

Collection COUP DE THÉÂTRE

**The Renewal of the Crime Play on the  
Contemporary Anglophone Stage**

*Le Renouvellement du genre policier sur la  
scène contemporaine anglophone*

Textes réunis par Susan Blattès et Aloysia Rousseau (RADAC)  
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## Avant-propos

**Coup de Théâtre** ! notre bien nommée revue se devait de rendre hommage au genre policier, ses bouleversements, rebondissements, et coups de théâtre. C'est chose faite dans ce 32<sup>ème</sup> numéro : **Le Renouvellement du genre policier sur la scène anglophone contemporaine.**

D'*Œdipe Roi* à *Richard III*, de la *Commedia del arte* à *The Importance of Being Earnest*, et autres *Comedy of Errors*, le théâtre s'est toujours écrit sur le mode de l'intrigue et de la quête, jamais loin de l'enquête. Depuis la fin du 20<sup>ème</sup> siècle le théâtre anglophone n'a eu de cesse que de brouiller les pistes conventionnelles (exposition, action, résolution), lever l'ancrage référentiel (causalité, finalité, dénouement), et rompre les amarres du sens. Et pourtant de nombreux indices dans l'écriture dramatique contemporaine révèlent la présence d'empreintes appartenant au genre policier, polar, thriller, roman ou film de série noire, qu'il s'agisse d'estampiller une société en crise, d'épingler des personnages aux mobiles douteux, ou de disséquer un monde déséquilibré.

Merci aux chercheurs qui ont mené cette investigation afin de dévoiler les dessous sombres ou ludiques— dessous cachés ou au contraire exhibés des textes de Pinter, Stoppard ou Sam Shepard, pour ne citer que quelques auteurs évoqués dans ce volume qui réserve bien d'autres révélations. Je voudrais remercier les commissaires chargées de la livraison n° 32, Aloysia Rousseau – à l'origine de ce dossier palpitant – ainsi que notre Présidente Susan Blattes pour leur investigation minutieuse du **renouvellement du genre policier sur la scène anglophone contemporaine.**

Reprenons cette enquête préliminaire en forme d'avant-propos avec une vérification d'identité de **Coup de Théâtre** : l'un des signes particuliers de notre revue est de briser les frontières et de jouer 'les affranchis', lorsque le théâtre s'associe avec d'autres genres. Mise à l'épreuve de la scène théâtrale sur les écrans cinéma et digitaux dans le précédent numéro : **A vos écrans ! La scène anglophone en 2D ;**

interrogatoires croisés entre le théâtre, l'art poétique et le pictural, l'histoire et le politique (n° 27 : **le transfert vers le texte théâtral**) ; confrontation avec la scène musicale (n° 25 : **le Musical : 'stage and screen', théâtre et cinéma**) ; auscultation des **rythmes du corps** dans le n° 23. On l'aura compris, **Coup de Théâtre** aime aborder le théâtre par la marge, le clamant haut et fort dès 1982 dans son 2<sup>ème</sup> numéro intitulé 'Marginalités'.

Revenir sur les débuts de **Coup de Théâtre** n'est pas fortuit. Ce numéro est sorti de presse en 2018, année marquant les 40 ans de notre société savante. Pour célébrer cet anniversaire, RADAC organise à Paris les 11 et 12 octobre un colloque international qui, à l'instar de **Coup de Théâtre**, s'inscrit sous le sceau de l'ouverture : celle du Théâtre anglophone contemporain sur l'Europe. Le Colloque *Crossing Borders : Présences et circulations du théâtre contemporain de langue anglaise en Europe* sera accueilli à la Maison des Sciences et de l'Homme de St Denis-Paris. Organisé par RADAC, l'Université Paris 13, l'Université Lyon 2 et Grenoble Université-Alpes, ce colloque réunira des chercheur.es allemand.es, anglais.es, espagnol.es, français.es, grec.ques, italien.nes, maltais.es, serbes, monténégrin.es et tchèques autour de la réception, de la diffusion et de la traduction du théâtre anglophone contemporain. Des tables rondes réuniront des traducteur.trices et des metteur.es en scène de ces divers pays. Le colloque *Crossing Borders* posera les jalons du grand projet entrepris par RADAC en vue de la création d'un réseau européen de chercheurs autour du théâtre anglophone contemporain. Je remercie le bureau de RADAC pour son engagement quasi-quotidien à la préparation de cet événement et tout particulièrement Agathe Torti-Alcayaga et Virginie Roche-Tiengo qui veillent à la réception du Colloque à Paris. Damien Giraud nous quitte pour d'autres missions et je souhaite le remercier chaleureusement pour son immense investissement, notamment dans la gestion de notre site (Radac.fr) et pour ses suggestions innovantes. Je félicite les nouveaux membres de notre bureau, Cyrielle Garson (Université d'Avignon) et Claire Hélie (Université de Lille), élues aux postes de webmestre et de secrétaire. Grâce à Cyrielle et Claire, RADAC s'exprime également sur les réseaux sociaux.

Je tiens ici à saluer tous les membres de notre société qui contribuent, de près ou de loin, au rayonnement de notre société. Continuez à nous proposer des thèmes de colloque ou d'étude pour **Coup de Théâtre**.

Christine Kiehl

Vice-présidente de RADAC



## Introduction

The expression “crime play” immediately brings to mind the formulaic *whodunit* in which a number of potential criminals are gathered in a drawing room waiting for the cunning sleuth to solve the mystery and unmask the murderer. The overwhelming success of Agatha Christie’s *The Mousetrap* – which opened at the Theatre Royal in Nottingham in 1952 before being transferred to the Ambassadors and St Martin’s Theatre in London where it is still performed today, making it the world’s longest running play – shows the enduring popularity of this highly codified genre. But is this traditional form of detective drama – with its plot revolving solely around the question “who has done it?” and the play ending with that question necessarily being answered – the only kind of crime play that can be identified in contemporary Anglophone theatre? The answer is of course no, as the wide diversity of plays studied in this issue of *Coup de Théâtre* exemplifies.

Apart from Beatrix Hesse’s seminal book, *The English Crime Play in the Twentieth Century*, published in 2015, studies of the crime genre tend to leave the theatre out completely, focusing on crime novels, films and television series, as though crime plays did not even exist. The articles collected in this volume attempt to address this gap in theatre and performance studies by showing how a number of playwrights and theatre companies have departed from the rigid and obsolete form of the drawing-room thriller to offer new forms of crime plays that both celebrate and subvert the genre. From Tennessee Williams’s 1958 play, *Suddenly Last Summer*, to Word for Word’s 2016 adaptation of *All Aunt Hagar’s Children*, the plays tackled in this volume show how playwrights and theatre companies have set out to renew the genre, blurring obsolete dichotomies and more particularly erasing the distinction between high and low culture.

Since the popularity of crime fiction took it from the page to the stage and into cinema and TV, it is not surprising that different types of adaptation figure prominently in the renewal of the crime play. Beatrix Hesse, author of *The English Crime Play in the Twentieth Century*,

discusses the complex relationship a contemporary crime play may have with the earlier work(s) it is adapting. Her article “Recycling the Classics: *The Witness for the Prosecution* (2016)” compares the 2016 TV mini-series to Agatha Christie’s original short story “Witness for the prosecution” (1925) and stage play (1953), briefly evoking other TV versions and, of course, the famous Billy Wilder film from 1957. Adaptation in itself poses a threat to certain generic conventions since, after witnessing multiple versions of the same story, the element of surprise at the end can hardly be expected to function. This 2016 production goes further in breaching generic conventions by dispensing with the conventional poetic justice of the ending. Not only is the murderer found not guilty, but an innocent woman is hanged for the crime! Deprived of the conventional attributes of the classic crime drama, Hesse shows how new versions use other means to interest audiences. In the case of the 2016 adaptation of *The Witness for the Prosecution*, this involves a double strategy. On the one hand, it appeals to the audience’s enthusiasm for period drama (seen in the success of *Downton Abbey*, for example), and makes full use of 1920’s costumes and sets. On the other hand, it offers a more contemporary slant on social and class differences, while featuring scenes (a dead body and sex) which could not have been shown in earlier periods on the stage or screen. Deliberately distancing itself from earlier adaptations in some ways, at the same time as it acknowledges their impact in the case of the Billy Wilder film, this production nevertheless includes a number of theatrical sequences and thus maintains a link with the story’s previous incarnations.

Another example of how adaptation can function within the crime play genre can be seen in Graham Saunders’ article devoted to the Harold Pinter screenplay for Kenneth Branagh’s remake of *Sleuth*, the 1971 film which was itself based on Anthony Schaffer’s 1970 stage play. “‘His Last Bow’: Harold Pinter’s Genre Disobedience in *Sleuth* (2007)” thus proposes comparison with both the earlier film and original stage play to show how the crime genre is constantly being renewed. While a prolific adapter into film of other writers, principally novelists, *Sleuth* is unusual because it represents the only example of

Pinter adapting a play source, with the exception of his unproduced screenplay of Shakespeare's *King Lear* in 2001. Saunders points out that "the visceral threat of the thriller – the pursuit and murder of victims for instance" is present in many of Pinter's plays as are scenes of cross-interrogation. Pinter's novelist in *Sleuth* is a writer of thrillers not detective novels. Saunders notes how the "radically uncertain" world of the thriller reinforces the sense of threat. This screenplay constitutes what Saunders calls "a destabilization of the rules of the genre", providing ironic intertextual doublings. It has therefore, along with other contemporary dramatists' responses towards crime and thriller genres, taken a turn towards postmodernism. Ultimately, both spectators and critics are positioned as detectives in the hunt to decode meanings for the puzzles they have been set.

There are other crime-play adaptations which are not based on films or plays but on works which started out as novels or short stories. Amélie Moisy analyses the 2016 Word for Word Company's adaptation for the stage of Edward P. Jones' 2006 short story "All Aunt Hagar's Children". This time, the adaptation seems designed not to undermine or subvert the perspective of the earlier text, but to reinforce elements of the *film noir* which were already present in the story. These features have been listed by the director of the production of *All Aunt Hagar's Children*. If the author of the story acknowledges his debt to this particular film genre, Moisy emphasises the way the stage production goes beyond the plot, character and setting typical of *film noir* to use specifically theatrical means to enhance the atmosphere of the genre. The use of lighting, costumes and certain types of music along with the movement and gesture of the actors all contribute to increasing the suspense. This is not, however, a simple reconstruction on stage of the aesthetics of *film noir*. Moisy demonstrates that the Word for Word company also manages to give a new perspective to hard-boiled fiction by giving space to female characters and domestic scenes.

Cécile Marshall also looks at an adaptation for the stage of a work of fiction. *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* was adapted in 2012 for the National Theatre by playwright Simon Ste-

phens from Mark Haddon's best-selling 2003 novel. She notes that the story explicitly presents itself as part of the British tradition of detective fiction by including in its title a quotation from one of Sherlock Holmes' stories. Marshall shows how the stage adaptation leads the audience into an "intertextual game of hide-and-seek". Simon Stephens's stage adaptation omits most of the explicit references to Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, "thus ascribing an active interpretative role (that of the literary detective) to the audience". She also notes how the stage version allows the audience to experience directly both the protagonist's confusion and the limits of language as the stage "becomes submerged with stroboscopic lights and an accumulation of sounds and spoken words". The theatrical medium also enables the audience to experience different spaces and actions simultaneously. The entertainment promised by the detective genre is subverted and replaced by a postmodernist game of literary borrowings; the *whodunit* is solved halfway through the play, but Marshall argues that there is more to it than that and suggests that *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* turns postmodernist playfulness into a social act.

Julie Valero tackles another type of adaptation in "*Newyorkland* (2011) : la scène, espace de recyclage médiatique du genre policier". The Temporary Distortion Company creates work in which visual art, theatre, cinema and music overlap in what has been named "remediation". Valero focuses on *Newyorkland* which was inspired by the 1971 police thriller *The French Connection*. *Newyorkland* also includes echoes from TV police drama and real-life crime stories, further emphasising how the representation of crime, seen from many different angles, is omnipresent on both screens and stages.

Although scholars have already identified numerous subgenres within the *whodunit* genre, it would appear that playwrights continue to invent new ones, taking the *whodunit* in many different directions, thereby testifying to its vitality and adaptability. Four articles provide evidence of the crime play's constant evolution.

In "*Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) : Variations sur un *whodunit* médicalisé" Thierry Dubost shows how Tennessee Williams takes all the ingredients of the traditional *whodunit* only to create something

rather different in this 1958 play. There is a crime with an enigma attached to it, many clues and much suspense. The detective figure, although a doctor, not a policeman, approaches the case with the requisite intellectual rigour and uses all the available scientific techniques to get at the truth. There is even a truth serum which acts as a kind of lie detector in order to obtain a confession. However, this is a *whodunit* with a twist because the detective figure in this play does not serve only to find out what happened in the past (who committed the murder), his status as doctor potentially allows him to intervene in order to change the course of future events. In other words, this play shifts from a *whodunit* (focus on the criminal) to the *willhedoit* (focusing on the detective/doctor). In *Suddenly Last Summer*, the elucidation of the circumstances surrounding the death of Sebastian is not confirmed, contrary to what we might expect in a conventional crime play. Dubost demonstrates that Williams uses his detective/doctor not to provide a neat solution to the enigma, but to denounce social hypocrisy.

Caroline Schlenker's contribution also tackles an American playwright whose interest in popular culture in general might explain his use of the *whodunit* format. Her study, entitled "*Suicide in Bb* (1976): le policier revisité par Sam Shepard" focuses on Shepard's experimental play from 1976. This play also takes the basic ingredients of a crime play and combines them with elements which are normally not present in the genre to produce something completely different. Two detectives come to investigate what seems to be the murder of a musician. They are dressed as we might expect detectives to be dressed in a *film noir*. Very quickly however, the spectator realises that discovering who has committed the crime will not be a straightforward procedure. The play repeatedly requires the spectators to reconsider what has happened and what is happening. The crime scene serves as a space for improvisation and experimentation in terms of music, language and gesture. The murder is re-enacted several times with variations, roles are exchanged and the detectives seem more interested in playing at being detectives rather than solving a crime. Has a crime actually been committed? The introduction of "performance" and metatheatricity into a crime play suggests that subverting the rigid codes of

the conventional *whodunit* is a way for Shepard to put to the test the conventional form and structure of drama in general.

The articles in this volume are not only concerned with how the *whodunit* itself has evolved into different subgenres. Vicki Hoskins discusses the influence of one particular variety of crime writing, “true crime”, on a completely different genre, the musical, in “Death is the Wages of Sin: Murder and the True Crime Musical”. Instead of arguing that we are witnessing the birth of another subgenre within the *whodunit*, Hoskins suggests that the “true crime musical” constitutes a new addition to the musical genre, in other words crime writing is extending its influence to reach other theatrical genres. Although it may seem an unlikely combination, since both genres have their own codes and conventions, she demonstrates how this subgenre has emerged and provides two case-studies to prove her point. *Bonnie and Clyde* (2011) and *Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story* (2005) are both “true crime musicals” and Hoskins explains how each of them approached the task of reconciling the two sets of conventions and audience expectations. While *Bonnie and Clyde* made some concessions to the expectations of musical theatre audiences by encouraging them to feel sympathy for the protagonists (rather than their victims), this musical seems to have alienated audiences with its uncompromising display of violence. She notes how disturbing blood-stained bodies can be on stage. *Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story* on the other hand, kept the actual murder off-stage and used violence in a more stylized way. This musical fared better at the box-office. Hoskins also raises the question of the most effective way to market such shows. In the UK, *Thrill Me: The Leopold & Loeb Story* was marketed not as a “true crime musical” but as a “musical thriller”. This reinforces the idea present throughout this volume of the adaptability of the crime genre with audiences prepared to accept any number of variations of the “thriller”, contrary to audiences of the musical genre who may not yet be quite ready for such a change.

If marrying musical theatre and true crime can already be seen as something of a challenge, in the final article of this section, Cyrielle Garson, introduces a third element into the equation, “verbatim

theatre”, in “Playing the Truth Game “Verbatim”: from Tribunal Plays to Experimental Crime Plays on the Contemporary British Stage”. There may be obvious affinities between the crime play and verbatim theatre in terms of subject matter, but verbatim plays approach their material from a different angle. The first play studied by Garson, Tricycle Theatre’s tribunal piece *The Colour of Justice* (1999), has clear parallels with the “courtroom drama”, one of the subgenres of the crime play according to Beatrix Hesse. Garson comments on the inherent theatricality of the legal system which lends itself to a stage production. Furthermore both the courtroom drama and the verbatim play pursue a kind of documentary realism. However, in verbatim drama suspense is not really the main objective since the audience is usually aware of the outcome of these high-profile cases. It is in the second case-study, devoted to Alecky Blythe and Adam Cork’s verbatim work *London Road* (2011) that the musical dimension intervenes. Garson describes the problems of welding three types of play into an aesthetic whole: the musical, the crime play and the verbatim play. Yet, *London Road* proved to be very successful, despite some reservations appearing in the press about the project. Once again, faced with a hybrid theatrical form, conventional labels seem inadequate. If the label “thriller” seems the most apt, Garson insists on the fact that verbatim plays contribute to redefining what the crime play is in terms of its thematic, aesthetic and formal conventions. Furthermore she contends that works like *London Road* have “radically altered the landscape of British new writing more broadly”.

In the last section of this volume, Jean Berton, James Dalrymple, Déborah Prudhon and Jean du Verger focus on liminal works that are characterized by their generic heterogeneity. In between homage and subversion, the plays and serial drama studied by these authors both celebrate and reinvigorate the crime play – be it the British *whodunit* or American hardboiled fiction – playing with the rigid conventions of the genre.

In his article entitled “*Dark Road* (2013), tragédie écossaise du doute”, Jean Berton shows how Ian Rankin and Mark Thomson’s play belongs to no clear-cut category, being both a tragedy and a thrill-

ler as well as offering a commentary on Scottish society. As such, the spectator could be described as a detective whose hermeneutical quest consists in trying to identify the genre of the play, always, however, failing to do so. It is, as we are reminded by Berton, for the reader and audience member to decide how to interpret the play.

James Dalrymple also points out the “attentive detective work” expected from the viewer, a typical characteristic of the classic *who-dunit*, in his article devoted to the 1986 BBC television serial *The Singing Detective*. The multitalented author Dennis Potter does not, however, content himself with paying homage to the classic detective story. “The Singing Detective” also borrows from hardboiled fiction – as the main protagonist’s name, none other than Philip Marlow, exemplifies – and the Hollywood musical. Dalrymple shows how the serial drama deconstructs these lowbrow genres, blurring the boundary between high and low culture as is seen, for example, in the many references to psychoanalysis. In between theatre and cinema, the *who-dunit* and pulp fiction, *The Singing Detective* cannot be easily categorized and can be deemed both entertaining and thought-provoking.

The figure of the spectator-detective is once again the focus of Déborah Prudhon’s article yet he is in fact no longer only a spectator. As Prudhon demonstrates in her article devoted to Punchdrunk’s 2003 show *Sleep No More* – a fusion of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and Alfred Hitchcock’s *Rebecca* and *Vertigo* – the company invests the notion of spectator-detective with a new meaning as the immersive spectator becomes a literal, rather than metaphorical investigator who meanders from room to room searching for clues. With its musical score and lighting effects borrowed from Hitchcock’s or David Lynch’s movies, *Sleep No More* adopts a typical *film noir* and neo-*noir* aesthetic yet also subverts the genre by replacing the stock character of the lonely hardboiled investigator with a community of detectives. As we are reminded by Prudhon, this community in fact outlasts the performance as fans keep looking – but seldom find – answers to *Sleep No More*’s many mysteries on the fan blogs devoted to the show.

There are no answers given either in Tom Stoppard’s 1972 play *Jumpers* whose aim rather seems to be to disorientate the audience,

as demonstrated by Jean du Verger in his close analysis of the play. Generic heterogeneity reaches a peak in this play which du Verger describes as a “house of mirrors” making the reader-spectator dizzy with its metaphysical and psychological references. As such, *Jumpers* both pays tribute to and subverts the crime play, constantly playing with the codes of the genre and inviting the reader-spectator to decipher the many intratextual and intertextual references. At the end of his article, du Verger analyses the main protagonist’s naked body as a textual metaphor. Dotty’s body is indeed offered to the audience’s gaze but the character’s psyche is still unreachable in the same way that Stoppard’s play is a typical *whodunit*... and much more than that, as are all the plays studied in this volume.

Susan Blattès and Aloysia Rousseau

