that funny thing, you're trying to perform it out of existence, as if it's not relevant then it means that conditions have changed to the point where society feels it doesn't need to see this anymore and it becomes history.

The land movement is very interesting even since we performed it. The community land movement has grown a lot in Scotland, and there's that phrase in the play that people must own the land. It's becoming, bit by bit, more real and now some of these communities are surviving and thriving very often because they've been able to buy land and have more autonomy over the decisions that affect them. You have communities now in the Outer Hebrides who are the housing developers. It's not the Council and it's not at the behest of a landowner.

If the play is saying something about Scottishness maybe you might put it on again, but what even is that? But it does go to the heart of a debate about fairness in Scotland. That, I think, will probably continue to be relevant for a long time. But there are other works of John McGrath that I think also do that and there are other plays and new works that will be made that will do that better.

Commentary on the interview

The interview highlights the various obstacles facing this *Cheviot* reboot and how Douglas and the production team sought to overcome these cultural, practical, historical and artistic challenges. When attempting to reimagine a play with such cultural heritage, there exists a need to refer to the lineage of the piece to allow for connections to be drawn down through the decades. The play itself carefully emphasises the importance of passing stories and culture down through the generations and presents a sweeping narrative spanning hundreds of years to enable links to be traced between disparate events, separated by time and geography, but connected through the themes of land use, capitalist oppression and cultural heritage. The 2015 production of *The Cheviot* achieved this by consciously referencing the original 1973 production by naming tables after the original cast members, by designing a set that imitated the village halls of the original Highland tour and by dressing up cast members to resemble original cast members. Additionally, the quasi-vetting process that Douglas experienced at the hands of Elizabeth MacLennan before being allowed to adapt the play, symbolically represents the passing on of the play, and also the causes for which the play advocates, to a new generation. This handover of the right to perform the play from artist to artist parallels the bequeathing of stories, poems and songs between different generations in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, a necessary act in preserving Gaelic knowledge and traditions for what is primarily an oral culture. Any revival of a play will likely engender comparisons with past productions but in this case the history of the play was an ever-present element of the creative environment. The creative team therefore actively acknowledged and venerated the past rather than seeking to lessen or ignore its significance.

Despite the necessity of recognising the play's specific heritage, the reboot sought to update and renew the show for the 21st century with a focus on making a piece appropriate for the moment of performance in 2015. The production made considerable alterations to the text, entirely repurposing the third section concerning oil. In 1973, the

oilfields of Scotland were only beginning to be exploited, the play then predicted how the petroleum industry, allied with industrial capital and the British government, might develop this newfound source of wealth under the North Sea. In 2015 the history of this exploitation could be presented with evidence rather than relying on the projected imaginations of McGrath. Douglas thus sought to reignite a long-running debate concerning the profits of the oil industry benefitting the whole of the UK, rather than Scotland as a country despite the natural resources resting entirely within "Scottish" waters. The updates highlighted the actions of successive Westminster governments and their reluctance to establish a national oil company through a negative comparison with the wealth of the Norwegian oil fund while also noting the links of many senior Conservative politicians to the oil industry. A further textual addition concerned the resetting of the border between England and Scotland in 1999 immediately before Scottish devolution which ensured multiple oilfields thus fell within English waters rather than Scottish (McGrath 2015).

When I saw the production in 2016 at the Lyceum in Edinburgh, I perceived a shift in the mood of the audience at this revelation. The tension in the room seemed to heighten as a recent politically sensitive decision with an unequivocal link to Scottish independence was presented and the motives behind these actions openly questioned by the performers. Up until this section of the play, the action occurs firmly in the past. Although many of the events represented are based on fact with the consequences enduring to this day, the piece can be perceived as a historical play, allowing the audience to remain at an emotional distance from the content. By updating the text to include contemporary events which have an undeniable impact on people's present-day lives, the theme of oppression of the people from capitalist, often non-Scottish, forces was also brought into the present day as a current issue rather than an unfortunate element of the past. In the wake of the Scottish independence referendum and the Brexit vote, two politically charged and divisive issues, the airing of political grievances in a direct and honest manner transformed the piece from

a potential relic with only metaphorical relevance to the 21st century into an engaged piece of contemporary political theatre.

Douglas refers to an interaction with an audience member who questioned the revision of the narrative thrust of the piece to support a nationalist agenda, a criticism also levelled at the revival in the press (Dickie). The alterations to the text were more overtly critical of Westminster governments, that is to say English-controlled governments. The reboots were certainly inviting the audience to see the play's narrative as a long history of Scottish subjugation ideally one day leading to independence. However, ever since the play was first performed in 1973, the message has regularly been interpreted as supportive of Scottish independence with the initial workshopped version of the play presented at a Scottish National Party conference entitled "What Kind of Scotland?" and 7:84 returning to perform the full version two years later at the SNP conference in 1974 (McDonald 214). Even today, the play is spoken of as supporting Scottish independence by original cast members and more widely in the press (Hassan). This despite the repeated disavowals of John McGrath of the nationalist argument who insisted that the play first and foremost presented a socialist vision of Scottish history and that nationalism without a rejection of capitalism would never bring about the changes in land ownership that the piece supports (Mackenney 360). It may therefore be argued that Douglas was utilising the contradiction inherent within the play that a socialist reappraisal of the question of landownership is intimately connected to the issue of independence and a binary separation of the two unrealistic. By conflating the two concerns, the revival continued an established element of the play's performance history.

Conclusion

Reviving plays from any period or genre is far from a formulaic process. *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* is no different in the essential necessity to reimagine the staging, the visual and audial aspects, and the textual interpretation. However, the emblematic

nature of the play in Scottish theatre, the investment of audiences and professionals in the work's wider meaning, and the topicality of the references compelled a profound reworking of the text alongside an engagement with the wider cultural and historical significance of McGrath's play. The play's structure and audience-orientated nature obliges any prospective director to update the text to ensure the play continues to communicate the fundamental themes of the work and "speak to" the audiences of the day. An intentional ephemerality is embedded in the essence of the play as the material context continues to evolve with time requiring the play to evolve in parallel.

The overall success of Joe Douglas' 2014 reboot of *The Cheviot* is attested to by the commercial success and the numerous positive reviews for the initial revival and the subsequent tours (Billington; Pollock; The Newsroom; Dibdin). I witnessed the enthusiastic standing ovation given to the 2016 production at the Lyceum in Edinburgh. Reviewers critiqued the combining of nationalist and socialist sentiment and the didactic nature of the material, but the overall tone of the coverage was overwhelmingly positive. Although the play may be castigated as outmoded, while the issues of land ownership, wealth inequality and natural resource exploitation remain as politically relevant as they were in 1973, the continued importance of *The Cheviot* to Scottish playwrighting will remain as elevated as ever.

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1 *The Monarch of the Glen* (1851) by Edwin Landseer is an oil-on-canvas painting of a red deer stag later used extensively by various companies to advertise Scottish products eventually becoming a cliche in its representation of Scotland. The original currently hangs in the Scottish National Gallery.

2 The film version of the play was commissioned by the BBC and broadcast as a Play for Today in 1974. Written by John MeGrath and directed by John Mackenzie, the film featured the original cast and mixed documentary footage, a filmed performance of the play and scenes filmed on location.

III - Audience reception across time and space

Henry VIII on the Anglophone contemporary stage: iterating an unpopular play

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Abstract: This article reflects on the iterability of a specific play on the contemporary stage: Shakespeare's and Fletcher's *Henry VIII*. The text, deemed to be a "bad" play compared to others in the Shakespearean canon, is often criticized for its lack of a clear structure. Nonetheless, two companies decided to stage it recently: Shakespeare's Globe (UK) offered a rewriting of the text and made it part of its summer season in 2022, and the Baltimore Shakespeare Factory (USA) staged it in April 2023 for its first in-person performance since the pandemic. This article articulates how the play was perceived by audiences and critics with the artistic endeavors of both companies. Using data collected through surveys and interviews with spectators, it reflects on the reception of an unpopular play, and questions its iterability on the contemporary anglophone stage.

Résumé : Cet article réfléchit à l'itérabilité de la pièce *Henry VIII* de Shakespeare et Fletcher sur la scène contemporaine. En effet, ce texte, considéré comme une « mauvaise pièce » parmi le canon shakespearien, est souvent critiqué pour son manque de structure. Malgré cela, deux compagnies ont choisi de mettre en scène cette pièce récemment. Le théâtre du Shakespeare's Globe (RU) a proposé une réécriture du texte dans le cadre de sa saison d'été en 2022, et la Baltimore Shakespeare Factory (USA) l'a mis en scène en avril 2023 pour sa première représentation en présentiel depuis la pandémie. Cet article articule la réception de la pièce par les critiques et les publics avec les efforts artistiques entrepris par ces deux compagnies afin de mettre en scène ce texte. Les données récoltées lors d'enquêtes et d'entretiens avec les spectateurs ont permis de réfléchir à la réception d'une pièce impopulaire, et d'interroger la possible itérabilité de ce texte sur la scène contemporaine anglophone.

Keywords: Drama; Shakespeare, William; Fletcher, John; *Henry VIII*; adaptation; reception; audiences; canonicity

Mots-clés : théâtre ; Shakespeare, William ; Fletcher, John ; *Henry VIII* ; adaptation ; reception ; publics ; canonicité

"Let's be honest: it's a red flag when the most famous English writer of all time has a play about one of the most obsessed-over eras of English history and it almost never actually gets staged" (Lukowski). *All is true*, best known today as *Henry VIII*, does not currently count amongst Shakespeare's most beloved plays. Contrary to staple texts such as *Richard III*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it is rarely performed. The question of its iterability on the contemporary stage is thus at stake for any company willing to produce it. As Anne Teulade underlines, "Elle demeure largement considérée comme une pièce monologique, patriotique et propagandiste, destinée à célébrer la dynastie Tudor dans une perspective providentialiste" (par. 7). This was not always the case: in the seventeenth and eighteenth century, *Henry VIII* was one of Shakespeare's most beloved plays. As Gordon McMullan explains, "[The play] has, in fact, had one of the longest and most stable theatrical histories of any play in the Shakespearean canon, something which has been both an immense advantage and also, for a range of reasons, an unfortunate burden" (8). This specific performance history leads us to reflect on the play's iterations in the twenty-first century: the notion of repetition and iteration is at stake for all of Shakespeare's texts, but here, the particular status of the play challenges its iterability in a specific way. Although it is not often iterated on the contemporary stage, Shakespeare's Globe (London, UK) decided to make it part of its summer season in 2022, and the Baltimore Shakespeare Factory[1] (Baltimore, USA), a semi-professional company with a limited budget, also chose to perform *Henry VIII* for its first in-person performance since the pandemic, in April 2023.[2] These two companies relied on very different means to produce the

play. The Globe's production (directed by Amy Hodge) offered a partly rewritten text by author in residence Hannah Khalil, working in "collaboration" with Shakespeare and Fletcher. She added new scenes with a feminist point of view, following the trail of the musical *Six,* which gave a voice to Henry VIII's six wives. The BSF performance (directed by Jeff Miller), on the contrary, decided to follow the text closely, with minimal cuts. The contemporary stage is an opportunity for these two directors to revive and reiterate a play which still suffers from a bad reputation. How is this early modern text, now rarely staged, envisioned by the two companies, both working on a very different scale? How do these two iterations deal with the bad connotations associated with the play? To answer these questions, I will analyze the reception of these two adaptations using audience data I collected at several performances of both plays (through surveys and interviews). In October 2022, I attended four performances of *Henry VIII* at Shakespeare's Globe, during which 143 surveys were filled out by playgoers and 23 short interviews conducted, either during the interval or after the play. In April 2023, I went to six performances of the play by the BSF, collected 128 surveys and ran 21 interviews on Zoom in the weeks after the show. This work with audiences takes place in the wider context of my PhD, which focuses on Shakespearean twenty-first century audiences, and which aims to explore, as Helen Freshwater puts it, "the road less travelled" (27), asking audiences directly for their opinion, rather than basing myself on what reviewers might write.[3] To do so, I rely on mixed methods research, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches drawn from sociology. The first step for each performance was to hand out a survey before the beginning of the play. The survey has a quantitative goal: I aim to measure gender, age, professional category, and yearly theatrical attendance. It also has a qualitative component, as I ask the playgoers why they had decided to come to the play, what their expectations were, or what they associated with the name Shakespeare. At the end of the survey for the BSF, the spectators were free to leave an email address or a phone number, so that I could contact them to conduct an interview on Zoom. At Shakespeare's Globe, I talked to

random spectators directly at the end of the play or during the interval. The Shakespeare's Globe study was conducted at the beginning of my PhD, at a time when I was still trying out different approaches: my interactions with the spectators were limited to what we may call "vox pop" or "street interview", only asking audience members what they thought of the performance, and what they had expected the performance to be like before coming in. The BSF study is composed of longer interviews, each lasting between forty minutes to an hour, asking twenty questions related to the performance, theatrical habits, and perception of Shakespeare. The Shakespeare's Globe's shorter interviews allowed me to get direct reactions from the spectators, right after they had seen the play, while the BSF interviews were more in-depth, but also more distant, as the interviews happened a few days or a week after the performance. For both studies, the survey was elaborated with the Plateforme Universitaire de Données (PUD) at the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme in Clermont-Ferrand, to make sure the quantitative data would be valid.[4] As of today, I have collected 1665 answers to the survey, working with theatres in France, Germany, the UK and the USA. In terms of these two specific studies, the BSF production attracted a very small crowd (around twenty spectators for each performance), and except for a dozen spectators who did not wish to fill out the survey, I was able to have it completed by all the playgoers. The Shakespeare's Globe performance drew a much larger crowd, and I was of course unable to survey the entire audience. Surveys should always be considered carefully, as spectators can misunderstand a question, and as they do not reflect the entire audience. As for the interviews, they should not be equated with truth either. As Hervé Dumez underlines about the work achieved through qualitative methodologies: "[C]e matériau est structurellement lacunaire : le chercheur ou l'équipe de recherche n'ont pas pu interviewer tout le monde ; ils ont pu observer certaines situations ou interactions, mais pas d'autres ; certaines archives ont disparu ou ne sont pas ouvertes" (21). Mixed methodologies have their limits, but they allow us to understand audiences in a better way, through their own discourse, and through quantitative data,

which offer some distance with what spectators formulate about their playgoing habits. The aim of the questions asked during the interview was not to validate a specific hypothesis – which would have led to directed and biased questions, beside enhancing the risk of circularity[5] – but to gather material on audiences' theatrical practices, and their impressions of a specific production. By exploring the interviews and surveys I have collected here, I do neither imply that my research represents all the playgoers present, nor that what spectators have to say about a production should be taken at face-value. My goal is rather to illustrate a reflection on *Henry VIII*'s contemporary reception by representing some of the audience's voices. To do so, I will analyze the difficulties of iterating an ill-loved play on the contemporary stage, before turning to how the two companies under study decided to tackle this challenge. Lastly, I will focus on what kind of audiences the two companies tried to target.

The challenge of iterating an ill-loved play

Before turning to our two productions, it seems necessary to delve into the text's reception and performance history. Indeed, *Henry VIII* was not always unpopular. As Gordon McMullan explains, "it was performed in every decade, and in every year of some decades, from the mid-seventeenth century well into the nineteenth century, and later nineteenth-century productions became showpieces of contemporary theatrical fashion" (3-4). Yet, McMullan also states that "critics remained largely lukewarm about *Henry VIII*, treating it at best as 'minor Shakespeare' and often ignoring it altogether. Certain key roles – Katherine and Wolsey, in particular – were considered powerful, but the play from which they were drawn was felt to be deeply flawed" (3-4). Performing *Henry VIII* became a challenge around the middle of the nineteenth century (Margeson 6). Indeed, at this point, the play's authorship started being questioned, and Fletcher's supposed participation to the writing of the play was pointed out as the main reason for its deficiencies. It was James Spedding who, in 1850, first suggested that Fletcher could have collaborated with Shakespeare and

criticized the play for this reason.[6] Moreover, the rise of Bardolatry in the nineteenth century has much to do with its definition as "bad" Shakespeare, according to Ilka Alter:

> By 1850 adoration of the Bard had become very much a part of English culture. Just as Shakespeare was viewed as the paradigmatic artist, so too was his work perceived to be the very model of aesthetic achievement. Not surprisingly, what constituted the perfection of his art was defined by Victorian literary standards, and what shaped dramatic response was Victorian theatrical convention. (179)

Indeed, the lack of unity in the "episodic structure" of the play was one important reason for its negative criticism in the twentieth century (McMullan 4). Rather than providing a clear message, or a detailed portrait of the monarch, the play does not lead its audience towards a specific meaning: this negative vision is also linked with the generic classification of the text, considering *Henry VIII* only as a history play. Instead of seeing the "mixing of dramatic genres" that is at stake in *All is True*, some critics have disregarded its possible status as a "tragicomic romance", which could explain why it has been perceived as lacking structure (Greenblatt 807). The text was thus considered as imperfect, incoherent and inconsistent (Alter 179), making the shared authorship with Fletcher the only plausible explanation for the text's flaws. As Alter explains: "Rather two authors, one of whom is clearly less able, than a deficient or inadequate Shakespeare" (179). Since then, the play has been reappraised by scholars (McMullan, Alter, and Gossett to name a few): however, it is still associated by theatrical critics (as the many negative reviews for the Globe's 2022 production have demonstrated) with a "bad" play, lacking a clear structure, with too many procession scenes, and an unfortunate collaboration with Fletcher.

What interests me here is not to determine if the play is actually good or bad – since, as the reception history of the play proves, aesthetic appraisal is subjective and ever-changing – but to emphasize how much this appraisal of *Henry VIII* as one of Shakespeare's "bad ones" weighs on audiences' expectations, before, during, and after the performance. In fact, criticism by George C. D. Odell, Professor

of English at Columbia University, first published in 1920, strongly echoes with how spectators perceived the play in the two productions I have studied. Odell states: "The trouble with *Henry VIII* is that it is impossible to maintain interest in its story after the fall of Wolsey and the death of Katherine; the bits about the christening of Elizabeth and the trial of Cranmer are actually glued on the first part in order to eke out the necessary five acts" (qtd. in Alter 179). More than a hundred years later, spectators at the BSF indicate: "the play has three trial scenes. I'm like, really? There's a third one?"; "And instead of making the play two and a half hours, if it was two hours and fifteen minutes… I mean, the last bit, you know, you're sort of done. The story's kind of done. Let's get to the christening." This negative appraisal of the play started even before the beginning of performance. Thus, one spectator at the Globe mentioned in the survey: "Should be good, even though probably not a terribly good example of Shakespeare, probably written mostly by John Fletcher", and another: "Not favorite play, love *Comedy of Errors* and *Henry V* more." The collaboration with Fletcher appeared as a bad starting point, as one spectator even mentioned "a lower standard of writing" in the survey.[7] One spectator from the BSF explained after seeing the production: "I know the history pretty well and skimmed this text in college, so I already knew I was in for a long show that isn't terribly exciting." Another evoked the fact that the play felt like a piece of propaganda from Shakespeare: "The fact of it is, *Henry VIII* is certainly not his best play. And I think there's a reason that it never gets produced. It's not very good. And as soon as the curtain came down, my first thought was, Shakespeare was such a suck up. And it was clear, it's always been clear that he knew who his patron was. And he cut and pasted his plays to make sure that the patron was happy at the end of it".[8]

Contrary to nineteenth and twentieth century disapproval of the play, blaming Fletcher for the "defects" of the text, contemporary spectators did not shy away from criticizing Shakespeare directly. The dislike of the production was not imputed to the company or the way they staged the play, but to the text itself. Performing *Henry VIII* on the contemporary anglophone stage is therefore linked to a set of

preconceptions that are hard to overcome. Any iteration of *Henry VIII* on the contemporary stage thus needs to deal with the "burden" of the play's status. How did our two productions take on this challenge, and what visions of the play did they offer?

Rising to the challenge: staging *Henry VIII*

The two productions under study took a very different path to iterate the play. Let us note that this difference is partly due to the scale of both companies. Shakespeare's Globe is a major company on London's theatrical scene, attracting both tourists and locals to its productions, with financial means considerably superior to those of the BSF. The BSF is a local company, attached to playing Shakespeare with minimal cuts to the text, universal lighting, and limited scenic designs. However, each director's dramatic choices in staging the play make the comparison of the two productions worth analyzing. First, Shakespeare's Globe offered a new version of the text. The company had already staged *Henry VIII* twelve years prior in a production that lasted three hours and made few cuts to the original (directed by Mark Rosenblatt in 2010). This time, the theater presented a partly rewritten text by writer-in-residence Hannah Khalil. She explains:

> My brief was to sculpt the play into an exploration of the female experience. I took threads that already existed within the play and stitched them into richer seams, pruning other sections that felt less relevant to this reimagining. To compose more language for the characters, I worked 'collaboratively' with Shakespeare, by mining the treasure trove of 37 plays and 154 sonnets. I 'magpied' snippets of text, putting new words in the mouths of the characters to deepen the exploration of their experiences and to tell a story that feels more relevant to now.

Cutting some passages (such as Cranmer's trial at the end of the play) while putting to the fore female characters (Anne Boleyn, Katherine of Aragon and Mary Tudor) gave a feminist dimension to the text. One spectator related the use of music and the refocusing of the story on women's point of view to the musical *Six*, which was performed at the same time in London's West End. This was a way to

make the iteration of the play speak to contemporary concerns and interests, as Professor Peter Kirwan underlines in his review of the performance:

> Amy Hodge's *Henry VIII* is the first major mounting of Shakespeare and Fletcher's play since *Six: The Musical*, in an era that has also seen a Black woman play Anne Boleyn on television, Thomas Cromwell become a leading figure in Hillary Mantel's book/television/film juggernaut, and Shakespeare's Globe stage more confrontations with its own history, most prominently Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's channelling of Emilia Lanier to demand that we 'burn the fucking house down'. (2022)

The characterization of Henry as an immature King, unable to control himself also echoed current political issues, amid the "partygate" scandal. The feminist lens chosen by Khalil was appreciated by several of the women spectators I spoke to: "I love how real it is and it's still real today. Women's right, women's privilege, lack of privilege"; "Yeah, I thought it was absolutely wonderful, the cast were incredible, the take on the relationships and how they turned it into a complete kind of empowerment of women at the end was really a lovely spin on Shakespeare's original." The production was frequently punctuated with songs, notably one making Katherine's words in 3.1 into an anthem: "unmannerly we women, we women lacking wit".[9] The Globe tried to free itself from the play's reputation to offer a new version of the text, in touch with contemporary interest in the Tudor period and in the rereading of the history of Henry VIII through a feminist lens. By doing so, however, it was also in touch with a long tradition of focusing the play on its female characters, as Susanne Gosset analyzes:

> In one way the reception of *Henry VIII* has been continuous from Victorian times to the present: in its focus on the two queens. The drama seems oddly current, the tale of an older, devoted spouse replaced by a fertile trophy wife many years younger. Anne's own uncertainty, the way in which she is pushed into her position and yet cannot help seeking it, nicely embodies contemporary ideas about the objectification of women and the internalised false consciousness that abets it. (197)

Despite its choice of rewriting the text, the Globe's iteration thus stayed aligned with a long tradition of selecting specific roles from

the play to put them forward – rather than trying to represent the different perspectives present in the text.

The BSF chose a very different line, making few cuts to the script. It laid strong emphasis on the gossip and the role of the courtiers in the making of information. This echoes with Anne Teulade's analysis of the play, as she demonstrates that an ironic reading of the initial title can be made: "La pièce démontre que tout est faux, de sorte qu'il est possible de la concevoir comme une incitation à réfléchir sur la construction et la fabrique de l'histoire" (par. 7). Instead of the traditional providential understanding of the text, implied by Cranmer's praise during Elizabeth's baptism at the end of the play (5.4), Teulade offers to read *Henry VIII* as a reflection on how truth is distorted and reported in historical accounts. Indeed, Shakespeare and Fletcher's text constantly stages rumors and lies. At the beginning of the play, Cardinal Wolsey asks a secretary to spread the belief that he was the one to make the king cancel an unpopular tax, when it was Queen Katherine's doing: "let it be noised / that through our intercession this revokement / And pardon comes" (1.2.105-6). The play is rife with the courtiers' gossip and alludes to the distortion of history, and to Teulade, the cumulative succession of actions, rather than being a weakness in the construction of the play, puts forth the absence of any logical link between cause and consequences (par. 24). This vision of the play is clearly the one chosen by director Jeff Miller. While Henry was confronting Wolsey for instance, the courtiers sneaked out of the room and slid a wooden panel that connected the theater to the backstage area that was visible and they watched the scene while commenting on it and rejoicing in the Cardinal's demise, before sliding the panel shut again. In the program of the play, one can read:

> In a play with no sword fights, no wars, and no bloodshed, the most powerful men and women in the world rise and fall through pen-strokes and word-of-mouth. As the alternate title (All is True) implies, the notion of what is fact and what is fiction pervades this play, and rumor runs rampant as political factions vie for power. (BSF 5)

Several audience members felt confused by this lack of "sword fights" and "bloodshed" and by the portrayal of Henry VIII, which proved disappointing for those knowing Tudor history, as this spectator underlines: "I'm familiar with the story, very into Tudor history, but I just never read that play and it's strange because I found the context of the play to be not as exciting as I expected it to be, considering everything that happened in Henry VIII's life, but I think the cast did a great job." Yet, one might argue that this unsettling representation of history is exactly what the play aims for. As Nadia Thérèse Van Pelt explains:

> The spectators receive their share in the playmaker's anxiety of how to portray a historical figure when their actions remain relevant for the society in which the play is performed. Shakespeare's play thematically addresses this anxiety, and turns unease into pleasure as he has his characters self-consciously reflect on themselves as historical figures, as fictional constructions in a play, and as characters at the mercy of their writers, their 'sick interpreters', for the image they will leave to posterity. (40)

The BSF production tried to represent this unease on stage, and to emphasize the gap between historical truth and theatrical representation. What both companies had to decide was whether the text is "a complex play with an underlying unity" or "a collection of lively shows and unrelated emotional scenes" (Margeson 32-33). In the Globe version, the script was no longer considered as a self-sufficient unit; the stronger passages were chosen, laying emphasis on Katherine and Wolsey's characters, and were reinforced with additions by Khalil. On the contrary, the BSF's focused on the play as a coherent whole, unified by the theme of gossip and the complex representation of historical truth.

Both performances, however, focused on their relationship with their audiences. With its pageant scenes and trials, *Henry VIII* appears as a constant spectacle, which is commented live by the courtiers, like a social media feed and creates a strong metatheatrical dimension. As John Margeson underlines:

> Irony is apparent in the structure of *Henry VIII*, it is also theatrically active as dramatic irony in specific scenes, and it affects much of the play through such devices as diverse observation and commentary, since almost everyone in the play becomes involved in watching others and speculating about their reactions or motives. (43)

The play continuously stages the question of reception, a fact that the Globe and the BSF did not overlook. In the Globe's production, two wooden platforms were installed in the middle of the pit, and the two gentlemen of the original text became two women in the production. They were on the platforms for most of the performance, commenting on what was going on onstage. They often started booing or laughing, which initiated reactions from the audience. Peter Kirwan explains:

> These two women played a semi-choric function, often deployed to clean up or attend on others and later progressing to be nurses, but regularly returning to their commentary role. Against the parade of immaculately dressed purple men – Kevin McMonagle's ludicrously bewigged and officious Chamberlain, Esmonde Cole's confident Surrey, Baker Mukasa's joyless and somewhat prissy Norfolk – the women spoke for this London, restless and unhappy, waiting to intervene. (2022)

Thus, they paved the way for the actual audience members by showing them that the theater had become a court, in which they were active participants, a crowd rather than an audience. For instance, Katherine invoked the support of the audience when she was pleading her cause during her trial, and the audience often applauded her exit, which she did by crossing the pit to go through one of the theater's doors, as if dividing a crowd of townspeople who had just watched the trial. The same is true of the BSF open production. The company played its production in a large room inside a church building. The room had a small proscenium stage, but instead of using this stage throughout the play, the actors played mostly amongst the spectators and the stage was reserved for trial scenes and official moments within the play. When Katherine knelt to pray for instance, she did this right in the middle of an alley between the spectators' seats. The action was played very close to the audience, and spectators felt like privileged

witnesses to history. The courtiers were constantly commenting on the action in the middle of the spectators. This reinforced the play's ambiguous representation of truth and historical facts, which the company aimed to expose. Audiences were at the center of both productions' approaches.

"Who's there?": planning *Henry VIII*'s reception and targeting the audience

Given the difficulty of adapting Shakespeare and Fletcher's play today, what kind of audiences did both companies target when programming *Henry VIII*? Linda Hutcheon insists on the importance of repetition in the pleasure of adaptation: "Like a ritual, this kind of repetition brings comfort, a fuller understanding, and the confidence that comes with the sense of knowing what is about to happen next" (114). But with *Henry VIII*, a majority of the audience mentioned that they were seeing the play for the first time. I evoked the weight of expectations at the beginning of this article, yet the Globe and the BSF might also have hoped to surprise their audiences. As Warren Chernaik underlines:

> With yet another production of plays in the standards repertory, it is sometimes hard to break free from the burden of tradition, the memory of having seen Laurence Olivier or Ian McKellen, Peggy Ashcroft or Judi Dench, in a particular part. With *Henry VIII*, hardly any members of the audience are likely to have seen productions, or even read the play (…) At the very least, there is the possibility of discovering something new, and finding out what the actors can make of the material. (101)

Thus, audiences could be pleased to discover a new text by Shakespeare, leaving room for surprise and novelty. However, several reviews of the Globe's production indicated that the performance could only please a specific type of spectators. The *Evening Standard* made it clear that only Shakespeare fans were likely to enjoy the play: "There's enough going on here to please nerds and Shakespeare completists, but I can't honestly recommend it to anyone else" (Curtis). Yet, the real audience was far from being composed only of "nerds"

and "completists", i.e. spectators trying to see all of Shakespeare's plays performed. At Shakespeare's Globe, due to its status as a tourist attraction, 60,5% of the audience had never been to the Globe before.[10] This indicates that an important part of the audience was not familiar with the company and the type of work it is pursuing. Thinking that the play is made for "completists" only does not come close to the truth. Staging *Henry VIII* at the Globe is actually a precarious balancing work, between audiences who are unfamiliar with Shakespeare (like this Globe spectator: "It's my first Shakespeare, it's my first time seeing Shakespeare at the Globe so I didn't know what to expect") and playgoers who attend the performance with very specific expectations, as was the case with this other Globe spectator: "I'm actually a history student so I'm comparing it to real life history […]. They don't really explain why Henry is so adamant on divorcing Catherine in favor of Anne Boleyn." Commenting on site-specific performances of *Henry VIII*, Johanna Schmitz evokes the 2010 production of the play at the Globe directed by Mark Rosenblatt:

> Knowing that this was the play during which the first Globe so famously caught fire and burned to the ground on June 29, 1613, I wonder how many in the audience looked up in act one, as the cannon fired two shots, 'chambers discharged' (1.4.49), to acknowledge the several visible sprinkler heads protruding so unapologetically above the pitch of the new Globe's thatched roof. (691)

This time, the Globe's 2022 production did not employ a proper cannon, but a pistol firing confetti that Henry used just after meeting Anne Boleyn. Rather than producing "a proximity to the theatrical past we so desperately hope to find" (Schmitz 692), the Globe's 2022 production tried to anchor the performance in the present. The costumes used contemporary elements like Nike sneakers or flip-flops, making the characters closer to us, as one spectator underlines: "I've never seen something live before but I saw a recording of *Twelfth Night* and it was very…the costumes were older and that type of stuff. So I'm surprised how they're wearing like sandals and these nice… they're wearing stuff I would wear!" The shift from cannon to confetti, from traditional costume to a mix of traditional and modern

elements, indicated that the Globe tried to build a performance not only for completists, but also for those who knew nothing about the play. Rather than alluding to the cannon that set fire to the Globe in 1613, a fact that completists and Shakespeare fans were bound to know, the performance emphasized a sense of spectacle and fun that was accessible to all. Completists were not forgotten, as the play was a patchwork of famous snippets taken from Shakespeare's other – and more famous – works: "Shakespeare enthusiasts will enjoy spotting which play or sonnet is being pilloried at any given time" (Hood). Indeed, a stewardess reported that a spectator, during one of the performances, exclaimed "but that's from *Henry VI*!" and the line "the lady does protest too much, me thinks" (*Hamlet*, 3.2.254) triggered laughter from the audience at the four performances I attended. The Globe's adaptation thus tried to please both newcomers and experts, taking into account what these different audience members would react to.

On the other hand, the BSF audience was mostly composed of spectators looking for this specific play, with a smaller number of newcomers discovering the company's work (60% had already been to a BSF performance). The BSF kept closer to the text, presumably because it is the artistic line of the company, which sets a strong focus on Original Practices, which can be described as "the means by which modern theater practitioners attempt to perform Shakespearean and other English Renaissance drama as they believe Shakespeare and his theatrical contemporaries might have done" (Weingust 1474). As Dr Farah Karim-Cooper explains, Original Practices are about "experimentation": thus, they go beyond historical reconstruction, as they aim not only to reconstruct and recreate but also to use and experiment with created artifacts such as architecture, costume, and to explore lighting, modes of playing, direction, language… (Shakespeare's Globe and Farah Karim-Cooper) One might assume that this is what the BSF audience, composed mainly of Shakespeare aficionados, was looking for. Several of the spectators mentioned being Shakespeare fans, and having already visited the Globe in London and Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford-Upon-Avon. As one of them

declared, "I'm a bardologer. I'm a, you know, […] I'm a Shakespeare worshiper for better or for worse". For this type of audience, the performance of *Henry VIII* was perceived as a special occasion: "Well I was very happy to see it, because it was the first time I've ever seen it live on stage. And it's not a play that's done very often. I'd seen recordings of the Globe production and so on. So this was a wonderful, rare opportunity to see the play live." The spectators of the BSF also prepared for the performance in advance: several mentioned having read the play, or watched online performances, as well as doing general research about it, and listening to podcasts or online conferences about Shakespeare. One spectator even had an Excel file listing all the Shakespeare productions he had attended: "So I've seen 34 out of the 39. I haven't seen any of *Henry VI* or *Two Noble Kinsmen* or *Troilus and Cressida*. *Henry VIII* was the most recent new edition. I had never seen that before. I've seen A *Midsummer Night's Dream* 11 times, the 'Scottish Play' nine times, and *The Tempest* nine times. *Romeo and Juliet* eight times, and then *As You Like It*, *Hamlet*, and *Richard III* all six times." These highly prepared spectators came to the performance with in-depth knowledge of Shakespeare and the play. The BSF thus emphasized textual proximity, something that the spectators – some of whom could be described as bardolaters and Shakespeare's enthusiasts – appreciated, as coming to *Henry VIII* was a rare opportunity to see the text performed. Therefore, bardolatry, which in the nineteenth century had much to do with the play being labeled as "bad" because of Fletcher's role in the writing, brought spectators to a play which still suffers from its difficult reputation.

Conclusion

Adapting the "rambling script from William Shakespeare and John Fletcher" (Nathan) proves a difficult challenge for contemporary directors. As Ilka Alter underlines, "given the infrequency with which *Henry VIII* is performed in our century, its relative popularity in earlier periods seems unexpected to say the least, raising inevitable questions about what factors ultimately determine the ongoing theatrical vital-

ity of plays within the canon" (180-181). The reception of the two productions at stake has shown that *Henry VIII* still suffers from its categorization as a "bad" play, but also demonstrates a desire to rise to the challenge posed by Shakespeare and Fletcher's text. The Globe production, with its contemporary rewriting, offered a new text, going beyond debates on authorship or structure. At the same time, it took up again a century-long vision of the play, putting forward female roles, reinforcing the belief that the play could only be iterated through the erasure of Henry's importance in the performance. As Ilter pleads for "a further exploration of the extent to which theatrical tradition and performance history shape what we have previously assumed to be the intrinsic meanings of a particular play" (184), one may wonder if the reappraisal of the play by scholars will lead to a new popularity on stage. *Henry VIII*'s place in the Shakespearean canon also invites us to reflect on the lack of popularity on the contemporary stage of other plays, such as *King John,* or *The Two Noble Kinsmen*, and on what contemporary audiences project on Shakespeare, the status of the plays being deeply affected by "social attitudes" towards them (Gossett 186).

Appendix

Survey, Shakespeare's Globe, *Henry VIII*

How old are you? ☐ less than 18 y. old ☐ 18-25 ☐ 26-35 ☐ 36-50 ☐ 51-70 ☐ over 70

What best describes your gender? ☐ Agender ☐ Female ☐ Male ☐ Gender fluid ☐ Non-binary ☐ Transgender ☐ Prefer not to say ☐ Other:

Is it your first visit to Shakespeare's Globe? ☐ yes ☐ no

Is it your first time seeing a Shakespeare play? ☐ yes ☐ no

How often do you go the theatre? ☐ 1-2 times a year ☐ 3-5 ☐ 6-10 ☐ 10-20 ☐ more than 20

Today, you came: ☐ alone ☐ accompanied

Do you live in the UK? ☐ yes ☐ no / Do you live in London? ☐ yes ☐ no

What are three words you associate with Shakespeare?

What are three words you associate with the play *Henry VIII*?

Why did you come to today's performance?

What are your expectations for the show?

Did you read any critical reviews about the play? ☐ yes ☐ no

Did you prepare yourself for the performance (by reading the play, articles, doing some research?)

Do you think the play will be ☐ easy to understand ☐ somewhat complex ☐ very difficult to understand

In your opinion, Shakespeare should be ☐ played as traditionally as possible ☐ modernized

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1 Now referred to as BSF.

2 I wholeheartedly thank Shakespeare's Globe and the BSF for letting me work with their audiences and being so very welcoming to me. I would also like to express my gratitude for the anonymous reviewers who gave me very precious advice on this article.

3 On reception and audience theory, see (to name but a few) Bennett, Freshwater, Kennedy, Mervant-Roux and Purcell. On the sociology of audiences, see Coulangeon and Pasquier.

4 The survey was conceived with Axel Delarue, a study engineer at the PUD. I have provided the Shakespeare Globe's survey in the Appendix.

5 The risk of circularity is when the collected data is used to verify a specific theory, thus leading the researcher to select data that will only confirm his or her hypothesis (Dumez 11).

6 "Spedding disliked the play, finding that it lacked a clear moral design, and did not believe that Shakespeare could have written the whole of it at the end of his career, even though he recognised that certain scenes showed the master's hand" (Margeson 6).

7 Interestingly, as Peter Kirwan mentions, the 2010 production of *Henry VIII* at Shakespeare's Globe erased Fletcher from all publicity materials (2010). The inclusion of Fletcher in the 2022 production indicates a new era in the Globe's marketing strategy, reinforced with its "Editing in Action" Project in the summer of 2022, when audience members were invited to explore extracts from Fletcher's plays with academics and actors (Shakespeare's Globe).

8 This vision is strongly reductive. Even though Shakespearean criticism saw a propaganda purpose in the historical plays in the 1940s, this vision has been largely contested and nuanced since then, as Anne Teulade explains: "Il fait consensus depuis les études Phillys Rackin (*sic*) que ces pièces sont davantage des réflexions sur l'agencement de l'histoire que de simples représentations de l'his-

toire, et qu'elles ne défendent pas une représentation monologique des desseins divins" (pars.3-4).

[9] Shakespeare and Fletcher's text reads: "Do what ye will, my lords and pray forgive me; / If I have used myself unmannerly, / You know I am a woman, lacking wit/ To make a seemly answer to such persons" (3.1.174-177). All quotes are from the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition.

[10] This is according to my survey. The Globe also indicates in its 2022-2023 report that in 2022, when the tourism market was still recovering from Covid-19, 40% of their audiences came from outside the UK.

"I belong only here in Baghdad": transcultural adaptation and the Shakespearean canon in Monadhil Daoud Albayati's *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* (2012)

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Abstract: *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, written by Monadhil Daoud Albayati, was commissioned by the World Shakespeare Festival in 2012. The festival aimed at commemorating the influence of Shakespeare across the globe and celebrating international adaptations and co-productions of his plays. The setting of the World Shakespeare Festival naturally encouraged cross-cultural adaptations, i.e. transpositions into cultural, political or religious contexts different from those of the hypotext. Daoud Albayati's adaptation decentres *Romeo and Juliet* and sets the play in Iraq, in the context of the invasion of the country by the forces of the Coalition. Based on Linda Hutcheon's concept of "transculturation", this article will analyse the incorporation of cultural Iraqi elements into the plot: although the play was a commission, Daoud Al-Bayati wanted to address his people first and foremost, even if it meant that *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* was sometimes obscure to a Western audience. This article will also address the paradox of using the Shakespearean canon, which to this day occupies an ambivalent position in the cultural landscapes of former British colonies and mandates, to draw the attention of a European audience to the tragic fate of Iraq after its invasion by British and American forces.

Résumé : *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, écrit par Monadhil Daoud Albayati, est une pièce de commande pour le World Shakespeare Festival qui a eu lieu en 2012. Ce festival ambitionnait de commémorer l'influence de Shakespeare à travers le monde et de célébrer les adaptations et coproductions internationales de ses pièces. Le cadre du World Shakespeare Festival a naturellement encouragé les adaptations interculturelles, c'est-à-dire les transpositions dans des contextes culturels, politiques ou religieux différents de ceux de l'hypotexte. L'adaptation de Daoud Albayati décentre *Romeo and Juliet* et situe la pièce en Irak, dans le contexte de l'invasion du pays par les forces

de la Coalition. En s'appuyant sur le concept de « transculturation » de Linda Hutcheon, cet article analysera l'incorporation d'éléments culturels irakiens dans l'intrigue : bien que la pièce soit une commande, Daoud Albayati a voulu s'adresser avant tout à son peuple, même si cela signifie que *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* demeure parfois obscur pour un public occidental. Cet article abordera également le paradoxe de l'utilisation du canon shakespearien, qui occupe aujourd'hui encore une position ambivalente dans les paysages culturels des anciennes colonies et mandats britanniques, afin d'attirer l'attention d'un public européen sur le destin tragique de l'Irak après son invasion par les forces britanniques et américaines.

Keywords: Iraq war; Shakespeare; transcultural adaptation; literary canon; World Shakespeare Festival; rewritings

Mots-clés : Guerre en Irak ; Shakespeare ; adaptation transculturelle ; canon littéraire ; World Shakespeare Festival ; réécritures

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, new translations and iterations of Greek tragedies began to flourish on British stages, inviting audiences to draw parallels between the wars and conflicts depicted in classical plays and the unfolding war on terror. Between May 2004 and January 2005, no fewer than five adaptations of Greek plays were staged in England: *Cruel and Tender* by Martin Crimp, a rewriting of Sophocles' *The Women of Trachis*, was performed at the Young Vic; Euripides' *Ion* was adapted by David Hunt at the Mercury Theatre in Colchester, and *Iphigenia at Aulis*, based on Euripides' tragedy, was directed by Katie Mitchell at the National Theatre. In addition, two productions of *Hecuba*, the first by Jonathan Kent at the Donmar Warehouse and the second by the Royal Shakespeare Company, were staged.

The return of these tragedies to the forefront of theatrical creation prompted Michael Billington to wonder: "Where does our theatre

instinctively turn in times of crisis? Not to Shakespeare or Shaw but to the Greeks." However, although tragedy can indeed be considered a "theatre of crisis" (Decreus qtd. in Banu 23), the Shakespearean canon remained, at the turn of the new millennium, a prolific matrix through which the subject of the war on terror, and more specifically the war in Iraq, was broached. For instance, *Henry V* was rewritten and set in the Iraqi desert in Nicholas Hytner's 2003 production at the National Theatre; *Much Ado About Nothing* was used as the hypotext for Roy Williams's *Days of Significance* (2008), which tells the stories of young British soldiers about to be deployed in Iraq; and *Macbeth* was reimagined through the Scottish lens in David Greig's *Dunsinane* (2010), inviting a parallel between colonial conflicts in Scotland and Iraq.[1]

This very brief overview of the British theatrical responses to the war in Iraq indicates that while original plays were written about the conflict,[2] playwrights also tended to turn to the Greek and Shakespearean canon.[3] The transformation that hypotexts undergo in order to be adapted to the contemporary world, and more particularly to the context of the war in Iraq, paradoxically seem to underline a desire for stability: in times of political upheaval, meta-narratives, in Lyotard's sense of the term, seem to be a source of immutability, a frame of reference through which the war in Iraq can be interpreted, processed and understood. However, as Linda Hutcheon points out, "adaptation is repetition, but repetition without replication" (vxi): the necessary changes made to a play in order to adapt it to contemporary events shed light on our present, but also allow us to reassess the ways in which a literary canon is constructed and can become a space of friction.

This paper will consider the Western literary canon, and more specifically the Shakespearean canon, as a space of conflict through the adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* by Monadhil Daoud Albayati.[4] Daoud Albayati rewrites *Romeo and Juliet* in the context of the sectarian conflicts that ravaged Iraq after the country was invaded by the forces of the Coalition in 2003. Using Linda Hutcheon's con-

cept of transcultural adaptation, I will analyse the ambivalent role of the Shakespearean hypotext: can the play, deliberately rooted in Iraqi culture, draw the attention of a European audience to the tragic fate of Iraq, without losing its cultural specificity by operating through a Shakespearean matrix? The political potential of this rewriting will first be studied through the specificities of the transcultural adaptation and the changes made to adapt the play to the Iraqi political and cultural context. The reception of the play, both in Iraq and in the UK will then be analysed in order to pinpoint the political influence of the Shakespearean canon. Finally, the historical presence of the Shakespearean canon in Iraq will beg the question of adaptation as (re)appropriation.

Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad as transcultural adaptation

As part of the Olympic Games organised in London in 2012, a festival celebrating the influence of Shakespeare across the globe was held from April to September 2012. The World Shakespeare Festival, which mainly took place in Stratford-upon-Avon and the capital, aimed at celebrating Shakespeare's work by inviting playwrights from all over the world to adapt the Bard's plays: "[The World Shakespeare Festival is] a challenge set by the Royal Shakespeare Company to theatre groups around the world to create contemporary versions of the classics to mark the London Olympics" (Spencer). The festival strove to open up a new space in which marginalised, and even oppressed, voices could express themselves, turning Shakespeare into a cultural catalyst: "Shakespeare becomes a vehicle of empowerment, an agent to foster the multicultural good" (Huang and Rivlin 1). The scope of the festival was clearly intended to be both meliorative and gratifying for the countries and cultures thus represented through the adaptations and rewritings.

Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad was commissioned as part of the World Shakespeare Festival. First performed at the National Theatre in Baghdad, the play was then staged in Stratford-upon-Avon. It updates *Romeo and Juliet* in the context of religious tensions in Iraq after

the invasion of the country by the Coalition forces: the geographical precision "in Baghdad", attached to the title of the play, underlines the decentring of one of Shakespeare's most famous plays. The setting of the World Shakespeare Festival naturally lends itself to transcultural adaptations, i.e., transpositions into cultural, political or religious contexts different from those in which the hypotext takes place. Linda Hutcheon sees transcultural adaptation as a dialogue between works and the context in which they were produced:

> Contemporary events or dominant images condition our perception as well as interpretation, as they do those of the adapter. There is a kind of dialogue between the society in which the works, both the adapted text and adaptation, are produced and that in which they are received, and both are in dialogue with the works themselves. Economic and legal considerations play a part in these contexts, as do evolving technologies […]. So too do things like religion. (149)

The transposition of *Romeo and Juliet* to Iraq requires a transcultural encounter, the result of which is a hybrid play that borrows from several cultural, political and religious contexts. The playwright displays agency by selecting passages or features from the hypotext: what is retained, along with what is discarded from the original play, becomes highly significant. This process of transposition was theorised by Linda Hutcheon as "transculturation" (xvi). Hutcheon uses the metaphor of the adapter to describe this transformation: "Power comes in different forms, in addition to AC/DC and 120v/220v, of course, and it can be adapted for use in different contexts (different countries); the adapter plug and the converter allow the transformation of power to a usable form for a particular place or context" (150). By ensuring that the hypotext is intelligible to the audience in terms of its history and its political, cultural, social and religious context, the playwright plays the role of adapter. Daoud Albayati chose *Romeo and Juliet* not only because it is a world-famous literary reference, but also because the play lends itself to comparison with the tragedy being experienced in Iraq:

> I found Shakespeare's text to be relevant to my Iraqi audience, which has been suffering from sectarian violence since the American invasion. It was

> a big adventure to struggle with a classical text, which is implanted in the memory of both the Iraqi and world reader. The process of writing took more than a year and a half. The adaptation should grow out of the Iraqi spirit entangled as it is with deep internal problems. Since I believe that theatre should be for the people, I had to adapt the Iraqi and local collective memory to the tradition of Shakespearean tragedy. (71)

Daoud Albayati's aim was to use Shakespeare as the matrix for a theatre steeped in Iraqi culture, which would speak first and foremost of the problems facing the country.

The sober aesthetic of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, as well as its bare stage, allow the audience to focus on the text and the changes made to Shakespeare's play. The essence of the plot remains untouched: the Capulets and the Montagues are at war (here, they are fighting over the ownership of a boat) and Romeo and Juliet, who have not seen each other for nine years, are condemned to a doomed love affair. The characters' first names are retained from Shakespeare's play, and *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* regularly makes intertextual references: for instance, when Romeo asks the Nurse to tell Juliet where they can meet, the place agreed upon is called "Sheikh Zubare", a paronym for "Shakespeare" (Amjad and Makki 26).

The introductory stage direction plunges the audience into the atmosphere of a civil war, which will only grow more violent throughout the sixteen scenes of the play: "*The sound of gunfire and explosions. The scene conveys the atmosphere of a civil war. Young people run in all directions, carrying weapons*" (75).[5] A history teacher replaces the chorus: the choice of this allegorical character reinforces the play's desire to present the history of Iraq through the Shakespearean matrix. The professor opens the play with a desperate observation:

> HISTORY PROFESSOR. A long time would pass before we could comprehend the magnitude of what had happened. Alas, our homeland has become an arid wasteland, unable to support our ambition. (*To the characters onstage.*) Why are you smiling at the darkness? Turn away, I don't belong to you.

As the HISTORY PROFESSOR. *addresses the audience, the other characters gradually exit.*

HISTORY PROFESSOR. I want to inhale the fragrance of palm trees, not the stench of war. I crave the lovers' night, the night of those deeply in love. I am the water of life. I am the legal heir to this country. Bear witness. I belong only here in Baghdad, and only to Romeo and Juliet. (75)

While the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet* evokes a quarrel between two families and the fates of two individuals, Daoud Albayati chooses to make the History Professor the personification of the Iraqi nation through the use of the first-person pronoun. The parallelism between the last two sentences of the Professor's rejoinders ("Turn away, I don't belong to you" and "I belong only here, and only to Romeo and Juliet") categorically rejects conflict and struggle as the essence of Iraqi identity: by banishing the characters from the stage, the Professor puts the love and unity embodied by the lovers, albeit cursed, back at the centre of the play.

As a transcultural adaptation, *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* incorporates Iraqi culture and traditions, and Iraqi folklore replaces Shakespearean tales. For instance, the infamous Queen Mab speech delivered by Mercutio in Act 1, scene 4 of the original play is swapped for the account of a dream Mercutio has had about a beetle and a rat. Both speeches draw upon folk tales: Shakespeare referenced the Queen fairy, a figure deeply rooted in English folklore, while Daoud Albayati uses "[…] a version of a traditional story from Mosul about *kham-fasana*, a beetle" (qtd. in Al-Azraki and Al-Shamma 106). Mercutio's dream centres on a female beetle who turns down a marriage proposal from a radish peddler, then from a lettuce peddler, as both men admit they will hit her. A rat then comes along, and promises to ever only caress her: the beetle agrees to marry him. The couple are happy but destitute, and they go hungry. One day, the rat happens upon a jar of date syrup: trying to get some nectar for his beloved, he falls into the jar and drowns. The female beetle, overcome with grief, flies off on a carpet to ask Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, then Scheherazade, to help the poor, who suffer from the never-ending wars that are wreaking havoc on their country. The story ends with this prediction, delivered by the

beetle who tries to comfort her fellow women: "Be patient. Romeo is coming with a jar of date syrup" (83).[6] This transcultural adaptation of the Queen Mab speech not only draws on Iraqi folklore, but also helps adapt the play to a specific contemporary context: "Sometimes adapters purge an earlier text of elements that their particular cultures in time or place might find difficult or controversial [...]" (Hutcheon 147). The transcultural shift from Queen Mab to the beetle illustrates the problems associated with adapting plays to different historical, religious and political contexts: the sexual undertones of Queen Mab, deemed inappropriate in Iraq, are replaced with a tale about the living conditions of the Iraqi people and presents Romeo as Juliet's saviour.[7]

The transposition of Shakespeare's play in the context of Iraq is also highlighted by the specificities of invasion by the Coalition forces and the inter-religious tensions it later provoked. The religious conflict is embodied by the fathers of the two protagonists: Juliet's father wears a keffiyeh with a red and white chequered pattern similar to that worn by Sunnis. Montague, Romeo's father, on the other hand, wears the black and white keffiyeh traditionally associated with Shiites (Arango). References to jihad and Al-Qaeda appear regularly, particularly in the person of Paris, who in this rewriting is a Mujahid advocating for violent action rather than traditional religious practices. The play also evokes the problems associated with the invasion of the country in 2003. Scene 7, for example, shows an anonymous and silent American General giving blood to Romeo's father: "*Romeo's father drags an IV stand with a transfusion bag. An American General stands beside him, giving him blood*" (85). Despite his silence, the presence of this high-ranking officer is a reminder that the Coalition forces have helped to stir up religious quarrels in Iraq. The play also refers to specific events, such as the massacre perpetrated by employees of the American private security company Blackwater. To Mercutio, who makes fun of her looks, the Nurse replies in Scene 10 that she will one day become famous in England and the United States:

> Anyone who wants to go to London, he must be an extremist because the British love extremists and one could become famous after that. And then the American ambassador will send for you and I'll become an important

> person and they will give me fat contracts with many security guards– Blackwater security guards. Then they'll break the heads of anyone who tries to laugh at me. (90)

Hired by the US government to provide, among other things, security for Paul Bremer, Iraq's civilian administrator during the country's reconstruction, Blackwater was found guilty of murdering seventeen Iraqis in Nisour Square in September 2007 while its employees were escorting an American convoy.[8] The Nurse denounces British prejudice against Iraqis and the permissiveness of the United States in the country's reconstruction market: lucrative contracts are awarded to the highest bidders.

Converting Romeo and Juliet to contemporary Iraq therefore serves Daoud Albayati's intention of writing a play specifically for an Iraqi audience. However, the dialogue theorised by Hutcheon in transcultural adaptations seems to give way to tension, in that not all references to specific events, traditional tales or other cultural and religious markers may be intelligible to a foreign audience.

Adapting for Iraqi and British audiences

The play was performed in Stratford-upon-Avon, and later in London, in Arabic with English surtitles, before being translated into English and included in the anthology *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* (2017), edited by Amir Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma. Bennett and Carson felt that this surtitling made it difficult to understand the play: "The audience was sparse and seemingly predominantly Western and unable to understand the Arabic language. The rapid-fire surtitles made following both the action and words hard-going" (qtd. in Edmondson et al. 184). It seems relevant, however, that the play was performed in its original language, since the process of transculturation is intended to adapt it to a context unfamiliar to British audiences; translation into English would also have deprived the Iraqi actors of the opportunity to perform in the United Kingdom. As Spencer points out, the play was not designed for a Western audience, even though it was commissioned by the

Shakespeare World Festival: "The political message – hammered home to me both by Daood [sic] and his actors – is aimed at their Iraqi, not British audience." The somewhat pejorative expression "hammered home" underlines the production team's resolve to subvert Shakespeare: this play is resolutely Iraqi, whatever the hypotext on which it is based, and is not intended to be didactic. The History Professor paradoxically does not teach the audience about sectarian violence in Iraq: the character, who in turn acts as chorus and a wise advisor reminiscent of both Friar Laurence and Prince Escalus, does not provide any historical perspective. Rather, his rejoinders are limited to broad injunctions: "Enough. All you can talk about is religion and religion has nothing to do with what you claim it does. It's been years. Haven't you had enough of killing? Haven't you had enough of animosity?" (95) As a seemingly secular figure, the Professor merely acts as the arbitrator between the two feuding families, therefore depriving the play of a structural tool for historicisation. The programme handed out before the performance in England is the only source of contextual information to guide British audiences: "Understand that we live in a place where terrorists break our homes over our heads. We are the family of *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, living in the time of the neo-barbarians" (qtd. in Steele Brokaw 8). The inability of British viewers to think of the eruption of unimaginable violence into the mundane may have, for some critics and members of the audience, downplayed the intrinsic horror of the final scene.

The last scene takes place in Baghdad's Cathedral of Our Lady of Sorrows, where the History professor has advised Romeo to go hide. He has already been there for forty days when Juliet comes to find him. As a battle rages outside, gunshots can be heard and an explosion throws Juliet to the ground: thinking his beloved is dead, Romeo kneels over her body and cries out in despair. The stage, bathed in a cold blue light, contrasts with the spotlights shining on the actors, enveloping them in a softer glow, like a cocoon shielding them from the rest of the violent, cruel world. Merely stunned, Juliet wakes up and the two lovers profess their love for each other. Paris then barges

in wearing an explosive belt: "*Paris approaches them and blows himself up. The two families enter. They find Juliet's scarf with that of Romeo. The History professor hands them to the families. The two brothers shake hands and exit. The end*" (105). The sobriety of the final stage direction contrasts with the audience's feelings about the ending of the play:

> On the night I saw the production in Stratford, this conclusion had a visceral effect on the audience. In the accelerated seconds between Paris's arrival on stage and his fatal move, there was a sense of chilling recognition among some, but far from all, of the audience that this is what it would be like: to know what comes next and to have no power to change the outcome, that this was probably the end of one's life. Even as I had that thought, I was also aware that others around me had no idea at all; their innocence was palpable and somehow deeply sad. (Bennett 9)

The visceral reaction Bennett first describes is nuanced: only a few people in the audience seem to be truly aware of what is going to happen on stage, while others, shielded by their relatively serene daily lives in the United Kingdom, are not expecting a suicide bombing. The play reaches its climax by depicting what Iraqis experience on a day-to-day basis, and by widening the gap between the different levels of interpretation: what is for some the tragedy of everyday life is for others a horrible realisation. That the final scene should unfold in this particular Cathedral is highly symbolic, and sadly familiar, to Iraqis: in 2010, it was the target of a terrorist attack which killed 48 people, perpetrated by a group close to Al-Qaeda. The location is therefore significant on three counts, since it is also located just a few steps from both the Iraqi National Theatre, where the play is performed, and Daoud Albayati's flat (Spencer).

While knowledge of the hypotext is not crucial to understand the play, many cultural references specific to Iraq may have been lost on a British audience. Reviews and accounts of the show, according to Bennett, have not been particularly complimentary, and the use of this hypotext has been criticised:

> Overall, the play's few reviews, both of the Stratford and London performances, were generally not enthusiastic—that Daood [sic] might have

> done much better to have written an original play if he had wanted to teach English audiences about conditions in Baghdad and that he should have left Shakespeare's classic play alone. (18)

That one should reproach Daoud Albayati's play with lack of originality seems unfair: by writing an original play, the playwright would never have had the opportunity to tour it in the United Kingdom.[9] The Shakespearean canon thus seems to be a necessary hypotext in order to familiarise an English-speaking audience with the suffering in Iraq and make the country's tragedy more visible. Paradoxically, Iraqi theatre critics have chided Daoud Albayati for not drawing more from his country's rich literary tradition: "The production has also been criticised by Iraqi reviewers for its use of colloquial language and for not exploiting the rich poetical history of Iraqi literature" (Amjad and Makki 9). Transcultural adaptation therefore becomes the *locus* of tensions between the hypotext and the hypertext, and, in the case of this play, challenges a British audience who does not share the same frame of reference. Shakespeare's global status and influence in the Western literary canon can be conducive to processes of (re)appropriation leading to such friction. The term, defined by Fischlin and Fortier, "suggests a hostile takeover, a seizure of authority over the original in a way that appeals to contemporary sensibilities steeped in a politicized understanding of culture" (3). The notion of adaptation as conflict therefore needs to be historicised and placed in the perspective of Shakespeare's presence in the Middle East.

Globalised Shakespeare: (re)appropriation of the Shakespearean canon

The spread of Shakespeare's works around the world has been studied under the label of "globalisation" since the 1960s. Bosman points out, however, that the term covers a much older reality: "[t]he term names a condition as ancient as the experience of empire and diaspora, of nations and the states they create" (qtd. in de Grazia and Wells 285). More specifically, Margaret Litvin, Avraham

Oz and Parviz Partovi detail Iraqi productions of Shakespearean plays in the twentieth century: "Iraq saw nine professional Shakespeare productions between 1962 and 1985. All were tragedies except *The Merchant of Venice* (1965) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1982), both directed by Sami Abdel Hamid" (102). From 2001 onwards, the Anglo-Kuwaiti playwright Sulayman Al-Bassam established himself as the leading director and adapter of the Shakespearean canon in the Middle East. His *Arab Shakespeare Trilogy*, published in 2014, consists of three adaptations: *Al-Hamlet Summit* turns Hamlet into a jihadist, *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy* analyses the consequences of the invasion of Iraq by Coalition forces and *The Speaker's Progress*, based on *Twelfth Night*, examines the political forces behind the Arab Spring. The omnipresence of Shakespeare in this region is partly explained by the frequent use of these plays, especially in countries under political and cultural censorship, to thwart prohibitions and comment on contemporary socio-political problems. Shakespeare is particularly present in Iraq: "Shakespeare is well-read here and, when one looks beyond Baghdad's recent history and to the traditions of an intellectual and cultural past that ended relatively recently, more revered even than in other countries with a theatrical history" (Spencer).[10] Under British mandate from 1920 to 1932, Iraq was exposed to Shakespeare, whose plays were used as a tool for British cultural imperialism. As Edward Said points out in *Culture and Imperialism*, the education provided in Arab countries gave pride of place to the Western literary canon: "Young Arabs dutifully read Milton, Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Austen, and Dickens as they might have studied Sanskrit or medieval heraldry; no emphasis was placed on the relationship between English and the colonial processes that brought the language and its literature to the Arab world" (305).

Literature is one of the tools of cultural imperialism, and Shakespeare in particular was used by the British Empire to promote the English language, as Julie Sanders argues:

> Shakespeare was undoubtedly deployed as a tool of empire, taught in schools across the world as a means of promoting the English language and the British imperial agenda. As a result, postcolonial texts that "talk back"

> to the colonizing culture frequently deploy Shakespeare as a means of achieving this. There are complex reasons at stake: as products of imperial and imperialist educational structures, many of these writers share knowledge of Shakespeare with the dominant culture they seek to critique. If adaptation requires foreknowledge of the source for the system of analogue and juxtaposition to succeed […] then Shakespeare is a reliable cultural touchstone, a language "we all understand". (52)

It is therefore not surprising that Daoud Albayati chose *Romeo and Juliet* to evoke the fate of Iraq after its invasion by the Coalition forces. By choosing a hypotext from the Western canon, the play becomes more easily accessible to the British and can be performed abroad; moreover, by responding to a commission for a global festival, Daoud Albayati ensures that the plight of the Iraqi people is visible to a Western audience. The World Shakespeare Festival's very approach, however, is marked by a form of cultural imperialism: if the aim is to celebrate a globalised Shakespeare and to honour transcultural adaptations, one might also argue that this event has reinforced British cultural prestige and influence throughout the world, and particularly in its former colonies. Although Emer O'Toole welcomes the geographical and cultural diversity of the productions in an editorial published in *The Guardian*,[11] she nevertheless laments the fact that these foreign companies have been invited to Britain for the sole purpose of staging Shakespeare's plays: "[…] wouldn't it be better if re-imagining the British canon were not a pre-requisite for invitation to the UK's biggest professional theatre festival?" (2012). The festival's website boasts that it is the biggest Shakespeare event ever organised, bringing thousands of international artists to England. It also points out that almost 50% of the world's children study Shakespeare at school, a total of 64 million pupils: "The Festival is creating a community of teachers across the world who are passionate about teaching Shakespeare, creating a legacy for young people everywhere" (World Shakespeare Festival website). The cultural prestige of this legacy, and the economic motive that goes with it (one million tickets were sold), have turned Shakespeare into an industry.[12]

The (re)appropriations of Shakespeare's plays over the centuries offer insights into historiographical approaches to this canon:

> […] a historiographical approach to Shakespearean appropriation becomes in many respects a study of theoretical movements; many theories which had their intellectual foundation in recent decades, such as feminism, postmodernism, structuralism, gay and lesbian studies or queer theory, and postcolonialism, have had a profound effect on the modes and methodologies of adapting Shakespeare. (Sanders 46)

In a postcolonial context, it seems crucial to bring Shakespeare down from his pedestal: Marjorie Garber sees him as a monument to be toppled (10), while Stephen Bottoms criticises his status as a deity and a figure of authority against whom we must now try to measure ourselves (qtd. in Adiseshiah and Lepage 78). With the advent of postcolonial studies, many critics are arguing for an emancipation from the cultural prestige attached to this author, following Bottoms' argument:

> I want instead to argue for an 'emancipated' approach to working with Shakespeare – one which acknowledges the inevitability of his influence (as the author of tales and phrases that now form part of our everyday cultural currency), while removing Colossus from his pedestal and restoring him to the status of fellow theatrical citizen. (qtd. in Adiseshiah and Lepage 60)

This new paradigm seeks to place Shakespeare on an equal footing with other authors in Western literary history, and to put an end to a form of "bardolatry" (60). The process of (re)appropriation offers a welcome decentring: using Shakespeare as a diversion, a gap, to comment on a contemporary situation would encourage other perspectives. By referencing Iraq's rich culture as well as the fallout from the invasion of the country by Anglo-American troops, Daoud Albayati decentres Shakespeare and uses a well-known tale in order to stage Iraq's plight as the main focal point. While he had to "adapt the local and collective Iraqi memory to the tradition of Shakespearean tragedy" (70), Daoud Albayati also reminds his audience in the foreword of the play that "[he] is the true heir of tragedy. [He] wrote while [his] clothes were drenched in blood" (70).

Conclusion

With *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad*, Daoud Albayati appropriates the Shakespearean matrix and uses it to shed light on Iraq's tragedy. Although the play was commissioned as part of a festival meant to celebrate Shakespeare, the playwright chooses, to some extent, to risk the alienation of part of its European audience by writing a play meant for Iraqis: as such, transcultural adaptations may become spaces of friction. Using Shakespeare as hypotext to denounce the consequences of the invasion of Iraq by the forces of the Coalition helps question our relation with the Western canon and the way it is built. In *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (2014), Douglas Lanier argues in favour of a rhizomatic conception of the Shakespearean canon, rather than a simply arboreal one: the structure of the tree invites us to think of Shakespeare's cultural authority as residing exclusively at the root, in the original texts. The horizontal network of rhizomes, on the other hand, provides a form of decentring:

> Within the Shakespearean rhizome, the Shakespearean text is an important element but not a determining one; it becomes less a root than a node that might be situated in relation to other adaptational rhizomes. To think rhizomatically about the Shakespearean text is to foreground its fundamentally adaptational nature—as a version of prior narratives, as a script necessarily imbricated in performance processes, as a text ever in transit between manuscript, theatrical and print cultures, as a work dependent upon its latter-day producers for its continued life. (Lanier qtd. in Huang and Rivlin 29)

The rhizomatic conception of the Shakespearean canon encourages us to consider rewritings, adaptations and (re)appropriations as an integral part of this canon. Shakespeare's status as a cultural authority is diluted, to the benefit of counter-hegemonic appropriations of his work: a web of references and texts related to Shakespeare is thus woven, with the aim of deconstructing the influence of this literary canon. I would add, however, that even if this rhizomatic web offers the possibility of creating other nodal points, it continues to make Shakespeare a central point: to start from one of his plays in order to

deconstruct it is to continue perpetuating the cultural authority of this literary figure (Lanier qtd. in Huang and Rivlin 6). Despite this, the rhizome has the advantage of placing Shakespeare's plays within an interconnected whole, in which each work has its place.

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1 More recently, Swiss theatre director Milo has also adapted Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* to the context of Iraq in his play *Oreste in Mosul* (2019).

[2] Jonathan Lichtensetein's *The Pull of Negative Gravity* (2004), Simon Stephens' *Motortown* (2006), Gregory Burke's *Black Watch* (2006), Colin Teevan's *How Many Miles to Basra* (2006), Caryl Churchill's *Drunk Enough to Say I Love You?* (2006) or David Hare's *The Vertical Hour* (2006) are some of the many British plays written about the war in Iraq.

[3] As underlined by Georges Banu, the rise in popularity of certain authors from the Western repertoire is uncertain. Banu sees the theatrical canon as an ocean, in which each playwright comes and goes as waves do: "In the repertoire, Brecht, Chekov, Shakespeare and the Greeks sometimes take precedence – not exclusivity. They all seem to respond, one after the other, to what the theatre of a particular period needs" (8, translation mine).

[4] There are several spellings of the playwright's name: I will use in this article the one that can be found in *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* (2017), edited by Amir Al-Azraki and James Al-Shamma.

[5] In a terrifying echo of the fear Iraqi people experience on a daily basis, real explosions were heard on the morning of the premiere of the play (Arango).

[6] The footnote included in the text explains that some versions of the tale end with a warning: "In one telling, it concludes after the death of the rat, with the moral 'Don't marry a rat'" (qtd. in Al-Azraki and Al-Shamma 106).

[7] Other examples of cultural and idiomatic references are listed in Fazel, Asadi, and Makki, Salam Hasan. "Al-Bayati's *Romeo And Juliet In Baghdad* And The Call For Love And Harmony: A Study In Adaptation And Its Concept Of Indigenization." *Mutlicultural Education* 7.3 (2021): 23-29.

[8] The four employees tried in the United States and found guilty of the massacre were later pardoned by Donald Trump in 2020.

[9] *Romeo and Juliet in Baghdad* is the only play from *Contemporary Pays from Iraq* to have been staged in the United Kingdom.

[10] The dictatorial regimes of the Middle East seem to have favoured this canon for the themes it tackles to their advantage, such as the legitimacy of power, but also for the anti-Semitic use they could make of it. Daoud Albayati's wife, Deborah Shaw, explains: "For instance, *The Merchant of Venice*, with its Jewish villain, was a staple of school curriculums under Mr. Hussein" (Arango 2012).

[11] O'Toole refers to productions of *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Richard II* et *All's Well That Ends Well*: "Bitter Pill's visually gorgeous Swahili *The Merry Wives of Windsor* managed to inject the most brainless and boring of Shakespeare's comedies with vitality and belly laughs. Palestinian collective Ashtar made a powerful political statement about displacement through its stripped-down *Richard II*. The festival has offered UK audiences their first chance to watch the National Theatre of China, and this week sees India's Arpana theatre perform in

Britain for the first time with an all singing all dancing Gujarati *All's Well That Ends Well*" (2012).

12 Fischlin and Fortier speak of an actual industry dedicated to Shakespeare. Apart from these economic issues, the permanence of Shakespeare's texts can also be explained by the fact that they have fallen into the public domain: "There are also economic and legal factors: Shakespeare is helpfully outside copyright law, making him safe as well as interesting to adapt" (48).

Entretien avec Koumarane Valavane
Entretien réalisé le 28 mai 2024

Marianne Drugeon (Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3)

MARIANNE DRUGEON : Koumarane Valavane, pouvez-vous nous décrire le processus d'écriture de votre adaptation de *Roméo et Juliette* qui deviennent Jack et Janani, habitants du Tamil Nadu d'aujourd'hui ?

KOUMARANE VALAVANE : Je suis parti d'un fait divers, un crime d'honneur. Les parents d'une jeune fille qui avait fait un mariage inter-castes ont voulu faire tuer les deux amoureux. La jeune fille, Kausalya, membre d'une caste supérieure, avait épousé Sankar, un intouchable, un Dalit, un *Chandâla*, et il fallait une sorte de sacrifice de ces deux amants pour laver l'honneur de la communauté[1]. Ma pièce se situe au point de rencontre entre *Roméo et Juliette* et ce fait divers. C'est cette fin qui m'a inspiré, je suis parti de là et j'ai remonté le fil jusqu'au début. Mais mes comédiens ont travaillé à partir d'improvisations : Shakespeare n'a pas écrit dans le contexte des castes, il ne dit même pas pourquoi les familles sont rivales, il fallait donc que nous repensions tout ce contexte. J'ai aussi été inspiré par la structure dramatique de la pièce : elle commence presque comme une comédie, puis il y a un coup de théâtre inattendu qui la transforme en tragédie. Au fur et à mesure de notre travail au plateau, nous nous sommes rendu compte que cela correspondait bien à notre situation en Inde. Un moment clé dans le développement du texte a été quand je suis allé interviewer la jeune fille qui a survécu à l'attaque : au fur et à mesure qu'elle me racontait son histoire, j'étais sidéré par le nombre et l'étendue des correspondances entre sa vie et l'œuvre de Shakespeare. Les similitudes se multipliaient jusque dans les petits détails : par exemple, elle a dit de son amoureux qu'une fois qu'ils ont été ensemble, il est devenu un ange ; et pour Shakespeare, l'amour transforme le plomb en or. Le deuxième moment fort de notre entretien, qui m'a montré

à quel point les choses se nouaient à certains endroits, comme si les deux récits étaient des fils qui s'entrecroisaient, c'est quand je me suis aperçu que ce n'était pas le père de la jeune fille qui était très violent, mais sa mère, comme dans Shakespeare.

Évidemment l'œuvre de Shakespeare est un monument, c'est un auteur qui était capable de comprendre toutes les subtilités de l'âme humaine, y compris de cultures différentes, et c'est en cela qu'il est universel. Ce qu'il raconte dans sa pièce, c'est quelque chose qui se passe aujourd'hui en Inde. En revanche, Shakespeare ne parle pas, selon moi, de la situation politique de son époque, il n'en avait pas forcément les moyens, n'y était pas autorisé. Il se concentrait donc sur l'âme humaine.

Nous avons suivi son histoire jusqu'à un certain point : dans la réalité, l'amante a survécu ; dans la pièce de Shakespeare, les deux amants sont morts, et c'est là que je prends la décision de prendre mes distances. Dans notre histoire, ils ne se tuent pas, ils sont tués. Chez Shakespeare, Roméo s'enfuit et on le suit ; chez nous c'est Janani, notre Juliette, que nous suivons, et au-delà de ces modifications ponctuelles, ce que nous avons apporté à Shakespeare, c'est l'actualité brûlante.

MD : Shakespeare subissait la censure : est-ce que vous avez reçu des pressions lorsque vous avez joué ce spectacle en Inde ?

VK : A l'époque où j'ai créé ce spectacle, en 2010, je ne me suis posé aucune question. En Inde, le théâtre n'est pas confronté à la censure comme l'est le cinéma. Il reste un art marginal, destiné à des populations plus ouvertes d'esprit : le système des castes divise les gens en Inde, il ne va pas y avoir de censure collective comme sur la question des femmes ou de la sexualité. Mais il y a quelque chose que je soulève dans la pièce de façon très discrète, car c'est dit en langue des signes et non avec les mots, c'est un rituel qui a existé jusque dans les années 1970-80 selon lequel si une jeune fille de caste supérieure mourait vierge, elle devait être déflorée par un Dalit après sa mort. C'est un

rituel d'une extrême violence et j'avais peur que le montrer dans la pièce soit mal pris : des chercheurs, en particulier étrangers, ont écrit dessus, des intellectuels de cette région-là connaissaient cette pratique, mais cela reste très délicat. En fait, quand le festival national indien a programmé le spectacle en 2019, on s'attendait à le jouer dans la capitale, comme c'est le cas pour toute la programmation habituellement, mais on a été invités à jouer à Pondichéry, dans notre théâtre. Soit c'est un pur hasard, soit on nous a empêchés d'aller à Dehli et d'avoir une trop grande exposition. Il reste que c'est le spectacle qui a fait le plus de tournées à l'étranger, qui a fait le plus de festivals en Inde, probablement celui qui a le plus marqué les gens. On avait besoin de ce récit-là à ce moment-là, et ce n'est pas fini.

Le spectacle a été programmé dans des lieux hautement brahmaniques, et les brahmanes avaient du mal à accepter que certains instruments, les *paraiattam* ou *tappattam*, qui sont les instruments des Intouchables, puissent y être joués. Maintenant cela se fait plus facilement, il aura fallu franchir cet interdit. Il y a peut-être aussi une forme d'auto-censure de la part des artistes.

MD : Pour en revenir au processus d'adaptation : la pièce que j'ai vue au Quai Branly en décembre 2023 était parsemée de références à Shakespeare, dont le portrait trônait sur scène avant le début du spectacle, et dont Jack lisait la pièce *Roméo et Juliette*. De façon plus précise, avez-vous injecté des passages de Shakespeare dans votre texte ?

VK : Il y a des références à Shakespeare dans la scène d'amour. C'était presque un jeu : la comédienne joue un personnage sourd, elle utilise la langue des signes, ce langage apportait une dimension extraordinaire à sa parole, ce n'était pas simplement, comme cela a pu être perçu, un message politique sur le fait qu'en Inde les femmes ne peuvent pas parler.

Dans la pièce de Shakespeare, Roméo parle de ses mains d'abord :[2] quand nous avons improvisé la scène avec les mains, c'est un des rares moments où le texte de Shakespeare est réapparu.[3]

Plus généralement, les comédiens ont repris des situations ; et surtout l'inspiration principale, ce sont les personnages : Roméo, Juliette, la nourrice, le frère Laurent devenu chez nous l'oncle mystique… Parmi les personnages, notre invention propre, c'est Cupidon. Ce qui nous a beaucoup intéressés, c'est la complexité de ces personnages et nous avons cherché à nous en approcher avec nos propres personnages fondés sur des personnes réelles.

Mais la grande question, celle qui revenait constamment dans notre travail, a été comment adapter certaines situations, par exemple la scène du balcon. Il fallait évidemment la faire. Nous avons réfléchi à cette idée d'espace liminal, de frontière entre les deux mondes, d'espace fragile et dangereux, insaisissable, qui est en même temps une petite scène inaccessible, une mise en abyme. On a transposé cette scène sous les jupes de la nourrice.

L'autre scène incontournable, c'était celle du bal masqué. En Inde, il n'y a pas de bal masqué : où trouver un lieu où les gens perdaient leur identité parce qu'ils devaient venir masqués ? Pour nous, c'est le cinéma, où tout le monde perd son identité et s'en approprie une autre, dans le noir. C'était aussi l'occasion de parler de l'influence du cinéma sur notre façon de penser la relation amoureuse ou romantique. Nous avons mis nos amants dans la situation de spectateurs d'un film érotique, un film que l'on va voir caché, dissimulé derrière une autre identité. Nous nous sommes demandé si des femmes allaient voir ces films en Inde, et puis après une petite enquête j'ai rencontré une jeune fille qui l'avait fait avec ses amies : elles s'étaient déguisées en hommes. La scène n'est donc pas purement tirée de notre imagination.

MD : Le travestissement c'est aussi un ressort dramatique récurrent dans les pièces de Shakespeare !

KV : Bien sûr, Shakespeare est un maître à ce jeu-là, mais on ne l'a pas vraiment développé. Dans notre travail préalable, on l'a testé : toutes les comédiennes ont joué le rôle de Roméo, du père, de tous les personnages. Je voulais aussi absolument que Roméo soit une fille, j'ai essayé plusieurs comédiennes, mais cela adoucissait le récit, il fallait que ce soit un garçon, avec un manque de maturité romantique.

MD : Vous avez aussi parlé du personnage que vous avez ajouté, Cupidon : est-ce une référence culturelle occidentale ?

KM : Cupidon existe aussi dans une version indienne : c'est Kâma, le dieu du désir, et plus particulièrement du désir amoureux, qui utilise aussi des flèches pour répandre l'amour. Mais en Inde aujourd'hui, on associe l'amour romantique à la culture occidentale. Il y a des groupes de policiers mis en place par des hommes politiques d'extrême-droite qui partent en guerre le soir de la Saint-Valentin et vont tabasser tous les amoureux, et ces groupes s'appellent Anti-Romeo Squads[4] ! C'est une preuve que, quand l'amour devient une problématique sociale et politique, on l'associe à la culture occidentale. Je voulais absolument garder l'idée que la liberté amoureuse n'était pas le fait d'une culture particulière, et certainement pas de la culture occidentale. Donc j'ai gardé le Cupidon indien pour cette raison.

Shakespeare est aussi très fort pour créer des personnages secondaires passionnants : à mon sens, dans *Roméo et Juliette*, la nourrice est le personnage le plus intéressant, sa langue, sa poésie amènent quelque chose de plus. Tout ce qui était lisse dans la pièce est renversé par elle, par son vocabulaire, sa façon de parler. L'amour, en théorie, c'est beau, c'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas concret, comme dans le cinéma tamoul. La nourrice permet de dire que l'amour qu'on voit au cinéma ne suffit plus, que l'expérience concrète de l'amour n'y est pas. Soudain le cinéma ne correspond plus à la réalité, n'arrive plus à expliquer ce qui se passe dans la société, les meurtres, les crimes d'honneur.

MD : *Roméo et Juliette* est une tragédie, mais j'ai lu dans un entretien que vous suiviez les règles du *Nâtya-shâstra,*[5] qui exigent que toute pièce de théâtre indienne se termine sur une fin heureuse et laisse les spectateurs dans un état d'*Ananda*, qui veut dire félicité en sanskrit : transformez-vous la tragédie en comédie ?

KM : Le *Nâtya-shâstra* est un vieux traité de théâtre classique qui dit que toute pièce doit finir dans l'état de félicité : les pièces de théâtre classique mais aussi le cinéma suivent cette règle en Inde, tout finit bien, mais nous les artistes contemporains sommes confrontés à cette règle. Selon moi, « état de félicité » ne signifie pas fin heureuse. Cet état de félicité, c'est l'état du public, et on peut l'atteindre en regardant une tragédie : toute notre sensibilité est éveillée, on est en connexion. Notre histoire se termine avec la mort des amants dont le meurtre était commandité par les parents, puis on voit la vidéo de la jeune fille qui raconte où on en est au moment de la représentation, car les choses ont évolué au fur et à mesure des programmations de la pièce. En 2019, les parents avaient été condamnés, la pièce se terminait joyeusement, les acteurs sautaient de joie ; en 2023 au Quai Branly, les parents ont été libérés par la Haute Cour ; aujourd'hui, on est à la Cour Suprême. Il fallait que nous inventions quelque chose pour dire que le combat n'était pas terminé : tous les comédiens ont revêtu le même costume, et ils ont chanté tous ensemble, comme un grondement, pour dire que le combat n'est pas fini, c'est une espèce d'annonce.

Je trouve que les textes classiques sont trop théoriques, ils n'ont pas été écrits à partir des pratiques théâtrales. Mais malheureusement le *kathakali*, forme de théâtre traditionnel codifié et ritualisé qui est pratiqué par les hautes castes dans les grandes villes en Inde, et qui sert de vitrine touristique, a pris ces textes au sérieux et les suit à la lettre. Les autres formes de théâtre sont bien différentes. Il y a le théâtre populaire, rural, qui se pratique dans les villages en fonction du calendrier des récoltes. C'est celui qui compte le plus grand nombre de praticiens et de spectateurs. Lui ne respecte pas le *Nâtya-shâstra*. Pas plus d'ailleurs que le théâtre de rue, qui est pratiqué par des activistes

sur le modèle du Théâtre de l'Opprimé d'Augusto Boal. Ce type de théâtre, qui date environ de l'Indépendance de l'Inde, a des codes spécifiques : les comédiens sont habillés de noir, il n'y a pas de décor mais un travail de mime, des chants et des danses, et surtout une forme d'engagement social et politique, par exemple la lutte contre le SIDA ou l'incitation à aller voter.

Ensuite, il y a le théâtre moderne, inventé dans les années 1970-1980 par le dramaturge Badal Sircar et l'élite indienne à partir de références occidentales. C'est une copie du théâtre britannique. Ce théâtre respecte certaines règles du *Nâtya-shâstra*.

Enfin, il y a le théâtre contemporain, que je représente, et qui ne respecte pas du tout ces textes.

Pour revenir à mes propos sur la nécessité de chercher la félicité des spectateurs à la fin d'un spectacle, j'étais donc ironique : je me moquais de cette injonction à chercher une fin heureuse, fin heureuse à laquelle est habitué le public en Inde. Par exemple, les spectateurs ont régulièrement demandé que la fin de films qui se terminaient mal soit réécrite.[6] Mais c'est une tendance récente : les mythes indiens sont très sanglants. Cette fin heureuse est bien hypocrite : le *Mahabharata*,[7] ce sont des millions de morts tout au long du récit, puis seulement une fin heureuse. Ce texte, de toute façon, est un texte pour les élites, qui n'est pas respecté par les gens qui font du théâtre dans les villages, du théâtre populaire.

Moi j'utilise le *Nâtya-shâstra* comme source d'inspiration. Par exemple, ce texte raconte très joliment l'origine du théâtre. Il faut le prendre comme un récit.

Mais je trouve que le meilleur guide pour *Chandâla* a été Shakespeare, sa trame narrative et sa connaissance de l'âme humaine, et notre propre expérience de l'actualité. C'est la rencontre entre ces deux mondes qui fait la force de ce spectacle.

MD : Dans le dossier artistique qui accompagne la pièce lorsqu'elle est montée au Théâtre du Soleil en 2018,[8] vous utilisez constamment

le terme de « plagiat », qui en français a une connotation négative, impliquant le vol d'une idée, le pillage non avoué ou l'emprunt non déclaré d'une œuvre originale. Revendiquez-vous toujours ce terme ?

KV : J'utilise le terme plagiat parce que notre désir était de s'approprier Shakespeare sans aucune gêne, à une époque où on parle beaucoup d'appropriation culturelle : oui, c'est un vol, c'est à notre tour de massacrer les œuvres européennes ! Comme s'il y avait quelque chose de sacré dans Shakespeare alors que personne n'a embêté Peter Brooke lorsqu'il s'est emparé du *Mahabharata* ! Pour moi rien n'est sacré chez Shakespeare. Mon plagiat est une forme d'hommage, qui reconnaît l'intérêt de cette œuvre mais fait de l'adaptation un geste politique qui décolonise, ou recolonise dans l'autre sens.

Oui, ce n'est pas détruire Shakespeare mais s'emparer de son souffle, de ce qui fait sa force, le copier, sans en avoir peur. Shakespeare est très grand, mais lorsqu'on est assis sur ses épaules, de là-haut on voit très loin : on a fait de Shakespeare une échelle plutôt qu'un fardeau. Je pense que d'autres metteurs en scène l'ont transformé en fardeau de façon à conserver une certaine mainmise sur ses œuvres : en le soulevant si haut, ils veulent se soulever eux-mêmes.

MD : Votre spectacle a été programmé au Quai Branly à Paris en décembre 2023. La pièce était alors présentée, comme à sa création en France au Festival des Francophonies en Limousin en 2018, en tamoul, avec des surtitres français. Mais à l'origine c'est une pièce qui a tourné en Inde : pouvez-vous retracer son itinéraire linguistique ?

KV : Mon théâtre, Indianostrum, est à Pondichéry, ancien territoire français, dans l'état du Tamil Nadu où les langues officielles sont le tamoul, l'anglais et le français. Au départ je voulais un spectacle uniquement en tamoul, pas quelque chose d'universel mais de typiquement indien. Mais dès qu'on quitte notre état en Inde, on ne peut plus le jouer, donc il faut des surtitres en anglais. En Inde aujourd'hui

tout le monde parle anglais, surtout les jeunes, donc Shakespeare a naturellement sa place, l'anglais a naturellement sa place, en tant que langue indienne et langue coloniale. Mais la moitié des comédiens de ma troupe ne parlent pas tamoul : ils chantent certains chants dans leur langue propre.

La pièce commence par une vidéo de l'entretien avec Kausalya, et j'ai décidé de faire porter son témoignage à chaque fois dans la langue parlée par le public. En France, c'est une comédienne française qui a dit ces paroles ; en Inde, elle parlait au public en anglais. Des surtitres ont été créés en anglais pour les représentations en Inde, et en français pour les représentations en France, en Tunisie et en Belgique. Le texte qui est présenté dans ce recueil est retravaillé, complété et réécrit à partir des surtitres anglais.

C'est une écriture multilingue, mais c'est aussi une écriture multiple au sens où elle s'accompagne d'un récit, d'une nouvelle que j'ai écrite et qui est également publiée dans ce volume de *Coup de Théâtre* sous le titre *Chandala*, et puis il y a un documentaire qui a été fait au moment de la création de la pièce. De plus, une partie du texte de la pièce est inspirée d'improvisations avec mes comédiens. C'est donc à la fois mon œuvre et une écriture de plateau, et c'est une pièce qui entre en résonance avec d'autres œuvres, créées pour d'autres médiums et d'autres publics.

MD : *Chandâla l'Impur* mêle d'ailleurs de nombreuses références au cinéma et d'autres au théâtre. Pouvez-vous nous parler des jeux intermédiaux que vous explorez tout au long de la pièce ? Le cinéma hollywoodien et les comédies musicales sont-ils une autre référence importante ?

KV : En Inde aujourd'hui, tout notre imaginaire de l'amour vient du cinéma, mais attention, Bollywood n'a rien à voir avec Hollywood. Le cinéma Bollywood vient du théâtre, il en a gardé ses chants, sa musique, ses danses, ses mythes… Les codes de Bollywood n'ont rien

à voir avec ceux des comédies musicales américaines : les films d'Hollywood reposent sur un scénario modélisé, et les films de Bollywood ont également leur modèle, qui est différent, raison pour laquelle Bollywood n'a jamais vraiment percé dans le monde occidental. Au théâtre, c'est la même chose ! Par exemple, les pièces de théâtre rural populaire durent toute une nuit. C'est impossible en Occident. On y inclut l'ennui et la fatigue, alors qu'en Occident, c'est inenvisageable. D'ailleurs, Peter Brook a écrit un essai à ce sujet, *Le Diable c'est l'ennui.*

Le cinéma avait bien sûr naturellement sa place dans notre spectacle, mais nous avons construit ces échos avec une progression. La première partie de la pièce suit les codes de Bollywood, tandis que la deuxième partie reprend les codes du théâtre, dans sa construction, ses personnages, le rapport frontal avec le public. La musicalité aussi est différente. Entre les deux a lieu le meurtre du cousin de Janani. Dans la première partie on se lance dans le spectacle avec la dynamique bollywoodienne, et dès que le coup de théâtre du meurtre a lieu, on va vers le théâtre pour décortiquer, essayer de comprendre, pour voir ce qu'il y a à l'intérieur de la coquille vide, ce phantasme de l'amour présenté par le cinéma. Dans la première partie la salle est dans le noir, et dès que le meurtre a eu lieu, on allume la salle, on éteint l'écran, les personnages se livrent au public directement et simplement. Il y a aussi des marionnettes, des chants, de la musique, de la danse *dalit*, des instruments de musique *dalit*, et tout cela fait partie du théâtre, pas du cinéma.

La famille de Janani appartient à la classe moyenne. Sa culture est celle du cinéma, et elle est vide, elle n'a pas d'instruments, pas de rituel, pas de musique propre, parce que les références culturelles de la musique, du chant, des rituels sont celles qui sont partagées par les communautés défavorisées, les Dalits. Ce sont eux qui préservent la véritable culture de l'Inde.

L'élite en fait une version policée, théorisée, alors que les communautés défavorisées la pratiquent beaucoup plus librement, de façon plus subversive, ouverte, sans code. Ma pièce représente l'affrontement entre ces deux visions de la culture, et à la fin, tous les comédiens se

retrouvent sur scène pour jouer de cet instrument *dalit*. Lorsque je viens en France avec cette pièce, j'apprends aux gens que je rencontre à jouer de cet instrument. C'est le cas des élèves du Conservatoire National de Paris qui en ont joué 15 minutes au Centre Pompidou il y a quelques semaines. Je tiens à partager cette culture, qui est la richesse de l'Inde. Imaginez-vous : en Inde, dans les villages, on continue à jouer le *Mahabharata*, c'est assez extraordinaire. C'est comme si l'Odéon, mais aussi un village au fin fond de la campagne française, et une ville de banlieue, programmaient tous *Les Atrides*. En Europe, il y a eu une institutionnalisation des mythes et textes fondateurs qui sont entrés dans les salles. Ils n'existent plus dans les villages, alors qu'en Inde c'est encore raconté dans les villages. Finalement, c'est un changement radical que j'aimerais initier, qui verrait le théâtre devenir de nouveau démocratique, de nouveau collectif et ouvert à tous : au fond, le théâtre pour tous c'est ça, le texte pour tous. Il n'y aurait plus de mur de séparation.

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1 Voir dans les références, l'article de Sophie Landrin dans *Le Monde*. Voir aussi l'article de Kamala Marius.

2 Voir *Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, scene 5 :

> "ROMEO. If I profane with my unworthiest hand
> This holy shrine, the gentler sin is this:
> My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
> To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss. (…)
>
> JULIET. Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
> Which mannerly devotion shows in this.
> For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
> And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss." (I.5.92-99)

3 Voir *Chandala*, act 1, scene 7.

4 Sur les Anti-Romeo Squads voir parmi les références l'article d'Atreyee Sen et ceux de Poulami Roychowdhury.

5 Le *Nâtya-shâstra* est une œuvre littéraire antique, composée par Bharata Muni, dramaturge et sage indien, entre 200 av. J.-C. et 200 ap. J.-C. L'ouvrage codifie le théâtre, le jeu dramatique, la poésie, la danse, le chant et la musique. Il demeure une référence pour les dramaturges indiens contemporains.

6 On peut ici penser aussi aux réécritures de Shakespeare à l'époque victorienne, où il fallait, par exemple, que *Roméo et Juliette* se termine bien.

7 Le *Mahabharata* est une épopée de la mythologie hindoue. Texte sacré considéré comme le plus long poème jamais composé, il date des derniers siècles av. J.-C. Selon la légende, il aurait été rédigé par Ganesh sous la dictée du sage Vyāsa, mais est en fait une œuvre collective modifiée au cours des siècles.

8 Voir la présentation du spectacle *Chandâla l'impur* sur le site du Théâtre du Soleil : https://www.theatre-du-soleil.fr/fr/agenda-2018/chandala-l-impur-2018-2166. Consulté le 30 juillet 2024.

IV - A short story and a play

Chandala - The impure

An appropriation of William Shakespeare's The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet

by Koumarane Valavane.



Crédit : Philippe Liezi.

Honour Killing is a despicable practice linked to the caste system in India that inspired this adaptation. I first wrote a short story before writing the play. This stage writing was nourished by the visions of all the actors who participated in the creation of the show and then its revival.

The play was originally written in Tamil. Later it was translated in French by Koumarane Valavane and Marine Cormorèche and in English by Srijita Kar Chowdhury.

The Short Story[1]

At the pinnacle of purity are the Brahmins, followed by the Ksatriyas— the warriors. Below them are the Vaisyas— the merchants, and finally the Sudras— the servants. As a fifth category, we must include those deemed completely impure to touch—the untouchables. They are excluded from everything due to their potential to contaminate the purity of places, the air, objects, and people.

—Excerpt from an ancient book, very ancient and very wise.

The eleven o'clock screening is often dedicated to the so-called Malayalam films, but in reality, it contains erotic content. We call them Malayalam films because these small erotic extracts are added to Malayalam-language films during editing.

The cinema hall – a rectangular building topped with a tin roof supported by a metal frame – is divided into four sections: the box and the balcony placed separately on the first floor, then the first class with recliners with sagging pad support, the second class with reclining chairs but no padding, and finally, the stalls, with nothing but dirt accumulated in front of the screen.

The toilets are separated.

After ten minutes of an uninteresting Malayalam film, the long-awaited erotic scenes in sepia colour begin. The alibi film then resumes its course, and hands emerge from dhotis. The screening progresses with screams, groans, insults, and the heavy silence of the viewers. The enticing title, racy image, and large letter 'A' on

[1] Originally written in French by Koumarane Valavane, translated in English by Srijita Kar Chowdhury. Thanks to Cordis Paldano for his valuable suggestions.

the poster (A means restricted to adult audiences, according to the Censor Board) follow, but the obscene excerpts remain the same: bare breasts, men in heat, pubic hair, but no scenes of penetration or images of penises.

I sit with my uncle on the floor, in front of an enormous breast distorted by proximity, with a man in the background breathing suggestively. My uncle leaves for the toilets and returns. It is my turn to go. He sits, blowing the last smoke from his bidi, and asks me,

"Do you want to fuck a virgin?"

The swinging door suddenly lets in blinding light, causing the image to pale. The room hurls, *The door!* and some insults. I quickly slip out. The earth seems to exhale like the man on the screen. In the toilet, I hear the dialogues of the camouflage film. I masturbate vigorously, imagining my promised virgin.

When I return, silence reigns as the erotic scene resumes. The smell of the sweating man almost pierces the screen, and the dense hair on the armpits raised above the breasts does not strip off the general excitement. I sit down quickly. My uncle whispers in my ear,

"She is a Brahmin."

I shudder, a mix of sexual excitement and immemorial fear. He adds,

"You will be paid."

That worries me a little.

"Three thousand rupees."

We must leave before the end to avoid meeting the spectators of the two-hour session — a romance story in sappy water. Students fleeing the boredom of classrooms, a few lovers seeking privacy, and singles hoping for love generally attend.

We quickly leave with our heads bowed.

Around three in the afternoon, my uncle informs me of the meeting place and slips a bottle of arak into my hand.

"One of their servants will be waiting for you", he says.

He stops me in my tracks.

"Don't back out. They will kill me."

Seeing my hesitation, he continues, "There will be no problem. I have already explained everything," he insists, pushing the bottle into my hand.

Brahmin women are very beautiful, fair-skinned, always wearing white saris with wide gold borders. I can't approach them; I have to keep a certain distance. Sometimes I dream of one and ejaculate, but I've always feared being caught and beaten or lynched. But this is work, paid work, work worthy of an untouchable.

"Drink the bottle but don't masturbate on the way," he warned. "Drink the whole bottle," he insisted.

Normally, I can't take the main road of the village and approach their neighbourhood more than ten metres. They have certainly prepared an enclosure in one of their farms, the furthest from their home.

A huge rounded stone marks the entrance to the village, a protection against the *dark*. A slender man, who was certainly at the eleven o'clock session sitting in second class, is waiting for me.

At my sight, he begins to walk, and I follow him at a distance. Huge containers of water are being set up along the passage. A few untouchables harvesting rice with their feet in the mud look at me with contempt. Our system of divisions and subdivisions with subtle differences in impurity has developed nuanced shades, allowing dogs to bite each other. They do not bite me because I am invited by their master to his daughter's honeymoon. I am supposed to deflower her!

I stop, finish the bottle, and throw it into a fallow field, the fine shards ready to notch into the master's faithful dogs. I derive pleasure from it.

We pass a plantation where a few men are slicing down the first banana trees at the base.

He reaches a large gate, signals me to stop, and enters the farm alone. The pedigree dog, with its muzzle against the crosspieces, stares at me, comfortably lying behind the base of the house. The wealth of this family, situated at the height of purity, is evident in everything it owns, including the size of the pedigree dog. Two banana trees along the gate spoil the peaceful atmosphere.

Preceded by an old servant, I advance towards an enclosure behind the servants' dwelling. The dog follows at a walking pace and at a safe distance, the last element of this absurd hierarchy.

She leads me through a stable to a small dwelling. She stops, the dog stops. We are there. She signals me to enter.

A terror seizes me as at the end of my erotic dreams—the fear of being lynched, the dread of a rat allowed to enter the lion's cage, to fornicate with the lion cub under the hateful gaze of the pack held on a leash by a simple and fearsome belief: *no virgin soul can cross the threshold of the afterlife*. As the price to pay for their excessive purity.

She locks me in with a young virgin. She is lying on a bench.

At first, I see her heels sculpted in minerals. Her big toes, slightly wrinkled, are tied by a piece of black fabric. The folds of her sari collapse in the hollow of her legs. Her hands rest on her lower abdomen with care. Her white sari reveals her white blouse through its translucent layers. Her conical breasts seem frozen. I dare not look at her face. Nearby is a stool, the glass reserved for untouchables, filled, I suppose, with water.

The bulb is fading. My uncle asked me to hurry.

I don't have much time. I uncover her chest to cover her face. I inhale fine particles of spices projected into the air. The fabric reveals a yellowed face, covered in turmeric. I undress, realising that I won't be able to deflower her on this narrow bench. She might fall, so I spread my dhoti on the ground and lay her on it, afraid that the poorly cemented floor will hurt her.

Terror sets in. I can't spread her legs; she resists me. I panic like a trapped rat. *How can she resist me?* It took a while to see her toes tied. I stop, a little out of breath but reassured. A few drops of sweat fall on her stomach. I look at her. No reaction. Of course. I wipe her belly, then release her toes. I spread her legs, lift her sari, and pull up her skirt to her pubis. She is incredibly attractive. I unbutton her blouse. Her breasts look dazed by their fate. I don't understand why I take so many precautions in this state of intoxication, fear, and ambiguity.

I kiss her tits, unable to get hard. I move to a corner and masturbate, thinking of the woman on the screen. I breathe now like the man in the background of the scene. I stare at her young virgin body and penetrate her with great difficulty.

The impurity of death and the impurity of birth finally mix their blood.

I quickly put her body back in place because the old woman starts knocking at the door, hurling insults at me. I leave, ashamed. I spot some bills under a stone, she is far now. I follow her to the small gate.

"You took too long," she reproaches under the threatening gaze of the pedigree dog. "Are you new?"

"Yes. Usually, it's my uncle."

"Five more minutes, and they would have lynched you."

I lower my head.

"If you talk about it…"

“Yes, I know, he warned me.”

As we talk, the men set up the two banana trees against the pillars, declaring the mourning. I set off alone, walking hastily. Behind me, I hear the conch blowing. I speed up. When I reach the banana plantation, the water poured along my path overtakes me.

The banana plantation, now completely mutilated, seems to express a certain desolation.

The Play

Characters

Jack, *a student of English literature.*

Mas, *Jack's friend.*

Gana, *Jack's friend and shopkeeper.*

Janani, *a young deaf student.*

Janani's father.

Janani's mother.

Aya, *a Tamil term that can mean mother, grandmother or trusted servant. Here, she is a distant cousin of the mother, a trusted servant.*

Dheena, *Janani's cousin.*

Sakthi, *Dheena's sister.*

Cupid.

Mama, *Jack's uncle.*

KATHIR, *friend of Mas, Gana and Jack.*

DATTA, *friend of Dheena.*

CHOTE, *friend of Dheena.*

Group of friends.

Two killers.

Author's Note: All the songs used in our version of the play were chosen by the actors, according to the situations. Thus, it is up to directors and actors to choose the songs. Only a few necessary inclusions were translated.

The Voice of Kausalya. *My name is Kausalya. I was 21 when I met Shankar at university. Shankar was a dalit.*[2] *My parents, belonging to a high caste, opposed our relationship and wanted to force me into an arranged marriage. We ran away and lived together for eight months. At the beginning of the ninth month, fearing I was carrying the child of a dalit,*[3] *my parents sent men to kill us. On 13 March 2016, while we were out buying a shirt for Shankar, they surrounded us as we were leaving the store, beat us, and tried to kill us. Shankar died, but I survived.*

[2] Dalit means oppressed in Sanskrit, it corresponds to the untouchables of the caste system in India.

[3] Chandala is a term also used for an inter-caste child.

The Prologue

In beautiful India, where our scene unfolds,
lives a very old demon who feeds solely on hatred.
Seated on his throne, varnished with sacredness,
he has divided the world into four colours:

At the pinnacle of purity are the Brahmins, followed by the Ksatriyas — the warriors. Below them are the Vaisyas — the merchants, and finally the Sudras — the servants. As a fifth category, we must include those deemed completely impure to touch — the untouchables. They are excluded from everything due to their potential to contaminate the purity of places, air, objects, and people.

An angel no bigger than a butterfly
Will face this eternal demon
Nimble on his wings, he will harass the demon with his arrows
He is Kama, the Cupid
Tonight we will offer to the insatiable appetite of this monster
two mythical lovers: Romeo and Juliet
renamed as Jack and Janani
The death of countless lovers has never
buried with them in their tomb the hatred of castes
because the monster has cleverly broken himself in pieces
and hidden them deep inside our hearts.

For the next three hours, if you lend us a patient ear
we will play for you the story of Jack and Janani
We will make love flow through your heart
to cleanse the pieces of this monster
and our zeal will fill the void with Anandha.[4]

[4] According to *Natyasastra*, the Indian Classical Treaty of Theatre, all plays should conclude with the state of Ananda, felicity. It implies a happy ending to all stories. The author ponders on the idea of Anandha being the concluding state of the play, and thus, questions with his ending why it should not be the final state of the public.

Act 1

Scene 1

A funeral ceremony for a deceased young man is being held.
The deceased wakes up and sings. Everyone starts singing with him.
Sakthi walks past the group of boys, she is waiting for the bus to go to high school.
Jack calls out to her while singing.

Jack. Sakthi, I'm Jack. You know when I first saw her, I was buying the book of *Romeo and Juliet*. It was a sign.

Jack tries to approach Sakthi to talk to her. The bus arrives, Sakthi rushes to the bus so that she doesn't miss it and drops a letter while running.

Jack picks up the letter and starts reading it aloud.

Jack. Oh, you handsome stranger with the grey and blue bike! You follow me every day, like a shadow. You smile, but never say a word. Can I know who you are? Call me tonight at 5 p.m. I'll wait. Sakthi.

Cupid enters.

Cupid. Love, Kaadal, Ishq, Mohabbat, Amour,[5]...

Mas & Gana. It's Cupid!

Cupid. Love, Kaadal, Ishq, Mohabbat, Amour,...

Cupid, Gana, Mas and Jack dance and sing together.

Gana. It's only 10 o' clock now!

All. It's only 10 o' clock now. We're to wait for her till 5 p.m.

Everyone is dejected.

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5 The word "Love" in different languages.

Cupid turns the hands of the public clock. It is now 5 p.m.
Cupid plays the instrument. Jack, Mas and Gana dance.
Jack calls Sakthi.

Jack. Hello, Sakthi? It's Jack.

Mas. Put the speaker on, put the speaker on!

Jack puts the loudspeaker on, and we hear Sakthi's voice.

Sakthi. Hello Jack.

Jack. Love is a smoke raised with the fume of sighs[6]…

Mas. Sir Jack goes to university, so he flirts in English!

Jack. I stole these lines from Shakespeare.

Sakthi. I don't know anything about you, tell me a little about yourself.

Jack. What do you mean you don't know me? How can I talk about myself? I am yours now, tell me who I should be and I will become it for love.

Sakthi. My family is very traditional.

Gana. And we have no traditions, tell her.

Jack. Is there any tradition older than love?

Sakthi. Yes, the caste system. What is your caste?

Mas. She talks about caste? Give her a good reply!

Jack. But Shakespeare wrote nothing about caste. Sakthi, the blind Cupid who guided my senses, never cared about my caste, my religion, or my race. So why are you talking about it?

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6 *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* (1.1.187).

Sakthi. My family's honour, my parents' consent, and my virginity are more important than love.

Mas. The girl doesn't understand anything about love, I am leaving.

He exits.

Jack. Sakthi, look, you have already bewitched me. Even your parents cannot change…

Sakthi. I swore to my parents that I will only marry a man of my caste... Are you of my caste?

Jack. I really love you Sakthi!

Sakthi. Just answer my question, what is your caste?

Dheena. Sakthi!

Sakthi. Yes, my brother.

Dheena. What are you doing?

Sakthi. I'm on the phone.

Dheena. Who are you talking to?

Sakthi. A friend...

Dheena. A girl or a boy?

Sakthi. A boy...

Dheena. Give me the phone. Hello! Who's there?

Jack. Jack.

Dheena. Where are you from?

Mas snatches the phone from Jack's hands.

Mas. From Ambedkar Colony.[7] Do you have a problem with that?

Mas and Jack leave the scene.
Gana and Cupid approach the phone to listen.

Dheena. Are you talking to a boy from the colony? They didn't send you to college to talk to boys. And you Jack, instead of working hard to become someone, you are trying to seduce a high-caste girl. Listen to me, we are the ones who feed others, and you, the ones who beg in front of us. You want to marry one of our daughters? We won't let you! We'll finish you off in your mother's womb.

Gana. Mas! Jack!

Dheena. And you, who are you? His accomplice? So, you hang around in a pack! You know well what happened to that couple, Shankar and Kausalya, no? The same thing will happen to you: you won't be allowed to live!

Scene 2

Cupid tries to rekindle the flames of love with his arrows. Gana and Aya are hit simultaneously. A seduction scene begins between them.
Janani's mother and father enter the scene, surprising Aya and Gana in their seduction act.

Aya. You have the rice, and I have the rice husk…

Cupid rekindles the flames of love in Janani's father with his arrows.
Janani's mother remains unmoved by his advances.
Janani arrives with Sakthi.

Aya. Janani is here with Sakthi!

---

[7] Ambedkar, the father of the Indian constitution, is a famous dalit leader. The term colony refers to the place where dalits live. These areas are often named after Ambedkar.

Janani's mother and Aya dress her in a beautiful saree.

Janani's father. When my daughter Janani was born, people told me: It's a girl! You'll only have trouble. Then you grew up and they realised that you couldn't speak, so they asked me: How will you marry her off? Despite everything, I raised you with great care. When you were 18, I didn't force you to get married, I even sent you to university! Today you honour me by marrying Ranjith, a chemical engineer in Paris, from a famous family of our caste.

He exits.

Aya. Do you remember Ranjith? Your cousin, the Paris boy. The little bell! The old people decided to marry you to him.

Janani's mother. Janani, come here.

Janani, distraught, enters the house.
Her mother and Aya follow her.

Scene 3

Dheena comes with his gang and provokes Gana.
They scare away Cupid.
Datta pushes Gana towards Dheena.

Dheena. Gana! Who is Jack? He is harassing my sister, that dog. I know he is like you, from the colony. Tell him to be careful. Otherwise the same accident will happen to him as happened to that couple, Kausalya and Shankar.

Gana. It was not an accident, it was honour killing.

Dheena. If a surveillance camera had not filmed everything, no one would have known anything about this story. There are more than hundreds of honour killings every year here, and there are no surveillance cameras on every street corner.

Datta. What is honour killing? If I kill you, is it honour killing or an act of honour? But if you kill me, it would be a crime of dishonour.

Gana. If your sister is having sex with a dalit, and you kill them in anger… You think you have saved your honour?

Datta. Oh, I understand. Chote, leave me. Jack wants to flirt with his sister but we have sworn to save our honour. Who is Jack?

Gana. It's not Jack, it's Romeo.

Dheena. Then we are anti-Romeos. Mister Shakespeare, if your Romeo approaches our sister Juliet, this is what will happen to him...

The images filmed by the surveillance cameras during the attack on Shankar and Kausalya are screened.

Scene 4

Jack enters.

Jack. They say love is blind, believe me, it's true. It leads you to a dead end. Gana, what happened here? A fight? What fight? No, no, don't tell me, I know everything. This has a lot to do with hate but even more with love. The love of caste or the caste of love.

Mas enters.

Mas. Jack!

Jack. Young boys and girls of the colony! Don't fall in love. If you fall in love, check the caste of the other because the other may reject you, as I was rejected.

A man comes to stick a movie poster on the wall.

Mas. Hey Gana, come and see this poster of the movie. There's a Shakila movie coming out tomorrow!

Gana. Great! Let's take Jack with us! It'll take his mind off things.

Jack. No Shakespeare, no Juliet. My tragedy will be shorter: sitting here, I'll sing my sorrow until death takes me and of this shop, you will make a tomb, a monument of love.

Mas and Gana take Jack with them.

Scene 5

Janani appears at the window.

Janani.[8] I don't want to get married or experience love, I just want to study.

Janani's mother arrives.
Janani's mother places a cloth on her daughter's shoulders, it is the cloth for wedding dresses.

Janani. What's the matter?

Janani's mother only responds with movie songs.

Janani's mother. *(singing)*
In this beautiful night sky,
your star and my star have appeared together…

Janani. I don't want to get married now.

Janani's mother. *(singing)*
The water from the pitcher is pouring…

Janani. No, I want to finish my studies before getting married.

Janani's mother. *(singing)*
Listen my friend, my sweet friend,
your heart is lost somewhere…

---

[8] Janani uses sign language throughout the play, unless indicated otherwise.

Janani. I have already spoken to Ranjith. We will get married in two years.

Janani's mother. *(singing)*

Suffering after suffering again, this heart sighs.
You have punished me for love.
What crime have I committed?
I am destroyed, oh yes, I am destroyed...

Janani's mother. *(In sign language)* Why did you speak to him? What if he changes his mind? Don't forget that you are deaf. You must be married this year.

Janani. But I don't feel anything right now.

Janani's mother. *(In sign language)* So much the better if you don't feel anything. Love will come after marriage.

Janani. You were married very young, I don't want that. You got pregnant young, I don't want that. And since then you have spent your days in the kitchen. I don't want to be like you. Your heart has become hard as stone.

Janani's mother exits, singing.

Janani. What I said, wasn't that important? I just said that I wanted to get married after I finish my studies. But they don't want to hear anything. If that's how it is, I'll find myself a lover and run away with him! Even today, I received a love letter. So, I'm going to start loving him. And I'm going to run away with him.

Janani takes out a letter, she reads it.
Cupid appears.
Janani goes to get the box containing all the love letters she has received.

Janani. All these are love letters that I have received. What use are they? I have never felt love.

She takes out a letter[9] *and opens it.*

The lover's voice 1

My eyes play with your femininity
that no hand has yet touched…
Oh flower bud, come and bloom on my chest.
Oh Janani, my body burns, soothe me with your tenderness.
Hey Janani, I love you!

Cupid chooses another one for her.

The lover's voice 2

Oh moon, stop your indifferent course,
for your heart is of stone.
Wounded, I get drunk on wine,
answer me at last.
This is the fifth letter I write to you
and you do not deign to answer me.
You even avoid my gaze.
How arrogant!
You made me cry more than laugh,
you know neither love nor heartache.
You are not likely to know them, because you have no heart.
Heart of stone! You are not worthy of love!

Janani. My heart is hard as stone, so what?

Cupid runs away.

Scene 6

Janani. I don't want to get married or experience love. I just want to study.

Aya and Sakthi appear at the window.

---

[9] All the letters are inspired by movie songs' lyrics.

Aya. First, we need to create the right ambience for her to feel the desire of marriage. Look!

Aya and Sakthi lead Janani in a sensual dance.
Janani's father enters.

Janani's father. Aya! What's that noise? Janani, will you come down?

Janani, followed by Sakthi, joins her father.

Janani's father. Janani, come. Your mother has already decided the date of the engagement. Ranjith is coming next week from Paris especially for that.

Janani. No, no, I beg you.

Janani's father. I can't do anything. What do you want? To finish your studies before marriage? Talk to Ranjith. Both of you discuss and decide together the time that suits you for the marriage.

Sakthi. Uncle, we've finished the semester, we'd like to go to the cinema.

Janani's father. Yes, yes, you have my permission to go out. Take Aya with you.

He exits.

Sakthi. But what fun are we going to have with Aya clinging to us!

Aya emerges from the window.

Aya. Hey! Residents of Vaishnava[10] Nagar! Ranjith and Janani are getting married!

She and Janani hug each other.

Janani. I will never leave you.

---

[10] As per the Indian caste system, Vaishnava is a high cast. Thus, here it depicts high caste area.

Sakthi. Aya, can we go to the cinema?

Aya. Oh great! (*Pointing to the poster stuck on the wall*). What if we go to see an erotic film?

Sakthi. But we can't go.

Aya. Janani is getting married, she must know these things! Shakila, my sister, will help your flowers to bloom!

Sakthi. It's impossible, only men can go.

Aya. So we will go disguised as men.

Janani. As boys!

Scene 7

Mas and Jack enter the movie theatre.

Jack. Can morning dreams come true?

Mas. Yes, why?

Jack. This morning I dreamed that I was dead, angels surrounded my body and cried…

Mas. What is this dream? I also had a dream: I was watching a Shakila film, when she saw me, she tore the screen and approached me, then she put my head on her chest and then our desires came true in the dream. And you, are you dreaming of death and angels?

Jack. I have a premonition, my soul will soon leave my body and fly away to the sky. My life like a ship on the waters will soon plunge into the abyss. Oh! The boatman is waiting for me. Happy! let's go on a trip.

Gana enters.

Mas. Hey, Gana! Come to first class!

Dheena comes in.

Dheena. Hey Gana, go sit on the floor!

Mas. Why would you go sit on the floor? We paid for first class tickets! Come sit here.

Dheena. Just because you can afford first class tickets doesn't mean you and I are equal. Your seat will always be on the floor, in front of the screen.

Mas. Get lost or I'll smash your skull in.

Dheena. You're getting excited because you're with your gang, but the day I find you alone, I'll take care of you!

Dheena comes out.

Mas. Hey, go on, start the movie.

The erotic movie starts.

Mas. Hey! Gana! Why are you leaving again!

Gana. Sitting in the front, then I can see everything bigger!

Aya, Janani and Sakthi enter. They are disguised as men.

Mas. Hey, big guy, get out of there!

Aya. Asshole, go away!

Jack doesn't watch the movie anymore.
Janani tries to leave the room.

Mas. Hey! Get out of the way.

Janani finds herself next to Jack.
Mas, excited, moves closer to the screen.
Janani brushes against Jack. Jack pulls Janani towards him, he kisses her ankles, and then they meet each other face to face.

Jack. If I profane with my unworthiest hand, this holy shrine, the gentle sin is this: My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand to smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.[11]

Janani. I am mute, I speak with my hands.

Jack. Oh! Your hands are your lips? Let me kiss them first. Take my mute hands, teach them to kiss…

Janani kisses his hands, his arms. Carried away by her desire, she bites Jack.

Janani. Forgive me, I bit you. My mute lips do not know how to kiss.

They kiss.

Jack. (*in sign language*) Your kisses have taken away my voice. Give me back my voice.

They kiss again.
The film ends.

Mas. Jack, come on, let's go.

Jack. What's your name?

Janani writes her name.

Janani. And you?

Jack. Jack.

Aya. Janani! Janani!

Jack runs away.

Aya. Janani, you're here. What's this movie? We never see them naked! Come on, come on.

---

[11] *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* (1.5.92).

Janani. Who are these boys?

Aya. They're from the colony. Come on.

Aya heads for the exit. Janani stands still.

Aya. What's wrong? Did he touch you?

Janani nods.

Aya. Where?

Janani holds out her hand. Aya wipes it. Janani shows Aya different parts of her body, Aya wipes them. At the end, Janani shows Aya her mouth.

Aya. Did he kiss you?

Janani. No, I kissed him. And I feel happy!

Janani rushes towards the exit.

Aya. Janani! Wait for me! Janani!

Aya exits.

The trailer for Ajith Kumar's[12] upcoming film is playing on the screen.

Scene 8

Gana's shop. Jack listens to the radio.

The voice of Love Guru. You are listening to Radio Amour 93.1 FM, listen, listen, keep listening. I am Love Guru. Divya has loved Savee for six years. The family opposes their love: the caste difference is the obstacle. Divya is forced to marry her cousin. In this difficult situation, Divya asks me: 'Tell me, Love Guru, what should I do?' Divya, if for six years caste was not an obstacle, and suddenly it becomes one, nei-

[12] A famous actor of Tamil cinema.

ther I nor anyone else can help you. Only you know your feelings, the decision is in your hands. I am sorry Divya. You are listening to Radio Amour 93.1 FM. Listen, listen, keep listening. Let's take another call.

Jack. Hello! Love Guru?

The voice of Love Guru. I'm listening to you.

Jack. This is the first time I've tried to call you and I managed to get through to you.

The voice of Love Guru. You are lucky. Who are you? Where are you calling from?

Jack. I'm Jack, calling from Villupuram.

The voice of Love Guru. Share your love story with us.

Jack. Love Guru, I love a young girl passionately. I don't know when and how I will see her again. I do not know what to do.

The voice of Love Guru. How long have you two loved each other?

Jack. I met her this morning.

The voice of Love Guru. What? And can we know her name?

Jack. I can't say her name here but I gave her another first name: Juliet.

The voice of Love Guru. Oh! Like Juliet in Shakespeare's play, what a beautiful love story!

Jack. Love Guru, can I send her a message via your show?

The voice of Love Guru. Of course.

Jack. Hello, Juliet? It's me, Jack! Do you remember? We met at the cinema hall this morning. Since I saw you I haven't stopped thinking about you. My heart is pounding at the thought of seeing you again and talking to you. Juliet, I hope you listen to this show. I'm sure

you're listening to me. I need to see you, just once. I need to hug you and kiss you. Tonight, at 11p.m., I will wait for you under your balcony. Will you come? But, do you have a balcony? Yes, I'm sure you have a balcony. I love you Juliet!

The voice of Love Guru. Thanks Jack. May your love story succeed. Dear listeners, continue to confide in Love Guru on Radio Amour 93.1 FM. Before taking another call, I invite you to listen to the sighs of a lover…

The radio is playing a romantic song.

Scene 9

Jack enters looking for Janani's balcony.
The bells ring at eleven o'clock.

Jack. Janani! Janani! There you go, this is Janani's balcony. It looks like the balcony of *Romeo and Juliet*, the same balcony. Under this same balcony, I am waiting, she will arrive soon, we will meet again and kiss each other again. Janani, come, come, let's kiss…

Jack waits under the balcony but no one appears.

Jack. She won't come. I don't even know if she heard me on the radio.

He moves away.

Jack. If she comes when I leave. I'm not going to leave. I'm going to stay here until dawn. Janani, I won't leave without seeing you. I'm going to count to five, if you don't appear on this balcony, I will enter your house no matter what. One… Two… Three… Four… Four point one. Four point two. Four point three. Four point four. Four point five. Four point six. Four point seven. Four point eight. Four point nine…

Aya appears.

Aya. Who are you?

Jack. I'm Jack.

Aya. From which neighbourhood?

Jack. Ambedkar colony.

Aya. Ambedkar colony? I wouldn't even give you my own daughter. Go away!

Jack. As in *Romeo and Juliet*, it is Janani who must appear on the balcony, not you, in fact you do not exist.

Aya. And who plays Juliet's nanny, your mother? I didn't come to see you, I came to pee. Go away.

Jack. I'm sure she will come, I'll wait. By love, that first did prompt me to inquire[13]…

Aya. What trash are you talking? I do not understand.

Jack. It's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Aya. Oh, it's *Romeo and Juliet*, huh? Tell, tell.

Jack. By love, that first did prompt me to inquire.
He lent me counsel and I lent him eyes.
I am no pilot. Yet, wert thou as far
As that vast shore washed with the farthest sea,
I should adventure for such merchandise.[14]

Aya. I always dreamed of playing Juliet. Oh Romeo, my Romeo. Come. Kiss Me.

Jack. No.

Aya. Do you want to see Juliet?

---

13 *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* (2.1.122).
14 *he Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* (2.2.122-126).

Jack turns away from her.

Why are you looking there? Do you really believe that we are in the story of Romeo and Juliet, that Janani will appear in her nightgown, with her hair down under the light of the moon? It's impossible! Silly! Here we are in India! If anyone sees you here, you're dead. The balcony is not there. It's under my saree. Do you want to see my balcony? Come.

Aya lifts her sari, Janani appears behind the transparent veil of her skirt. Jack approaches Janani to kiss her. Aya threatens him.

Janani. Jack! Why are you Jack? Denounce your caste and abdicate your name; or, if you do not want it, swear to love me, and I will no longer be Janani. The caste system alone is our enemy. You are not a dalit, you are yourself. What is a dalit? It is neither a hand, nor a foot, nor an arm, nor a face, nor anything that is part of a man... What is in a name? What we call a rose, would be as fragrant as now under any other name. Jack, renounce your name; and in place of this name, which is not part of you, take me whole.[15]

Jack. Okay, I'm changing my name. From now on, I am Romeo.

Janani. And, from now on, I am Juliet. What were Romeo and Juliet doing during the balcony scene?

Jack. They didn't speak. They kissed…

Janani. Aya! Just one kiss, please…

Aya. Come under my balcony. Hey Romeo, don't touch what's never been touched.

Lovers hide under her saree.
Aya sings.
We hear the rooster crowing. Aya runs away.

---

[15] Janani is adapting Juliet's speech in Shakespeare's scene of the balcony, but she still uses sign language.

Scene 10

We are in the Ambedkar colony area. Mama is crouching over the sewers.

Mama. Oh dear goddess Kali, I have to go down inside to unblock.

Jack enters.

Jack. Mama, I met my angel, she told me: I love you and I want to marry you. Cupid pierced my heart.

Mama. So, finally Sakthi said yes, eh?

Jack. Sakthi? Huh! Already forgotten!

Mama. You've already met another girl!

Jack. Yes. Yesterday. I met her at the cinema, at the erotic film screening.

Mama. What? She went to see an erotic film? And you like this kind of girl?

Jack. Don't say bad things about my darling, Mama. She's made of pure gold! Last night I managed to see her in front of her house and she kissed me.

Mama. What? You have gone to her house and kissed her? You're right, this girl is gold.

Jack. It's not over! She suggested that we run away and get married. I told her that I can't do anything without knowing my uncle's opinion!

Mama. Now you need my opinion but to kiss her on the balcony... Go, go, go!

Jack. Mama, stop joking. If you saw her, you would say she was made for me. She is so beautiful! Her eyes are like stars... Her lips are like swimming dolphins…

Mama. Tell me who is this girl.

Jack. Janani.

Mama. Nice name. Where's she from?

Jack. From here.

Mama. From here? Which neighbourhood?

Jack. Vaishnava Nagar.

Mama. Vaishnava Nagar?

Jack. Jack and Janani. Sounds nice, no?

Mama has disappeared to the bottom of the sewers.

Jack. Mama, where are you? What are you doing? Get out of there.

Mama. Vaishnava Nagar! At least let me save my life!

He disappears again.

Jack. Mama? Where are you going again?

Mama. I'm going to Vaishnava Nagar.

Jack. Oh! Are you going to propose to my darling?

Mama. No! I'm going to work, there are clogged toilets there. Hold on! Are you free now? Come here. Take off your shirt. Take this stick. Here, go unclog these toilets. I have to go back, I haven't eaten yet.

Jack. What, Mama! I ask you to help me marry Janani and you send me to unclog the toilets in her neighbourhood... Don't forget that I have a Master's degree in English literature.

Mama. English or Indian literature, for them we were born to unclog sewers. We can never change it. Except for one day in the year, when I play Kali during the village festival, that day they consider

me a goddess and they all pray before me. But every other day of the year, I'm the one who has to pick up their shit.

Jack. I swear on Goddess Kali that I really love her! You are my guide! It is you who must unite us.

Mama sings a prayer to the goddess Kali.

Mama. *(Singing)*

To our ancestors! To our ancestors!
Our knowledge, our senses are limited.
I implore the millions of gods and goddesses to unite us in love...

Scene 11

Mas, Gana and Jack accompanied by a few friends return from a funeral ceremony. They play the parai[16] *and dance.*

Mas. Cousin! Where are you going? We're all singing and dancing, why don't you join us? It's me, Mas. I'm calling you, get out of there.

Jack leaves the house.
Jack and Mas compete in dance.
Jack hits Mas.

Mas. He's my friend, he has the right to beat me.

Jack. Do not touch me.

Mas. What? I'm not allowed to touch you? What's your problem?

Jack. Why did you bring me with you? I don't like this job.

Mas. There were not enough of us for the funeral ceremony.

Gana. I told you not to call him.

---

16 Instrument associated with funeral rites.

Jack. I don't like this work that we do. Since the time of fathers, now to sons.

Gana. These are high caste funerals. Hands full of money and mouths full of alcohol.

Jack. They fed the deceased ten times and we have been playing since the morning and when we ask for water, they tell us: "Go and drink from the public fountain!"

Mas. When he was still alive, there were thousands surrounding him, once he died, no one is left! Hey cousin! Even his family won't be there anymore. Who accompanies him till the end? We do! It is us who burn his body while singing and dancing, so that the deceased leaves joyfully. We should be proud of this work.

Jack. I will be dead soon, burn my body and fill your pocket with four thousand rupees.

Gana. What are you talking about?

Jack. I say that I don't like this work. Degrading, discredited, humiliating…

Mas. Refuse to do this work? But it's not me who decides. When I was in primary school, my father showed me what a funeral ritual is. He died when I was in high school, and I performed the funeral rites for him. It didn't start with me. My father, my grandfather, my ancestors, have always done this work associated with our caste. Cousin, this instrument is our protector, our god. Today it's me, then it will be my son and all his descendants who will do this work…

Jack. You are right: the son of the one who picks up shit, can only pick up shit. The son of the one who burns bodies, can only do this job. Even if we have a first-class seat at the cinema, we will still have to sit on the floor. How can we get rid of this system dictated by the great sacred book of Manu?

A Friend. He is becoming paternalistic like Gandhi. He will end up like him, calling us Harijans.

Jack. The Brahmins are born from the head of the creator, the Kshatriyas from his arms, the Vaishyas from his legs, and the Sudras from his feet. And us? Where do we come from? The ass! We are the Chandalas! The damned!

Gana. I don't know about you but I was born from my mother's womb.

Mas. Okay, we do as you say, we abandon this work. We know how to sing, we know how to dance. What can we do with it?

Jack. Perfect! Let's make our voices heard. We just have to start a music group.

All. What? A band?

Mas. You're the one who wants us to change, so give our music group a name!

Jack. Let's pay tribute to all lovers, call our group Romeo music squad.

Jack begins to sing.
Aya enters.

Mas. Hey Gana, do you *jilko*[17] with Aya?

Aya. Get out of here, you swine! Shut your mouth! Jack, come here. Who are these people? Your friends?

Jack. No.

Aya. You drink?

Jack. No.

---

[17] A slang word in Tamil meaning having a sexual affair.

Aya. You smoke? Beware! Janani, I carry her in my heart! If you play with her feelings, I'll kill you!

Jack. I really like Janani…

Aya. Show me how you walk. Since I am giving you my daughter, I must examine you. Walk like a hero.

Jack complies.

Aya. In the other direction.

He turns around.

Aya. Stop.

Jack stops in front of Aya.

Aya. Raise your arms.

Aya approaches Jack and touches his arm.

Aya. You have pumped up your biceps, huh…

Mas. He's going to the gym!

Aya. Oh he goes to the gym? Look up!

Jack rolls his eyes, Aya takes the opportunity to pinch his crotch.
Jack steps back, stunned.

Aya. Everything is in its place. You all want me to check…

The group of friends run away.

Jack. I spoke to Mama. He agreed to arrange our wedding in secret.

Aya. All right.

Jack. Tomorrow morning we will get married in Pondicherry.

Aya. All right.

Jack. Don't forget to join us with Janani.

Aya. All right.

Jack. Aya? You understood?

Aya. All right.

Jack kisses Aya.
Mas enters.

Mas. I want to kiss you too...

He kisses Aya.

Aya. If I hit you, your balls will go right up into your mouth!

Scene 12

It's Jack and Janani's wedding day.
Kathir plays dholak.[18]
Mama enters in a Rickshaw.

Mama. *(Singing)*

Let's go celebrate Jack and Janani's wedding.

Two florists enter singing.

Mama. Here are the florists! Come on the rickshaw.

They get into the rickshaw and decorate it with flowers.
The song continues.
Mas enters.

Mas. *(Singing)*

Oh! My friend, don't fall in love.
That is like putting your head on the railway track...

---

[18] A musical instrument.

Gana. Do you think it's time to sing that?

Mas. What should we sing then?

Jack comes out of the shop singing.

Jack. *(Singing)*
Come out of the painting and stand before me, my love.
It is my destiny that you come before me, my love...

Everyone sings with Jack.
Mama takes Jack in his arms. Jack joins his friends in the rickshaw.
Aya enters playing the parai.

All. Aya!

Everyone starts dancing to the rhythm played by Aya.
Aya and Mama are singing.

Mama. When Janani is here, all of you must reach Pondicherry. I will be waiting for you all there for the wedding.

He goes out.
The singing continues.

Jack. Aya, Janani is still not here?

Janani enters.
Janani sings in sign language.
Aya translates the lyrics of Janani's song.
Janani joins Jack.
The singing continues.
Cupid appears.
With the exception of Jack and Janani, everyone leaves the stage.
Cupid gets on the rickshaw and drives Jack and Janani.

Cupid. Love, Kaadaal, Ishq, Mohabbat, Amour...

Act II

Scene 1

Inside the cinema hall.
Day of the premiere of Ajith Kumar's film. Celebration begins.
Jack and friends enter and dance.
Dheena and friends enter and dance.
Dheena pushes Mas roughly to the ground.

Dheena. In Shakila's film, you were being smart because you were with your gang. Come on, let's settle our scores now.

Mas. In Shakila's film, you ran away like a coward. There are 200 of us who have booked our seats in first class, we're going to sit in first class and we'll see what you're going to do!

Jack tries to intervene.

Mas. Leave me alone, Jack.

Dheena. Are you the one who was talking to my sister Sakthi on the phone?

Dheena tries to hit Jack but Mas intervenes.

Mas. How dare you attack my friend in front of me?

They all start dancing again.
The film starts.
Dheena comes back and stops Mas from sitting in first class.

Dheena. Go ahead, sit on the floor.

Mas. Why should I sit on the floor? I'm going to the first class.

Dheena. Dare sit in first class now! You are destined to sit on the floor.

Mas. You guys only have your caste in mind…

Jack. Don't look for a fight. Sorry, brother.

Dheena. Don't touch me! Do you think you're Romeo? Look what I'm going to do to you!

Dheena pulls a knife out of his pocket.
Dheena's friends try to hold him back.

A Friend. He has a knife in his hand!

Mas. Just because you have a knife doesn't mean you can use it.

Dheena rushes at Jack. Mas steps in and gets stabbed.
Mas is injured.
Dheena and his friends run away.
Gana and Jack approach Mas to help him.

Mas. I will not die without seeing *Thala*'s film![19] *Thala*, my hero, my absolute idol, *Thala*!

The hero of the film appears on the screen.

Ajith Kumar (*on the screen*)**.** If the whole world opposes you, no matter the situation, if they all scream at you: you are not defeated. Not defeated, as long as you do not accept your defeat, anywhere, anytime, no one will be able to defeat you. Never, never again, you must never give up.

Mas collapses in the arms of his friends. Jack and Gana carry Mas to the exit.
The cinema catches fire.

Scene 2

Cupid and Janani come out of the shop.

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[19] Thala is the nickname of actor Ajith Kumar.

Cupid. Love, Kaadal, Ishq, Mohabbat, Amour…

Janani. Where is Jack? We got married today and he has already gone to the cinema with his friends. Where is he?

Cupid. Love, Kaadal, Ishq, Mohabbat, Amour...

Janani. All you can say is love, love, love.

Cupid. Love, Kaadal, Ishq, Mohabbat, Amour...

Janani. I will go and get him.

She starts to leave.

Janani. Which way should I go? This way or that way?

Cupid. Love, Kaadal, Ishq, Mohabbat, Amour...

Janani. I'm leaving!

Janani heads for the exit and then turns back.

Cupid. Jack?

Janani looks for Jack.

Cupid. Majnu, Shahjahan, Romeo, Antonio[20]…

Janani attacks Cupid.
She hits him, kicks him, then throws herself to the ground.
They get up together.

Cupid. Jack, I will bring you happy flowers from the mountains, bluebells, dark hazels and rustic baskets of kisses. I want to do with you what spring does with cherry trees.[21] Jack, I love you.

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[20] Legendary lovers' names.

[21] Lines taken from Pablo Neruda's "Poem XIV: Every Day You Play" in *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair (Bilingual Edition)*, translated by W.S. Merwin, Penguin Classics, 1969, 2004, p. 55.

Janani. Fire! I see fire everywhere! It's the cinema. It's burning.

Scene 3

Mas' funeral procession crosses the stage.

Jack. My friend is dead, he was killed before my eyes, and I did not do anything because my heart thinks of Janani. Love made me lose my manhood, and made me a coward. My brother, I will avenge your death! My friend's body is alone in the procession. One of us should join him.

Jack has a sword. He enters the house.
He rushes out followed by Dheena who collapses on the ground.
Janani's mother comes out of the house and throws herself on Dheena's body.
She is joined by Aya.
Both of them wail in pain.

Janani's mother. Oh, Honourable members of our community! A Chandala has entered my house and killed my nephew before my eyes! I promise a handsome reward to whoever brings back this Chandala, alive or dead. If you kill one of us, we will kill a hundred of yours!

She goes into the house.
Aya alone on stage starts a funeral song.
Janani comes out of the shop.

Janani. What's wrong?

Aya. He's dead!

Janani. Jack is dead?

Aya. No, your cousin Dheena is dead.

Janani. How did he die?

Aya. Your husband Jack killed him. Your mother swore to kill Jack. If they find out the truth, they won't spare you. Listen, tomorrow morning you can get up as usual, put on your uniform and go to university, no one will notice anything. And in a week your cousin Ranjith will be here, marry him and go far away from here.

Janani. Do you really think the uniform will still fit me?

Aya. The little bird wants to fly, for that the little bird will pay. What will I tell your parents then?

Janani. Tell them that I am ready to take care of myself. I want to see Jack. Find him for me.

Janani gives her a letter.
Aya goes out.

Janani. I am going to the nuptial bed. May death or Jack come and take my virginity. Oh! If it is Death, my family will perform the ritual dedicated to women who die as virgins so that their souls can rest in peace. A dalit will come and deflower my virgin body. What if my father called Jack to deflower me once I was dead…?

Scene 4

Jack is alone on stage, with his sword.
The bodies of Mas and Dheena are still present on stage.

Jack. Jack, loving without caring about caste is only possible in movies. Mama warned me. And I replied to him with Shakespeare's *Romeo & Juliet*. Janani is waiting for me in the shop, but I won't go see her. Janani, I tricked you so I could marry you and become a member of the high caste. Everything will be fine, the members of your caste will find you, they will convince you to forget me and they will marry you to a boy of your caste. All's well that ends well! And I will go and join my friend Mas. I will stage my own death

now. Mas, I avenged your death. (*Pointing at Dheena's body*). I killed him. Dheena, get up. Show him your wound.

Dheena's body complies.

Jack. Janani!

Janani comes out of the shop.

Jack. Now she will speak as you wish.

Janani.[22] Jack! What is your caste? Answer me Jack, what caste category do you belong to? Do you even know? It must be written in your school records. General? Other Castes? Backward Castes? Most Backward Castes? Scheduled Castes? Scheduled Tribes? Chandalas?!

Jack. Romeo!

Janani. Romeo? Do you know what the first sentence of the play *Romeo and Juliet* is? The first words of the play are: Two families, both equal in dignity!

Jack collapses.

The Prologue[23]

Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life,
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.

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22 Here, in his vision, Jack is able to hear Janani's voice.
23 *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet* (prologue).

The fearful passage of their death-marked love
And the continuance of their parents' rage —
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove —
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;

The which if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

Scene 5

Jack is seated on the chair of the funeral ritual. Cupid and friends mourn him.
Aya enters.

Aya. Jack, wake up. Get out of your nightmare.

Jack does not wake up.
Aya takes out Janani's letter.

Aya. Jack, I will bring you happy flowers from the mountains, bluebells, dark hazels and rustic baskets of kisses. I want to do with you what spring does with cherry trees. Jack, I love you.

Cupid shoots an arrow at Jack.
Jack wakes up and begins to sing.

Aya. Romeo, I wish you a beautiful night of love.

Jack leaves with his friends.

Aya. I know what will happen now. When I go home, her parents will ask me: 'Where is Janani?' I will answer: 'Janani has gone to pee. No, she has gone to shit. No, no, she has gone to the market with the neighbours.' It will soon be night time, and they will ask me: 'Where is Janani now? Janani! Janani!' They will go and see in her room. They will beat me to know the truth from me. If they hit me, I will end up telling the truth, right? Janani has left the house. With Jack, the boy from the colony. I am the one who helped them!

To run away, to get married, I even helped them for this night of love that awaits them! Do you know what will happen if I confess everything? What? You want me to go and wait in the garden? Yes. I will have only one regret then: that no one visited my balcony ever.

Scene 6

Janani leaves the shop, Jack walks in front of her.
They both carry a puppet in their image.
Janani undresses Jack's puppet and Jack undresses Janani's, until both are naked.
They place the two naked puppets side by side, facing the audience.
Jack and Janani go to the shop together and lock themselves inside.

Scene 7

Mama enters half-costumed for the upcoming performance and arranges the elements dedicated to the ritual, on the stage.

Mama. The whole city is on fire, bloodshed all around. I thought that love would destroy the caste system. But love has destroyed our lives. Everything is happening like in the play *Romeo and Juliet*. But I will change the end of the story. Tomorrow I will embody the goddess Kali, and the whole city will be in front of me. During the ceremony, Jack and Janani will be able to escape. They will escape death. I, Mama, will protect them. I, Kali, will protect them.

Gana and a friend enter to finish preparing the ritual. Mama transforms and enters the skin of the goddess Kali, he sings.

Scene 8

Janani's parents enter.
Janani's mother goes to the shop, knocks on the door. She starts singing as she breaks down.

Janani finally opens it.
They hug each other.
Janani then goes to hug her father.

Janani's father. They killed your cousin Dheena. We won't let them hurt you. We know everything, your nanny confessed everything to us. Consider it all a nightmare and come home.

Janani. My marriage to Jack was like a dream. Dheena's hatred turned it into a nightmare.

Janani's father. Listen Janani, you are too young and too immature. They are trying to fool you, come back with us!

Janani refuses and goes to the shop.
Her mother throws herself at her feet to stop her, singing again.
Janani ignores her and locks herself in the shop.
Janani's father leaves the scene.

Janani's mother. Anyone want to sleep with my daughter? She is a pretty young woman. She is from Vaishnava Nagar. Hey Janani, what is your price? 100 rupees? 200 rupees? 500 rupees! But if you are a dalit or a friend of Jack, then it is free. This is the shop where she sells her body. Janani! Your customers are waiting for you, undress.

She opens the door of the shop.

Janani's mother. What you are wearing belongs to us, give me back your clothes!

Janani throws her clothes one by one.

Janani's mother. And your sandals too. Now that you are a Chandala, you don't need them anymore! Your husband got what he wanted from you: here you are naked in the street.

Scene 9

Mama concentrates for the upcoming performance.
Gana finishes preparing the ritual.
Janani's father enters.

Janani's father. Gana!

Gana. Tell me, sir.

Janani's father. The wet nurse died early this morning.

Gana. She died?

Janani's father. Yes. She fell in the garden…

Gana. I can't believe it.

Janani's father. Forget it. She died a virgin. So, Aya's body is in the room. Do the marriage ritual and deflower her.

Gana enters Janani's house.
Mama leaves.

Janani's father. My daughter is so selfish. To satisfy her body's desires, she sacrificed the family's honour. She dared marry a dalit, I have no dignity anymore. In nine months, she will carry a Chandala in her belly, bringing chaos, disorder and apocalypse… My soul is soiled! I am betrayed, I will not let it happen. I am my community!

Two killers enter. Janani's father shows them the shop, the killers enter the shop.
Janani's mother enters with offerings
Mama enters transformed into Kali and performs the ritual.
Gana comes out of the house. The killers leave the shop.
Janani's parents enter their house.
Mama goes to the shop and opens the door. He discovers the bodies of the two lovers.

Mama. *(Singing)*

I have already forgotten my songs,
I have abandoned my rhythms and my sounds…
I can't resist the urge to sing!
Oh goddess Kali!
I can't resist the urge to play.
Oh goddess Kali!
If we remain silent any longer,
it's over for us.
If we remain silent any longer,
it's over for us…
Let's sing so we don't die!
Oh goddess Kali!
Or let's sing until we die!
Oh goddess Kali![24]

The Voice of Kausalya. After Shankar's death, I tried to commit suicide twice..., I was not able to live without him and without his immense tenderness. One night, in my dream, he told me: 'Stop thinking that I am dead, do not listen to what others say, I am not dead, I am always with you…' I have always been courageous, I took my parents to court. After a year and a half of trials where I suffered all the humiliations possible and imaginable, the murderers and my father were severely sentenced in December 2017, but my mother was released... She is not a mother, she is a murderer who is an accomplice in this heinous crime of honour. I took my mother to court, the trial is ongoing... Some people ask me how can you have your own parents convicted? How can they send killers against their own daughter? My mother couldn't stop talking about honour, caste, family, but she never wanted to listen to my heart…[25]

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[24] A folk song from Kerala.

[25] In June 2020, Madras High Court acquitted Kausalya's father Chinnasamy and released him. The case has now moved up to Supreme Court.

V - Master's Prize

Prix de Master RADAC 2024

Le Théâtre du ricochet : le trumpisme à l'épreuve du féminisme sur la scène américaine chez Halley Feiffer, Aleshea Harris, Emily Mann et Heidi Schreck

Agathe Faucourt (Sorbonne Université)

This is the magic of both a movement and a play. Like a pebble tossed into a pond, the ripples keep changing lives

(Mann 2019: xv).

Dans son avant-propos à *Gloria: A Life*, pièce que lui consacre Emily Mann en 2018, Gloria Steinem attire notre attention sur la nature double de cette œuvre et proclame l'étiolement définitif de la frontière qui sépare l'engagement politique de la création artistique. Si l'icône de la deuxième vague du mouvement féministe américain restreint ici son commentaire à l'œuvre biographique de Mann, il est toutefois possible de l'étendre à toute une partie de la production théâtrale qui émerge alors sur la scène new-yorkaise. Et pour cause : en parallèle de l'élection de Donald Trump, le paysage théâtral américain connaît une re-politisation sans précédent et en particulier chez les femmes dramaturges (Collins-Hughes). Une grande majorité d'entre elles assimilent en effet la montée du trumpisme à l'avènement d'un ensemble de valeurs rétrogrades et sexistes qui mettent non seulement en péril les droits des femmes à l'échelle du pays, mais qui menacent également l'existence même de leur art au sein de la sphère publique. Dans le sillage de la retentissante marche des femmes du 21 janvier 2017 qui vient électriser un mouvement féministe alors en perdition, bon nombre de productions féminines auraient eu pour objectif de faire résonner un discours protestataire, donnant ainsi un nouvel élan à la création féministe.

En s'appuyant à la fois sur les textes et les mises en scène de quatre pièces écrites par des femmes sous l'ère Trump – *The Pain of My Belligerence* de Halley Feiffer (2020), *Is God Is* d'Aleshea Harris (2021), *Gloria: A Life* d'Emily Mann (2019) et *What the Constitution Means to Me* de Heidi Schreck (2020) – ce mémoire propose d'analyser la forme et la portée de ce contre-discours. Quoique très hétérogènes du point de vue du style et des thématiques abordées, ces quatre pièces semblent faire cause commune face à une nouvelle forme de masculinisme politique communément identifiée sous le terme de trumpisme. Pour autant, y a-t-il lieu de définir là une nouvelle esthétique contestataire et féministe, et selon quelles modalités ? En quoi ce corpus se distingue-t-il d'une tradition féministe et brechtienne déjà très ancrée sur la scène américaine ? À en croire Gloria Steinem, le théâtre du ricochet partage un même idéal avec le théâtre brechtien : la capacité à transformer le spectateur, et par extension, la société. La comparaison qu'elle utilise dans la citation qui nous sert d'épigraphe laisse en effet supposer que la pièce de théâtre serait l'évènement déclencheur d'un phénomène de répercussion qui conduirait *in fine* à la prise de conscience politique et au militantisme. La militante omet cependant de souligner le caractère parfaitement aléatoire du processus. De même qu'il est bien souvent impossible de contrôler les rebonds d'un ricochet, la transformation du spectateur n'est jamais pleinement garantie. La pertinence même d'un théâtre du ricochet sera interrogée : puisque la scène new-yorkaise s'adresse en majorité à un public déjà converti aux idéaux progressistes, les quatre pièces qui nous intéressent ici peuvent-elles vraiment « changer des vies » ? À la croisée des *performance studies* et de la critique féministe en études théâtrales, ce mémoire tente en somme de répondre à la question suivante : le théâtre du ricochet parvient-il à tenir toutes ses promesses ?

Pour répondre à ces interrogations, la réflexion s'attache en premier lieu à mesurer le lien qu'entretiennent les pièces avec leur contexte politique et social. Les œuvres de Mann, Feiffer et Schreck se révèlent étroitement corrélées à l'actualité politique : la nomination de Brett Kavanaugh à la Cour Suprême, l'élection de Donald Trump et plus

généralement l'invisibilité constitutionnelle des femmes viennent respectivement déclencher le processus d'écriture. Harris maintient pour sa part un lien plus ténu avec le paysage politique et paraît même refuser le parallèle politique : la critique du gouvernement est à première vue absente dans *Is God Is.* Mais si la dramaturge affirme que le contexte visé par son œuvre dépasse amplement celui de la deuxième décennie du XXIe siècle (Faucourt et Thomas), elle reconnaît néanmoins que la violence de ses personnages vient buter contre un certain nombre de préjugés raciaux que la présidence Trump aurait contribué à raviver (« In Conversation »). La critique du gouvernement Trump opère ainsi à différents degrés selon les pièces. Mann multiplie les attaques frontales à l'encontre de la présidence tout en taisant le nom du chef de l'état, établissant de fait une relation de connivence avec son public. Chez Feiffer, la référence à Trump est tout aussi explicite, bien que celle-ci ne s'accompagne pas nécessairement d'un appel à la révolte. L'allusion contextuelle se fait plus discrète chez Schreck : si l'autrice-comédienne laisse entendre dès la scène d'exposition qu'elle aurait écrit sa pièce en réaction aux élections de 2016, il s'agit en vérité d'un mensonge puisque l'écriture aurait débuté en 2007 (Genzlinger). Le texte est donc retravaillé pour inclure des références implicites à la présidence.

Qu'elle soit frontale ou indirecte, la critique du gouvernement Trump cache en vérité une attaque bien plus large dirigée à l'encontre d'une société qui s'obstine à marginaliser les femmes. Contre cette exclusion systémique, le théâtre du ricochet met en valeur des corps résistants prêts à en découdre. Les personnages de femmes battues – que le « male gaze » a trop souvent relégués à une forme de docilité érotique selon Mann (2006 : 75-81) – retrouvent toute leur agentivité dans les œuvres de Harris et Schreck. Plus largement, c'est la passivité traditionnellement attribuée au genre féminin qui se trouve contestée dans l'ensemble de ces pièces. Qu'il s'agisse de personnages de fiction ou de figures historiques, ce corpus met en lumière des personnages de femmes fortes, parfois violentes, pour permettre aux spectatrices de s'identifier à des modèles de féminité qui ne seraient définis ni par le manque, ni par la fragilité. Les personnages masculins n'échappent pas non plus à cette refonte des codes de la représentation. Feiffer et Harris

s'attellent à examiner les conséquences de la masculinité toxique sur le couple comme sur l'identité masculine. Les hommes ne sont jamais considérés comme seuls responsables des maux qui affligent leur compagne et sont au contraire présentés comme tributaires d'une vision très étriquée de la masculinité. Pour briser ce cercle vicieux, Mann et Schreck mettent toutes deux l'accent sur des modèles de masculinité positive. Nous relevons ainsi une volonté commune au sein de ces pièces : faire éclater un système de représentation idéologique que le conservatisme politique cherche à pérenniser au sein de la société.

Cet éclatement se concrétise sous des formes et des types d'écriture très variés que ce mémoire étudie dans leur singularité. L'œuvre de Mann renoue pour sa part avec une forme très répandue chez les féministes de la deuxième vague : la pièce biographique consacrée à une figure historique féminine. L'originalité de *Gloria* tient aussi à sa forme documentaire. L'enchevêtrement des documents d'archives finit par engendrer une vision kaléidoscope du sujet biographique, d'ailleurs incarné par différents membres de la troupe pour mieux nuancer son exceptionnalité. Chez Schreck, l'approche biographique est délaissée au profit d'un récit autobiographique – deuxième forme typique de la tradition féministe – auquel se mêlent nombre de considérations juridiques. Schreck donne ici naissance à un genre nouveau qu'elle baptise « auto-legal-history » (Soloski). Dans ce quasi-seule-en-scène satirique qui trouve sa conclusion dans un débat semi-improvisé où le public est amené à voter pour ou contre l'abolition de la Constitution américaine, l'exploration du texte fondateur des États-Unis devient un prétexte pour creuser l'histoire personnelle et familiale. Feiffer opte quant à elle pour une forme plus conventionnelle souvent associée au féminisme libéral : un dialogue intimiste entre deux personnages qui remplit toutes les conditions du réalisme dramatique. C'est donc par l'écriture des dialogues que la dramaturge fait entendre ses convictions. Feiffer adopte une langue aussi véloce que vulgaire pour mieux contredire les critiques masculins qui encouragent les femmes dramaturges à privilégier une langue plus lisse (Libbey). Enfin, Harris entretient la multiplicité générique dans une pièce expérimentale qui emprunte aussi bien à la tragédie grecque, qu'au western, au récit de vengeance,

ou encore au hip-hop et à l'Afropunk, démontrant ainsi par l'exemple qu'aucun genre n'est inaccessible à la communauté afro-américaine.

Loin de privilégier une unicité de l'écriture, le théâtre du ricochet prône le pluralisme. Une variété stylistique qui nous autorise à reposer la question de l'écriture féminine que soulevait Hélène Cixous en 1975 (2010 : 37, 43-44). De même qu'il est désormais nécessaire de pluraliser la notion de « féminisme », il faudrait alors parler d' « écriture**s** féminine**s** », d'autant que les pièces qui nous intéressent ici démontrent une affinité croissante avec la tradition féministe et plus largement avec la tradition brechtienne.

C'est cette double filiation qu'il s'agit désormais d'étudier. Force est de constater que le fameux mantra qui avait guidé l'avant-garde féministe continue de résonner au sein de ce théâtre : le personnel est encore politique, bien que l'adage soit tantôt revendiqué, tantôt mis à distance. Chez Schreck comme chez Mann, la formule tient toujours lieu de méthodologie. L'expérience personnelle vient nourrir le processus de création théâtrale. L'actrice n'est plus seulement l'agent de la performance, elle en est aussi le sujet. Inversement, Feiffer et Harris font volontairement disparaître les particularités individuelles au profit d'une potentielle universalité de l'œuvre. L'intrigue fait toujours écho à l'histoire personnelle mais les deux autrices ne revendiquent plus cette corrélation et se gardent de reproduire certains travers de la tradition féministe – selon Helene Keyssar, l'hyperpersonnalisation de l'œuvre dramatique avait pu entraîner une certaine herméticité des productions féministes de la deuxième vague (5). Mann et Schreck choisissent au contraire de célébrer les héritages féministes, et ce notamment par la réutilisation de la technique du groupe de sensibilisation (ou « consciousness-raising group »). Par leur dimension collective et participative, *What the Constitution* et *Gloria* constituent les dignes héritières de ces groupes de parole féministes au sein desquels les participantes étaient invitées à partager leur expérience personnelle afin de favoriser l'éveil politique. Les deux autrices s'efforcent néanmoins de ne pas généraliser à outrance l'expérience féminine en effaçant les particularités liées à la classe sociale, à la sexualité, à l'âge, et surtout à

l'identité raciale – reproche que formulait Audre Lorde dès 1987 (4). La tradition féministe n'est donc jamais suivie aveuglément, mais bien revisitée pour servir une esthétique plus contemporaine.

Il en va de même pour la tradition brechtienne. De prime abord, le théâtre du ricochet partage en effet un même espoir avec la dramaturgie brechtienne : la possibilité d'un art théâtral capable de transformer le spectateur, et par extension, la société. Mais contrairement aux nombreuses productions contemporaines qui se contenteraient de réemployer certains ressorts bien connus de l'esthétique brechtienne – tels que l'adresse au public ou la narration de l'action scénique – sans nécessairement témoigner d'une ambition politique (Barnett 30), la réutilisation de stratégies propres au théâtre brechtien demeure ici motivée politiquement. Ces stratégies sont du reste bien souvent retravaillées pour servir la dimension politique de l'œuvre. Mann, Schreck et Harris multiplient les effets de distanciation sans jamais s'interdire de rompre avec l'esthétique brechtienne. La frontière entre l'interprète et son rôle est tour à tour conservée, abandonnée, questionnée. Si elles partagent encore l'idéal d'un théâtre politique capable de (r)éveiller le spectateur et de déclencher son engagement, ces trois pièces entretiennent par conséquent un rapport ambivalent avec la tradition politique. Les procédés brechtiens sont systématiquement altérés pour servir une esthétique plus contemporaine. Cette entreprise de réappropriation n'est pourtant pas condition de l'esthétique post-féministe, si tant est qu'elle existe. La pièce de Feiffer en est l'exemple idéal : il paraît tout à fait envisageable de répondre au conservatisme politique sans réclamer de filiation avec l'héritage brechtien. Mais existe-t-il d'autres conditions à l'esthétique post-féministe ? En quoi ce théâtre se distingue-t-il des traditions féministe et politique ?

Les pièces de Schreck, Feiffer et Harris nous encouragent tout d'abord à formuler une première hypothèse : l'esthétique post-féministe nécessiterait une scénographie de l'enfermement. Qu'ils évoluent dans le hall de l'association des anciens combattants de Wenatchee, Washington, ou dans un restaurant japonais qui se mue en appartement étriqué, ou encore qu'ils soient entourés de cinq et non quatre

murs, les personnages sont toujours à l'étroit dans leur environnement scénique. L'exemple de *Gloria* nous permet néanmoins de réfuter notre première hypothèse : les décors sont ici bien plus intimistes et accueillants vis-à-vis du public et des personnages. L'esthétique post-féministe n'est donc nullement conditionnée par une scénographie restrictive. Elle persiste en revanche à faire résonner une poétique de la souffrance qui contamine l'ensemble des personnages. Qu'elle soit physique chez Feiffer et Harris ou psychologique chez Schreck et Mann, la douleur s'infiltre partout et devient bientôt le reflet de la nation malade. Tandis que Harris fait signe à la longue et douloureuse histoire du peuple afro-américain en recouvrant le corps de ses deux protagonistes de brûlures profondes qui refusent de cicatriser, Feiffer laisse entendre que les élections de 2016 sont directement responsables de la maladie de Lyme dont souffre son personnage principal. Dans le théâtre de Mann et de Schreck, la souffrance psychologique trouve cette fois-ci son origine dans la figure maternelle. C'est parce que les mères ont subi de plein fouet les conséquences d'une société fondée sur des valeurs patriarcales que les protagonistes sont sujettes à une instabilité psychologique. Loin de se laisser envahir par la désolation, les quatre autrices parviennent à pondérer cette poétique de la souffrance par un humour mordant, à la fois salvateur et revendicatif. Résolument comiques, les pièces de Schreck et Feiffer assurent une alternance jouissive entre la tension dramatique et le soulagement humoristique. Malgré un ton plus sérieux, les pièces de Mann et Harris réussissent également à provoquer ce rire de soulagement.

Si la scénographie de l'emprisonnement ne constitue guère un passage obligé à l'échelle du ce corpus, le théâtre du ricochet postule au moins deux conditions complémentaires au renouvellement de l'esthétique féministe. La fracture de la société américaine est d'abord reflétée par une poétique de la souffrance physique ou psychologique qui affecte l'ensemble des personnages. L'humour est également revendiqué comme une « arme sociale » (Pavis 56), capable de réitérer le projet politique. L'analyse comparée nous autorise dès lors à suggérer l'émergence d'une esthétique protestataire d'un genre nouveau, ou du moins adaptée aux ruptures de son époque. À en croire Steinem, cette

nouvelle esthétique abrogerait définitivement la frontière entre la production artistique et le mouvement politique et conduirait *in fine* au militantisme du spectateur. Mais est-il vraiment possible d'appliquer cette affirmation à l'ensemble des œuvres qui nous intéressent ici ?

Qu'il s'agisse d'enclencher une révolution politique ou de générer un renversement plus intime, la contribution politique du théâtre du ricochet reste limitée. Malgré les différents stratagèmes mis en place par Mann, Schreck et Feiffer pour guider le temps de l'« après-représentation » (Schechner 2020 : 39) et garantir l'effet « perlocutoire » de l'œuvre dramatique – soit l'effet produit sur le destinataire de la représentation théâtrale selon l'expression de Keir Elam (Aston 60-61) – la réception de leurs œuvres demeure par nature indomptable. Les quelques témoignages de spectateurs recueillis par la critique sont encore trop peu représentatifs pour affirmer avec certitude que l'éveil politique du spectateur a bien été atteint. C'est peut-être là toute la subtilité de la métaphore de Steinem qui nous servait d'épigraphe. Le théâtre du ricochet n'a pas l'arrogance de provoquer une réaction nationale. Il vise au contraire à produire une ondulation, une réaction en chaîne, qui pourra, au cas par cas, produire un effet sur des vies individuelles. Et la nature de cette répercussion s'avère d'autant plus versatile que l'expérience théâtrale conserve une grande part d'indéterminé (Ubersfeld 11). La réception du théâtre du ricochet nous paraît d'autant plus mitigée que son public ne constitue pas un échantillon représentatif de la nation américaine (Grange 25). Loin d'ignorer l'exclusivité de la scène new-yorkaise, Schreck, Mann et Harris s'emploient à faciliter l'accès à leurs œuvres. Mais leurs efforts sont encore insuffisants pour renouer le dialogue avec les publics conservateurs. Pour autant, il nous semble trop sévère d'accuser ces autrices d'opportunisme – à en croire certains critiques, le théâtre de l'ère Trump aurait exploité le contexte politique pour stimuler la vente de billets (Heller). Le parallèle politique est loin d'être gratuit ici : il doit aider le spectateur à mieux vivre l'ici et maintenant.

À cette première ambition s'en ajoute une deuxième : faire croire en l'espoir d'un avenir meilleur. Quand bien même les pièces de ce

corpus ne pourraient assurer la prise de conscience du spectateur, elles engendreraient au moins un sentiment d'espoir en lui offrant une vision de ce que pourrait être le monde de demain. C'est là l'essence même de la représentation théâtrale selon Jill Dolan. Bien consciente que l'œuvre dramatique ne peut à elle seule changer le monde, la chercheuse défend l'idée d'un théâtre humaniste, capable de transmettre la promesse d'un avenir meilleur (2, 5, 20). Un humanisme auquel adhère chacune des autrices considérées ici. Malgré la gravité des thématiques abordées, l'espoir finit toujours par dominer. Les pièces se concluent à l'unanimité sur l'évocation d'une confiance sans faille à l'égard des jeunes générations qui se voient confier la lourde tâche d'apaiser les maux de la société. Outre cette volonté commune de représenter le possible, les autrices sont également partisanes d'une dramaturgie de la communion spectatorielle – identifiée par Dolan comme essentielle à la portée utopique de l'œuvre (2). Par l'entremise des références au contexte local et des moments de participation, le public se métamorphose en « assemblée civique » et en « *communitas* » – soit un ensemble organique, voire spirituel, qui effacerait les particularités individuelles pour laisser place à l'harmonie sociale (Dolan 12, 34). Enfin, ces quatre pièces s'avèrent volontairement accueillantes à l'égard des artistes qui s'en saisiraient. Tout aussi instructifs que libérateurs, les paratextes proclament sans relâche la malléabilité de l'œuvre. Les autrices se montrent ainsi favorables à une dramaturgie du partage artistique.

« Comment, femme, peut-on aller au théâtre ? Sauf à s'y trouver en complicité avec le sadisme dont les femmes y sont l'objet. À se voir invitée à prendre, dans la structure familiale-patriarcale, que le théâtre reproduit à l'infini, la place de la victime. » À la question que posait Hélène Cixous en 1977, Mann, Schreck, Feiffer et Harris répondent d'une seule et même voix : à l'heure de la quatrième vague du mouvement féministe, le théâtre des femmes doit assumer un rôle de contre-pouvoir au sein de la société. En cela, le théâtre du ricochet réaffirme la place de l'art théâtral dans la construction de l'identité nationale. Souvent négligé par les grands penseurs du nationalisme

culturel, le théâtre peut servir à affirmer, contester, ou encore repenser l'américanité, et ce notamment en temps de crise (Wilmer 1-3). Dans chacune des œuvres considérées ici, la scène s'apparente désormais à une tribune publique où la communauté des spectateurs – devenue la synecdoque du peuple national – pourra examiner les valeurs qui sont au cœur de l'identité américaine. En ce sens, ces pièces peuvent être qualifiées de « politiques » puisqu'elles permettent à la *polis*, à la communauté citoyenne, d'opérer un retour sur elle-même. Alors que Richard Schechner condamnait le théâtre américain du XXIe siècle à l'obsolescence en vertu de son incapacité à prendre en charge l'instant contemporain (1993 : 21), les autrices n'hésitent pas à expérimenter avec leur contexte de production, au risque de se voir refuser l'accès au canon théâtral. Bien qu'il soit encore trop tôt pour tirer toute conclusion au sujet de la postérité de ce théâtre du ricochet, nous pouvons au moins remarquer que seules les pièces de Schreck et Harris ont connu un grand nombre de reprises. Cette étude nous encourage malgré tout à poursuivre notre réflexion sur le renouvellement de la forme politique à l'ère Trump. La métaphore de Steinem peut-elle servir de prisme de lecture pour l'ensemble des pièces écrites et/ou mises en scène dans le sillage des élections de 2016 ? Les réactions théâtrales à l'avènement du trumpisme ont-elles été systématiquement conditionnées par les critères qui nous ont permis de définir l'esthétique du théâtre du ricochet ? Quelles autres formes ont été proposées et en quoi se distinguent-elles de la tradition politique et de l'esthétique que nous avons identifiée dans ce travail de mémoire ? Enfin, quelle a été la portée de cet autre théâtre politique ? Voilà les questions auxquelles il nous faudra répondre.

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VI - Book Review

Book Review: *Theatre Censorship in Contemporary Europe – Silence and Protest*, edited by Anne Etienne and Chris Megson, University of Exeter Press, 2024.

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Starting with a broad definition of censorship as "any attempt to modify the integrity of the artistic work and its reception" (7), the book covers a wide range of practices that have effectively partially or completely silenced artists in various countries of Europe, from 1989 to the present. The fall of the Berlin Wall was taken as a starting point as it profoundly affected the distribution of power, nationally as well as internationally. Academic publications usually tend to explore the distant past but Etienne and Mergson's work, a collection of very varied and precise case studies, makes the choice of focusing on the contemporary period and covering a wide range of geographical and social realities, which produces a unique and valuable addition to the field of censorship studies.

Censorship, the editors of the volume argue, may originate in the political, social or financial powers in place, and may take many forms, both direct, when play-texts are cut and performances forbidden, and indirect, when performances do not happen, for a series of reasons. Indeed, the book also considers self-censorship – which seems to be almost more effective than external censorship –, social censorship through protests against particular performances, and various more or less subtle cases of indirect censorship through political and financial pressure. If the example of director Kirill Serebrennikov, who was arrested and tried in Russia in 2017, springs to mind when thinking of political and state censorship, silencing can also operate more subtly, through lack or withdrawal of funding as is often the case in Slovenia, or through omission of sensitive subjects by fearful artists and theatre managements (we may think of Oliver Frljić in Poland but also of the

culture wars currently being waged in Western democracies). Silencing can also be the result of a decision to stop producing controversial shows such as corridas in Spain or Shibari performances, or through protests organised by activists against productions which are deemed unacceptable, as exemplified by Brett Bailey's *Exhibit B*, which was canceled in the UK in 2010.

The book is structured in three parts. Part 1 ("Forms and Sources of Censorship") centers on the way censorship operates, from what source it originates and who it targets. Part 2 ("Ghosts of the Past") offers a historical perspective on censorship practices and part 3 ("Staging Taboos") considers particular instances of subjects that are deemed too sensitive and are therefore more regularly censored.

The book also alternates between longer chapters which offer a more expansive scope on topics, and shorter interventions which concentrate on single case studies or go through fields of investigation more thoroughly. This alternation is very effective in enlightening broader considerations thanks to very particular and precise analyses.

The book opens on one of those interventions, by Vicky Ann Cremona and Marco Galea who focus on the terrible fate of Maltese journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, who was killed in 2017 after a bomb was placed under her car seat. Her assassination gave rise to protests and debates which ironically put under the spotlight the very causes which she defended and which her censors wanted to silence. The theatrical reappropriation of public space, public buildings and public debate by protesters, effectively preventing, that is to say censoring, the politicians who would have much rather had gone on exercising power through corruption in the wings, highlights how versatile and powerful, but also how spectacular censorship is.

In the first chapter, Milena Dragićević Sesić and Aleksandra Jovićević describe the recent developments of censorship in the countries of former Yugoslavia and the wider region of Central Europe. After observing a wide variety of censorial acts over the years, showing how the fall of the Berlin Wall which prevented censors, at least for a time,

from operating directly and openly, led to ever more inventive ways of meddling indirectly with productions, the chapter concludes: "All public performances are potentially political acts echoing variations of representative democracy, which, according to Jacques Rancière, generate and reformulate public life" (48).

In chapter two, Alex Trustrum-Thomas draws a terrifying picture of censorship in Putin's Russia, centering on the telling itinerary of Serebrennikov, whose case highlights the sheer absurdity of the accusations against him (which did not prevent his being sentenced) and the hypocrisy of his accusers who are also his devoted spectators. Referring to the story of the Emperor's new clothes, Trustrum-Thomas counterbalances the conclusion of the previous chapter: with an authoritarian regime, there is actually no need for subtle or indirect censorship, as keeping up appearances is not even at stake anymore.

In chapter three, Anne Etienne and Lisa Fitzpatrick concentrate on the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland and the silencing of women's voices on Irish stages. A "semi-conscious or even unconscious censorship" (74) explains that women are much less represented not only as playwrights, theatre directors and stage directors, but even as fully-fledged characters, because "male characters are understood to interest everyone, while female characters are only of interest to women" (76). The authors conclude: "The operation of a largely unconscious 'concealed agenda' and its impact on women theatre-makers is an example of the workings of implicit censorship which marginalizes voices and creative works that disrupt settled assumptions and metanarratives" (85).

The second part opens on an intervention: Andrea Tompa explores censorship in Hungary, offering a historical perspective. In spite of the disappearance of official censorship in 1867 and the absence of visible regulation during the socialist era, the 2010 election was the start of a new period of indirect state interference and intimidation that effectually countered any attempt at fighting homophobia and violence against women in the wake of the #MeToo movement.

In chapter four, Denis Poniz explores the situation in Slovenia, going back to the 1980s thanks to artists' testimonies. For instance, Czech dissident and political prisoner Václav Havel, whose plays and books were banned in his own country, still saw his plays being produced in prominent Slovenian theatres, including the National Theatre in Ljubljana. This case exemplifies the very complex tensions at stake in the exercise of censorship, when a government uses restriction, cancellation but also leniency to show its power. Though Slovenia became an independent country in 1991, not much seems to have changed as private entities took over the role of censor from the state, skillfully hiding behind concepts of ownership and editorial policy to curtail free speech.

In chapter five, Agnieszka Jakimiak focuses on a case of self-censorship in Poland in 2013. Commissioned to produce the classic play written by Romantic poet Kraziński, *Un-Divine Comedy* in 1835, Oliver Frlijić wanted his adaptation to acknowledge the guilt and complicity of Poland in promoting antisemitic discourse. But faced with dissention in his own company and a breach with the management of the theatre which put the production on hold, Frlijić had no other option but to cancel the performance, effectively self-censoring his own work.

Chapter six is the occasion for Andrew Holden to contemplate opera censorship in the transnational context of Europe at large. To counter threats of censorship of sexual, moral and political content, major institutions have worked at diversifying their sources of income and their audiences, but in response, potential sites of censorship have also expanded to include casting, marketing, social media and audience engagement. Challenging blackface in Italy, trying colour-blind casting in Hungary, fighting against the silencing of Black voices in global opera, countering this silencing by proposing colour-conscious casting to better tackle the historic exclusion of artists of colour, opera productions have constantly fought against a multi-faceted censorship throughout Europe.

Part two ends with the intervention of Lonneke Van Heugten who analyses another case of blackface, this time in the Netherlands: the Black Pete controversy started in 2011 but the racist and reactionary show represents a tradition that lives on, as protests against it have stagnated. The surveys of the population are telling here: though a vast majority of people recognize that the character is racist, they are also inclined to protect a tradition that appears immutable.

Another intervention opens part three, in which Roaa Ali explores culture wars, also known more controversially as cancel culture, in the UK. Ali's argument is that "while cancel culture is a tool employed to redraw ideological fault lines, there is a danger that a more nefarious version could be sanctioned by the state to censor racialized and marginalized voices" (169). Exploring this very topical debate leads Ali to recognize that state censorship has now been replaced by commercial, economic and social interference.

In chapter seven, Chris Megson analyses the complex links between religion and censorship through several case studies, among which the cancellation of *Homegrown* in 2015 in the UK, which illustrates how sensitive the issue of Islam and Muslim citizens has become. In contrast, Rodrigo Garcia's *Golgota Picnic* also elicited protests in France, Poland or Malta because it was deemed blasphemous. As a conclusion, Megson reflects on the role of sacred images as a locus of faith for religious believers, and sees it as an explanation for those plays being targeted by censorious audiences.

In chapter eight, Olga Kolokytha, Yulia Belinskaya and Matina Magkou also explore the role of religious institutions in silencing theatrical productions in Greece where, though censorship committees were officially abolished in 1986, censorship practices have continued for political and religious (rather than artistic) reasons, thus showcasing the "instrumentalization of theatre for political purposes" (196). If further proof were needed, the very fact that the writers could not conduct more than five interviews for that chapter also shows how sensitive censorship and self-censorship still are, in an ever-more polarized and religious society.

Chapter nine centers on Spain, as Duncan Wheeler explores another kind of spectacle, corridas, which have been for some time the target of audience protest, despite audiences being twice as large for bullfighting as for theatrical productions. Once more, this particular case study shows how analysing any kind of theatrical performance through the lens of censorship uncovers very complex tensions between the freedom of creation, the freedom of audiences and the questioning of traditional forms of spectacle which seem to be no longer permissible in today's society. This is best exemplified by a few facts which highlight the very contradictions which work at the heart of censorship practices: attending a bullring is more and more considered as an exercise of democratic right in Spain; playwrights Federico García Lorca and Angelica Liddell both envisage the bullring as "a sacred place in which values cast aside by the (post-) modern world are embodied and enacted" (214); in Catalonia, though it is theoretically again allowed to stage corridas since 2016, no one has dared do so; in 2021, two bulls killed in a bullring in Gijón were named 'Nigeriano' (Nigerian) and 'Feminista' (Feminist).

The book ends on the intervention of Hannah Probst who recounts her experience as a spectator of a Shibari performance in Berlin and reflects on intra-community cultural censorship. Her conclusion that "acts are censored because we know about the constitutive power that acts can have" (237) may serve indeed as a general conclusion to the book as a whole: the long list of censored plays and the length to which censors go to find ways of silencing artists, as evidenced by the wide variety of case studies explored, in terms of geographical origins, historical and cultural contexts as well as form, certainly bears witness to the ability of theatre to resist, subvert and challenge oppression.

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Koumarane Valavane holds a PhD in theoretical physics, is a former actor with Ariane Mnouchikine's Théâtre du Soleil and founded the company Théâtre Indianostrum in Pondichéry in 2007. His plays deal with violence perpetrated in the name of a war or a system, the relationship between men and women in Indian society as well as myths and the sacred.

Koumarane Valavane devises his plays with his company, basing his work from a classical text (*Chandala l'impur; Les rêves de Tipu*), a news item (*Oïkos, Le reste est silence...*), a character (*Flying Chariot(s); Alfonsina*), a historical event (the *Terre de cendres* trilogy) or a myth (*Kunti-Karna*)

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