

Verse drama on the Anglophone stage in the 20th-21st Centuries: An Introduction

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Abstract: This issue of *Coup de Théâtre* emanates from the contributions to a one-day conference co-organised by the Université de Bordeaux and the Université de Lille in November 2018. The guest speaker was poet-dramatist Glyn Maxwell and extracts from his *Best Man Speech* (2004) were performed by the English undergraduate students. The conference meant to put under the limelight a genre that used to be coterminous with drama originally but is now considered as just a branch of it, and not a popular one at that. This introduction aims at giving a broad overview of the main criticisms the genre has faced since the 20th century, criticisms that are more specifically addressed in the following essays.

Résumé : Ce numéro de *Coup de Théâtre* est issu des travaux qui se sont tenus lors d'une journée d'étude co-organisée par l'Université de Bordeaux et l'Université de Lille en novembre 2018. L'invité d'honneur était le poète et dramaturge Glyn Maxwell, et des extraits de son *Best Man Speech* (2004) ont été mis en espace par des étudiants en licence d'anglais. La conférence visait à mettre sous les feux de la rampe un genre qui était synonyme d'écriture dramatique à l'origine, mais qui est aujourd'hui considéré comme une branche du théâtre, une branche qui ne reçoit guère les faveurs du public et de la critique. Cette introduction a pour but d'offrir un vaste panorama des critiques principales émises à l'encontre du genre depuis le XX^e siècle, des critiques qui sont ensuite plus spécifiquement analysées dans les chapitres qui suivent.

Keywords: British theatre, metatheatre, naturalism, poetic drama, verse drama

Mots-clés : Théâtre britannique, métathéâtre, naturalisme, théâtre poétique, théâtre en vers

I am not saying or hinting that the poet is a bad writer of plays or that he has a bad influence upon the theatre, I only wish you to understand that the poet is not of the theatre, and that only the dramatist among writers has any birth-claim to the theatre.

Edward Gordon Craig (116)

The least to be said is that contemporary verse drama suffers from a bad reputation. To put it bluntly, some practitioners, academics, and audiences seem to believe it can generate neither good poetry nor good drama. In his 1974 foreword to his critical response to Denis Donoghue's ground-breaking book on verse drama, Arnold Hinchcliffe ironically deemed "the value of verse in modern theatre certainly doubtful" (xi). Forty years ago, William G. McCollom spoke of the "declining visibility of verse drama" (99) in the 20th century and claimed that the genre "may soon become a historical phenomenon, whatever the achievement of individual plays" (100). Some 20 years later, James Fenton, in a chapter on "Poetic Drama and Operas" that wrongfully considers poetic drama and verse drama as one and the same thing, still claimed that nothing of great value had been added to the canon of English verse on stage since the Jacobean period (122-125). Indeed, while verse drama was the norm on stage until the 17th century, it virtually disappeared for three centuries before going through a revival in the first half of the 20th century, as Irene Morra shows in what is probably the most complete historiographical narrative of the genre to date.

In the late 1950s, the genre declined again. Compared to prose drama or even poetic drama, the production numbers of verse dramas are rather low – Kayla McKinney Wiggins, in her *Modern Verse Drama in England: An Annotated Bibliography*, draws a list of 500 verse plays written and published in England between 1935 with T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and the early 1990s with Lee Breuer and

Alexis Deveau. When reading reviews of verse plays today, the negative comments can be classified into two main types: 1. The reviewer sees no future for verse drama as a genre if one particular contemporary verse play fails at the box-office, regardless of its past achievements; 2. The reviewer blames the use of verse when the play is bad, but not the other components of the play (actors, staging, plot...). Morra claims that such lack of faith in the genre "is today reflected in the relatively marginal treatment of verse drama in mainstream critical and academic studies" (2). This collection of essays takes up her cue to critically challenge the idea that verse drama is both unreadable and unperformable, and to give evidence of its vitality by engaging with productions from 1945 to today, with a special focus on one of verse drama's staunchest advocates, Glyn Maxwell, whose monologue, *Best Man Speech*, can be read at the end of this issue in a French version.

The idea that verse drama is a dead form of the past that can no longer attract large numbers of theatre-goers in England is deeply entrenched. And yet, living poets-cum-playwrights like Tony Harrison (whose plays have been performed at the National Theatre), Peter Oswald (the first contemporary writer in residence at Shakespeare's Globe), Glyn Maxwell (whose plays have travelled well to the USA), Simon Armitage (the current Poet Laureate), or Richard O'Brien (who contributes an essay to this collection) have made a consistent use of the genre. Other verse plays have met with success, like Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* (1980), Sean O'Brien's *Keepers of the Flame* (2003), Michael Frayne's *Afterlife* (2008), Jenny Lewis's *After Gilgamesh* (2011), and Mike Bartlett's *King Charles III* (2014), to name but a few. Besides, the form is quite alive in the English-speaking world, be it in Ireland (with Seamus Heaney, Bernard O'Donoghue, and Tom Paulin for instance), in Scotland (Edwin Morgan, Liz Lochhead, and David Greig), in Wales (Owen Sheers, for example), in the United States (Alexis Deveau and Lee Breuer), and in former colonies (Wole Soyinka and Derek Walcott to name just two). Therefore, considering verse plays as a mere oddity for the happy few can only be understood as a blatant misreading of the contemporary relevance of the genre for the creative team, for the audience, and for the scholar. As a con-

sequence, this misconception needs to be addressed. By working on the definition of verse drama, this short introduction aims to raise a few issues surrounding the reception of verse drama and some of the challenges faced by its practitioners from the beginning of the 20th century to today.

The generic definition of verse drama does not seem to be a problem at first sight – it is a play written in verse. Verse lineation is indicative of the genre on the page while rhythm (and sometimes rhyme) enhances it on stage, differentiating verse drama from performance poetry, dramatic poetry, and poetic drama. Eliot made a strong case for aligning form and content in his essay “Poetry and Drama” (1951):

For I start with the assumption that if poetry is merely a decoration, an added embellishment, if it merely gives people of literary tastes the pleasure of listening to poetry at the same time that they are witnessing a play, then it is superfluous. It must justify itself dramatically, and not merely be fine poetry shaped into a dramatic form. From this it follows that no play should be written in verse for which prose is *dramatically* adequate. (132)

Denis Donoghue, in *The Third Voice* (1959), agrees that verse drama is not just a verbal construct but that poetry must be found in all the components of the play – words, gestures, plot, visual image – what he calls the “‘situation’: the play is a succession of enacted situations so chosen and arranged as to constitute the objective equivalent of the motive which is the ‘action’ of the play” (7). Verse drama requires “organic unity” between form and content, a concept derived from Coleridgean “fusion” or Aristotelian “entelechy” (8), the conditions under which something potential becomes actualised. The organic unity between form and content is what defines verse drama more than the mere use of verse. This does not mean that verse, as a metonym for poetry, deals only with the poetic, understood as an elevating, otherworldly type of material. On the contrary, as Rowland Cotterill puts it in his essay, verse drama is a genre in which poetic and anti-poetic forces are set in tension to question the very definition of poetry and the poetic. Verse drama is therefore not that easy to define as it is a genre that goes beyond the mere lineation on the page to include

other aspects, such as content, but also stage design and actor training as we shall see.

Still, verse is considered as unbefitting to contemporary theatre. The most common argument used to support this is probably that there is room for only one poet on the national stage, and he hasn't been dethroned for over 400 years. Let us say more generally that blank verse is always set against the production of the Early Modern period (i.e. Shakespeare, if he has to be named, but also Marlowe and Jonson), and lacks speakability in other epochs, making Eliot remark that both the Romantics and the Victorians failed in the genre because of that. Critic and poet John Wain thought likewise – verse plays try to echo Shakespeare's success by “employing a kind of thinned out Elizabethan iambic to suggest Shakespeare, and thus charge the air with theatrical and literary incense” (59). Blank verse is presented as a ritual that has lost any power to enthuse the audience. In “The Possibility of Verse Drama” (1922), Eliot had already suggested that “the Elizabethan drama was aimed at a public which wanted entertainment of a crude sort, but would stand a good deal of poetry.” He therefore suggested that to avoid “poetic pastiches of Euripides and Shakespeare”, playwrights had to “treat [art] as a joke” so as to engage the audience into “one more quiver and giggle of art debauch” (63). Eliot subsequently mentioned the music hall as a possible life-saver. Tony Harrison heard him loud and clear when he put Lancashire comedian George Formby on a par with Czech composer Bedřich Smetana in his own verse drama, an idea which is at the core of Cécile Marshall's essay. Yet, Richard O'Brien, in his essay on contemporary productions at Shakespeare's Globe, shows the difficulties playwrights face to free themselves from these past models and overcome the audience's resistance to verse on stage. This begs a tough question: can verse drama be anything else than citational or ironical today? Estelle Rivier-Arnaud highlights the reflexive nature of contemporary verse drama in some adaptations of classical plays, in scenes in which characters, or even actors, comment on the genre and its reception.

There are other reasons why verse drama virtually disappeared in the 1950s, reasons that William G. McCollom summarises in a debatable list :

Many reasons contribute to this change of taste – the coming of TV and the related decline in demand for excellent or even educated speech, the increasingly high risks of theatre production, the defensive reaction of the poets to the money-changer, the sense that verse drama belongs to a distant and irrecoverable past, the supposition that iambic pentameter fails to suit our speech patterns, the movement of poetry from metered verse to prose rhythms, and [the poets'] tendency to prefer verse or even prose dialogue to drama. (99)

All of these reasons seem contextual for some, limited for others, but most are probably disparaging to the potential theatre-goers. Yet, John Wain had already expressed the idea of a “decline in demand for excellent or even educated speech” in no cautious terms in 1960 :

Perhaps, after all, it is a social rather than an artistic matter, perhaps there are certain habits and preferences set up in bookish people by the kind of education they have and the kind of circle they live in, that demands verse as an extra trimming to a play, lifting it automatically into a higher class. (62)

The age-old classist assumption that verse drama is an elitist form of theatre can be challenged by the huge success of plays translated or adapted from the classics for the modern English stage, as volume 33 of *Coup de Théâtre* (2019) dedicated to that trend or the many interviews with playwrights and directors collected by Margherita Laera in *Theatre and Adaptation* (2014) have shown. Yet, there is no grounded evidence that a period costume play makes verse drama more acceptable (even though in French we could say that “le vers habille la pièce”). For instance, Tony Harrison’s epic retelling of Nansen’s exploration to the North Pole in *Fram* (2008), and Benjamin Askew’s take on the Arthurian legend in *The Lady of the Lake* (2015) received the same kind of mixed reviews as most verse plays set in a contemporary setting.¹ Clearly, the success or failure of verse drama cannot be caused by verse alone.

Translations and adaptations from classical plays constitute the bulk of contemporary verse drama. Yet, the repertoire studied in this

issue mostly includes new plays in verse and original productions that have been thought out with the contemporary world in mind. Can verse sound congenial to modern themes, to the social and political preoccupations of the present time? Donna Gerstenberger, in "Poetry And Politics : The Verse Drama Of Auden And Isherwood" (1962), already challenged Richard Hoggart's claims about Auden's plays that "their importance in the history of the modern theatre is negligible", and that they are at best "amusing", for "sports" (73). On the contrary, she claimed that Auden and Isherwood's verse drama expressed complex social and political dilemmas that were most important in the 1930s "in vocabulary and images drawn from contemporary science, clinical psychology, Marxian economics, power politics, and mechanized warfare" (125). Though her close reading of *The Dog Beneath the Skin* and *The Ascent of F-6* reveals some of their weaknesses, she concludes by affirming that "[the plays] aid in defining limits and in exploring possibilities as well as in objectifying an inherent dissatisfaction (poetic and political, in this instance) with the conventionally established products of the past" (132). In other words, the timely relevance of verse drama lies in the way it conjures up a historical genre to lampoon the past assumption it is ridden with. Even today, a play in verse is deeply political. For instance, Kerry-Jane Wallart, in her essay on Derek Walcott's *Drums and Colours*, delineates how the genre, which is communal in essence, can be appropriated to write back at England, its literary canon and official historiography.

Furthermore, maintaining that "verse drama belongs to a distant and irrecoverable past" does not do justice to the work of each epoch's practitioners, because verse drama is not a backward-looking form that should be brought back to life, but a living mode of expression that can rejuvenate theatrical practice by breaking loose from the "mind-forg'd manacles" of prosaic statements to use Blake's words. Nor is verse drama escapist, at least if we are to believe Eliot: "What we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike its own, an unreal world in which poetry is tolerated" (1951: 141). Still, its

decline in England accelerated in the 1950s with the emergence of the Angry Young Men and Kitchen Sink drama, which adopted prose as the main verbal vehicle on stage. This realist type of drama was believed to better represent English identity at the time with its mix of class issues, accents, education and sexuality, as in the works of John Osborne, than verse drama, which was perhaps more classical in its expression, less in touch with the social changes of the past, and which looked to the continent to find models, as Morra claims in her book. Verse and drama increasingly occupied separate spheres. While prose theatre could deal with English issues, verse drama was relegated to “the distant, the vague, the exotic, and the heroical” (24), according to Gerstenberger in “Perspectives on Modern Verse Drama” (1960). The paradox is that while in the 1930s, verse drama was intrinsically linked to social movements with Auden and Isherwood, it became associated with a bourgeois, elitist form of theatre in the 1950s with Christopher Fry, a reputation which lasted until Tony Harrison got his foot in the door and had the working class speak in rhyming iambic pentameters.

Gerstenberger mentions another consequence of such dissociation: “The conception of verse drama as a formal experience was what had been lost as a result of an increasingly rigid separation on the stage of the domain of poetry and the world of real and vital concerns” (24). Following “the movement of poetry from metered verse to prose rhythms”, another genre, namely poetic drama, seems to have superseded verse drama as a means to experiment with language and structure, while verse drama is relegated to drama in verse but with no poetry in it. For instance, Wanda Rulewicz states that “it is the inadequacy of language which causes the use of poetry in drama, but in the hands of a genius, prose can also become the vehicle for transcending reality and presenting, what is not easy to be communicated” (175), thus suggesting that verse is used by those who lack genius.

Verse drama is often considered as coterminous with anti-realistic drama first because poetry itself is deemed anti-realistic. It superimposes a verbal order that sounds inauthentic. Yeats’s experiences consisted exactly in finding a reconciliation between the rhythms of the voice

and the prosody of metre, as Pierre Longuenesse analyses in his essay. Still, Derek Walcott, in “The Poet in the Theatre” (1990), remarks that, in spite of such experimentations, metre is dismissed as too artificial to be used on stage because of its rhetorical and formal aspects that prevent dialogues from sounding like everyday speech. Indeed, audiences are required to pay attention to the words, the rhythms, the sounds, so much so that the process of identification with the characters is disturbed; audiences cannot become engrossed in the action. But is this necessarily detrimental to the theatrical experience? Tony Harrison, in his introductory pack to *Fram* (2008) advises his viewers not to be afraid of verse because they have been immersed in it since they heard their first nursery rhyme. Rhythms, rhymes, sounds are a source of pleasure. For him, verse drama is “nearer to opera than it is to naturalistic drama” (National Theatre Workpack).

The idea that audiences have “certain habits” is probably a more stimulating one for the practitioner and the scholar. For instance, W. B. Yeats, after the performance of *Deirdre* at the Abbey Theatre in November 1906, saw that the reception of verse drama was changing and deplored the fact that the “modern audience has lost the habit of careful listening.” He therefore embarked on a quest to re-educate audiences to verse on stage, even if, he admitted, “the difficulties of holding an audience with verse are ten times greater than with the prose play” (quoted in Bushrui 122). Still some 50 years later, Eliot made a similar observation, but drew opposite conclusions: “We have to accustom our audience to verse to the point at which they will cease to be conscious of it. [...] The verse rhythm should have its effect upon the hearers, without their being conscious of it” (1951: 134). Whether verse drama is at its best when it lulls its audiences into a semi-conscious receptivity or when it triggers their participation through heightened attention is definitely an artistic choice that can work for many different types of audiences.

Besides, in the context of what Elisabeth Angel-Pérez has called “a revival of the verbal theatre: a theatre ‘In-Yer-Ear’ rather than In-Yer-Face” (2013) in the late 1990s, that is to say a theatre in which

nothing happens but language, poetic drama has probably given the impression that verse was redundant. Glenda Leeming's *Poetic Drama* (1989) reminds us that the classical rules were elaborated over a long period, starting with Aristotle. They persisted into the Renaissance through the Anglicisation of classical plays and the autochthonous tradition of Folk Plays, Morality Plays, and Mystery Plays. Yet, many books on 20th century verse drama begin with a reminder of these classical rules, even if they are quite alien to contemporary taste and theatrical practice. Leeming therefore contends that poetic drama is "a reaction against the conventional realism of current commercial theatre writing, and a willingness to experiment with relating form and content to the twentieth century, instead of limply imitating Shakespeare" (2). *Mad About the Boy* (2012), by Gbolahan Obisesan, is a case in point: while the three-hander is not written in verse, the lines are so short they look like verse, as if the play was an extended stichomythia, each character picking up a word or phrase from the other to develop his own poetic line of thought. By intertwining the storylines of the three characters through poetic means such as repetition, word-play, and sound patterns, the drama unfolds until its tragic denouement.

When critics and audiences do not immediately recognise verse as verse, but sometimes merely as contrived diction, free verse or rhythmic prose, that might be because they have run out of the habit of listening to poetry on stage, but it is more likely that the playwright has decided to dress his choice of medium in the guise of the natural rhythms of speech. That is what Eliot meant to do in the early 1950s when he wanted "to find a rhythm close to contemporary speech, in which the stresses could be made to come wherever we should naturally put them, in uttering the particular phrase on the particular occasion" so that "the audience should find, at the moment of awareness that it is hearing poetry, that it is saying to itself: 'I could talk in poetry too!'" (1951: 140). Mike Bartlett, in his much acclaimed *King Charles III* (2014) also made that choice by "avoid[ing] lines with monosyllabic words, because, spoken out loud, they expose the

rhythm too much” (2014). The issue then is to find a way to adapt verse to speech rhythms and still be verse.

Dan Rebellato and Nicholas Holden have noted that with the emergence of performance studies, which places live performance at the heart of the discipline, the text and the page it is printed on have started to look suspicious.² Yet, one might think that with plays in verse, the writtenness of the playtext goes against this phonocentric trend, and that the success of the play depends on the compliance of the actors. Verse is a means to intensify the dramatic action so the actor must sacrifice emotion, accentuation and expressive intentions to promote fidelity to scansion. Indeed, diction is fixed through phonological rules, typography, and rhyming patterns. Patrick Le Boeuf, in his close reading of Edward Gordon Craig’s rare material held at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, shows how verse drama’s staunchest opponent changed his mind in the 1930s, and set up what can be called a programme for actor training in how to deliver lines of verse on stage, beginning with the metronome, with a strict observance of metrical rules and original pronunciation, to finally break free from the rules and find a voice. There is an emphasis on rhythm and sounds as orchestrated in the written text. Of course, the performance can shift the attention to meaning. However, the creation of a regular rhythm tends to restrict the possibilities of variation during a performance. The text reads as a sort of musical score. The musicality of verse, rejuvenated by the recourse to rap, hip hop, and performance poetry, is at the heart of Kasia Lech’s panorama of ultra-contemporary experimental production of verse in plays.

Versification sets expectations because it is based on regularity, which the dramatist can play with. For instance, Caryl Churchill, in *Serious Money* (1980) eases her audiences into rhythmical regularity progressively since the first lines are in prose and then progressively shorten until line breaks marked by rhymes are introduced. Throughout the play her characters move in and out of tetra-, penta-, hexameters, depending on the needs. The line break, especially when it ends with a rhyme, allows to delineate the psychological contours

of the characters, for instance when Greville Todd, Jake and Scilla's father and a stockbroker, complains :

Scilla, you don't seem to realise. Newspapers across the nation.
I could easily lose my job if I lose my reputation.
You and the yobs you work with are hardly worth a mention
(no one expects them to have any standards),
But I have to keep very quiet, and not attract attention.
Until it's all blown over I think I'll stay in bed. (223)

The extended use of the -tion rhyme, which Greville will take up a fifth time and his daughter a sixth as if to put an end to his rambling, suggests the extent to which the character is trapped in his own thoughts. Yet, the two lines that do not actually rhyme show that this is all pretence, that he is subjecting his daughter to emotional blackmail (he later rhymes "sad" with "Dad", and rejects her accusation of "pomposity" by pointing at her "monstrosity" (224)). This is not poetry, but versification and this is very effective as a dramatic tool. The switchback rhyme and the shared line are other such tools that can prove the dramatic nature of verse.

In a dialectic movement, Daniel Jean, in his essay on Eliot's *The Confidential Clerk* (2009), asks the question: if poetry cannot be limited to the use of line, what are the grounds for writing verse drama? His contention is that verse does not help reach a kind of truth or authenticity in the dialogue, but, because it is the sign of a verbal order, it does point at the artificiality of any speech act. Using verse is not a conservative choice but a revolutionary one, it is a metatheatrical tool to deconstruct dramatic illusion.

In spite of all the reservations mentioned by critics in this introduction and as this volume will show, verse drama can make the most of both verse and drama. Verse drama, which is not a play that *happens* to be written in verse, but a play that *had* to be written in verse, is an experimental form that makes it necessary to rethink what theatre can do and explores new types of reception for the audiences. The genre is necessarily reflexive – it deconstructs both theatrical and poetic il-

lusion, and in doing so, it is critical of dramatic and linguistic modes, but also of national and aesthetic norms.

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¹ While Aleks Sierz stated that Harrison's *Fram* proved that "verse plays are among the best ways of driving audiences to narcolepsy" (132), Alfred Hickling went as far as to say that the use of blank verse "bore[d him] senseless."

² This idea is taken from Dan Rebellato and Nicholas Holden's call for papers for a one-day conference entitled "From Stage to Page: The Material text in Contemporary Playwriting" which was scheduled at The Royal Court Theatre on Friday 20 July 2020. The conference organisers intended to show that the page had made a huge come-back on stage in the last couple of years, but the conference was cancelled due to COVID-19.

