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TITOLO DELLA TESI DI DOTTORATO

A Map of the World

The 4-Way Street of British Political Theatre 1968-1985

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Abstract

This thesis will focus on four case studies in the landscape of British political theatre between 1968 and 1985. These two years are milestones in more than one way: 1968 marks the peak of the students' protest all around Europe, and the end of the Lord Chamberlain's censorship of the theatre in Great Britain; 1985 records the defeat of the miners' strike and the definitive triumph of Thatcherism. This study considers the work of one company, CAST, and three authors, David Edgar, Caryl Churchill and Howard Barker. In Chapter One, CAST's history is reconstructed from original documents from the East London Theatre Archive and the Arts Council of Great Britain Archive. The company's history has been divided into two periods: the first one from 1965 to 1975, in which the company remained non-professional and the artistic bases of the company were laid, and a second one, from 1976 to 1985, during which the company was the recipient of an ACGB subsidy and was therefore allowed to become full time. In Chapter Two the first paragraphs have been devoted to a general assessment of the playwrights of the post-1968 generation. I have then focused on Edgar and examined three of his plays: *Dick Deterred* as an example of Shakespearean parody applied to contemporary politics; *Destiny* for its long-lasting relevance as an analysis of the growing influence of a fascist ideology on the working class; *Our Own People* for having been written for a small company, Pirate Jenny, and for its derivative relationship with *Destiny*. Chapter Three opens with an overview of women's presence in theatre in general and in playwriting in particular during the period in question. I have then focused on three of Churchill's early plays. *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* has been particularly examined as an early example of Churchill's use of dystopia in order to make powerful political statements; *Vinegar Tom* has been singled out for dealing with witchcraft – a central theme in feminist re-thinking of social history – and for being the result of a close collaboration with the Monstrous Regiment company; *The After-Dinner Joke* has been the subject of a close scrutiny as regards the strategies of humour employed: a certain kinship with Brecht's *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* is also touched upon. In Chapter Four I have dealt with three of Barker's early plays. *One Afternoon on the 63rd Level of the North Face of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great* is an effective depiction of life in a factory, chronologically dislocated in ancient Egypt; its relationship with two of Brecht's poems is discussed. According to Barker, *Cheek* was written in reaction to Bond's portrayal of working-class life in *Saved*: this relationship is therefore discussed. *A Passion in Six Days* is the last of Barker's plays with a direct connection with British contemporary political reality: in staging a Labour Party annual conference, it stresses Barker's view on the crisis of socialism in the UK. The latter play is also examined as a prelude to Barker's Theatre of Catastrophe. In the Conclusion I have briefly assessed the creative production of the four subjects in connection to Britain's muted political situation from the second half of the 1980s onwards. Barker has completely severed any link with political theatre. Ronald Muldoon and Claire Burnley have for twenty years run the Hackney Empire, a theatre in the East End of London, proving that socialist ideas and enterprising spirit are not

incompatible. Caryl Churchill has established herself as the most important British living playwright, showing an increasing experimental attitude. David Edgar has remained faithful to his political commitment; his latest play, *Trying It On*, is briefly reviewed.

Introduction

The Sunday Times of 11 July 1976 saluted the imminent premiere of Howard Brenton's *Weapons of Happiness* at the Lyttleton Theatre with a preview by John Peter titled "Meet the Wild Bunch". The event was truly a memorable one, since *Weapons of Happiness* was the first newly-written play staged in the complex of the National Theatre. The title of the article, with the reference to Sam Peckinpah's masterpiece, made explicit a few things: that Brenton was not a one-off, but could be considered to be part of a larger group of playwrights; that these authors were perceived as outsiders and a not entirely welcome novelty; that the establishment, both political and theatrical, which *The Times* in a way represented (Bull 1994, 63), was trying to come to terms with those playwrights who, after having been for years restricted to the theatrical fringe, were reaching London's 'institutional' theatres. This access to larger stages and audiences proved both that these authors were actually willing to test themselves in a new, unfamiliar environment, and that their theatrical worth was starting to be recognized outside the circuit of alternative theatre. Whether this group of playwrights constituted a movement or a school was debatable then, and will be discussed in the course of this thesis; they had in common a variously expressed belief in a socialist future, and an experimental attitude that distanced them from the traditional approach of other politically committed authors such as Arnold Wesker, just to mention one emblematic name. Elizabeth Swain, in her essay *David Edgar Playwright and Politician* (1986) mentions a few members of this "wild bunch", besides Edgar: Edward Bond, David Hare, Steven Poliakoff, Howard Barker, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, Barrie Keeffe. This is a very partial list, as at least Snoo Wilson, Trevor Griffiths and John McGrath should be included. It is even more important to point out that the presence of just one woman, Caryl Churchill, proved how difficult it was for women playwrights to get recognition, even by other women. Keeping just to the best-known names, Pam Gems, Michelene Wandor and Olwen Wymark should not be omitted, as their works gained wide attention and contributed to bringing feminism and identity politics into the spotlight. Another noteworthy point is that the progress of the above authors, male and female, was made possible by a flourishing, from the late 1960s onwards, of a crop of independent companies, some of them operating just for some months and others for a score of years, that were eager to stage and tour new plays. Behind this theatrical phenomenon there was not only the cultural climate of those years, but also the financial intervention of the Arts Council, a state organization aimed at distributing financial aid to various artistic forms, theatre included. In fact, the Arts Council was the first to acknowledge that something new was going on in the theatre, as asserted by its Chairman Arnold Goodman in the final report for the financial year 1969/70: "We had, rightly or wrongly, heard that a group of youngsters around the country had some new ideas and the rumour grew with disturbing persistence. Reverberations came from arts laboratories in London and nearby seaside resorts, from towns rarely associated

with artistic explosions”. (Quoted in Megson 2011, 64) Following this early acknowledgment, the Arts Council started to pay attention to this theatrical ferment, and, from the late 1960s to the end of the 1970s, increasingly supported the idea that drama should reach wider audiences, outside the established theatrical circuits. In dealing with the works of the above authors, it will be stressed how fruitful was their collaboration with independent companies, devoting also some space to the intricacies of the Arts Council’s system of assessing and financing.

Everything started in 1968. All through Europe and the United States, the opposition to the Vietnam war acted as a catalyst of the youth’s dissatisfaction with the status quo, starting movements that had a long-lasting effect on political and social life. Great Britain was no exception and, even if the protests did not reach the same momentum as in France, they nonetheless made 1968 a watershed year. Catherine Itzin opened her seminal *Stages in the Revolution* (1980) asserting how much this year changed the lives of many people:

1968 was a historic year which politicized a lot of people. Rarely can one year be singled out as an isolated turning point, but in the case of 1968 so many events coincided on a global scale that it clearly marked the end of an era in a historically unprecedented fashion, and the beginning of a period of equally unprecedented political consciousness and activism. People had 'never had it so good' (as Macmillan's election slogan had put it in 1959), and they wouldn't again. (Itzin 1980, 1)

1968 marked a milestone also for British theatre, as in September the Lord Chamberlain’s control on new plays came to an end. Even if politics were not the main preoccupation of the censors, especially in the last years of their activity, yet the end of censorship made life easier also for political authors. As Edgar put it: “The most obviously irksome manifestation of censorship applied to sex [...] but political censorship was also involved and the very bureaucracy of script approval (which took several weeks) effectively pre-empted topical or improvised work”. (Edgar 1988, 24-25)

At this point, it is useful to make an attempt at defining the meaning I attribute to the adjective “political” in the context of this study. The term has been applied to such different subjects as to make a univocal definition quite difficult. Perhaps it is more fruitful to delimit a range of possibilities. On the one end we have G.B. Shaw, according to whom the adjective ‘political’ applies to a playwright whose goal is “to induce people to vote on the progressive side at the next county council elections”. (quoted in Edgar 1988, 163) This definition has the merit of restricting the scope excluding, for instance, authors such as Tom Stoppard or, going back in years, Noël Coward who overtly displayed their political opinion in their plays with the opposite aim, that is inducing people to vote on the conservative side; yet it is obviously too vague, while also presenting the difficulty that many of the ‘political’ playwrights did not consider representative democracy the main way to achieve radical social changes. On the opposite end there is the position

expressed by Margaretta D'Arcy in a meeting among socialist playwrights¹ published in *Theatre Quarterly* n. 6:

Let me make it quite clear that when I talk about 'political' writers and groups, I intend this in a narrow sense of groups and individuals within groups, who claim an overt political purpose for their theatre work. [A] *political* group is one that has a definite *political plan*,² which, if followed out, as sure as night follows day, will bring about the overthrow of capitalism. (D'Arcy 1977, 48)

Over-optimistic and slightly messianic undertones apart, this statement suggests that, to be called political, a playwright needs to pursue the revolution as his only goal, and to know how to do it. There are a few difficulties in this statement: it is left unsaid what this plan should be and who should provide it – in the same debate John Arden points at the Workers Revolutionary Party, a small Trotskyist party, as the possible source of a political line. D'Arcy and Arden seemed not to have gained much sympathy in the group of playwrights taking part in the debate: for instance, D'Arcy's opinion that a play about contraception is educational and not political (Ibid.) did not trigger any positive reaction by the other participants. Summing up, neither one of the two positions – the 'Fabian' and the revolutionary – would have been wholeheartedly embraced by the majority of the group, nor, on the other hand, would have been completely dismissed, especially considering the development of the political situation through the years. Even though the triumph of socialism through parliamentary means was considered, to say the least, unlikely, yet the electoral system and the Labour Party are looming presences – one could call them the Stone Guests, thinking of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* – in many of the plays of these authors. To name a few: Edgar's *Destiny* has as its backdrop a by-election, the result of which is a central issue; the Stalinist revolution in Brenton's dystopian *Thirteenth Night* is started by a Labour electoral victory; a few of Barker's plays have – mostly disreputable – Labour politicians in them, and in *A Passion in Six Days* also the technicalities of boundary changes between constituencies are mentioned. Moreover, Edgar showed a substantial acceptance of the parliamentary way by entering the Labour Party in 1981.³ (Swain 1986, 18) Yet, while most playwrights would have theoretically embraced a revolutionary position, a healthy dose of scepticism in actual political organizations left-of-Labour was a common feature among them, as can be seen in the character of Anna in Edgar's *Wreckers*, the confused squatters – who believe themselves revolutionaries – in Brenton's *Magnificence* and the various caricatures of extreme-left students in CAST's works. It seems therefore productive to assign to the label of 'political playwright' the widest possible sense, that is theatrical authors who

¹ The symposium was held in July 1976 and the debate was published in *Theatre Quarterly* 24, 6 Winter 1976-77 p. 35-78 with the title "Playwriting for the Seventies: Old Theatres, New Audiences, and the Politics of Revolution". The participants were John Arden, Bruce Birchall, Caryl Churchill, Margaretta D'Arcy, David Edgar, Pam Gems, Steve Gooch, Malcolm Griffiths, David Halliwell, Roger Howard, Roy Kift, Michelene Wandor, Arnold Wesker and Olwen Wymark.

² Emphases in the original.

³ In his autobiographical play *Trying It On* Edgar says that he joined the Labour Party in the 1980s (Edgar 2018, 192); he does not mention an end of his membership.

pursued through their works a fairer society based on equalitarian and socialist principles, without excluding any means to achieve it.

It comes as a consequence of all the above reasoning, that it would be limiting to consider this generation of playwrights just in terms of traditional politics: they were not just progressives or socialists or communists, since they variously felt the influence of all those movements that challenged the basic assumption of Marxism, that socializing the means of productions was enough to change human life for the better.⁴ The political views of these authors were charged with the utopian aspirations of May 1968, expressed in the slogan: “Soyez realistes, demandez l’impossible – be realistic: demand the impossible”. In many ways the generation of 1968 was moved by a Utopian impulse, both in the theatre and in all the other manifestations of social life. The title of this thesis, *A Map of the World* – which is also the title of a play by David Hare, staged in 1983 – is an acknowledgement of this utopian drive: it is a quotation from an essay by Oscar Wilde, *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*, in which the positive value of utopian thinking is explicitly affirmed:

Is this Utopian? A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias. (Oscar Wilde 2007, 247)

The last sentence is the key to the interpretation of the whole quotation: Utopia is not just daydreaming or wishful thinking, but the capacity to imagine, and therefore to design a better future. For all its faults – Margaret Thatcher and other Tories were vocal in blaming every possible social ill on the libertarian attitude of the 1960s (Edgar 1988, 94) – the longest living legacy of 1968 is having given to a large number of people, especially young, the feeling that personal, social and political situations could be modified.

This thesis focuses on four authors from the generation of 1968. Restricting the focus to a small number of authors has been necessary since this study is not meant as a general overview of the period, but as an in-depth analysis of theatrical aspects previously unexplored or not studied enough. At the same time, this sample of authors has been chosen with the aim of providing, among them, a comprehensive appraisal, both theatrical and political, of the period that went from the dreams of 1968 to the brusque awakening of Thatcher’s years. The sub-title refers to the title of Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young’s album *4 Way Street*: recorded live in 1970 and released in 1971, it is not just one of the best known and longest-selling pop-rock records of all times, but also a document of a period in which social

⁴ This challenge to Marxism was presented in the theatre as early as 1958 by Ada Kahn, a character in Wesker’s *Chicken Soup with Barley*, when she confronted her mother’s lasting faith in communism: “It only seemed a crime to you that a man spent all his working hours in front of a machine because he did not own the machine. Heavens! The glory of owing a machine”. (Wesker 1971, 34) The failure of Ada and Dave’s experiment with life in the country in *I’m Talking About Jerusalem* (1960) shows that the author left the question open.

and political causes were widely discussed and perhaps even fashionable. Songs such as *Ohio*, *Chicago* – both mentioned in the chapter about David Edgar – and *Southern Man* brought to the general public issues otherwise relegated to the attention of a minority of militants, such as the repression of political dissent and the endemic presence of racism in the south of the United States. It struck me that the image of a four-way street could be an effective metaphor for the different ways that could be followed in pursuing a fairer society. In fact, the four authors selected are intended to account as comprehensively as possible for all the lanes of this imaginary theatrical road to socialism. The four subjects that are going to be discussed are CAST, David Edgar, Caryl Churchill and Howard Barker.

The acronym CAST – Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre – does not refer to a single author but to a theatrical company active between 1965 and 1985. The choice of including them together with three authors could be problematic, but their peculiarities, both theatrical and political, were so many and manifold as to make them a compelling subject of study. They were indisputably the first (Edgar 1988, 24) of the new wave of theatre groups, and also their longevity – though not a record⁵ – is an eye-catching feature: behind it, there was the constant presence of two of the founding members, Ronald Muldoon and Claire Burnley, who were the moving forces of the company throughout its life. CAST's history is exemplary of the trials and tribulations that independent companies had to face in order to survive; the wide range of people and institutions they clashed with, from Tory MPs and the National Front to the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, attests to their independent and unorthodox political stance. This said, it is surprising to note how little space they are accorded in critical literature. The only studies of any length are the chapters devoted to them by Catherine Itzin in her *Stages in the Revolution* (1980) and by Bill McDonnell in the collective volume *British Theatre Companies 1965-1979* (2017); apart from that, they are accorded some space in *Dreams and Deconstruction* (1980) by Sandy Craig, and mentioned in passing in various studies, such as John Bull's *New British Political Dramatists* (1983). The lack of interest by the critics can be explained bearing in mind that CAST, through their twenty-year history, have published only one play, *Confessions of a Socialist* (1979), signed collectively with the name of the company, even if it is largely to be attributed to Ronald Muldoon. Part of my work has consisted in reconstructing other texts from typed or handwritten stage scripts I have found in the East London Theatre Archive, kept in the University of East London. Their ten years as a subsidized company, from 1976 to 1985, have also left ample traces in the ACGB – Arts Council of Great Britain – archive; the study of these documents have given an opportunity to take a closer look at the inner life both of the company and of the Arts Council. From these different sources it has been possible to build a coherent narrative of the company's history while also exploring their theatrical form. Unlike other companies, CAST did not draw for inspiration on Brecht or contemporary experimental companies, such as the Living Theatre, but on the popular tradition of

⁵ Red Ladder have recently celebrated their fifty years of activity 1968-2018. See <http://www.redladder.co.uk/>

music-hall, in an overt attempt to build a working-class audience. CAST's political position was also peculiar, as it was the expression of libertarian socialism with a strong connection with the American counterculture, and a very creative approach to Marxism; at the same time CAST were overtly and pungently critical of middle-class revolutionaries, especially students, taking revolution to the 'masses'. All in all, CAST can be catalogued under the label of New Left, with a particular emphasis on the influence of rock 'n' roll on their aesthetics and performing style: it could be argued that in their pantheon Lennon was more prominent than Lenin. (McDonnell 2010, 107)

Other alternative companies are dealt with in this study: a substantial space is devoted to Pirate Jenny and Monstrous Regiment in the chapters on David Edgar and Caryl Churchill respectively; Portable Theatre is mentioned for having brought together for collaborative projects some of most important authors of the period; 7:84 is discussed in the context of the contrast between David Edgar and John McGrath; Ed Berman's Inter Action is singled out for being instrumental in bringing identity politics inside the theatre. Other groups are mentioned more cursorily, mostly when dealing with the system of financing by the Arts Council: North West Spanner, Counteract, Joint Stock, Broadside Mobile Workers Theatre, Pip Simmons Theatre Group, Joint Stock, Red Ladder and Belt and Braces. Some of the above-mentioned groups, such as 7:84⁶ and Joint Stock,⁷ have been extensively studied; others were partially neglected. My choice of CAST as a subject of study depended on a series of motives. As regards the actual research, the excellent work of cataloguing by the University of East London of Claire Burnley and Roland Muldoon's archive promised a chance to widen the existing critical literature, even by reconstructing unpublished works. Moreover, the kind collaboration of Dr Bill McDonnell, who was a member of CAST between 1979 and 1982, has given me some direct insight into the life of the company. As for theatrical expression, CAST's referring to typical British youth's sub-cultures such as the Mods and the Teddy Boys made them an interesting bridge between British young proletarians and American counterculture. Furthermore, CAST's anti dogmatic stance stood out as exceptional also in the context of alternative theatre companies. CAST's distinctiveness is better shown by quoting one exemplary case in a play by another company: in Belt and Braces' *England Expects* – the story of an Ulster girl, Maureen, who gains political consciousness working in a factory in London – at one point a professor is introduced on stage, who, speaking with a mock German accent, makes a quite long and tedious lesson on why there is neither inflation nor unemployment in the Soviet Union, making a comparison with capitalism: "In order to maintain hiss rate off profid ze capitaleest can eizer put ub hiss prizes or lay off his verkers".⁸ (Richards 1977, 18) Another character, Lilian,

⁶ See Maria DiCenzo, *The Politics of Alternative Theatre in Britain 1968-1990: the Case of 7:84 (Scotland)*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

⁷ See Rob Ritchie (ed), *The Joint Stock Book, the Making of a Theatre Collective*, London, Methuen, 1987.

⁸ All the spelling mistakes are meant to highlight the German accent of the speaker.

glosses: “[I]n a socialist economy, they don’t produce for profit, they produce for need”. (Ibid.) This apology for the Soviet Union could never have been found in a CAST’s show, as they always distanced themselves from traditional left: see for instance Muldoon’s musing about the Berlin wall in *Confessions of a Socialist*. (CAST 1979, 22) This stance did not make Muldoon and company’s life any easier – as will be seen in their contrasts with the Unity theatre’s management – but kept their works safe from any suspicion of being based upon prefabricated and unilateral views, which was a common, and not unfounded, criticism aimed at alternative companies. Furthermore, the long speech by the Professor was exactly what CAST carefully avoided, rightly fearing that the audience would leave the show and go for a drink: hence the creation of their fast, cabaret-like style. All these considerations made CAST both an exemplary case and a very particular one in the context of alternative theatre, and a worthy subject of study.

The career of David Edgar did not differ much from that of other of his college-educated colleagues: he started soon after leaving University, writing for an agitprop company, the General Will, before making the grade through provincial repertory theatres to the London stages. What distinguishes Edgar from colleagues such as Howard Brenton and David Hare, is that, theatre apart, he has been more directly engaged in politics up to the present day. This has been largely due to the success of *Destiny* (1976), a play on the rise of the National Front in the early 1970s, that gave him the status of an authority in the matter of the British brand of fascism, also for the thorough work of documentation which had preceded the writing of the play. *Destiny* remains a milestone in the history of British political theatre, also for having been broadcast by BBC TV in 1978: according to Itzin, it was “an event regarded by many as one emphatic vindication of the political theatre movement”. (Itzin 1980, 39) It is surprising and somehow worrying that in the intervening forty years *Destiny* has not lost, and perhaps has even increased, its political relevance. The topicality in contemporary Italy of *Destiny* explains my decision to translate it into Italian as part of my thesis: the translation appears in the Appendix. Politically, David Edgar represented an orthodox Marxist view, on the Trotskyist side of Marxism, at least in the early years of his career. (Reinelt 2011, 63) As stated above, in 1981 Edgar joined the Labour Party, thus marking a decisive turn towards an acceptance of parliamentary democracy. As for the other chosen dramas, *Our Own People* is interesting for facing the same issues as *Destiny*, only in a reduced pattern, and for having been written for a small company, Pirate Jenny: in discussing the play I will also make a survey of the company’s life, marking the decisive differences with CAST that made Pirate Jenny’s existence short. *Dick Deterred*’s motive of interest lies in its ingenious treatment of Shakespearean matter in order to satirize contemporary politics: it is a detailed chronicle of the Watergate affair in the frame of Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. Being based upon a literary source, it was open to the danger of being enjoyable only for a minority, a danger that Edgar himself had acknowledged in general terms, not referring in particular to *Dick Deterred*: “The exploitation of literary and theatrical sources [...] renders it inaccessible to those without the dubious advantage of a university education”

(Edgar 1988, 44). This notwithstanding, in discussing *Dick Deterred*, I will try and demonstrate how, ephemeral as the immediate references could be, its political message was intended to be as durable and universal as possible.

The choice of Caryl Churchill among other feminist women playwrights is linked to her having been the first to gain wide recognition as a representative of second-wave feminism, foregrounding in her plays the ‘personal is political’ approach. At present, Caryl Churchill is extensively studied and written about for being arguably the greatest living English playwright, and therefore it seemed valuable to focus on plays which, through the years, have remained on the margins of critical attention, while also stressing their relationship to better-known works and to her more recent productions. Two of the plays I examine were not written for the stage, even if both would be staged in later years: *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* was written for the radio and broadcast by BBC in 1972; *The After-Dinner Joke* was aired by BBC TV in 1978. Both plays were one-offs in Churchill’s early production: *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* was Churchill’s first foray into dystopian territory, and *The After-Dinner Joke* was her first, and the only one so far, openly comic play. In discussing *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* I carefully pointed out how much this play prefigured the dystopian inspiration in many of Churchill’s later works. *The After-Dinner Joke* will be examined at the light of Churchill’s declared intent to take inspiration from Monty Python shows. (Churchill 1990, n.p.) The third play, *Vinegar Tom*, was written for and staged by the feminist company Monstrous Regiment: in juxtaposing the lives of women accused of witchcraft in the seventeenth century and of contemporary women, the play is very much attuned to the spirit of the 1970s. Politically, at the time Churchill described herself as both a socialist and a feminist; since she does not give interviews nowadays, and she has not done so for many years, her current political views are not known. Yet, from her most recent plays it can be surmised that she still is.

Howard Barker’s working-class origin makes of him a case apart. In the early years of his playwriting his political views seemed to come from the combination of a class-conscious upbringing from his shop-steward father, and first-hand experience of life in a working-class neighbourhood, social deviance included. As he famously said to Itzin: “After all, there are more juvenile delinquents than there are Young Socialists”. (quoted in Itzin, 252) Two of the selected plays reflect this dichotomy in Barker’s early career between a socialist instinct and a more complicated reality. *One Afternoon on the 63rd Level of the North Face of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great* is a time-dislocated tale of conflict and betrayal on a building site; *Cheek* is a family drama against the backdrop of a young proletarian’s struggle to avoid work. Barker’s early plays agreed with his then-declared socialist ideas, even if his approach could be defined as more anarchic than socialist. Anyway, Barker’s ‘socialist’ phase is actually a short parenthesis in his overall production, and he has almost disowned it in later years, or at least explained it just in terms of pleasing a middle-class, Royal Court-type audience. (Brown 2011, 27) The third play discussed here, *A Passion in Six Days*, shows

Barker's disillusion with the politics of the Labour Party, while also marking his turn towards his new brand of theatre, that he will label theatre of Catastrophe.

As indicated above, the choice of the authors has been made on the basis of covering as comprehensively as possible the various political positions expressed by the movements on the left of the Labour Party in the post-1968 years which found an expression in the theatrical productions of those years. Summing up, in the general plan of my study CAST stand for counterculture and New Left, Edgar for Marxism of Trotskyist tendency, Churchill for feminism, Barker for instinctive, more than ideological, anarchism. Given that it is not possible to cover all the political nuances of a troubled and fertile period, it is a fairly comprehensive sample.

As for the choice of plays, as already stated, the main criterion has been to focus on plays which have been overlooked, partially or totally, by the critical studies on the period. CAST is a special case, as it was not so much a question of choosing plays, as of reconstructing as many texts as possible from the existing sources; and *Destiny* is the obvious exception. For the rest, the selected works have remained on the margin of critical attention, some of them for discernible reasons: *Our Own People* for being derivative and having marked a sort of regression into the theatrical fringe on the author's part after having reached the mainstream; *Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* for being a radio play on what was considered then a marginal topic; Barker's *Cheek* and *A Passion in Six Days* for the widespread hostility towards Barker's productions by the British critical establishment.

The other works discussed here, *Dick Deterred*, *The After-Dinner Joke* and *One Afternoon on the 63rd Level of the North Face of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great* have the common feature of being unreservedly comic: it is intriguing to note that, because of their humorous nature, they could have been considered second-rate in comparison with 'serious' political plays: this could explain the scant critical attention accorded to them. The success of Dario Fo's *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, staged by Belt and Braces between 1979 and 1981, would shortly make very clear that this prejudice had no reason to exist, and that humour could be an effective political weapon even in the post-1968 climate. As was the case with their political positions, the four subjects under scrutiny followed different models and strategies of humour. As regards CAST, the reference to music-hall was explicit, for instance in the name of the character, Muggins, ever present in their early productions; apart from this very traditional reference, Ronald Muldoon took much of his style from stand-up comedians, and particularly Lenny Bruce. (CAST 1979, vi) David Edgar's *Dick Deterred* is inserted in a time-honoured practice of Shakespearian parody that was rejuvenated by Barbara Garson's *MacBird* (1965). As for Churchill, *The After-Dinner Joke*'s open and declared indebtedness to Monty Python's *Flying Circus* will be the subject of detailed scrutiny. Barker is, again, a case apart: even if a dislocation of time and space is a very traditional device of humour, as it can be also found in Gilbert & Sullivan operettas – see, for instance, *The Mikado* (1885) – yet Barker treats it in a very original way, adding the spice of

his original approach to politics and class struggle. All in all, these plays are meant to provide a brief survey of the use of humour as a political weapon during the period in question.

Chapter 1: CAST

Founded in 1965 by a group of working-class school-leavers (Claire Burnley, David Hatton, Roland Muldoon, Raymond Levene and Red Saunders) CAST – an acronym for Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre – were the first of the new wave of theatre political groups that flourished between the end of the 1960s and the mid-1970s. Their importance, however, does not lie in this hardly disputable fact, nor in their longevity that allowed them to go through arguably the most troubled twenty years (1965-1985) of post-war Great Britain. Building a narrative based mostly on contemporary documents, I intend to fill the critical and historical voids left by the scarcity of published texts and critical literature, while also highlighting how their social origin and their unusual theatrical training resulted in a unique theatrical experience.

In a theatrical milieu almost exclusively composed of middle-class and university-educated troupes and individuals, CAST's working-class background particularly stood out. A whole series of consequences derived from this social peculiarity, the most evident of which was the early start of their activity: while the political interest of many authors and groups was triggered by the events of Paris 1968 – by and large a students' rebellion – CAST's activity was already well underway in the late 1960s and they hardly took notice of the Parisian *événements*. In their *The Trials of Horatio Muggins* (1967) they even anticipated the problems that the coexistence of workers and students in a political movement could produce. Moreover, their first-hand experience of working-class life prevented them from the typical mistake some political groups fell victim to, that is pretending to comprehend issues they knew nothing about. As Clive Barker brilliantly synthesized: "The Alternative theatre in England during the early 1970s had too many examples of groups of students explaining to car workers how the car-workers were being exploited, a subject on which the car workers were experts and the students were not". (quoted in Megson 2012: 60) CAST's sensitivity to the British political climate and, even more, their capacity to foresee the difficulties the political left was going to meet became their trademark. This allowed them, for instance, to focus their attention on the ideological and functional crisis of the Labour Party (*Sam the Man*, 1973) before the authors writing for the 'official' subsidized theatres or TV, such as Trevor Griffiths (*Bill Brand*, 1977) and Howard Brenton (*The Thirteenth Night*, 1981) stressed this issue in their plays.

Following in the footsteps of Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop⁹ in the search of entertaining and at the same time politically effective formulas, CAST

⁹ Joan Littlewood (1914-2002) was an actress and director. Together with her then husband Stuart MacColl, in 1946 she founded the Theatre Workshop, a company devoted to political theatre that would take residence in the Theatre Royal in Stratford, London. According to Michael Billington, who partially reports a Kenneth Tynan's opinion: "They [Theatre Workshop] wiped the puritan

showed an interest in the traditional popular forms such as music hall, circus, pantomime etc., but added to it, one could say, a generational fascination for the pop culture of the 1950s and 1960s, namely rock ‘n roll. Also the unusual theatrical training of CAST’s members, especially in their first line-up – all of them had approached theatre as stage technicians or through night classes – made of them an ensemble ready and keen to learn and experiment with new forms of expression. The result was a theatrical form that dispensed with a written script and was mostly based on improvisation. As Roland Muldoon has recently stated: “Our movement was timed, flexible improvisation governed by the plot”. (Muldoon 2018)

Roland Muldoon and Claire Burnley were ever-present elements: a theatrical pair but also a married couple, they were the driving force that took CAST through their twenty-year history, and beyond. When the Arts Council withdrew CAST’s subsidy in 1985, marking in fact the end of the company as such, Muldoon and Burnley took control of the Hackney Empire, a run-down East End theatre that had served in later years as a Mecca bingo hall. They ran the Hackney Empire for twenty years, making of it the centre of New Variety, a group of stand-up comedians that started as a spin-off from CAST in 1982 (Rees 1992, 74). With the Hackney Empire’s takeover, Muldoon and Burnley offered CAST’s final and most striking paradox: a working-class company whose theatrical expression escaped all classifications, who had performed for two decades in non-theatrical spaces and to non-theatrical audiences, and who finally challenged and beat Thatcherism at its own game, that is entrepreneurial spirit.

1.1 In the Beginning There Was CAST

CAST was the first and for a long time the only avowedly socialist theatre company of the sixties. (Itzin 1980, 12)

In 1967 there was one independent socialist theatre group in Britain: Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre. (Edgar 1988, 24)

[Agit-prop] was a style usually adopted by many left-wing theatre groups, CAST (Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre) being the first of many. (Patterson 2003, 14)

These quotations come from quite different sources and belong to a time range of more than twenty years. The first one is to be found in *Stages of the Revolution* (1980), Catherine Itzin’s seminal study on British political theatre from the mid-1960s to 1979; the second in *The Second Time as Farce* (1988), a collection of articles and essays by British playwright David Edgar; the third in Michael Patterson’s *Strategies of Political Theatre* (2003), a study of British political theatre between 1953 and 1989, focused mainly on the productions of the 1970s and the 1980s. The three authors, albeit from different points of view, unanimously attribute to CAST a leading position, at least chronologically, among the alternative theatre companies of the period. Yet CAST are usually accorded very little space in critical

frown off the popular image of socialist art; and their belief in communal celebration reminds us that, even in the austerity-conscious Forties, there was a hunger for joy”. (Billington 2007, 26)

literature, even in comprehensive and specialized studies. Catherine Itzin's *Stages in the Revolution* is an exception, as she dedicates a whole chapter to this company. Elsewhere, CAST get little more than a few lines, as happens in Edgar's and Patterson's volumes or in the otherwise fundamental *New British Political Dramatists* by John Bull, or no mention at all. The most comprehensive survey of CAST's activity to date has been provided by Bill McDonnell in an article published in November 2010 in *Theatre Notebook* with the title *Jesters to the Revolution*, enlarged by the same author in the third chapter of *British Theatre Companies 1965-79* (2017), a collection edited by John Bull. McDonnell tries to explain this apparent lack of critical interest, calling into cause political reasons:

Despite their longevity, CAST never received the kind of consistent national attention commanded by companies such as 7:84 and the People Show. There were a number of reasons for this, the most critical of which was political: that is to say, the revolutionary and interventionist nature of their performance work. CAST did not perform at, and were not interested in, the kinds of middle-tier venues that attracted national critics. Their venues were by and large union meetings, community halls and public houses, and their performances were for audiences organized by trade unions activists and the revolutionary left. They were also, until 1976, a metropolitan company, who rarely ventured outside London, a fact reflected again in the critical reception of their work. (McDonnell in Bull 2017, 143-44)

In reconstructing CAST's history, McDonnell also offers his own periodization:

CAST's history can be divided into four phases. The first 1965 to 1971, was the highpoint of the company as a feted guerrilla group, mixing experimental and agit-prop forms to produce a distinctive, hybrid aesthetic. The second, 1971 to 1974, was a period of splits and reformations in which, for a while, CAST lost their way, distracted by their counterculture celebrity. Rebirth came in 1975-76 in the form of Arts Council subsidy, and lasted until 1979. That year would mark another watershed, presaging the slow phasing out of touring shows and the incremental and historically important rise of New Variety, which, even before grant aid was cut, took the company in a new direction: one that reached its rich apotheosis in their stewardship of the Hackney Empire, 1986-2005. (Ibid.: 122)

McDonnell focuses on the 1965-79 period in accordance with the volume's title and rationale: his approach has the merit of accounting for and recording the twists, turns and changes of cast (with a small c) that characterized CAST's life in the 1960s and 1970s. It neglects however the years between 1980 and 1985 that threw the seeds of the entrepreneurial, political and artistic adventure of the Hackney Empire takeover. It is also worth pointing out that McDonnell appeared as an actor in some of CAST's post-1979 productions, starting with *From One Strike to Another* (1980). In focusing on 1965-79, he avoided the risk of lacking the necessary detachment in examining a period in which he was part of the show, but he also missed the chance of sharing the insight of first-hand experience. For my part, while basically accepting this perspective, I will put the stress on the granting of the Arts Council's subsidy in 1976 as the biggest watershed in CAST's history, since it allowed the company to turn professional and to give up what the original

group considered an essential feature of their theatrical and political attitude. According to Muldoon: “What the philosophy of the group was, we had to live the contradiction. Which meant we had to work during the day and be a theatre group in the evening”. (quoted in Craig 1978, 18) Professionalization on the one hand put an end to what can be considered the ‘heroic’ phase of CAST as a purely guerrilla troupe,¹⁰ while on the other it introduced a form of discipline, both artistic and administrative, in the running of the company, forcing the Muldoons¹¹ to keep some record of their activity and somehow paving the way for the entrepreneurial activity that would follow.

The company was already active in 1968, when the Lord Chamberlain’s censorship of theatres was abolished. Five of CAST’s productions were staged before or in that year: *John D. Muggins is Dead* (1965), *Mr Oligarchy’s Circus* (1966), *The Trials of Horatio Muggins* (1967), *Muggins Awakening* and *Harold Muggins is a Martyr* (both 1968). One may expect to find copies of at least some of these texts in Lord Chamberlain’s archive (kept in the British Library), but a research in the on-line repertory gives no result. In recalling the years of censorship in his artistic autobiography *Taking on the Empire* (2013), Muldoon has explained this void:

It should be remembered that it was only after 1968 that the medieval Lord Chamberlain lost control over theatre. At one time Watch Committees sat in Variety theatres, making sure the artists didn’t cross the line and depart from their published script. [...] Then improvisation was considered neither desirable nor legal, and was even outlawed. [...] For its part Unity theatre had to be legally registered as a member’s club to allow uncensored political performances to take place. There they had pioneered, among others, Brecht and O’Casey under these restrictions, and were once taken to court for challenging the Lord Chamberlain’s ruling. [...] CAST later broke free from those restrictions, and appeared in unlicensed venues and improvised to our heart’s content. But this was not the norm, and we weren’t normal. (Muldoon 2013, 27)

Even David Edgar quoted CAST as an example of a challenge to obsolete rules: “Some groups, like CAST, had always merrily ignored the Lord Chamberlain, but for most theatre workers his abolition was a welcome release”. (Edgar 1988, 25) CAST ignoring the Lord Chamberlain’s office may appear as a principled opposition, but we should not forget that it depended also, and mostly, on their shows being unscripted, and therefore impossible to be sent for preventive approval in written form. As late as 1979 Roland Muldoon showed some perplexities in reading the printed edition of their only published play *Confessions of a Socialist*: “It doesn’t look so good to us in cold print – it must work in the magic way we tell it”. (Muldoon 1979, vi) Moreover, CAST often staged their plays at venues, such as Unity theatre, that were registered as private clubs and therefore exempted from the obligations of public theatres; also, they frequently performed in spaces, such

¹⁰ On the self-definition as “guerrilla theatre” by CAST see p. 22.

¹¹ Claire Burnley signed her Arts Council correspondence as Claire Muldoon, and so it can be inferred that they were a married couple, even if the marriage has never been openly stated.

as trade unions' meeting halls or pubs' upstairs rooms, that were largely ignored by Lord Chamberlain's officers. In 1991 Muldoon recalled how escaping the attention of the Lord Chamberlain resulted indeed in a means of self-promotion for the company, since it made them well-known in an alternative, i.e. non-strictly theatrical, circuit whose existence they also incepted:

I sometimes forget how important the existence of the Lord Chamberlain was. Pre '68, the office had not been abolished, so the very idea that a theatre group was going to perform a play, that they had not told anybody they had written, meant there were not many places we could perform. In the mid-Sixties, folk clubs were often run by the Communist Party or other left organizations. They heard about us. We became increasingly fashionable. (quoted in Rees 1992, 70)

One should never forget that CAST, all along their artistic life, had strained relations with various kinds of superior 'power', be they the Arts Council of Great Britain or arts patrons such as the Trotskyist International Socialists – IS, later Socialist Workers Party. As a result, CAST conflicted with a wide range of persons, parties and institutions. The granting of the Arts Council's subsidy proved a watershed in this respect, too: in the first decade of their life CAST found themselves at odds with every branch of the British Left, thus firmly affirming their independent political views. Conversely, in their second decade, apart from brushing with the Arts Council officials, they clashed with and were the target of the whole spectrum of the British Right, from the Tories to the National Front. The status of CAST as a state-funded company mightily irritated a range of conservative-leaning people, as McDonnell has recently pointed out: "Complainants would include Tory MPs and town councillors, retired generals and right-wing students and, critically, the right-wing press". (McDonnell in Bull 2017, 137) The basic complaint was, of course, that CAST were doing left-wing propaganda while on the Arts Council pay-roll; even more serious was the recurring accusation of supporting the IRA, because of one play, *The Other Way Round* (1977), which showed the actual consequences on basic human rights of the 1974 and 1976 Prevention of Terrorism Act.¹² The never-ending exchange of letters between the Arts Council officials and right-wing malcontents – including a conservative MP, Teddy Taylor and the Grand Secretary of the Orange Order of Scotland, David Bryce – are interesting documents of the theatrical and political climate of the decade 1976-1985, and will be the subject of close scrutiny in the fourth paragraph of this chapter.

1.2 Rebels with a Cause: CAST's First Decade 1965-75

While CAST's early productions have been scarcely documented in critical literature – the already mentioned *Stages in the Revolution* and Sandy Craig's *Dreams and Deconstructions* (1980) being the only exceptions – and their scripts – if they actually existed – have never been published, we can rely on an abundance

¹² The 1974 Prevention of Terrorism Act, voted in the aftermath of the IRA bombings in Birmingham of the same year, enlarged Police power in matter of searching and detaining people. The 1976 Act strengthened these measures.

of newspaper reports. Many of them are reviews of the various shows of the period. These press cuttings are part of the Hackney Empire Archive that the Muldoons donated to the East London Theatre Archive between 2007 and 2010, and which is now kept at the University of East London (UEL). This archive is the richest source of information regarding Cast's history before 1976, that is before the granting of the ACGB subsidy.

The archive offers a crop of documents among which I found an illuminating handwritten document, unsigned¹³ and undated, but datable to circa 1967, that may be considered as a sort of manifesto of CAST's early activity. It starts with an explanation of the "guerrilla theatre" label:

We define ourselves as a guerrilla theatre, and cannot apply to ourselves any of the labels, amateur, pro, or semi-pro. All non-professional groups have either ambitions which lie in the framework of commercial theatre, or exist solely as pastimes for their participants. [...] CAST works in the theatrical medium as a guerrilla unit, the production of plays and their style of presentation being governed by this. (HE/CAST/MF/1/HW)¹⁴

The "guerrilla" metaphor is then explained at length, and a bit tediously, drawing a parallel between CAST and a guerrilla unit as they both struggle against overwhelming forces – of bourgeois culture, in the case of CAST – and aim at spreading guerrilla warfare by stimulating the formation of new groups. The expansion of the acronym 'CAST' is more interesting, as it goes further in defining the theatrical strategies of the group:

The name Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre is a definition of what the group is. Cartoon is our stream of of [*sic*] short, self-explanatory, limited scenes and the stylised, anti-naturalist, acting form. [...] If a king is portrayed, he is the most typical, most obvious king of all. In guerrilla theatre, playing to rough and tumble, inattentive audiences there is no room for any portrayal of an individual, it is irrelevant anyway. The man at the back of the room, drunk and noisy, must see and hear a king when he is meant to, or the play has failed. Archetypical characters are also the only form in which situations can be expressed effectively in theatrical terms when analysing society, as they are immediately recognisable forms. Slogan refers to the simple easily understood argument and views put across by the plays, another essential for any group wanting to work with non-theatrical audiences. Theatre, in the loosest sense, tells people what to expect. [...] The group must makes [*sic*] use of all other popular communications, the most obvious one being pop music, as it has grown from the working class and still generally is performed by working class artists. (Ibid.)

This basic declaration of intents set the tone for CAST's style all through their history; yet in this early formulation their artistry seems to fall well inside what is commonly labelled as agitprop, that is an overly simplified theatrical form whose

¹³ The Hackney Empire Collection catalogue attributes it to Roland Muldoon.

¹⁴ The documents are classified with the classification appearing on the various folders in the UEL archive (e.g. HE/CAST/MF/1) plus a short denomination characterizing the single document (e.g. HW).

first aim is propagandistic. Muldoon resisted this tag as being somehow demeaning, and did not miss a chance to stress that CAST shows always presented a multifaceted political view and could not be classified as simple propaganda. In fact, as the historian David Caute, who had attended one of their early shows, *Mr Oligarchy's Circus*, proposed, CAST's performative style was hardly classifiable: "A style which was more Brecht than Brecht and more Artaud than Artaud – chalk white make-up, a brash delivery and crude earthy humour". (Caute 1988, 284) As we will see in the following chapters, Brecht's theatre was a standard the political playwrights of the 1960s and 1970s had to reckon with, even when rejecting it. The allusion to "short, self-explanatory, limited scenes and the stylised, anti-naturalist, acting form" appears as an obvious hint at Brecht's dramaturgy. Nevertheless, CAST's avowed purpose to catch the attention of the half-interested drunk man at the back of the room sounds antithetical to the kind of intellectual involvement required by the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*. In fact, Muldoon mentioned Brecht in his artistic autobiography *Taking On the Empire* (2013) among the influences on CAST's style:

We claimed influences from Bertolt Brecht to Marcel Carne's *Les Enfants du Paradis*, rock'n'roll and music hall, silent comedy movies, and of course socialist ideas. This was also the time of Peter Brook's 'Theatre of Cruelty' initiative, and earlier I had been turned on to a cartoon production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi* at Bristol University's drama department. (Muldoon 2013, 18-19)

Muldoon also mentions Brecht in an interview with Susan Croft on 13 November 2004, talking about CAST's early approach to theatre after they joined the Unity theatre: "We were quite intellectually into it and we were reading Bertolt Brecht, and we were reading all the things".¹⁵ The adverb "intellectually" leaves the impression that Brecht was considered somehow a matter of study to be reckoned with when making an attempt at political theatre, more than an influence deeply felt, and that mentioning him was a kind of obligatory homage. This impression is reinforced by a 1977 letter to the Drama Panel, that will be scrutinized later on, in which Brecht's name is used as a negative term of comparison, maintaining that CAST are "not this week's answer to *Time Out's* search for the new Brecht".

Muldoon came back a few times to the various influences on CAST both during the company's life and in later years, with the intent to underline how much CAST's approach was original, and unconnected to any avant-garde experiment. The first of these declarations is to be found in the introduction to *Confessions of a Socialist*, the one and only play-text CAST published during their existence as a company:

We owe our influences to the Catholic church's confessional, rock musicians on stage, music hall and variety and, of course, Lenny Bruce — the Shakespeare of entertainment ... how pretentious can you get. (Muldoon 1979: vi)

¹⁵ <http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/hidden/audio-transcriptions-two/#rolandmuldoon1>

In *Stages of the Revolution* the importance of rock 'n' roll is stressed again, while any influence by Peter Brook is denied, as he embodied the 'official' avant-garde experimentalism:

Peter Brook used to come and say: "Where did you get that style from?". As if I owed him something! And I told him our influences were working class entertainers — and they are. Chuck Berry and Little Richard for instance — they were there — they were really present on stage and they influenced our acting style more than any avant garde experiment. Theatre then was all about sitting down and standing up and walking out of French windows. We were the first rock 'n' roll theatre group. Other groups eventually took their historical references from the Russian revolution and the agitprop of Germany, but we took ours from pop culture. We were a group with a gang ideology. (quoted in Itzin 1980, 14)

In an interview with Roland Rees, published in his 1992 volume *Fringe First*, Muldoon came back to the company's name CAST and illustrated their philosophy, touching upon various influences:

Cartoon that was our style. Archetypical was our philosophy. We were influenced by the archetypicality of Laurel and Hardy, Charlie Chaplin, and the characters in the movie *Les Enfants Du Paradis*. [...] 'Slogan' because we made the language of the plays out of this sort of imagery. 'Theatre' because we made theatre. And CAST because that made us anonymous. For years we pretended we did not have anyone in the group called Roland Muldoon or Red Saunders. Naming the cast would be bourgeois individualism! If you are into archetypicality, you don't need to know the name of the actors! Of course that was stupid. (Quoted in Rees 1992, 69)

The various lists of influences are not entirely consistent with one another and deserve a few comments, as they include different, or even entirely dissimilar individuals and institutions such as the Catholic Church and Lenny Bruce (1925-1966). As for the former, the reference to the Catholic sacrament of confession can be explained as a reference to what Muldoon called "presentationism", that is a very direct, nearly one-to-one, relationship with the audience: "The most important thing CAST did in the history of political theatre was turn to the audience. At the time, we actually invented looking straight in the audience's face and telling them what we were talking about. [...] It's like a three-card trick. Once you get them watching, the magic starts". (Quoted in Itzin, 14) This explanation is reinforced by the stage directions of *Confessions (!) of a Socialist*: "*Harry adopts a half-confessional, half sensational and definitely intimate style of communication with the audience*". (CAST 1979, 1) Actually, Muldoon refers to the 'confessional', that is the space where confession takes place. Given that in Catholic and Anglican tradition the two parties involved in confession hear but do not see each other, which is not what Muldoon advocates, it is plausible that Muldoon metonymically referred to the act and not to the venue; unless Muldoon meant that his relationship with every single member of the audience was so compelling as to near the forced intimacy of the confessional proper. As for Lenny Bruce, he is still nowadays a model for stand-up comedians who wish to pursue a style that we would label as 'politically

incorrect' i.e. controversial and often resorting to vulgarity.¹⁶ Apart from that, Muldoon expressed his admiration for Bruce's style of communication: "We liked his use of streams of consciousness, so we made use of that. We got from him the idea that you could change the script to fit the mood of the audience". (Quoted in Rees 1992, 70) While the allusions to Laurel, Hardy and Charlie Chaplin clearly indicate how CAST's shows were meant to be humorous in an unsophisticated, slapstick way, the reference to *Les Enfants du Paradis*, Marcel Carne's 1945 film, is less straightforward. It could refer to the fact that many of its characters are artists who perform to and for the working-class in a Parisian neighbourhood known as Boulevard du Crime,¹⁷ and share the life of their audience, including the petty criminal activity. This bears a certain resemblance to CAST's lifestyle and, in fact, Muldoon openly stated that he resorted to stealing in supermarkets in the difficult times between the split of the group and the granting of the ACGB subsidy, and had no moral objection to it. (Muldoon 2013, 23) In a personal communication Muldoon himself has recently acknowledged this juxtaposition of real and stage life, and stressed the importance of the main male character of the film, the mime Baptiste Deburau, interpreted by Jean-Louis Barrault, as a source of inspiration for the group:

We saw French films at the Academy Cinema in Oxford Street, Renoir etc. There was an annual screening of *Les Enfant [sic] du Paradis*. Baptiste's face looks on at the audience with a clown like intensity; we can read into his stare and see all truths are challenged. [...] the theme that all life within the films revolves around the stage and dialectic between the legit actor and the mimes juxtaposed against the real world and the endless cavalcade of revellers is, and was to us, compelling. It became essential viewing to those who joined our theatrical gang. Claire learnt to moon walk as Baptiste. (Muldoon 2018)

The most openly and consistently declared influence is rock'n'roll. Chuck Berry and Little Richard were really archetypal figures for the working-class youth of the 1950s – all CAST members were teen-agers in that decade. Muldoon provided a detailed answer to my question about the influence of rock 'n' roll, and how it was mediated by the archetypal American movies of the 1950s, namely *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) and *Blackboard Jungle* (1955):

In my town my ex classmates were adopting Teddy Boy styles some years after its sensational appearance in the Elephant and Castle (an area in South London) and which had been a shock for post war Britain. They had attracted a lot of generational hostility and disdain, all of which, we, as undisciplined teenagers relished; freed as we were from national service. I didn't associate with James Dean and while the title *Rebel without a Cause* sticks out as historically significant, they were rich Americans with cars. While *Black Board Jungle* helped introduce rock music (that's how we identified

¹⁶ In the review of a CAST's performance, the critic Benedict Nightingale mentioned in passing their proclivity to profanities: "What stirred the women most was that one of the actors kept using four-letter words. 'Don't forget the children' one shouted. 'Sorry, love' he called back, and started saying 'sod' instead of 'fuck'". (HE/CAST/SHO/1/2/NIGHTINGALE)

¹⁷ Boulevard du Crime was the nickname given to Paris' Boulevard du Temple, because of its many theatres staging crime melodramas.

it) rather than its (*sic*) gang moralizing scenes of *Rebel without a Cause*. It was the moody Elvis and the inspiring drive of black rock which revolutionised a whole generation's musical taste. "Move over Beethoven and give Tchaikovsky the news".¹⁸ (Ibid.)

It was not just the musical taste of teen-agers that was revolutionised, but their whole way of life as their antagonism to the elder generations gave rise to the phenomenon of juvenile gangs, among which the Teddy Boys were the first. According to Muldoon in the mid-1960s a few members of CAST still felt a sense of belonging to these gangs: "Red Saunders and Pete Bruno were Mod¹⁹ in physical attitude, I was more the Teddy Boy". (Quoted in Rees 1992: 69) Muldoon's description of himself back in the 1950s is worth reporting for its vividness:

I was in the evenings a Ted spitting in puddles outside the High St fish and chips shop, wearing my long Edwardian jacket, a sort of Tony Curtis haircut and large/thick creped soled shoes known as brothel creepers. While in London I was being introduced to the emerging mod culture by inner London boys, who wore Italian style four button 'bum freezer' suits, pointed 'winkle picker shoes' and 'college boy' haircut. Most important of all my new friends followed Modern Jazz. (Muldoon 2018)

The Teddy Boys, as can also be ascertained from Muldoon's testimony, had no particular ideological leaning and their rebelliousness was generically aimed at an established order represented by the grown-ups – would it be too far-fetched to consider them as the 'illiterate' correspondents of the Angry Young Men? – nor could any political divide be traced between them and the Mods. Yet it has to be remembered that a significant number of Teddy Boys took part in the 1958 Notting Hill Riots,²⁰ and consequently the group acquired the fame of having a racist background. A sort of nostalgia for the Teddy Boys years must have stayed with Muldoon: CAST's last play, *Personal and Private conversations with Mrs T* (1985) included a rock band dressed as Teddy Boys who called themselves the Left-Wing Teds, a specification that meant to distance CAST from the dubious fame that had stuck in the years on the Teddy Boys. But, apart from their – frankly rather ridiculous – Edwardian style, the Teddy Boys left a deep and lasting impression on CAST's organization, as recalled once again by Muldoon himself:

The gang ethos suited me during my late teens for despite getting in constant trouble with the law the class solidarity and constant excitement was reinforcing. When later in CAST "all for one and the one for all" practice was enshrined along with other gang collective principles I would describe our internal law as such. When other theatre outfits adopted mirror Labour movement committee structures CAST never found

¹⁸ This is a quotation from "Roll over Beethoven" (1956) by Chuck Berry.

¹⁹ The Mods were a juvenile group that moved around in Italian scooters, and whose uniforms were parka coats. As for musical tastes, they mostly listened Rhythm and Blues and Jamaican ska. (Bull 2017: 5)

²⁰ Between August and September 1958 a series of attacks were aimed at the Notting Hill population of West-Indian origin by white working-class young men. These events went down in history as the Notting Hill Riots. They were the first signs of hostility towards what is known nowadays as the Windrush Generation, from the name of the boat that took the first large group of West-Indian immigrants to England in 1948.

them appropriate. [...] I carried on with my ‘gang’ like description of our activities. (Ibid.)

As should be apparent by now, much as CAST wanted to act and to be considered as a collective entity, it is undeniable that Roland Muldoon was the leader. Interestingly enough, Muldoon’s background did not seem inductive to a theatrical career, and this could partly explain both his and CAST’s unconventional approach to theatre. As McDonnell justly foregrounds: “Muldoon, the group’s creative inspiration and spokesperson, was raised as a Roman Catholic in a second-generation Irish family on a council estate in Weybridge, Surrey”. (McDonnell in Bull 2017, 123) Muldoon himself recalls his early years in the interview with Rees:

I lived on a council estate in Surrey, and I was a good show off, so I kept saying: “I’m an actor”. But nobody thought I had the education. So I used my technical training at the Bristol Old Vic and became a technician for a year and saw the great problem theatre had. It would never reach my council estate in Weybridge because it was not dynamic. It could not walk up to someone in the estate and say: “Bang! Wallop! Watch *this!* Don’t watch telly”. Rock ‘n’ roll can do that, telly can, cinema can, theatre couldn’t. That intrigued me. If I was going to be in theatre with the idea that it must be popular culture and have the attraction of rock ‘n’ roll, then I had to invent a style for that theatre. Twenty, twenty five minutes long, totally compressed, totally dynamic, cut, cut, cut, speed. (quoted in Rees 1992, 70)

More details on how and when he came to be involved in the theatre were provided by Muldoon himself in a conversation with Sandy Craig published in *The Leveller* of April 1978:

Well, I reckon I started off at school, being the class show-off. I wasn’t so physically strong that I could beat anyone up, so I had to make everyone laugh. [I] applied to the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. I’d heard you could get a grant for acting. They didn’t give me a job as an actor but [...] they thought they could get me for a one year technical course as a stage manager. (quoted in Craig 1978, 18)

Muldoon attended a technical course at the Bristol Old Vic between September 1962 and July 1963. (HE/CAST/EY/1/OLDVIC) Those few months were decisive since, as Muldoon himself recalls: “Bristol was where I met Claire and where I also became a Socialist”. (Muldoon 2018) As soon as the course was over, Muldoon and his future wife Claire Burnley moved to London, apparently with no intention of finding a job in the theatre but just to earn a living in one way or another:

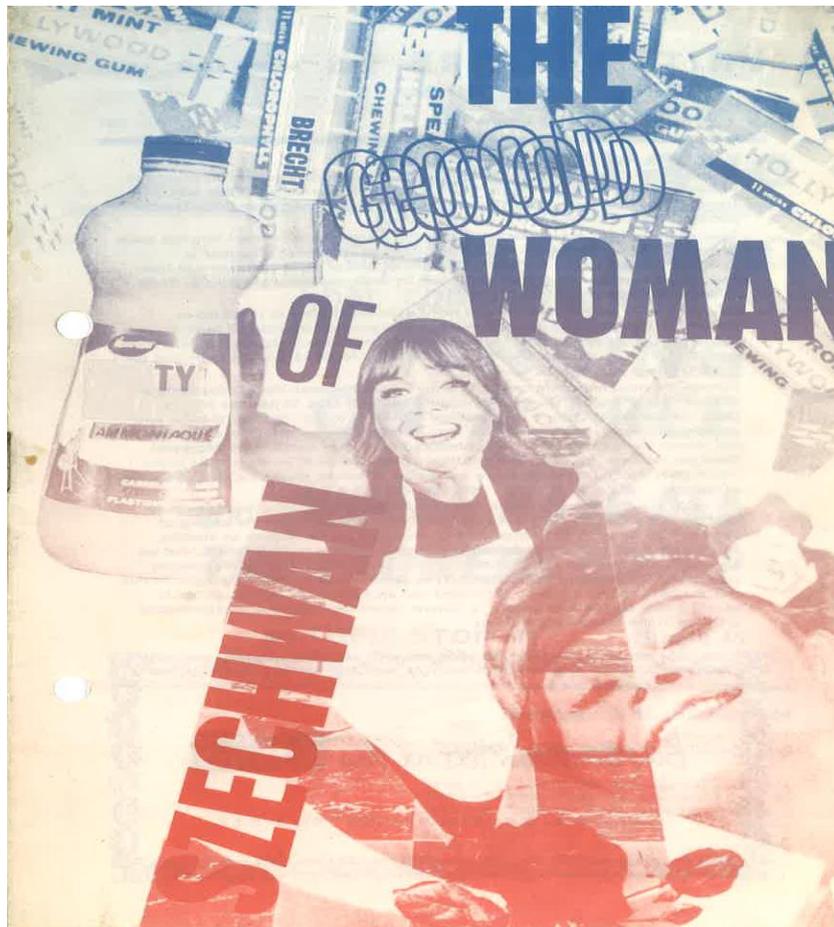
I was working on the famous Shell building [in London] as an electrician’s mate with the Communist Party stewards and they said to me: If you really did do that year technical course – because they didn’t even believe me – if you really did do it, there’s a party theatre called Unity. So I went there [...] and they immediately made me stage director of the theatre. And so we, me and Claire [...] ran Unity for two years. (quoted in Craig 1978,18)

The Unity was a playhouse in Camden Town with a strong connection with the Communist Party. The shows on offer were, of course, mostly traditional: “Claire and I were the stage managers and [...] realised that the nostalgia was crap. [...] It

was either folk, which was the Communist Party tradition, or it was old tyme Music Hall!”. (quoted in Bull 2017, 123) It was an uneasy coexistence between different generations of the British Left. In his *Taking On the Empire* Muldoon briefly recalls how the Unity Theatre experience led to the inception of CAST:

The group was first formed shortly after I had been expelled from Unity theatre in Camden by the old-style Stalinists, who desperately clung to the control of the famous workers’ playhouse and feared the new Left were out of their control. [T]he venue was stifled by the paranoia of Unity’s Management Committee, who were defensive and suspicious of our plans. (Muldoon 2013, 16-17)

Muldoon’s implication that Unity Theatre was a nest of rear-guard Marxism should be downplayed, at least from the aesthetic point of view. Among the documents kept in the East London Theatre Archive, for instance, the programme of Brecht’s *The Good Woman of Szechwan* (HE/CAST/EY/2/THEGOODWOMAN) is pleasantly designed and shows a substantial acceptance of the 1960s Pop aesthetics that could hardly be expected from a bunch of hardened Stalinists. (see fig below)



The performances of the above play went on from 13 of March 1964 and the programme shows how much by this time the future CAST members were well in control of the technical running of the theatre: Roland Muldoon was stage manager

of this production, Raymond Levene was lighting operator and Claire Burnley was in charge of properties. It is also worth pointing out that Arnold Wesker's Centre 42 is mentioned on this programme for providing additional lighting equipment, a testimony of the – often under-appreciated – contribution of Wesker's creature to political theatre.

It was inevitable and fitting, however, that the relationship between Muldoon and the strictly pro-Soviet Communist Party would turn sour: even if the latter showed a certain good will towards the newcomers, the gap between the new and the old British Left was too wide, and the clash quickly became unavoidable. In fact, what triggered Muldoon and the company's expulsion was an attempt at a general reassessment of the Unity's theatrical activity and, basically, a censure motion against the Managing Committee, presented at the Annual General Meeting – AGM – of 28 October 1964. It is no surprise that it resulted, in traditional Soviet terms, in a purge. A typed copy of Muldoon's speech²¹ to the AGM members is kept in the East London Archive:

I was told that it was ok to go ahead and form an acting group and maybe even a writers group but this is the crux of the matter: why should it be left to me, a Relatively new Comer, to form all these groups, why did not exist already? [...] why were we doing plays like

“EVERYTHING IN THE GARDEN”

“The Licence”

“WOYZECK”

“SQUARING THE CIRCLE”

none of which have much social consequence and even the Highly successful “CAUCASIAN CHALK CIRCLE” would be it true to say that if the play had included the MORAL at the beginning, the Prologue, from which the author built the rest of the play, would that have been a dismal failure too????

I submit, the reason why the audience stay away from our plays is the fact that our choice is LOUSY.

Now I know [...] how difficult it is to choose plays, but one has to ask where has the dynamism, that existed in the past gone? Were there more socialist Playwrites [sic] in the thirties???????????? (HE/CAST/EY/2/MYCASE)

This list of plays deserves a few comments. According to Muldoon's CV *The Licence* was an “old time musical” (HE/CAST/MF/7/CV) but I could find no further details (author, date, etc.) about it; the other mentioned plays are well known. Valentin Petrovich Katayev's *Squaring the Circle* (1927) stages the misadventures of two couples who are forced to share a room by the shortage of housing solutions in post-revolutionary Russia and end up swapping partners.

²¹ In the document it is not stated whether the speech was actually pronounced or was sent in written form to the members.

Therefore, it is a satire of the shortcomings of Socialist economy, funny and inoffensive enough to avoid the wrath of Soviet censorship: nonetheless the Managing Committee members are to be given credit for not being obtusely pro-Soviet and for staging a play showing also the less agreeable aspects of collectivization. Roland Muldoon was stage director of this production, but he also starred as actor in a minor role and, according to a review which appeared on the *Kilburn Times* on 20 November 1964, he stole the scene thanks to his comic talent. (HE/CAST/EY/2/KILBURN) As for *Woyzeck*, it seems ungenerous on Muldoon's part to censure the offering of Georg Büchner's masterpiece on the basis of its lack of appeal to the general public:²² this attitude was part of a more general divide among political authors on the issue of the presentation of classics to working-class audiences, which saw Wesker and McGrath at the opposite poles of the debate. As regards Giles Cooper's *Everything in the Garden* (1962), in his *Anger and After* (1963), John Russell Taylor defined it as: "A parable about suburban hypocrisy, depicting a group of suburban housewives who blandly accept spare-time work as highly paid prostitutes and then win over their husbands to the advantages of the situation [...]". (Russell Taylor 1963, 27) Hence it could be considered a mild attempt at social satire that, according to Russell Taylor, "suffered from [...] ill-advised attempts at modishly sub-Pinter fragmented dialogue". (Ibid.) As for Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, Muldoon's criticism implies that its partial success was due to it having been staged in an abridged version. All in all, the plays on offer at the Unity theatre do not appear to be devoid of quality, while also presenting a wide range of choice. Muldoon's criticism seems to address the lack of rhythm and consequently of political clout of these plays rather than their overall dramatic quality. In theatrical terms the key word is "dynamism", even though we may perceive more than a hint of juvenile iconoclasm and generational antagonism in Muldoon's tirade.

The minutes of Unity's AGM translate into a bureaucratic jargon the members' reaction to Muldoon's attempt at reorganization, accusing him of "conduct injurious to the society in that he secretly conspired with non-members to overthrow the legally elected management committee". (quoted in Bull 2017, 98) Communist paranoia apart, a certain degree of conspiracy went on, as can be understood by an undated letter written by Roger Hudson²³ to Roland Muldoon, quite fittingly, from the Metropole Hotel in Moscow, undoubtedly during the preparation stages of the AGM: "Have had high degree of acceptance from people I have explained the plan to but I haven't talked to everyone involved". (HE/CAST/EY/2/HUDSON) The plan referred to – attached to Hudson's handwritten letter – consisted of a six-month carte blanche for a new Management

²² In the hand-written document quoted above (HE/CAST/MF/1/HW) Muldoon stated that CAST's production after *The Trials of Horatio Muggins* would be an adaptation of Büchner's *Woyzeck*, titled *Woyzeck Muggins*. The project was not carried out, but at least it shows that CAST had come to appreciate the social relevance of Büchner's masterpiece.

²³ Roger Hudson (1936) is an activist, journalist and theatre director. He was one of the founding editors of *Theatre Quarterly*. See <http://www.rogerhudson.me.uk/about.html> last accessed 18/05/2018.

Committee that included Hudson and Muldoon and, among others, John Arden. It is not surprising that the Unity's old members did not take to it kindly. Muldoon's expulsion, however, did not solve the case and the quarrel went on and on, since Muldoon basically refused to acknowledge the AGM's decision. The dispute resolved itself in 1967, when CAST took part in Unity's reopening after a period of closure, staging there a double bill composed of *John D. Muggins is Dead* and *Mr Oligarchy's Circus*. (HE/CAST/EY/2/MAY1967) One year later they staged there John Arden's *Harold Muggins is a Martyr*, a theatrical event the importance of which will be discussed below. Anyway, at the beginning of 1965, as a consequence of the expulsion, the original quartet found themselves homeless – in theatrical terms – and had to look for a new venue. Consequently, they made the short walk from the Unity Theatre in Goldington Street to the Working Men's College in Crowndale Road, both in London NW1. The Working Men's College was a Victorian institution meant to provide higher education for the working and lower-middle classes, still active today. To their credit, the headmaster, Robert Austin, received the group with open arms and assigned a teaching course on drama during the 1965 summer term to Muldoon and Levene. (HE/CAST/EY/3/AUSTIN) This is commonly considered only an interim period before CAST started their activity as a theatrical ensemble. Yet, it was important in reassessing the company's theatrical views and aesthetics. In an article for the college journal titled "New drama outlook at the college" Muldoon put forward a few ideas that would have a long-lasting importance in shaping CAST's activity:

The world of theatre seems to be split into three factions. The first being commercial, that is to say "what Aunt Edna wants, Aunt Edna gets". The second; the theatre for theatre's sake! which, in effect, means theatre for the initiated. The third – in which we are interested – goes under the dubious title of 'theatre for the people'. At first glance this seems to state the obvious – How could theatre be about anything but the people. An investigation into the past world of theatre would indicate that through the patronage of the middle classes the majority of plays have been orientated towards this minority. Whereas, theatre for the people would apparently suggest the totality of society. [...] Theatre has in the past been at its most vigorous when the material presented has been functional, that is when it mirrored the confusions, contradictions, attitudes and achievements of its society. Shakespeare, Greek Theatre and Brecht, are cases in point. Even so, these particular examples can never be said to represent peoples [*sic*] theatre in the real sense of the word, as even now we have not noticed a great rush from our college to see the existentialist Hamlet which is currently being performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company; who are, at this moment, embarking upon a campaign to bring Shakespeare to the 'masses'. [...] What we are suggesting is that theatre should go towards people, and not people towards theatre. There has been time in the past when a form of theatre – and usually a spontaneous form – has enjoyed a large support from the unsophisticated classes. [...] We are talking, of course, of the Music Hall, Burlesque, Pantomime and farther back still, the Medieval Guild play. [...] reflective and relevant to its time and, at the same time, indisputably entertaining. From these arguments we are bound – if we are to be in any way constructive – to attempt to formulate a type of theatre which is relevant to *our* Society. Therefore we, the Drama Group, hope in the next year, to present in our work a series of presentations which will reflect the argument put forward in this article. (HE/CAST/EY/3/MULDOON)

The distinction into three theatrical factions is, of course, oversimplified and oversimplifying, and the reasoning about Shakespeare's plays is quite tricky, as it seems to measure their relevance in Elizabethan times by the lack of interest in them shown by twentieth-century audiences. Yet this article is interesting as it points out the challenges Muldoon, as any other young author, had to face in the mid-1960s, and how much he was venturing into an undiscovered country. By commercial theatre Muldoon probably meant the kind of light entertainment that was provided in the mid-1960s, at its highest, by the late work of Noël Coward and the early work of Alan Ayckbourn; while the definition of "theatre for theatre's sake" presumably hinted at Absurdist theatre in its 'British variant' i.e. Harold Pinter's plays.²⁴ It is significant that, in examining the third faction, Muldoon seems to have no sure model of "popular theatre" in his time, and is forced therefore to look back to medieval times or refer to traditional forms at high risk of owing their popularity to escapist and, quite often, reactionary – racist, sexist – contents. It is not completely true that a reflective, relevant and entertaining theatre was unknown in post-war Great Britain, since it had been Joan Littlewood's aim all through her career, and *Oh What a Lovely War*, which had premiered two years before on 19 March 1963, was a clear example of music hall form employed to convey political messages. Maybe Muldoon did not acknowledge and mention Littlewood's experience simply because he was not aware of it, since he was still in Bristol doing his technical course when the play was first performed, and, moreover, being a self-taught outsider, he had no acquaintances in London's theatrical world who could keep him informed. Yet, not having immediate antecedents was probably at the roots of Muldoon's self-assurance and absolute freedom in experimenting his own form.

During their stay at the Working Men's College, the group was joined by Red Saunders, who had met Muldoon and Levene at the drama courses they taught there and was to provide a fundamental contribution to the company. With Saunders, the original formation was complete and ready for the stage. There is no birth certificate for CAST, nor a precise date for their foundation or their first performance. All the sources – including Muldoon's CV – agree in placing CAST's debut in 1965: since, according to the Working Men's College prospectus, Muldoon and Levene's courses went on through the 1965/66 year, it is likely that they debuted while still teaching. Their largely self-taught theatrical skills were reflected in a peculiar, to say the least, approach:

None of us had previously considered ourselves actors, we had in fact been theatre technicians. [...] As technicians we had come to loath actors: their poncy pretensions along with their uncommunicative drawn-out production. If we were to be the actors and to play to audiences who shared our disdain of theatre, and to play in decidedly non-theatrical environments, we would have to develop a style and image that would fit into people's expectations of an entertaining night out. This we did. (Muldoon 1977: 40)

Be it as it may, in 1965 CAST were ready to produce their first show: "We did a play called *The Nightmare of Joe Muggins*: we did it at the Peanuts Club to

²⁴ John McGrath, in his *A Good Night Out* caustically defined Pinter as "our own cut-price product" in the Absurdist tradition. (McGrath 1996: 3)

immediate sensation”. (Muldoon quoted in Craig 1978, 18) This play is mentioned in no other source, not even in Muldoon’s CV and it is therefore plausible that it was a sort of early version of *John D. Muggins is Dead*, which is generally acknowledged as CAST’s first play.

John D. Muggins is Dead is about the Vietnam war. Muldoon stressed its originality, since it did not present simply a pacifist point of view but tried to go deeper in explaining the cultural roots of the conflict: “Instead of just saying that the bomb should stop and there should be peace in the world, we said that America was conditioning its youth through a process we were all being culture vultures about”. (quoted in Itzin 1980, 15) It was performed at the UFO club in Tottenham Court Road, a venue which owes its legendary status to the pop and rock groups that performed there: “A leading but short-lived venue for the psychedelic scene, its first two weeks hosted Soft Machine and Pink Floyd, and Procol Harum played there the same week that ‘A Whiter Shade of Pale’ topped the single charts”. (Bull 2017: 27) The UFO club was founded and run, among others, by John ‘Hoppy’ Hopkins. He was also one of the founding members of the *International Times (IT)*, a journal that followed in the trail of the so-called ‘flower power’: a movement originated in S. Francisco that “came to be associated with drug-induced dreams of peace and love”. (Bull: 25) Both the Ufo Club and *International Times* were the expression of the so-called Counterculture, that is a political – in the broadest possible sense – position that took its inspiration from the Beat Generation and various American libertarian movements. While at the Unity Theatre Muldoon and Company had faced the more traditional ranks of the British Left, here they were to confront what could be considered the ‘New Left’. As Muldoon recalls, it was not a match made in heaven:

We played at the UFO which was the first of the hip clubs with mixed media, Pink Floyd, Christopher Logue, Mike Horowitz. We went on and did *John D. Muggins is Dead* and were really popular with the audience and afterwards we rang up *International Times* and asked them what they thought of it, and they said: “Oh it’s terrible”. We said: “Why?” They said: “We’re into *love*, man, and you’re telling us about *war* and *butchery*. It’s dangerous, dangerous to say to our generation which is looking for peace and alternatives and expansion of consciousness, to just keep focussing in on this Vietnam war”. So we realised that we had to fight the alternative culture argument, because the alternative culture argument really was “drop Out”. (quoted in Craig, 1978, 18; emphases in the original)

Interviewed by Catherine Itzin, Muldoon used even harsher words to describe their confrontation with IT: “And they said, ‘you’re terrible, you’re talking about killing and Vietnam and the real thing is love’. We just said, ‘go screw your arse,’ you know”. (quoted in Itzin 1980,16)

The most comprehensive summary of the plot is provided by an enthusiastic review by Chris Gilmore appeared in *Peace News* on 28 October 1966:

For 25 riveting minutes, two actors and an actress, led by Roland Muldoon, demonstrated how, from the moment Muggins is born, he is indoctrinated by the telly

advert. He goggles even when he gurgles and gains his first glimpse of the Great All-American Dream. Quick switch to his school where his class is asked what they're going to be when they grow up. Muggins, desperate for admiration, conforms. "I am going to kill". Smiles all round. [w]hen you're an all-American guy you are qualified to kill and therefore to copulate. [...] Once at the front, Muggins calls on his president to talk to him. He does so, a lot of syrupy crap about freedom and liberty as little Muggins, large with machine gun, joyfully kills all the audience, a chair shuddering in his hands as he shoots all of us. [...] So what? We may ask. We've heard it all before. What's so different? I believe this highly charged, savage charade is theatrical dynamite. True, much of the humour was music hall. It's easy enough to score laughs against America with references to hot-dogs, coca cola and Cadillacs. But this entertainment is aimed at non-sophisticated audiences (if and when and where they find them) and I maintain that these clichés have here been creatively exploited. (HE/CAST/SHO/1/1/GILMORE)

John D. Muggins is Dead introduced for the first time the Muggins character who would be constantly present in CAST's productions, although with different first names and gender identities, up to *Confessions of a Socialist*: John, Harold, Horatio, Hilda etc. In Muldoon's words: "[Muggins] is the English archetype of the bloke who does everything and gets no reward. Charlie Chaplin, if you like. An Everyman. Muggins represents the working class – the people who are mugged!". (quoted in Itzin 1980, 14-5) The origin of the character "Muggins" is to be traced back to the Unity period, as explained by Muldoon: "He was adopted by us from the favourite lament *I'm Billy Muggins*, which we had come across while working on the revivalist old-time music hall shows, one of Unity's pioneering specialities". (Muldoon 2013: 18) It is not easy to find more details about this Billy Muggins song. In <https://monologues.co.uk/music/hall/Songs-B/Billy-Muggins.html> the song is dated to 1906 and is attributed to a Charles Ridgwell, whose dates of birth and death are not stated. In this page one can find the lyrics of the song, from which the Muggins character is depicted as far from defenceless in a quite funny way, as in the following example:

My brother lost a breach of promise case, and had to pay
 The nice love-letters he wrote to the girl gave him away
 I courted once that self-same Miss, she might have breach of promised
 this
 Although I said she should be mine, to her I never wrote a line
 I'm Billy Muggins – commonly known as a Juggins/
 Silly Billy, that's what my friends call me
 When she said love-letters gave her delight
 Why did I tell her I could not write?
 I'm Muggins the Juggins, and Muggins I'll always be. (Ibid.)

Even if CAST's Muggins often ends up being defeated, he is not a fool, either: challenged by overwhelming enemy forces, he often puts up a fight, and sometimes turn out to be the moral, if not actual, winner. In CAST's second production, *Mr Oligarchy's Circus*, staged in 1966, there were no less than three Mugginses. In Muldoon's words: "We said capitalism was a circus, the ruling class was the circus master and the Labour Party was its bedfellow". (quoted in Itzin 1980, 15) The play received mixed reviews. D.A.N. Jones from the columns of the *New Statesman* enthused about "the nearest modern equivalent of Aristophanes" and gave a brief outline of the play, in which the three Mugginses were participants in a TV quiz. When asked what they desired most in life, they answered: "Hilda Muggins of Cleethorpes wants the Queen Victoria prize for embroidery. Humphrey Muggins, a West Indian immigrant, wants to meet the Archbishop of Canterbury. But 'I'd like you to abolish private enterprise', says hopeless Herbert Muggins, amid laughter". (HE/CAST/SHO/1/2/JONES) Simon Trussler, in his review published in the *Tribune* on 12 May 1967, was a bit less complimentary and wrote that "*Mr Oligarchy's Circus*, though clever in conception [...] is thematically too discursive to do much damage. It's my own feeling that the company need a co-operative scriptwriter to direct their fire [...]. I recommend them to Left-wing palates jaded by satire of the lavatory and establishment schools". (HE/CAST/SHO/1/2/TRUSSLER) A longer and more articulated piece on *Mr Oligarchy's Circus* was written by Benedict Nightingale, later to become theatre critic for *The Times*, and was published in the *New Society* magazine of 30 May 1968. Part of the interest of this particular performance, and consequently of the review, comes from the former having taken place in a Working Men's Club in Tilbury, a small port town in Essex. Nightingale opens his review with a brief description of the audience and their reaction:

The fact that the children were set in a semi-circle at the front, sucking at their Coca-Colas within spitting distance of the performers, while their parents sat by the walls quaffing beer, seemed to suggest that what was generally expected was entertainment of some harmless, conventional kind. Those expectations crumbled abruptly – in about the time it took a parody TV quizmaster to ask his guest what he most wanted in life, and the guest to answer "abolish private enterprise". That was the first sketch. CAST, as the children quickly discovered, is the Cartoon Archetypal [sic] Slogan Theatre, a group of bejeaned young Londoners who want to abolish more than private enterprise. [...] This essentially was why they were in Tilbury, haranguing the men, women and children. No one seemed offended or patronised by their efforts; nor did anyone seem particularly enlightened or excited, though one or two of the older men did admittedly nod and say it all made good political sense. [...] In fact, the general response was a sort of intrigued bewilderment that contrasted a little sadly with the committed frenzy of CAST. (HE/CAST/SHO/1/2/NIGHTINGALE)

Both the venue and the human environment appear to be similar to the ones described by John McGrath in the chapter titled *Towards a working-class theatre* in his *A Good Night Out* (McGrath 1996, 18-35) as the typical Saturday night in a Working Men's Club, namely in Chorlton-cum-Hardy in Greater Manchester. The entertainment in the Chorlton-cum-Hardy club is provided by a compere-musician

who introduces successively “an up-and-coming comedian/crooner or young girl who bounces around singing pop songs merrily” (Idem: 24), a round of bingo, a match of wrestling and a female stripper. The atmosphere is riotous: “The dance floor gets crowded, the fights break out, the glasses smash, and the white-coated waiters turn out to be a squad of bouncers in disguise”. (idem: 25) McGrath does not idealize the venue nor does he hide the underlying social and political issues: “It bears all the marks of the suffering of the urban industrial working class of the north of England – the brutality, the violence, the drunkenness, the sexism, the authoritarianism that have been part of its life since the Industrial Revolution”. (Ibid., 25) Yet, according to him, it is a reality to be reckoned with and worth examining since “it is a night in inner Manchester, enjoyed by many people who in themselves have many excellent qualities. These are the people who may well be making revolution. It will bear a certain amount of examination”. (Ibid.) I have quoted McGrath at length because it puts into perspective CAST’s task to bring theatre to untheatrical venues and audiences. Of course, there is a geographical difference – North v South – and, more importantly, in Tilbury, as stated elsewhere by Nightingale, it is Thursday, and not Saturday, that is a night not intended for excesses of any kind, which probably explains the presence of the children; also the presence of the word “circus” in the title may have created some false expectations and encouraged parents to bring along their kids. Yet a certain amount of drinking goes on anyway (“their parents stood by the wall quaffing beer”) and potentially the audience could have a hostile reaction to such an unexpected kind of entertainment. CAST succeeded, however, in keeping the attention of the audience and even their “intrigued bewilderment” is not an outcome one should easily dismiss. Nightingale then deals with what went on stage:

Again and again, in mime and dialogue, the performers repeated their fundamental message: wake up and see what “they” are doing to you. A symbolic worker was mocked, derided and exploited, interviewed by a corrupt journalist, exhorted by a blimpish Labour Party politician, offered a flower by a lispng pouf, sold short on everything from insurance to luncheon vouchers, bribed with TV, bingo and offers of promotion to the middle class. Most of the time a capitalist, toggged up in opera hat and white gloves, snickered at him from the sidelines. At the end, international communists, socialists and anarchists stepped up and offered their various dogmas. The symbolic worker simply shrugged. “I want my politics to be about where I live and where I am,” he declared. “until you show me how to get results, in a way I can follow, I suggest you leave me alone”. The polemic may have been crude, but it was surprisingly effective at times. [...] Could it honestly be said that, on this their first foray into exclusively working class territory they managed to sow fresh political seeds amid the grassroots? Hard to believe it. (HE/CAST/SHO/1/2/NIGHTINGALE)

Even if the title of the show is never mentioned in the review, it must be assumed to be *Oligarchy’s Circus* because the action with the mock quizmaster is the same D.A.N. Jones’s had referred to in the *New Statesman*. Among other curiosities one cannot help noticing that being offered a flower by a gay man, whom the reviewer disparagingly qualifies as a “lispng pouf”, is listed below the misfortunes of the worker, which shows how much in the late 1960s political correctness was far from

the minds even of revolutionary youths. At the end of this detailed report, Nightingale is still not sure about its political effectiveness: while conceding that some of the spectators nodded their political approval, he still maintained that the actors were from London, middle-class and educated, and that this was “their first foray into exclusively working class territory”; thus implying that their attitude could be somehow patronising. As we know, Muldoon and Burnley were not Londoners: as for social status and education, as Muldoon recalled: “We were self-educated, working class: left school at fifteen, now twenty-one, twenty-two. (Itzin 1980, 16) Nightingale’s misunderstanding is anyway quite significant, as it highlights the general assumptions about a company which made its name in ‘alternative’ venues such as the already mentioned Peanut and UFO clubs, that is, some sort of sham or would-be revolutionaries. CAST’s following production, *The Trials of Horatio Muggins* (1967), was somehow instrumental in underlining that they were not middle-class misfits.

Bill McDonnell gives a detailed description of the opening scene of *The Trials of Horatio Muggins* included in the documentary *The Year 1967*, produced by the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign in connection to a fund-raising event:²⁵

It cuts back to the opening images of *The Trials*. Downstage right a body lies prone across three chairs. A white faced figure hovers. From the darkness upstage four more figures advance. They are dressed in black; their faces are chalk-white, like those of mime artists. Their movements are balletic. The central figure holds a red flag. They form a tableau, which is briefly held. They move forward again with an admirable precision and unity. They move and pause three times, and then speak in unison. Their voices are hard, impersonal and metronomic: “We/ are/ the/ Cartoon/ Archetypical/ Slogan/ Theatre/ and/ we/ demand/revolution/ now!”. They dissolve the image and retreat upstage. Then one of them notices the sleeping figure. She moves forward until she is leaning over him. Turning, she gestures to the others to approach. They again move forward as a unit. They deliver their slogan now at the prone figure. They call on him to wake. As he stirs, they begin to shout at him: he must arise and organize the class for revolution! As he sits up and yawns, we notice that he is dressed in ordinary clothes and has no make-up. He ignores them, turns to the audience and speaks: “What the fuck do you lot want, eh, waking me up like that” [...] Horatio Muggins gets up slowly and puts on his trilby. The group begins to upbraid him for his failure to act. The proletariat is asleep, they tell him, and must awake and take its preordained role in the coming revolution. Muggins shrugs, yawns, smiles at the audience. (McDonnell in Bull 2017, 129-130)

This opening sets the tone of the whole play: the self-appointed revolutionaries put the proletarian on trial for his complacency and lack of activism, but he counterattacks and rejects their accusations maintaining that they do not know what they are talking about. The result is humorous if abrasive and potentially irritating to an audience composed mostly of left-wing militants who could identify

²⁵ A part of it is visible on the web at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqZoszQYfHw&t=25s>: last accessed 25/08/2018.

themselves with the ridiculed revolutionaries. D.A.N. Jones published a comprehensive and creative review in the *Listener* of 16 January 1969:

In circuses you get the dandified white-faced clowns who juggle or trumpet flawlessly; but the star is the *auguste*, the baggy-trousered tramp who skilfully gets things wrong, the one with whom we identify and who has to be much cleverer than those who play the expert: “this fellow’s wise enough to play the fool”. In the *Trials of Horatio Muggins* the sleek dandies are socialist agitators and the *auguste* is that ragged-trousered philanthropist²⁶ known as the British working-man, Horatio Muggins. (HE/CAST/SHO/1/5/JONES)

Muldoon’s mass of red hair actually gave him an *auguste*-like look and therefore the identification of Horatio Muggins with the baggy-trousered clown worked at visual level too. Visual suggestions apart, by mentioning circus clowns Jones captures very well CAST’s intention to produce an unsophisticated show while also setting from the start the audience’s sympathy against the white-faced revolutionaries. Muggins’ shabby appearance sharply contrasts with the uniform-like tidiness of the revolutionaries’ attires and underlines that what the audience is going to witness is a true class conflict, albeit of an unusual kind. Jones later introduces yet another allusion to popular culture (and children’s entertainment) in order to point out how the play aims at staging the demolition of the public image of the conceited revolutionaries – Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*:

To start the show, the dapper know-alls (black-uniformed, dead-white pans) pose with slogans and red-banner around the sleeping prole – as though he was a bewitched Snow-White. No prince will come; he has to make do with these dwarfs. What is enchanting is the counterpoint of the natural, lifelike man (Roland Muldoon) against the artificial epigrammatic commentaries on our society offered by Claire Muldoon and the rest of this tightly knit company. They don’t hear Muggins’ efforts to educate them, explaining his experience of Horatio Nelson Secondary School: they are too busy calling him a bourgeois and recalling their own bourgeois upbringing. Then “Can we be hippies? Ooh, supah! The mind-expanding drug passes from hand to hand – £ 10 an ounce, to start with, and finally “ten bob a joint to you, Horatio”. (Ibid.)

The black-clad revolutionaries are made fun of for their ineffectiveness, but also for their ideological confusion since they do not seem to notice the contradiction between socialist militancy and hippie lifestyle aiming at an expansion of consciousness through drugs. In highlighting the opposition between Muggins’ ‘authenticity’ and the revolutionaries’ artificiality, Jones touches on the core of what CAST meant to communicate with their theatre, that is that workers are absolutely able to express themselves without being aided by cultured mediators giving an acceptable literary form to their needs and aspirations. While the

²⁶ Robert Tressell’s (1870-1911) novel *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, posthumously published in 1914, is a classic of working-class literature. The philanthropists of the title are the British workers who leave much of the value they produce to their employer. Stage adaptations of the novel were produced in the 1920s and 1930s and, more recently, by Stephen Lowe in 1978 and Howard Brenton in 2010.

patronising attitude of the New Left was the target of the early part of the show, later on the butt of CAST's satire are the "elders of the left":

Satire on the elders of the Left follows. A nice lady sings "Men and women stand together". A Civil War veteran cries: "I built Unity Theatre with these two hands!" Pretty Claire Muldoon somehow becomes a Lancashire worthy: "I wish to state categorically that ours is the only socialist party represented in Parliament". Nothing is laboured: these squibs and skits are almost too speedy to grasp. Horatio gets his word in, his authority growing. It is no use the students trying to include him in their scene: "I know in the end you want me to act for you". (Ibid.)

The song sung by the "nice lady" is John Brunner's²⁷ *The H-Bomb's Thunder*, the unofficial hymn of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), a pacifist organization founded in 1959, and still active today, that advocated unilateral disarmament and was founded as an alternative to both Labour and Communist parties' positions. Neither of the two traditional British left parties were left alone. CAST were particularly daring in presenting a Spanish Civil War veteran with the intent to satirize the backward-looking attitude of the Unity theatre and, for association, of the Communist Party, both nostalgic for past glories and not too keen to take on new challenges.²⁸ The "Lancashire worthy" is clearly a Labour MP, even if I could not find a direct reference to a particular figure. Summing up, no sector of the Left was spared, and this did not help CAST make new friends. In an interview with McDonnell, Muldoon recalled Ewan MacColl's²⁹ reaction:

We were told off by Ewan MacColl for being too counter-culture. He got us back after *The Trials of Horatio Muggins* and he said: "You know you're great what you do, but it's terrible, because you take the piss out of capitalism, and then in the same play you also take the piss out of Ho Chi Min, Fidel Castro, and Mao Zedong. And Karl Marx. In the same way you took the piss out of everyone else. There's no definition for the working class". (Quoted in Bull 2017, 124)

By 1967 CAST had produced three shows and had gained a certain fame, albeit in limited quarters, for their particular theatrical form and unorthodox political approach. The definite consecration seemed to take shape when John Arden got in touch with the company and offered to write a play for them or, more accurately, in collaboration with them. By that time, the critical, if not commercial, success of *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959), *Live like Pigs* (1962) and *The Workhouse*

²⁷ John Brunner (1934-1995) was a science-fiction writer and a member of CND.

²⁸ Interestingly enough, the association of Unity Theatre and Civil War veterans may have been suggested to Muldoon and Co by their experience as stage technicians. In the programme of Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) that went on at the Unity on 11 and 12 September 1964, it is stated: "We are most honoured to have with us on opening night members of the Internationale Brigade". (HE/CAST/EY/2/GLASS) In those performances, Claire Burnley was stage-manager and Raymond Levene was in charge of props. *The Glass Menagerie's* connection with Spanish Civil War is a loosely one, since it consists in the latter being mentioned in the conversation as an important event, contemporary to the stage action.

²⁹ Ewan MacColl (1915-1989) was a folk-singer, actor and playwright. In 1945 he founded with Joan Littlewood The Theatre Workshop, which provided a model and an inspiration to the political companies of the 1960s and 1970s.

Donkey (1964) had established Arden as a very promising young playwright and, as Muldoon stated: “He was almost a household name. Not as big as Wesker or Osborne, but my mum knew who he was”. (quoted in Itzin 1980, 21) Arden had seen some of CAST’s shows and had liked the Muggins character: hence the idea of a play with a Muggins as protagonist, and the title *Harold Muggins is a Martyr*. Actually, Arden’s Muggins had not much in common with the character invented by Muldoon, as he was a bourgeois, the owner of a run-down café which is revitalized and taken over by the Mafia as a metaphor of capitalism. Maybe this distortion of the Muggins character explains why Arden’s proposal met some unspecified resistance inside the company, as Muldoon recalls: “Now half the group didn’t want to know, but I thought it was a good idea, especially if it went on at Unity, because I thought we might be able to recapture the Unity spirit if we put on a successful production there”. (Ibid.) With hindsight, it is difficult to imagine a worse mismatch than the one between the educated, classical-leaning Arden and CAST’s ‘crazy gang’. The venue itself, the Unity theatre, which made the project appealing to Muldoon, was second best for Arden: as he explained to Roger Hudson in an interview published in the *Running Man* of July 1968, originally his idea was to use a church hall in Notting Hill, that would have allowed him to re-create the Muggins Café with no neat division between the actors and the spectators, who would sit at tables around the acting area. The idea was abandoned, according to Arden, for technical reasons, and the play was mounted at the Unity, a traditional theatrical space which did not respond to Arden’s original concept:

We wanted to get together with CAST and work with them outside the structure of the theatre. [...] The original idea was to use a church hall in Notting Hill and have a kind of festival. The structure changed because we’re in a theatre. Everything else we wanted to do, the street theatre and everything, became a sort of appendage for the play. By going into Unity everybody sees a proscenium and their minds get distorted. People focus on the play and the rest become just trimmings.
(HE/CAST/SO/1/4/HUDSON)

In the same interview, actress and activist Margaretta d’Arcy, who had married John Arden in 1957 and co-authored various plays with him, added: “It’s a very new concept that when you’re doing a play you involve the community”. (Ibid.) That a theatrical event should expand as much as possible to the community around does not sound too ground-breaking nowadays, and it probably did not sound a complete novelty in 1968 either. Nevertheless, this plan set off the frictions between the Ardens and the theatre management. Muldoon, for once, seemed to sympathise with Unity’s more traditional approach and their reasons, spurred by practical considerations. As he later recalled:

It was a difficult thing the meeting of us and the Ardens. They didn’t want to do it at Unity. They wanted to do the play in the All Saints Hall, off the Portobello Road, with a S. Francisco-style meets-the-people [sic] kind of protest show. We wanted a Labour Movement audience at the Unity. They hated me for that. Into this situation, the Ardens invited John Fox from The Welfare State and Albert Hunt, with the students from Bradford College of Art, to make an environment in the Unity Theatre forecourt. They

were committed to getting the neighbourhood in. Unity did not want this because they had been censored in the Forties and Fifties for being a left wing theatre, and had preserved themselves by having a license from the Lord Chamberlain on the basis of allowing in members only. So the public could not walk in. The old Stalinists were cringing when the Ardens said: "Let's have everybody in and have a community '68 summer Festival!" So there was a complete clash of cultures". (Quoted in Rees 1991, 72)

That Muldoon should side with the Stalinists, who had ejected him from the Unity just three years before, against the Ardens shows how wide the gap between the two factions working at the production of *Harold Muggins is a Martyr* was. This situation may appear as a reprise of the misunderstanding between CAST and the *International Times*, with regard to *John D. Muggins is Dead*, that is between a working-class oriented Marxist left and an Americanized hippy-style one. Ironically, it also looked like a re-creation in real life of the situation staged in *The Trials of Horatio Muggins*. Unkind as it may be to compare the Ardens to the mock-revolutionaries of this play, their inability to recognize and come to terms with the material conditions affecting the Unity's existence, that is restricting the access to members, showed a scant understanding of Marxist concrete analysis of concrete situations.

Politics apart, the deepest divide between CAST and the Ardens was conceptual. The most evident difference was that Arden's theatre was text-based, while CAST mostly relied on improvisation. In his interview with Arden, Hudson stated that the play resulted from a collaborative work: "The play itself, worked out of improvisations by CAST, then written by the Ardens, and reworked in rehearsals, became the main focus both for the critics and for the more vocal members of the audience". (HE/CAST/SO/1/4/HUDSON) This was also Muldoon's original plan, but the Ardens ended up providing a script, thus curtailing any improvisation: their move was accepted with relief since it took much of the creative burden off CAST's shoulders, (Rees 1991, 71) yet it was probably perceived as prevaricating. As expected, the literary quality of Arden's playwriting, which was considered his trademark, caged and damaged CAST's theatricality, as Muldoon colourfully claimed: "When we got down to doing this sodding play, I couldn't move anything. I mean his scanning lines, his perfect English was impossible. I mean we made up our own lines in CAST. So Raymond Levine³⁰ [...] had to come out and he had five pages and he would cut it down to four lines". (Itzin 1980, 22) This is how Muldoon recalls the première:

It was fucking atrocious. It went on and on and it was falling apart. The first night was the carriage trade and the critics – Peter Brook's gang was there and Wolf Mankowitz. There were the fans of CAST and the fans of Arden thinking this was going to be the greatest mix in history – forget sliced bread. 'Cos it was a cast in a million. But by this time Arden was being so fucking awkward and Margareta so ridiculous that our lot was hiding from everyone. We were out the back getting stoned, you know. Didn't

³⁰ Despite being generally recorded as "Levene", which I assume to be the right spelling, his surname is spelt "Levine" both here and in Bull's *British Theatre Companies 1965-1979*.

care a fuck. Said to ourselves: “Ah shit, as soon as this is over, we’ll go back to our audiences”. (Quoted in *Ibid*, 23)

According to McDonnell, the production was a financial success (McDonnell in Bull 2017, 125) but critical reactions were mixed, to say the least, ranging from the openly negative to the unenthusiastic. The only positive review I could find in the UEL archive is by Bob Leeson in the *Morning Star* of 17 June 1968: Leeson mostly focussed on the political relevance of the event as a point of convergence of the Old and the New Left, urging people to see the show. (HE/CAST/SHO/1/4/LEESON) Others were quite stinging; among others, Ronald Bryden – the critic renowned for having ‘discovered’ Tom Stoppard and his *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* at the Edinburgh fringe in 1966 – damned *Harold Muggins is a Martyr* as “surely the stupidest play ever written by an intelligent writer. Hasty, inept, profoundly patronising, it’s an embarrassing demonstration of how not to write down to the imaginary prejudices of the audience”. (HE/CAST/SHO/1/4/BRYDEN) Another piece, “The banality of Muggins”, which appeared in *The Stage* on 21 June 1968, and was signed PH, used similar tones, also blaming the failure on the method of collective creativity – abandoned early on, as we have seen: “*Harold Muggins is a Martyr* turns out to be an evening of almost stupefying banality and a very poor advertisement indeed for a method of play construction that permits everyone to have a finger in the pie”. (HE/CAST/SHO/1/4/STAGE) Muldoon jokingly summed up these negative reactions holding that “[c]ritics and Theatre historians have put that production in the category of ‘Most important cultural event in the twentieth century sort of/almost crap’”. (quoted in Rees 1991, 71) This seemingly ‘couldn’t-care-less attitude’, however, hid his disappointment, which was worsened by the feeling that CAST were taken to be responsible for the inadequacy of the play, mostly because no one dared blame it on the Ardens: “[T]hey all came – Tariq Ali, Wolf Mankovitz and Geoffrey Reeves, who was the big name working with Peter Brook at the time. They all lined up afterwards to give me a wiggling. Nobody dared tell the Ardens off”. (quoted in *ibid.*, 73) All in all, though, Muldoon was to all appearances unregretful: “We nearly hit the big time, you know, but we didn’t want to. Apparently it was quite a turning point for the Ardens, but we haven’t worked together since. We said, never again”. (quoted in Itzin 1980, 23) Some bitterness, however, or at least a feeling that CAST had missed a good chance transpires from his words.

In the same year³¹ CAST, perhaps as a reaction to this experience, went back to their characteristic theatrical form producing a 35-minute play, *Muggins Awakening*, and even hired new members. In the previous years CAST had already taken on Peter Bruno and Jane Shallice, and for this new project recruited Ken Day, John Shaughnessy and Pam Brighton. They became part of a turnover that, according to Muldoon, was essential for the survival of the company. *Muggins*

³¹ In her *Stages in the Revolution* Itzin dates this play to 1970, but this is certainly a mistake, since all other sources attribute it to 1968, including Roland Muldoon’s CV (HE/CAST/MF/7/CV) and a CAST chronology attached to the appeal against the cut of subsidy. (HE/CAST/HE/10/APPEAL)

Awakening was an ambitious play with a large cast, summarized in CAST chronology as “Muggins becomes aware of the third world”. (HE/CAST/HE/10/APPEAL) In Muldoon’s words:

It was a smashing play, high style. It also took the piss out of the new wave of theatre, like burning the butterflies in *US*. In the middle we would light matches and take a bow and the audience would clap as they did at the Royal Shakespeare Company. We’d tell them that the world was much worse than that crap, and how bad it was – going through Vietnam and imperialism. Audiences used to sit and go “wow”. By that time they’d had the rock groups – the Beatles, the Who – and were quite sophisticated. But the IS felt quite horrified because it wasn’t enough of a class analysis. About this time we began to worry about whether we were just getting off on our own trip. (Quoted in Itzin 1980: 17)

A few more details can be found in *Taking on the Empire*: “The full company counterpoised world images, from poisoned sheep in Utah to ingratiating tribal chiefs welcoming invading GIs. A whole nightmare of the coming barbarism culminated in Red as a US president assassinated in a masterful display of dark comedy. (Muldoon 2013: 20) Muldoon shows a confrontational, if not belligerent, attitude towards ‘experimental’ theatre: his target here is *US*, a 1968 play collectively created by the Royal Shakespeare Company under the direction of Peter Brook. As we have seen, Muldoon mentioned in various interviews that Brook had tried to assert a sort of cultural patronage on CAST. In the *Leveller* interview Muldoon particularly recalled having been approached by Brook after a performance of *John D. Muggins is Dead*: “We even had Peter Brook coming down to see us and saying: ‘Did you get that idea from Artaud? Where were you influenced?’ And we said ‘Karl Marx’. And he walked away. But he had us in his film *US*.”³² But evidently Brook’s figure loomed large on the theatrical scene of the late 1960s and caught CAST’s attention once again. *US* centres on the reactions, or, more precisely, on the indifference of the British general public to the atrocities committed in the Vietnam war. Brook drew a parallel between *Oedipus*, which he had recently staged, and *US*: “There is nothing in common in their idiom, but the subject matter is almost identical: the struggle to avoid facing the truth”. (Brook 1988: 63) Shocking the audience and making them face the truth was one goal of the play. In its finale, to give an impression of the horror of napalm bombings, some butterflies were released on stage, and an actor pretended to burn one of them. Even if it was later revealed that what was actually burnt was a piece of paper, (Hunt, Reeves 1995, 119) this climactic ending started a heated debate – even at the playhouse, right after the performance – on what should and should not be put on stage, and the play is still remembered mostly for that. CAST sneered at middle-class sensibility that required the horrors of the war to be mediated by a visual metaphor, and a faked one, for the matter.

³² The film version of Brook’s *US* was actually titled *Tell me Lies* (1968). I could find no trace of CAST’s participation in Brook’s essay *The Shifting Point* (1988) which devotes some pages to the movie. (Brook 1988: 206-211)

But even if Muldoon thought that he could afford to mock one of the best known and appreciated British directors, not everything was fine in CAST. Theatrically, the company was ‘alive and kicking’ and CAST were very active, as can be seen from a busy schedule of performances for February-April 1969, which includes a performance at the Round House with the legendary rock group The Who and the Nancy Theatre Festival in France (HE/CAST/SHO/1/4/SCHEDULE), but tensions were surfacing within the group. Roland and Claire Muldoon had welcomed their first child and were considering the advantages of financial security, while Saunders and Bruno wanted to stay part-time. Yet CAST’s malaise was essentially political and originated in the difficulty of assessing the goals and means, both theatrical and political, of their production. As late as 1977 Muldoon pinpointed a lack of direction in CAST’s activity:

By 1968, everywhere one went and looked there was talk of revolution, with the exception, that is, of the traditional working class. That was CAST’s trouble: it was going everywhere except in the direction it claimed it wanted to go in. There was the Rock Revolution, the alternative culture Revolution, the Youth Revolution, the Student Revolution. Although I was opposed to most of it, the group was dragged into it. [...] By the time the working class became active and placed a demand on theatre, CAST had become enmeshed in its self-importance. [...] True, we toured with Bernadette Devlin³³ and played Occupied [sic] factories, but it was with old material. We had become so good at our style that we walked around almost like stars. We were in danger of believing that our work had become fine art. (Muldoon 1977, 41)

It seems as if the accusations of political ineffectiveness, which had been piling for years on CAST and had been jokingly dismissed – as was the case, as quoted above, with Ewan MacColl – had finally stuck. CAST were in danger of producing the dreaded “theatre for theatre’s sake”, (HE/CAST/EY/3/MULDOON) which would mean to betray all the company had been about. During this period of crisis, CAST produced *Auntie Maud is the Happening Thing*,³⁴ which Muldoon describes as “quite funny, but not a great success”. (Quoted in Itzin 1980, 17) It was the last production of CAST’s ‘united’ company’. This was the show CAST took to the Come Together festival, which took place at the Royal Court between 21 October and 9 November 1970, and reunited the leading British independent theatre companies of the time, such as the Brighton Combination, The People Show, the Portable Theatre and the Pip Simmons Theatre Group. As often happened, CAST’s performance was variously reviewed. *Play and Players* critic Vincent Guy could not find a single redeeming feature in the show: “The sheer volume of unorchestrated sound in the enclosed space of the Theatre Upstairs made me want to crawl into a corner and die. [...] In a TU hall or a park it might be effective and meaningful; here one could only look at it like a caged wild beast of the species

³³ Bernadette Devlin (1947) is a Northern Irish politician and civil-rights militant. During the Troubles she was particularly active, opposing the presence of the British Army while advocating the overcoming of the sectarian divide among the population of Northern Ireland.

³⁴ In *Stages of the Revolution* the title is slightly different: *Auntie Maud Was a Happening Thing*. (Itzin 1980, 17) Both CAST’s chronology and Muldoon’s CV style it as *Auntie Maud is the Happening Thing*, which I suppose should be taken as the correct title.

Political Street Theatre”. (Guy 1970: 31) Conversely, Helen Dawson in *Gambit* defined *Aunt Maud is the Happening Thing* as “a genuine Marxist view of British industrial history; compact, impressively thought out and sustained; a good sharp puncturing of the democratic bubble”. (Dawson 1970: 179) Anyway, the split was not caused by the mixed critical reactions: it was probably the sum of family problems for the Muldoons and a longing for new challenges by the other members. As Muldoon recalls: “We split in 72/73, in the middle of making a short film, *Planet of the Mugs*³⁵”. (Muldoon 1977, 41) It was not an acrimonious divorce since Muldoon has recently stated: “Red, Claire and I remain firm friends and promise to go to each other’s funeral”. (Muldoon 2013: 23) Saunders founded his own company, the Kartoon Klowns, that toured *Mr Oligarchy’s Circus*, but his main activity became photography, and as a photographer he collaborated with CAST and the Muldoons.³⁶ Ray Levene and David Hatton also left the company in 1972, leaving Roland and Claire Muldoon as the only representatives of the original quartet. Muldoon recalls the reformation of the company without the usual buoyancy:

Claire and I were left to re-form the group. Starting again was very difficult. We had to teach the new members the style and approach to theatre that we had developed collectively over the years. We sorely missed the talent that had departed. We also found it hard to attract people. We had nothing to show people, only a ‘has been’ image. By this time the Arts council was funding groups who were, unbelievably, able to go full-time. We managed to get an awkward play together, *Come In Hilda Muggins*, and as we dragged ourselves around the country, playing weekends and days off work, we could see the wealthy group in their flash Merc vans leaving us behind. We developed an inferiority complex. (Muldoon:1977: 41)

Hard as it is to picture Roland Muldoon developing an inferiority complex, the tone of his recalling bears witness that these were really difficult times. In addition to the creative work and the day-to-day running of the company – they could not afford an administrator – the Muldoons had to face the problems of a growing family since Claire Muldoon was expecting her second child and, during *Come In Hilda Muggins* “had to be helped up and down a stepladder in the middle of the action”. (Muldoon 2013: 24)³⁷ Since the play dealt with the difficulties a working

³⁵ A newspaper cut in the UEL archive, unfortunately unsigned, undated, and with no reference to the source, gives a brief outline of the plot: a visitor from another planet landed on British soil and got in touch with the British Government in an unsuccessful attempt to sort social problems out: an undeclared reprise of Robert Wise’s classic film *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951). A photo attached to the article shows Saunders in the role of the visitor, Hatton as the Prime minister and Muldoon as the Archbishop of Canterbury. (HE/CAST/SHO/1/6/PLANETMUGS) A rusty canister in the UEL archive contains what survives of this movie. I doubt whether it may be playable, even with the appropriate device.

³⁶ In 1976 Saunders was instrumental in the inception of Rock Against Racism, a movement that reacted to racist comments by rock stars Eric Clapton and David Bowie by organizing concerts and rallies with a strong anti-racist content.

³⁷ Roland and Claire’s first daughter was born in 1969, as McDonnell states that, when taking part to the Nancy festival in summer 1969 “differences within the group began to surface. The Muldoons now had a small child, issues of childcare and financial stability were increasingly important, and

woman has to face, one cannot think of a better way to expose them than showing on stage a woman forced to work well into her pregnancy; the play also touched on the sore point of the relationship between Socialism and the growing reality of feminism. CAST faced the issue in their usual straightforward way:

We showed a TV programme like *This is Your* life in which they were telling Hilda all about her life. [...] But Hilda didn't know what the fuck was going on – with everyone interpreting her life for her. In the end she just said: “Look, I work in a factory. I'm fed up with the whole lot”. We got a lot of flack from the women's movement who said stupid things like “how can you have a play with four men and one woman!” We worried about it then, but could never come up with answers that pleased them. But now, if they persist with their daft criticism we tell them to fuck off. It was about women in relation to capitalist economics, pointing out that working women – as well as men – should be about the fight for equal pay and unionization in addition to their other needs. This was the beginning of Hilda's strength as a working-class woman. We actually had some controversial things to say at a time when feminism was divorced from socialism. Trouble is, it still too often is, and the confusion continues. (Quoted in Itzin 1980: 17-18)

Judged by today's standards Muldoon's analysis is quite crude, not only because of the language, and reflects the Left's difficulties in coming to terms with women having “other needs”. As McDonnell rightly points out (McDonnell in Bull 2017, 126) it is significant that between 1970 and 1974, when working-class militancy in Great Britain was growing and challenging the new Tory Cabinet and the international situation was no less explosive – 1973 was the year of Pinochet's coup d'état in Chile – CAST produced just one play, and on top of that it focused on what was considered as a marginal issue. This creative slackening, as it were, signaled that the artistic crisis that had led to the split had not been fully resolved yet. Nonetheless, “an awkward play” as it might have been, at least *Come In Hilda Muggins* served the purpose of testing the new members³⁸ and consolidating the company. Muldoon felt his self-confidence growing again, and the result was a new play, *Sam the Man*. It is not possible to attribute a precise date to the premiere of *Sam the Man*, yet it can be assumed that it took place at the end of 1973³⁹ when Heath's Tory cabinet was living its terminal crisis and a Labour government with a resolute socialist approach was a distinct possibility. In the following year, 1974, two general elections took place, the second giving a narrow majority to the Labour party which consequently stayed in power until 1979. This is the political climate Muldoon refers to in the following passage as a time of great expectations but also of reassessment of the past:

they felt unsupported by the rest of the company”. (McDonnell 2017: 125) Claire Muldoon most likely had her second child in 1973, after touring *Come in Hilda Muggins*.

³⁸ According to McDonnell the new members of the company were Dave Black, Dave Humphreys, Derek Couturier and Eithnie Hannigan, joined in mid-1979 by Ray Meredith and Kate Rutter. (McDonnell in Bull 2017, 145)

³⁹ Both CAST's chronology (HE/CAST/HE/10/APPEAL) and Roland Muldoon's CV (HE/CAST/MF/7/CV) place *Sam the Man* in the 1973/74 period.

It was as if theatre had finally broken out of its constraints and had become truly popular. With the Tories out of office and the grim number being done on everyone by Labour there was little working class activity and theatre seemed to fill the vacuum. We tried to follow the leaders and produced a 75-minute play *Sam the Man*. We had no money for scenery, but we had our fast style and a now competent group. The play was successful. This time we jumped the gun on Trevor Griffith's breakthrough, *Bill Brand*. Sam, a dedicated left Labour MP, whilst wishing to rally the audience to his cause, was dragged by a hard-bitten theatre group through the years of compromise and accommodation to the Labour leadership. From 1945 to date, Sam suffers the tragedy of our political past. Yet he still believes. The group far to the left of him offered nothing but accurate criticism. Again the audience is in a dilemma and they laugh along with both sides. We attempt to milk sympathy for Sam and yet his dilemma is our dilemma. (Muldoon 1977, 41)

Muldoon boasts to have “jumped the gun” on the great success of Griffith's *Bill Brand*, a TV series broadcast in 1976 by ITV and centred on the political career of a left-wing Labour MP, honest and dedicated but forced to come to terms with the general compromising and defeatist attitude of his party. Yet there is an even more immediate parallel to be drawn with another of Griffith's TV plays, *All Good Men*, aired by BBC on 31 January 1974. Both *Sam the Man* and *All Good Men* took inspiration from Ralph Miliband's *Parliamentary Socialism* (Griffiths 1988, 6; Muldoon 2013, 24) a 1961 political treatise that argued for a more radically socialist approach on the part of the Labour Party. The inadequacies of the Labour Party were the subject of at least three other plays in the decade 1971-1981, starting with David Hare's *The Great Exhibition* (1971) and going on with Howard Barker's *That Good Between Us* (1977) and Howard Brenton's *The Thirteenth Night* (1981). But while the first one had mostly a satirical intent – the exhibition of the title refers to the habit of a Labour MP to expose himself indecently on the Clapham Commons – and the other two had dystopian undertones, hinting at a possible dictatorial development of a Labour government, both *Sam the Man* and *All Good Men* addressed an extremely concrete question: did the Labour Party do all that was possible to create socialism in Great Britain and, more painfully, was that still its goal? Most of the action of both plays consists in the questioning of the two main characters. Edward Waite, the protagonist of *All Good Men*, is aggressively confronted by his son William, a Marxist historian, who openly accuses him of treason, while Samuel Kier Hardy Muggins, the MP of *Sam the Man*, is questioned by a theatre group in the stage fiction. Somehow CAST's play seems to re-create the situation of *The Trials of Horatio Muggins*, in which an individual is put on trial by a collective. But while in *The Trials* the fun was poured unreservedly on the middle-class imaginary revolutionaries, here the situation is more balanced – or dialectical, as Muldoon would probably say – and none of the two parties involved seems to hold the truth. It is significant that, for all his relative position of power as an MP, Samuel Kier Hardy is still a Muggins as the other CAST's working-class heroes. He was therefore not depicted as a true villain or traitor to his class:

In the end the poor fellow was likeable, but ridiculous. We showed him as a nice old fool and really caught the audience out. They'd always voted Labour and believed in

a Labour left, yet they were laughing at him. There was a poignancy: he was appealing to them as a real live human being, yet his politics were meaningless in terms of the class. The play was presenting the dilemma the left is in – there’s a real vacuum in terms of working-class politics, which no one as yet is filling. (Quoted in Itzin 1980, 18)

Sam the Man marked a decisive moment in the history of CAST since, on the strength of its success, the Arts Council granted them a subsidy. The times were favourable, as the mid-1970s saw a more benign attitude towards the small companies – even if the lion’s share was still accorded to the big institutional theatres such as the National Theatre, the Royal Court and the Royal Shakespeare Company. According to Megson, the money granted by the Arts Council to the alternative theatre companies rose between 1971 and 1978 from £ 7,000 to £ 1.5million. (Megson 2012, 64-65) Muldoon makes it sound like a godsend: “Then, in true showbiz style, the Arts Council gave us a grant”. (Muldoon 1977: 41) Of course, there was a certain amount of diplomatic work behind it, as acknowledged by Muldoon in his *Taking on the Empire*: “The then-independent drama panel, including film maker Mike Leigh [...] recommend[ed] our work for a £30,000 Arts Council Grant; eventually they gave us £14,500”. (Muldoon 2013, 24) To put this amount into perspective, we can compare it with what other companies were granted in the same years: according to Maria DiCenzo between 1972/73 and 1975/76 Red Ladder saw their subsidy increased from £1,105 to £18,950 and 7:84 (England) from £1,296 to £ 29,950. (quoted in Megson 2012, 65) So, what CAST received was not a really large amount, but for the Arts Council, continuity was a value to be cherished and encouraged, and Red Ladder and 7:84 (England) were already well-established companies, while CAST were newcomers, at least as ACGB clients.

As for the Arts Council, it may be useful to provide a few more details on its structure and functioning. The Arts Council catered for all forms of art, and therefore was divided into Art, Music and Drama Department. The Drama Department was appointed by the Minister for the Arts and in its turn designated the Drama Panel, composed of people with a theatrical expertise at various level who acted as advisors. In its turn, the Drama Panel was divided into three committees: the Standards and Assessments Committee, which supervised on-going clients, the New Writing Committee, which examined playwrights applications for bursaries, and the Projects and New Applications Committee, which dealt with new applicants. All things considered, it was a pyramidal organization, whose politically appointed top members co-opted their collaborators.⁴⁰ Of course, there was the risk that it would become an old-boy-network. This preoccupation is expressed by Steve Gooch in the already mentioned symposium of playwrights⁴¹ in which he advocated the necessity of establishing a sort of trade union of playwrights: “The Theatre Writers Group intends to see that

⁴⁰ A graphic of the Arts Council’s structure can be found in *Theatre Quarterly* 24,6 Winter 1976/77 p. 59.

⁴¹ See note 1.

people get grants. Because it shouldn't be done on the basis of knowing people's telephone numbers". (*Theatre Quarterly*, 24.6,59) It was inevitable that personal contacts played a certain role in the administration, and indeed, as stated above, Muldoon made no mystery that Mike Leigh was instrumental in the granting of the subsidy, and reaffirmed it in the interview with Rees: "Mike Leigh helped get it for us". (Quoted in Rees 1991, 73) This said, we should also acknowledge that, in dealing with the various controversies caused by CAST in the following decade, both the politically-appointed Drama Department and the theatrically professional Drama Panel mainly showed a commendable resistance to political pressures and a sincere aversion to censorship. As we will see, at both ends of the watershed of 1979, CAST were constantly supported and defended by a Drama Panel officer in particular, Jonathan Lamede, while the relationship with other members was more nuanced.

1.3 Revolutionaries on a state pay-roll

In 1976 CAST began their life as an ACGB funded company and for the first time they were able to give up day-time jobs and devote themselves to theatre full-time. As a result, they immediately produced and staged three short plays, sometimes performed together with the title *Three for the Road*. It cannot be stated for sure whether this outburst of productivity was due to the will to impress the new patrons, or to a surge of creative energy released by the new status as professional theatre workers. Perhaps there may also have been the intention to test from the very start how much the ACGB was ready to accept controversial plays, and if the new status as state-funded company would expose them to the risk of censorship; or, more simply, they had them ready when the subsidy was granted. As recalled by Muldoon the three plays dealt with contentious themes and were a good test of the ACGB's tolerance:

C.U.T.S *Cutting Us to Shreds* dealt with the Labour government's capitulation to the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its attack on the Welfare system, along with the plans to squeeze the NHS.⁴² *The Other Way Round* asked who were the real protagonists in the North of Ireland, as the state introduced detention without trial under the notorious Prevention of Terrorism Act. *Heads We Win, Tails You Loose* tried the system for failing to create jobs. (Muldoon 2013, 24)

As is the rule with CAST, the texts were not published nor written down: the nearest we can go to reconstructing the plots is by the leaflets publicizing the single playlets, kept at the UEL archive, which give an outline of the stage action. These leaflets were intended for potential spectators but even more for potential organizers, since they report also the company's address and phone number, and some requirements for the venue. *C.U.T.S* focused on the cuts on social spending carried out by the Labour government in charge: "The play shows how, bit by bit, the screws are turned, how apathy sets in, how the Labour Movement is conditioned

⁴² National Health Service.

to accept the wisdom of the Cuts and how private industry intends to benefit from them”. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/5/CUTS) *Heads We Win, Tails you Lose* tackles the issue of unemployment in a quite realistic way, as can be seen in this synopsis:

SEE, HEAR Harold & Jim give evidence along with Maggie, the CBI and the TUC, Marvel at the “Natural Law of Economics”. Experience the impartiality of the law courts. “Heads You Win and Tails we Lose”,⁴³ illuminates the farce, asks when is a joke not a joke, and even more, this Red Farce or Black Comedy (call it what you will), dares to ask what the hell is going on. **GUARANTEED TO MAKE YOU LAUGH AT WHAT IS’NT [sic] FUNNY**⁴⁴ (Ibid.)

In *Plays and Players* of 16 May 1977, Muldoon hinted at a surreal atmosphere: “An unemployed worker is tried in an Alice in Wonderland court”. (Muldoon 1977: 41) Both these plays were tightly connected to the difficult economic moment that forced Wilson to ask the International Monetary Fund for a loan in March 1976 and probably had a part in his subsequent resignation.⁴⁵ But *The Other Way Round* was an altogether different matter. The so-called Irish troubles were potentially a theatrical minefield, since the few plays that dealt with the Irish situation had created great controversies – as Arden’s *Serjeant Musgrave Dances On* (1972) and Arden and d’Arcy’s *The Ballygombeen Bequest* (1972) – or even terminated the company performing it, as was the case with the Portable Theatre and *England’s Ireland* (1972). Yet by the following short presentation it can be assumed that CAST did not feel intimidated:

As militant members of the Irish working class in this country are held without trial or charge. The lesson for us must be sounded out loud and clear; the Irish have become a ‘natural’ target, Des Warren⁴⁶ was held in prison to the end. Police and troops have been used against strikers. Racial minorities daily experience the weight of the Law. It is time to ask **WHO SHOULD WE REALLY FEAR.** (HE/CAST/SHO/2/4/ROUND)

As can be seen the play expressed a preoccupation for the deteriorating of the human rights situation in the UK, and was not in the least pro-IRA, even if, of course, the organization was mentioned. For a start it was not set in Ireland but in Liverpool, and the protagonist was suspected of terrorist activities just for having Irish roots – as Muldoon himself – including a Republican grandad. Nonetheless, *The Other Way Round* became the pretext for a campaign to cut CAST’s subsidy that went on until 1985, when the grant was actually cut. In part, Muldoon himself

⁴³ The play is also referred to as *Head I Win Tail You Lose* in the appeal against the cut of subsidy. (HE/CAST/ADM/3/10/APPEAL)

⁴⁴ Harold and Jim are Harold Wilson and James Callaghan, who swapped places as Prime Ministers of a Labour Government in April 1976 (exactly when CAST started their life as a subsidized company). The CBI is the Confederation of British Industry, an employers’ association, while the TUC is the Trades Union Congress, a federation of the major English and Welsh trade unions.

⁴⁵ Wilson’s resignation has never been satisfactorily explained. It has also been suggested that he resigned to avoid a coup d’état by the security services, as can be seen in <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/mar/15/comment.labour1> last accessed 28/07/2018.

⁴⁶ Des Warren (1937-2004) was a trade-union activist who served a long jail sentence for picketing.

was to blame because of the interview he gave to Sandy Craig in *The Leveller* of April 1978 in which he boasted about the lack of control by the ACGB:

When we got our first ARTS council grant we were totally frightened because the first play we did was a half hour play against the Prevention of Terrorism Act. We live in an area of London where all the bombs were going off and we had the State's money, and we were going round telling the audience that the state locked people up without trial. We thought: "Three months and they'll fucking come round, and that's it. Somebody will ring up the arts council and say: 'You know you're funding the IRA'. But the great thing was, the ARTS council never came to see us at all. They didn't know. They just kept giving us the money. (Quoted in Craig 1978, 19)

As we will see soon, the claim that the ACGB had not assessed CAST's new work was unfounded. Initially ACGB did not comment on the general bragging tone of the interview, and the underlying charge that they had fallen short of their duty, and therefore I assume that they did not resent, or simply did not read it. Unfortunately, this interview caught the eye of a retired army officer, Lieutenant P. Dalzel Job, and this triggered an extended epistolary dispute that involved three Ministers for the Arts, various MPs and the Orange Order of Scotland. I will come back to this issue later on. In those days CAST found it hard to comply with the required standard of a subsidized company. First of all, from the administrative point of view, as can be seen from various internal memos, such as one of 20 October 1978, by Jonathan Lamede, who exultantly announces: "Voilà! CAST's B/O [Box Office] Returns from April 1977 onwards – but⁴⁷ attendance figures are very sketchy". (ACGB 34/34/3/LAMEDE1)⁴⁸ But adapting to the new status was also theatrically problematic. Contrary to what Muldoon stated, the ACGB officer went to see CAST, and the comments were far from enthusiastic. In an ACGB internal memo dated 9th September 1976, Jean Bullwinkle, a Drama Panel member, reported on a lunch-time performance she had attended:

I saw 'The Other Way Round' and 'Cuts' at the ICA⁴⁹ on Thursday, 9th September. The former seemed to have very little claim to be described as theatre at all; it consisted mainly of five actors haranguing us and each other to reveal various aspects and implications of the Prevention of Terrorism Act. [...] 'Cuts' was better and more interesting. It clearly, but I thought rather heavy-handedly, illustrated the present and possible future dangers resulting from the economic cutbacks. [...] I wouldn't call it witty at all, though it did move at quite a good pace, and it would, in fact, be much improved by some humour. Perhaps in a club or somewhere more relaxed and welcoming than that bleak ICA theatre and a stodgy London lunch-time audience this piece would be better. (ACGB 34/34/1/BULLWINKLE)

A hand-written note at the foot of this typed report, signed BR (Betty Richie), states: "Her views are mine as well. It just wasn't theatre in my opinion as it could have

⁴⁷ Double underline in the original.

⁴⁸ In the ACGB archive documents are divided into files, which, in their turn, contain various folders. The documents are classified with the number of the file (e.g. 34/34) and the number of the folder (e.g. 3) plus a short denomination characterizing the single document.

⁴⁹ Institute of Contemporary Arts

been done without trained actors”. A red-ink anonymous scabble adds: “Roy Kift mentioned that he had been and left half way through”. Betty Richie seems both to go to the core of the problem and to miss it: CAST did not want to look and sound as trained actors and moreover, as regards the founding pair, Roland and Claire, they were self-trained; yet it seems that CAST’s gang had still to adjust to the idea that an ACGB-funded company had to meet some standards. It was undoubtedly a disastrous critical reception by the ACGB reviewers, and Roy Kift going away before the end was particularly damning, since he was a playwright, and not a theatrical bureaucrat. Actually, Bullwinkle’s review is quite insightful, as she recognized at first sight CAST’s features: high speed, a very direct approach to the audience, a close adherence to the political actuality. It seems as if the transfer from the untheatrical venues of their first decade to theatres proper had exposed all CAST’s inadequacies, deriving from their self-taught status.

Muldoon was probably unaware that CAST’s performance at the ICA had not been well received by the ACGB reviewer, as on 1st November 1976 he wrote an apologetic letter to Drama Officer Clive Tempest without touching upon this particular issue. Muldoon’s intent was to justify his failing to fulfill the program to write and stage a full-length play together with the three short ones:

April of 1976 was the first time that we faced the task of being completely fulltime, consequently we drew up a rounded programme; three ‘Issue Plays’, an entertainment, a full length play and 70 performances. We now view that programme as a manifestation of our then lack of confidence. We worked like beavers for three months getting our compact short plays ready. We never foresaw the immediate success of these plays or that we would stumble on such an underdeveloped area of the expanding new theatre market. Here we are half way through our first year with completed and proposed performances already over fifty and little sign of this letting up. [...] Our success has become our problem, we are finding it difficult to get time to rehearse, or to indulge in workshop. [...] It seems to us that due to consistent Arts Council funding over the years a demand for theatre has been established, especially in the Labour movement, community and student worlds. This has led, paradoxically, to circuit building and specialisation, resulting in a loss of flexibility. CAST, by offering three short plays, that have little staging demands and are low in cost and fit in at any function, are filling the vacuum. The fact is that we cannot satisfy the demand. We work very hard and are very excited by what is happening. What we are asking for is the freedom to respond to our audiences. (ACGB 34/34/1/TOTEMPEST)

Muldoon takes the scenic route to justify CAST’s shortcoming in delivering the promised full-length play. His reasoning goes like this: we did not expect to be so successful with our three short plays, and so we have been continuously busy with performances and have not found time and energy to write a new one as we had promised. There is also a clear attempt at winning Tempest’s sympathy by stating that this theatrical demand had been established in the years also thanks to Arts Council funding. All this sounds like an excuse, yet it raises some important points, namely that CAST were aware of the importance of not losing touch with the non-theatrical venues, which had been their main source of income in their first decade,

and the question of flexibility, that is to adapt the company's creative work to contemporary events. Tempest's answer was sympathetic in tone and firm in content, recalling that planning over longer periods was part and parcel of receiving a grant, and that a loss of flexibility was an unavoidable consequence. Anyway, Tempest promised to submit the request of abandoning the plan of a full-length play to the next Drama Panel meeting. (ACGB 34/34/1/FROMTEMPEST) There was no answer by Muldoon, but these questions resurfaced in a long letter Muldoon sent to the Drama Panel – indeed, it is addressed: “Dear Drama Panel” – on 10 May 1977. The letter is meant as a self-appraisal of CAST's first year as an ACGB client, and a request for a higher grant. Muldoon starts by asserting that keeping the grant at the same level would correspond actually to reducing it, and that nationally CAST had to compete with companies that received much larger allowances. Then Muldoon defends the plan to keep to short plays, arguing that “Their success indicated to us that the real way forward is through short plays which fit into an evening, rather than demand the evening to be fitted around them”. (ACGB 34/34/1/MAY1977) Here one can perceive the echo of what had been CAST's philosophy from the start, that is capturing the interest of the drunk and noisy man at the back of the room (HE/CAST/MF/1/HW), and also the issue of the venues where to perform. By this time Muldoon was certainly aware that the ICA performances had been a critical fiasco. As was to be expected, Muldoon was not shy in offering his point of view:

One other problem was the ACGB who, on viewing the plays at the ICA weren't turned on. While, it must be admitted, they don't see the problems of the Prevention of Terrorism Act or are they at the receiving end of the Cuts or, for that matter, the disease of unemployment, yet we couldn't help feeling that what they required was two and a half hour of re-oriented rep actors verbalising and musicalizing the working class blues. (ACGB 34/34/1/MAY1977)

To hint that Panel members did not appreciate *Three for the Road* because they lived a privileged life and therefore could not see its point was not going to endear CAST to ACGB reviewers and, in fact, some of the reviews of the following years smacked of personal enmity. Even more serious was the accusation of having wrong expectations about CAST's show, and therefore not having the slightest idea of what they were going to review. Muldoon maintained that on the current subsidy it was impossible to tour and at the same time to write and rehearse new material, including the elusive full-length play. According to Muldoon, the logical consequence was that more money would solve most problems:

What then of the future; we would like to be based in the centre of England, with a good van, a comfortable base, and administrator (for filling in ACGB forms and rationalising tours) and a sense of continuity. What you would get in return is a group, who, free of fashion, consistently travel the country with new material opening the door to theatre. Although always below the limbo bar of respectability, farting, in the best traditions of Theatre, at the established norms of our society. In conclusion, give us the money to establish our viability, or you'll never know what you missed. We need the assurance of continuity. (Ibid.)

Muldoon is never short on self-confidence, nor does he restrain his language for dealing with people who have the control of his livelihood. Whether this approach was valid remained to be seen. Attached to the letter there is a “Programme for the Year 1977/78” which was probably meant to appease the Drama Panel members by showing that Cast’s activity was in full gear. There is a list of five plays introduced by the statement: “We are working on, and or in discussion of, about 5 plays”. The specification “about 5” – strange indeed for such a small number – shows how much the list was tentative. Every title is followed by a short explanation of the content of the play:

“THE CANDIDATE” Now half way through rehearsal [...] The subject matter deals with the ideological strategies of the extreme right [...] (3 actors).

“THE PROSTITUTE WHO WANTED TO BE A POP STAR” about to start production. Again using 3 actors. In some way the title is self explanatory [sic].

“THE MAN MOST LIKELY TO BREAK THE SOCIAL CONTRACT” (tentative title) this play is temporarily held up waiting for results. [...] The play will lampoon journalism, the trade unions, agit-prop theatre and contemporary economics and of course the “Social Contract”.

“THE HISTORY OF THE WORKING CLASS IN SIXTY MINUTES” [...] It is intended as a big play, with much more scenery than before. We see it as the replacement of SAM THE MAN. The trouble is we must spend a lot of uninterrupted time on it. This we have scheduled for the early Autumn.

“MUGGINS THE MURDERER” [...] Muggins has murdered his wife. Condemned by everybody to do with him, except his dead wife, who, on the witness stand will admit that if he hadn’t killed her she would have killed him. We will be sermonising on the claustrophobia of the family institution. (Ibid.)

None of these plays have been produced, at least not with the above title, and it is impossible to say if this list had some substance, or was a publicity stunt meant to impress the Drama Panel, or a smokescreen intended to hide a creative stagnancy. Anyway, *The Prostitute Who Wanted to be a Pop Star* and *The History of the Working Class in Sixty Minutes* have disappeared leaving no trace. According to Roger Lancaster’s report of 19 October 1977 (ACGB 34/34/3/LANCASTER), *The Man Most Likely to Break the Social Contract* was one character of *Goodbye Union Jack*, the play that CAST actually premiered in Autumn 1977, and it is therefore plausible that the project tagged *The Man Most Likely to Break the Social Contract* turned into the latter play. *The Candidate* could have had some relationship with *What Happens Next?* which focused on the increasing influence of the National Front on the British working-class. As for *Muggins the Murderer* no Muggins was ever charged with uxoricide, and so this idea seems to have been abandoned altogether; and yet the reciprocal hate between husband and wife is dealt with by Harold Percival Muggins in the opening of *Confessions of a Socialist* and, as will be seen, will be the source of various troubles: it is therefore plausible that, skipping the murder, Muldoon kept the difficulties of family life as an inspiration for a future play. After disclosing his – albeit optimistic – work programme, Muldoon went back to the main subject, that is the amount of the subsidy:

I, Claire my wife, the others in the group, my two children, eat, drink, live and excrete theatre [...], on the other hand there is your lot. In the first year of our getting the money you took no notice of us, apart from sending us a lot of irritating forms which we had to take time off to fill in. [...] Our idea of you was that while you were seen to worship in the temple of respectable theatre and mouth the Psalms of the Fringe bandwagon, you were all the time happy with the knowledge that we had found the hole in the fence and were sowing seeds in virgin fields. No such luck, we now see you as the inevitable goofy prefect, searching for justification guarding yourselves from the scolding of a bureaucratic headmaster (probably imagined) and setting up passport control at the fence – just trying to be funny – not really rude. [...] However, CAST, whether you like us or not, does innovate. We don't fit in, we are a group. We don't mind if our plays go on for years and years, we're mavericks. We want the fame of the rebel, not this week's answer to Time Out's search for the new Brecht. So, give us the money and lie awake at night, and imagine all the pats on the back that we're earning for you. (ACGB 34/34/1/MAY1977)

The meaning of the whole rant – I think that this term is apt – could be synthesised in the “give us the money” near the end. Yet, while the overall sense is clear, it is not easy to interpret the rhetoric and the reasoning behind it. The elaborate metaphor of the fence, which is at the centre of the argument, could be interpreted like this: you, the Drama Panel, have given us very little money and then payed us no attention – false, as we know, since CAST's work had been assessed – because you were busy with ‘serious’ theatre – both mainstream and fringe – in the hope that, left on our own, we would create ground-breaking work even if underfunded. Now you have to account for our activity to your superiors (the ACGB) and we have not much to show: next year will be better, especially if you give us more money. This position is further elaborated in the final lines, with the promise of great works in the near future, while looking askance to other ‘alternative’ companies: “Our present plays only show glimmers [of our potential]. Still, we don't feel outclassed by what we see around us”. (Ibid.) There is also a final note, which may sound apologetic, but basically reinforces the point of the inadequate funding: “If we had an administrator, our position could have been presented more formally. I'm sorry I haven't got time to rewrite all this – unless you feel it vital”. The general tone is assertive, just short of aggressive: it has to be said that a belligerent approach to the Drama Panel was not uncommon among the companies, as we will see with Pirate Jenny. Probably Muldoon knew how far he could go, and the lack of indignant written reactions proved he was right. From the theatrical viewpoint, it is interesting to note that Muldoon felt that CAST did not belong to the fringe but were a phenomenon of their own – “mavericks” as Muldoon put it – and resented not receiving the same amount as other companies, missing no chance to remind the Drama Panel of it.

As a result of this letter, Muldoon appeared in front of the New Applications and Projects Committee on 27 May 1977. From the minutes of the meeting, Muldoon's tone was much more conciliatory than in his letter: “He [Muldoon] said he understood the reasons why the Committee had not felt confident in recommending more subsidy. [...] He appreciated the difficulty for the Council's advisors in seeing

Cast's [sic] works – performances took place in unconventional venues". (ACGB 34/34/1/NAPS) Whether for being intimidated by the Committee, or because he saw the advantages of being reasonable, Muldoon continued on the same note, touching on the familiar theme of CAST's unicity, as reported by the Drama Panel minute: "The subject matter is humorous and satirical and the style of work is unfashionable on the fringe. He argued that Cast was innovative but was a "maverick" in the ranks of left-wing theatre groups". (Ibid.) Muldoon then went back to the issue of the amount of the subsidy, compared to other companies, and of the staging of longer plays:

He [Muldoon] felt that other groups working to similar audiences received greater subsidy but produced far less work: the productivity of Cast [sic] is considerable although the number of new shows in the repertoire is limited by the demand by bookers for old shows. [...] He had been obliged to postpone the development of new full-length plays because short plays on particular issues were what was needed by the bookers. In the long-term he wanted to have several "big plays" in his repertoire and to create short pieces which could be slotted in to a "satellite" programme whenever suitable. It was Casts' [sic] policy to run shows for as long as they were relevant. [...] Mr Muldoon stressed the need for reliable transport and for help in administration. (Ibid.)

With the benefit of hindsight we can safely assume that Muldoon's plan to have contemporarily different programmes, some based on "big plays" and some on "short pieces", was partly wishful thinking and partly a diplomatic move intended to appease the Committee. According to the list of productions attached to the appeal against the termination of subsidy, when CAST started producing longer plays – in the 60-75 minutes range, which hardly qualifies them as full-length – starting with *From One Strike to Another* (1980) they gave up on short ones, and so performances alternatively based on long and short plays remained a project. Apart from that, Muldoon introduced the same issues he had dealt with in his letter, such as the need for administrative help; but he did so in a much less assertive and more polite way. Muldoon's argumentation must have been convincing, up to a point: the committee confirmed the ACGB's patronage, but stated that the company should be closely scrutinized, and kept the subsidy at the same level as before: "Mr Muldoon was thanked by Mr Everitt for his entertaining account, and he left the meeting. The Committee felt that the interview had answered some of their doubts but it would still be very important to see as much of the work as possible. In the meantime the Committee confirmed a recommendation of £ 14,000". (Ibid.)

So the grant was renewed but CAST felt they had to stage a play soon after the summer period of preparation, to show the ACGB that they were not idling away. The result was *Good Bye Union Jack*, which was premiered in autumn 1977: it is impossible to point out the precise date and venue of the premiere. The title is a pun on Union leader Jack Jones, who retired in that year, and the main subject is the so-called Social Contract, that is an agreement between Wilson's government and the Trade Unions, in which the former offered a freeze on prices and rents in

exchange for restraining the demand of salary increases. This was, of course, anathema for anyone with a revolutionary agenda, and the play was an expression of this opposition, as Muldoon recalled:

This was a Calendar of the Social Contract, and its victory, with nobody knowing what it was – going on to the rise of the National Front in the vacuum of Labour politics, covering Grunwicks,⁵⁰ Lewisham,⁵¹ up to Christmas 1977. It was like a time bomb – tick-tick-tick-tick – ending with the question of what happens tomorrow. A calendar of political malaise. (Quoted in Itzin 1980, 19)

There is not much about *Good-Bye Union Jack* in the ACGB archive. Sandy Craig reports on the performance of 12 October 1977 – nothing points out that it was a premiere – in “some god-forsaken pub in god-forsaken Reading”. (ACGB 34/34/2/CRAIG) The venue is not welcoming either: “Into this horrible and tiny upstairs room of a pub around 25/30 people were squeezed – some standing at the back”. (Ibid.) Contrary to what one could expect, the review is entirely positive:

The show was very interesting – more than that, good. But then CAST have been going for years and have pioneered a lot of the styles and techniques associated with political theatre. The show wasn’t only slick, nor was it merely imaginative (I think Roland Muldoon is a man to be reckoned with theatre-wise). It was a very accurate, detailed analysis of a range of recent politics which would have left many left groups gasping in the dilemma of whether to rush for their Marx or the Hansard.⁵² (Ibid.)

Sandy Craig is surely to be numbered among CAST’s friends inside the Arts Council, proof being the space he devoted to the company in his *Dreams and Deconstructions*, where he defined Muldoon as “the original socialist comedian”. (Craig 1980, 47) Yet his review should not be explained in terms of favourable bias as, in stressing the political accuracy of the play, Craig goes to the core of the matter. The passage of the post of Prime Minister from Harold Wilson – supposedly a socialist – to James Callaghan – a Labour right-winger – in April 1976 had marked the end of the illusion that the Labour Party could aim at a radical transformation of society. CAST voiced this disillusion in their own original style. The “political malaise” mentioned was the general crisis that would lead to Thatcher’s triumph in May 1979. According to Itzin, Muldoon’s above-mentioned quotation is an extract from an unpublished interview held in 1978, that is one year before Labour’s catastrophic defeat. Muldoon identified in the Social Contract not

⁵⁰ Muldoon refers to an industrial dispute that took place at the Grunwicks Film Processing Laboratories in Willesden, North London. It went on from 1976 to 1978 and ended in a bitter defeat for the trade unions.

⁵¹ Lewisham is a borough in south London. Muldoon refers to the so-called Battle of Lewisham, that is a violent confrontation on 13 August 1977 between National Front militants that intended to march through its streets and left-wing inhabitants and activists. It is considered the biggest anti-fascist riot in London after the Battle of Cable Street (4 October 1936).

⁵² Hansard is the name traditionally attributed to the transcripts of Parliament debates in Great Britain, from the name of Thomas Curson Hansard (1776-1883) the first official printer of the Parliament.

just a mistake by the Labour Party but a sign of a lack of direction by the Left in general: quite a foreseeing view, knowing that Labour would have to wait until 1997 to win General Elections, and that Tony Blair could hardly be called left-wing or socialist.

Anyway, in autumn 1977 CAST found themselves in the uncomfortable situation of having produced only one short play in the current financial year, and with no precise project to work on. This situation led to their greatest success: *Confessions of a Socialist*. In the preface to the published edition Muldoon reconstructs this tortuous path:

We first devised *Confessions of a Socialist* in the first quarter of 1976, but it was not performed until February 1978. The reason for the delay reflects the pressures that we felt as a group in receipt of ARTS council funding. [...] Well, in April 1976 we received enough subsidy from the ACGB to become a full-time theatre group and entered into a productivity deal with the government. We never compromised our politics: indeed, we were never asked to. Instead we toured five plays in two years, desperately, trying to meet self-imposed standards, in order that the ACGB might give us enough money to enable us to take a deep breath and decide what we really wanted to do. (Muldoon in CAST 1979, v-vi)

In his letter to the Drama Panel of 10 May 1977, Muldoon had lamented the impossibility of giving up touring plays in order to devote a substantial period of time to workshops and rehearsals aimed at new plays: “we would love to spend the whole year building our repertory for the future – but alas, you haven’t shown enough confidence in us to allow us to do such a thing”. (ACGB 34/34/1/MAY1977) This is the “deep breath” Muldoon referred to: a period of study that was not compatible with ACGB’s request of a minimum of performances – this minimum was never exactly stated, but a year without performances was unthinkable. Things seemed not to work out as expected:

In the winter of 1977 we attempted a spectacular play entitled *Overdose*. It dealt with the changes in popular ideology since the industrial revolution. The play – having cost a fortune (in our scale), not to mention three months of freezing cold rehearsal – was abandoned in February 1978. (Muldoon in CAST 1979, vi)

Overdose was never performed and does not appear in CAST’s official list of productions. Muldoon recalled some of its general features: “It was an investigation into failed ideology, not saying the left had failed, but pointing out that they certainly hadn’t succeeded. It was going to end in 1983 with a big battle against the fascists. But we scrapped it because it was negative”. (Quoted in Itzin 1980, 19) Consequently, CAST found themselves with nothing to show to the Drama Panel, after claiming that they had five plays in gestation. But Muldoon was never one to lose heart:

Shit, what were we going to tell the Arts Council? We had been shouting our mouths off about our mammoth production. Now everyone was going to find out what a bunch

of charlatans we really were. In desperation we trotted out *Confessions* and to our surprise people said it was great. The Arts council liked it. [...] Sandy Craig in *Time Out* said it was one of the highlights of 1978. Well, it all goes to show there's no counting to taste. (Muldoon in CAST 1979: vi)

Confessions of a Socialist was premiered on 3 February 1978 at a Benefit for the film 'The Right to Work' at the Architects' Association in London. It is hardly believable that it was performed after just a few days of rehearsal, which shows that what Muldoon says has to be taken with a pinch of salt. Anyway, we have the rare opportunity of having a report of this first evening by Sandy Craig:

Easily 150 people there ranging from left wingers through your London trendies to a selection of punks. The show itself was a 30/40 minute fantasy, mainly monologued by Roland Muldoon. It's a great, hilarious shaggy story with a very black sense of humour. [...] Muldoon is the original, socialist comedian, taking off in a sense from where the likes of TWTWTW⁵³ crossed with Lenny Bruce ended. [...] This was one of the best and more heartening shows I've seen in a long time. (ACGB 34/34/2/CRAIG)

According to the published edition, the play was performed by three actors: besides Muldoon, David Humphreys and Derek Couturier, who impersonated all the other characters shortly present on stage, such as the Pope, Johnny Rotten, an American executive and his computer. Muldoon's had by large the lion's share in what is almost a one man show. This is the plot in a nutshell: Harry Percival Muggins is a factory worker who loses his job because of an overproduction crisis. With his redundancy money, he goes package-holidaying in Spain with his wife. On his return he finds that there has been a revolution and now Great Britain is a socialist republic. He is not given back his work, but he is offered various alternatives. While he ponders how wonderful this all is, the alarm-clock rings, he wakes up and discovers that it was just a dream. This plot is barely a skeleton around which CAST builds a rich phantasy. The directions accurately describe the starting situation on stage:

*The organist sits extreme stage left behind his organ which is linked to the PA. In the centre front stage is a mike on a stand. The lighting is mainly pink and blue. The character actors (Dave Humphrey and Derek Couturier in the CAST production) take their places centre stage facing each other. On time the organ starts to throb its robot music. The actors do a slow motion version of the bionic man's⁵⁴ run in time to the throb. After a while they turn to the audience still running. **Harry Percival Muggins** slowly walks towards the centre mike. The music subsides; the actors stop, hang their heads with arms down. Harry adopts a half-confessional, half sensational and definitely intimate style of communication with the audience through the centre mike while the others stay in position. (CAST 1979: 1)*

⁵³ *That Was the Week That Was* was a satirical program broadcast by BBC between 1962 and 1964.

⁵⁴ This probably refers to *The Six-Million Dollars Man*, a TV series broadcast in UK between 1973 and 1978, whose protagonist is a former astronaut who gains super-powers through bionic implants.

The presence of an organ and a microphone on stage is reminiscent of popular entertainment as described by John McGrath in his *A Good Night Out*, (McGrath 1996, 22-25), but the atmosphere turns almost to science fiction with the non-naturalistic pink and blue lighting, the robot music and the actors running in slow motion. The “half-confessional, half sensational” style hints at Muldoon’s usual loud and direct way of addressing the audience, also referring to the Catholic rite of confession in which Muldoon is both penitent and confessor as he opens his heart to the audience while also trying to perceive their emotions. The often-repeated refrain “know what I mean” clearly aims at establishing a two-way communicative channel with the audience:

It was on the thirteenth of November of last year that I walked in my door at home, and I was overwhelmed by the most stinking, lingering, disgusting smell of boiled cabbage. My wife boils cabbage, you know what I mean like ... like it was, like ... every school dinner you’ve ever had, rolled into one. Just ’cos she comes from the north, you know what I mean, she thinks it should be boiled all day and all day and all day. [...] And Wall’s sausages. I thought to myself – not again, not Walls’ [sic] pork pink sausages ... I can’t stand it. (Ibid.,1-2)

Muldoon’s overview of his family life starts with olfactive sensations and the prospect of cheap sausages for dinner. This far it is a fairly ordinary British proletarian interior. Muggins’ monologue dips deeper into it:

Now my wife, she used to be attractive when I met her fifteen years ago, but now she wears her varicose veins like she’s got ranks in the army. The difference between my varicose veins and my wife’s is that I wear trousers and keep them out of sight – you know what I mean? She wears them like she’s proud of them. Now the thing is, that evening, I thought to myself, I really can’t stand this. (Ibid., 2)

Muggins’ rebellion takes the familiar form of a visit to the pub. There he meets forty other like-minded blokes and the evening turns into a drinking spree: “Anything, anything, anything to feel what we was feeling, which was liberation”. At closing time all forty of them go downtown to an Indian restaurant and try all the different dishes: “For the first time, I was with forty blokes, and none of them had mixed grill. Everyone had genuine Indian, you know what I mean. We was into Bombay Duck, Jumogin Gosht”. This gastronomic adventurousness does not only counterpoints with the sadness of English home cooking but also – far-fetched as it may sound – gives to these twentieth century proletarians a glimpse of the excitement their fathers felt for being part of the British Empire. At the end of the feast, Muggins is sick out of a window and, unable to catch breath, swears that he will become a better human being if he survives. Next morning he goes early to the factory, willing to put into practice his new resolution, and he puts himself eagerly to work, in complete symbiosis with the machine:

*The organ plays ‘Good Vibrations’ as the actors become the machine. The machine sings the song and dances a machine dance [...] when singing ceases the music lowers in volume. The machine dances on as **HARRY** talks over the top from behind the machine – with a hand held mike. (Ibid. 4)*

While Harry is in full swing, he is summoned by the American executive manager at the highest floor of the building and fired on the spot; he is also asked, before leaving, to make a last Universal Gottlieb Junction Joint – it is a spare part of some sort, but it is not clear what it really is – so that they can put it into a machine and have as many of them as necessary. Muggins refuses to do so, and instead takes the redundancy money and goes holidaying in Spain with his wife. There, they find themselves in the middle of a revolution and come back to England. When at home, Muldoon switches on the television and finds out that things have changed in Great Britain:

*Organ plays the ‘Red Flag’ as a TV jingle. A large TV screen is carried on to the middle of a stage. It is a big enough screen to show an actor from the top of his head to his waist – it stands on a tripod. The screen has drawn curtains upon which is emblazoned in red sequins the letters BBC. The C has been transformed into a hammer and sickle. One of the actors as **HUGIE GREEN** draws the curtains. (Ibid., 13)*

During Muggins’ absence, the revolution has triumphed and now Great Britain is a socialist republic. The first to enter the TV screen on stage is an actor impersonating Hughie Green, an extremely popular presenter of a TV quiz; here he announces that he has been voted out of the BBC by the viewers, and that he is starting a new career with a small theatre group called Wet Bladder – a thin travesty of Red Ladder, a company against whom Muldoon bore some grudge for receiving a much larger subsidy than CAST.⁵⁵ After him other characters are viewed through the screen: an announcer who invites the audience not to throw away the tabloid headlines of those years – such as “Miners hold nation to ransom” – as a reminder of the past; Harold Wilson apologizing at length for having betrayed the working class; and Tony Cliff, the leader of the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party, who invites all the comrades to look for the only worker capable of making the Universal Gottlieb Junctions Joint, essential for the success of the revolution. Muggins understands that they are talking about him and goes back right away to his factory. There everything has changed: everyone calls him “comrade” and the workers are in complete control of the factory. He is invited by a workers’ delegate to make a last Universal Gottlieb Junction so that they can put it into a machine and produce as many as they need. So, it seems that this has remained the same as before, but the difference is that Muldoon is offered some alternatives by the Work’s Committee Man:

So us on the steering committee have asked me if you’d like to be chairman of the work’s archery team. [...] Or if you don’t like that, how about a course on silicone

⁵⁵ According to Bull, Red Ladder received £ 30,000 in 1976/77. (Bull 2017: 83)

chips? [...] Economics? [...] Astral dynamics? [...] Er... mending Russian watches with Bert Ramelson?⁵⁶ [...] Visiting Brian Walden⁵⁷ in prison? (Ibid., 19)

What Muggins wants is simply to go fishing in the canal, and this is easily granted. As McDonnell rightly points out, Muldoon here comically reinstates one of Marx's rare attempts at Utopian thinking:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, raise cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming fisherman, herdsman or critic.⁵⁸ (Quoted in McDonnell 2017, 141-42)

I do not know if CAST had in mind Marx's *Grundrisse* when they described this socialist paradise. Anyway, Muggins embraces it unreservedly, but it is too good to be real:

Well, I thought to myself, this is absolutely marvellous! This is paradise on earth. I can go fishing by the canal. I think the whole world can go fishing by the canal. [...] Well, anyway, I thought to myself, the world can eat! Why not, I thought to myself, let's make it happen, now! No more investing in the insurance company and going to church every ten years to keep in with that insurance company. No, I said to myself, life can be marvellous! [...] So as I was walking out of the door I got a wink off the black secretary. Oo-er, sorry, sexist. [...] And as I went out of the door I thought to myself, I have reached the – the germ of what I was looking for. And then, and then, guess what happened.

Alarm clock goes off.

I woke up and it was the thirteenth of November. (CAST 1979, 20).

It is not completely clear whether his having been sacked was also part of the dream, but that is beyond the point: in fact Muggins does not resign himself to the end of his dream and tries to spread his vision of paradise on earth, but he only meets people who repeat parrot-like the commonplaces of conservative rhetoric. The first one addresses the supposed arrogance of the Unions:

And I went out of the door and I tried to tell the world about this vision that I'd had. And I met this bloke, who told me the working class are holding the country to ransom. I said, holding the country to ransom? I've been hearing that all my fucking life! I said, it must be the longest kidnap in history! (Ibid., 20-21)

The second one addresses the issue of immigration. He could be tagged as a racist *tout court*, but since an interview on 27 January 1978 in which Margaret Thatcher

⁵⁶ Bert Ramelson (1910-1994) was a prominent member of the Communist Party.

⁵⁷ Brian Walden (1932) is a former Labour MP and journalist.

⁵⁸ It is striking how much Marx's Utopia sounds like the world of the Web social media.

had expressed her feeling that “people are really rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture”⁵⁹ the race issue was at the centre of Tories’ discourse in their search for votes on the right:

And I met another bloke who said, you’ll never ... he said ... look, the blacks run the country. I said the blacks run the country, do they? I said they’re all unemployed, and the ones in our factory ... the only job they can get is sweeping up! I said if they run the country the place ought to be a bit tidier. (Ibid.,21)

The third bloke touches on another pet subject of Tory campaign, that is privatisations in general, and the possibility for Council house tenants to buy their home in particular:

I walked on... a bloke said to me... he says, you ought to be able to buy your own council house. You ought to be able to... I fucking paid for ours eighteen times over! It’s held together with Green Shields stamps – you know what I mean – it’s ridiculous. (Ibid.)

After meeting these people, Muggins loses hope of a sudden change, and he rightly starts to fear that things could even go from bad to worse: “And then I started fucking getting these terrible nightmares. About Mrs Thatcher running the country. And... and... and the National Front or whatever they’re called. It was terrible.” (Ibid.) Some hope is offered by young people selling revolutionary newspapers, but even they could not give him a final vision:

One of them said, Russia was a shit-heap. I thought, that must be right. The other one said, it is a shit-heap but it’s degenerating more each year. The other one said to me that it was paradise and the reason I didn’t turn on to it was because I didn’t appreciate their sense of humour. So I asked him about the people they’d shot on the Berlin Wall and he said they were the ones who couldn’t stand the laughs any more. (Ibid., 22)

The finale is bitter-sweet: on a personal level, Muggins and his wife, who have got in touch with feminism, agree on a new, less exploitative, division of housework that hopefully should lead to a new, more balanced relationship between them. Politically, it is an open ending:

Well what can I say to you? I’d have my dream and I’ve seen that automation could be the key to us all having a good time with nothing to fear. So I believe we ought to revolt and take over before we’re finally crushed ... I just want to say this in advance – before we actually storm the palace... That well... like all my generation... I’m a wanker. At least, I’ve got something to get hold of. (Ibid.)

The punchline is decidedly vulgar and witty at the same time, sure to get a laugh from both a working-class audience and a sophisticated one. The political message

⁵⁹ See <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485> last visit 05/08/2018.

is quite explicit: Muggins concedes defeat in the short term and passes on the bucket to the younger generation, while also acknowledging that things could get worse. Generally speaking, Muggins' attitude reflects the widely-felt disappointment for the action of the two Labour governments of the period (Wilson 1974-76; Callaghan 1976-79) and also the generational sense of dejection of those who were nearing their forties – Muldoon was born in 1941 – without fulfilling the utopian dreams of 1968. The published text is dated 1979 with no reference to the month, so we cannot know if the text was finished before or after Thatcher's victory on 3 May 1979. It can be factually proved that the published text did not correspond to the one staged in the premiere. When the Pope appears to Muggins on his way to the Executive manager's office, the name of the character THE POPE is followed by the mocking stage direction: "*Who's recently taken to dying*". This remark places chronologically the published edition after the death of John Paul I on 28 September 1978, less than two months after his predecessor, Pope Paul VI died on 6 August of the same year. It is less easy to state if the hypothesis of a Thatcher's government was just a nightmare or was written after 1979 General Election. In Muggins' vision, Thatcher's government would result in the imposition of a pensioners' lifestyle to all of Britain: "They moved the capital to Tunbridge Wells!⁶⁰ You had to eat flat meat and three veg and listen to Elgar⁶¹ all day long". (Ibid.: 21) Considering Thatcher's aggressive approach from her early government acts, I am led to believe that Muggins' prophecy was too optimistic to have been based on the observation of facts, and therefore that *Confessions of a Socialist* was sent to print before the General Elections.

Chronological questions apart, *Confessions of a Socialist* is overflowing with points of interest. Theatrically, it is obviously based upon Muldoon's ability as a solo actor, but also the two other actors have the chance to show their talent. For instance, the Executive Manager and his computer form a funny double act in the best tradition of music hall. In the following exchange there is a sprinkle of anti-American satire, since they both speak American slang and the manager is referred to as **American**, but the biggest target is the new jargon of industrial relations, softened in form but brutal as ever in its substance:

American: Harry, you have been chosen as part of the solution, Harry, a modern, twentieth-century, high technological space-age answer to an age-old problem. Harry, from thousands of applicants you have been chosen. Why, this is more futuristic than *Star Wars*. I mean ...

(*Computer signal*)

Computer: Hey, quit that bullshitting, just tell the fink he's got the sack.

American: Jesus, you heap of chickenshit, I was just beginning to relate to the guy, you shit up everything. Why couldn't I tell him nicely that ... tell the guy he's been de-hired. (Ibid., 9)

⁶⁰ A small city in Kent, renown for being a place mostly inhabited by well-off retired people and a Tory stronghold.

⁶¹ Edward Elgar (1857-1934) was a British composer. His *Land of Hope and Glory* is much played at Tory Party conferences.

Also the scene in which the two actors impersonated the machine Muldoon worked with must have required a considerable ability in miming. McDonnell underlines that this is a brilliant theatrical translation of Marx's theory of worker's alienation. (McDonnell 2017: 140-141) Politics apart, the easiest connection is with Charlie Chaplin, sucked up by the machine in *Modern Times* (1936), which goes a long way in showing how much CAST creatively exploited archetypal figures such as the Tramp. As Muldoon stated in his interview with Rees, the workers in CAST's play escaped working-class idealization: "They weren't this working class stereotype with a cloth hat that a lot of the Agit-Prop groups portrayed in the Seventies. We did not have heroic workers in our shows". (Quoted in Rees 1992: 73) In accordance with Muldoon's declaration, Harry Muggins is far from being a heroic worker. His personal file, read by the manager's computer, gives the following brief description: "Member of the AUEW.⁶² Doesn't attend union meetings". (CAST 1979: 7) Therefore, Harry Muggins is not an activist: he is a union member just in case of need, as probably the majority of factory workers, and does not take part in the union's life. Moreover, he has a sexist attitude to his wife, a complete disregard for housework – this will partially be remedied after he wakes up from his dream – a touch of racism – he is sexually aroused only by the black secretary at his factory – and maybe – as hinted at by his foray into the Indian restaurant – some unconscious imperialist nostalgia. Of course, it was the 1970s and political correctness was a still largely unknown concept: yet, as we will see, the issue of sexism will cause some problems a few years later in the solo version *Full Confessions of a Socialist*. Anyway, even with his personal faults, or because of those, Harry Muggins is a veritable portrait of an average worker and not the wishful thinking of a middle-class author.

Confessions of a Socialist is the apotheosis of the Muggins character, and also his last appearance: there will be no new Muggins, only reprises in *Full Confessions of a Socialist* and *The Return of Sam the Man*. It is not possible to find a satisfactory explanation for the abandonment of the Muggins character. Maybe Muldoon was afraid that the Muggins mask would be limiting to his development and that of the company, or that it could tire audiences out. In fact, the protagonist of the following play, *What Happens Next* (1978) could be a perfect Muggins, but he is only called by his Christian name Ralph. *What Happens Next* stands out in CAST's production for a few reasons. If not commissioned, it was sponsored and encouraged by the Anti-Nazi League, an organization funded in 1977 with the goal of confronting the increasing presence and influence on public life of the National Front. For once, CAST did not arrive first in tackling a political issue: David Edgar's *Destiny* had been first presented by the Royal Shakespeare Company on 22 September 1976, and its spin-off *Our Own People* had been presented by Pirate Jenny at the Half Moon Theatre in November 1977 (no exact date is provided). *Destiny* was an epic state-of-the-nation play covering thirty years of British history and requiring a large cast – some thirty people in the original production; *Our Own People*, even in the

⁶² Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers

restricted size of a courtroom drama, staged multifarious conflicting characters and viewpoints. CAST's original approach consisted in putting at the centre of the drama the point of view of one single character, the above-mentioned Muggins-like Ralph. Bill McDonnell, who would appear in some of the following CAST productions, provides a detailed synopsis of the plot:

Set in 1976, the play traced the rise of the NF through the experience of Ralph (played by Muldoon), a shop steward and life-long Labour supporter. Attacked by his punk teenage daughter for his failing radicalism, we see him being courted by Reg, a patriotic stallholder, and his NF minder, the urbane Archie. Meanwhile there is a crisis at Reg's factory, where the nightshift (mostly black workers) are threatening to strike over a productivity deal, and are calling for the support of the (mostly white) daytime shift. Ralph takes up the night shift's cause and, in short sharp scenes, we see the strike develop, and the barriers of race replaced by (it is being argued) a more fundamental mutual class interest. Some of the scenes are extremely funny, as Ralph/Muggins throws himself into reggae nights and Asian cultural evenings in the effort to build new bridges with his 'black comrades'. When the strike is undermined by Dave, white convenor, the new found unity dissolves in bitter recrimination. Back at home, with his reputation as a 'black-lover' doing the rounds of local pubs, Ralph is again criticized by his daughter for not doing enough to defeat racism. She storms out leaving him alone. A small package falls through the letterbox. Ralph picks it up. There is a violent explosion and a sudden blackout, which is held. (McDonnell in Bull 2017, 142-143)

The racial divide between the night and the day shifts was also a central part of the plot of Edgar's *Our Own People*, as will be seen later on. From what can be gathered from the synopsis, Muldoon aims more at making the audience laugh – which does not exclude the possibility of making them think – than at digging deep into the issue of racial divide in workplaces: yet there are some interesting peculiarities. The contrast between Ralph and his daughter can be considered a recreation of the clash between the proletarian Muggins and the would-be revolutionaries in *Mr Oligarchy's Circus* and *The Trials of Horatio Muggins*, but turning it into a family conflict added a poignancy that was a novelty in CAST's style. What was a constant feature was an eye for the funny side of things, and we can imagine that nearly middle-aged Ralph – varicose veins were mentioned in *Confessions of a Socialist* – must have raised some laughs with his attempts at reggae – the late 1970s were the golden years of Jamaican music. Once again, CAST's bigger accomplishment was to stage what the working-class felt and thought, without complacency or self-censure: Ralph being targeted in his own environment for being a 'black-lover', and also this concept having wide currency, showed how much the working class was not exempted from the virus of racism. So Ralph is stuck in no-man's-land between the extremism of his own daughter and the racism of his comrades. The situation is more than serious, and the tragic finale is a logical outcome. This climactic ending was intended to lead to a discussion after the black-out,⁶³ as the whole production

⁶³ A final discussion with the audience is mentioned in Aldous's report.

was meant to advance a debate on the fascist peril. A review of a performance in Scunthorpe on 15 September 1978 by the ACGB officer Robert Aldous was substantially positive, even if he lamented the bad acoustics of the venue, the Ukrainian Club:

I felt the piece was very well put together [and] attempted a fair round-up of attitudes towards the National Front. [...] although the show was under the aegis of the Scunthorpe Anti-Nazi League, only half the audience were actually members. (this helped counter ‘preaching to the converted’) [...] My favourite line was a reference to Hitler as a ‘misguided patriot’. (ACGB 34/34/2/ALDOUS)

This time Jonathan Lamede was less enthusiastic than usual, even if substantially supportive:

‘A real play’, as Roland Muldoon calls it, about the menace of racism and the National Front. The company felt they had to produce a weighty, bookable and tourable product. The result is a rather wordy piece [...]. The company are unhappy with the show. It isn’t in fact doing anything that several other companies aren’t doing just as well, and CAST really want to use the kind of fast cabaret style they began to develop in *Confessions of a Socialist*. The play also suffers from the fact that Roland’s own part (that of the shop steward) is fragmentary and inchoate, and simply too small – we need to see and hear more of him. But it does show this group’s characteristic intelligence and refusal to look for easy answers or use simple-minded agitprop techniques. (ACGB 34/34/2/LAMEDE1)

From Lamede’s comment it can be inferred that *What Happens Next* was CAST’s answer to Drama Panel’s repeated request of a ‘real play’, even if its duration – one hour, according to CAST chronology – was still short of what was commonly considered full-length. As Lamede observes, *What Happens Next*, in its quite traditional structure of exposition, action and final educative catastrophe, was not particularly innovative; but evidently in some way it hit the target, because CAST found themselves at the centre of serious controversies. According to McDonnell: “The controversy was stoked in part by CAST’s claim that the production was sponsored by the Anti-Nazi League and the Arts Council, an assertion which their right-wing critics used to attack Arts Council policy”. (Mc Donnell in Bull 2017, 136). This is certainly true, and a letter by Lamede to Claire Muldoon on the issue shows how much Drama panel members were rightly sensitive to wording: “Can you please not use the formula ‘Sponsored by the Arts Council of Great Britain’? [...] Thus, the formula should consist of an acknowledgment of the Arts Council’s ‘financial assistance’”.⁶⁴(ACGB 34/34/3/LAMEDE2) Yet this does not explain the cancellation of venues and subsidy by local councils, at very short notice and in the whole country. The relocation of shows in York, Northampton and Wolverhampton was caused by direct threats, probably by NF members; but in peaceful and touristic Cornwall – namely, in Redruth and Launceston – it was simply stated that political

⁶⁴ Emphasis in the original.

plays were not welcome. One explanation could be that the Anti-Nazi League, that initially had been a cross-political movement,⁶⁵ had been increasingly influenced by the Trotskyist Socialist Workers Party and therefore seen as an extremist organization, as Robert Aldous hinted in his review: “The next day I saw another newspaper report on the Anti-Nazi League (the play’s subject) that inferred that the S.W.P. is heavily behind the movement”. (ACGB 34/34/2/ALDOUS) A simpler explanation is that the worries expressed by the play were well-founded and that the NF’s influence was growing beyond their traditional strongholds: the industrial Midlands, Yorkshire, and the London docks. Also Lamede in an internal memo to John Faulkner, dated 18 October 1978, commenting on some letters of protest to the Arts Council, expressed his feeling that there was something strange in the sudden interest and concerted attacks by individuals and institutions against CAST: “Something seems to be brewing in connection with CAST; why has it blown up only after CAST have put an anti-NF play on the road? It seems to me that people objecting to the staging of plays against Fascism should tread very carefully”. (ACGB 34/34/2/MEMO)

Before *What Happens Next* the only complaints about CAST in the ACGB archive were the letters of a lieutenant Dalzel Job, a retired army official living in Scotland. I found what was supposedly the second letter of the flow, addressed to John Faulkner and dated 8 July 1978. It started by acknowledging a previous letter by Faulkner and went on with various grievances and malicious questions:

Thank you for your letter of 4th July concerning the group that calls itself C.A.S.T. I would point out however that the description which I quoted was that given to the press by the group’s own representative. [...] While it is no doubt correct for the council to take no heed of a company’s political stance, this is one which describes itself as a “Socialist Theatre Group”. It goes on to say that its production “is sponsored by the Arts Council”. [...] Can you tell me, please, how much money has been paid to this group, and whether any representative of the arts council has seen any of its productions before or since the first grant? At the same time, can you tell me whether the Arts council subsidises any companies with political tags other than Socialist, or which take a stance avowedly anti-socialist? (ACGB 34/34/2/JOB)

Faulkner answered elegantly the various questions raised by the Lieutenant with a letter dated 1 August 1978:

I too have received a copy of the press release from which come the quotations that trouble you. I do not wish to sound over solemn about one press release issued by one theatre company but in matter of detail accuracy is all important. The release gives socialist with a lower case ‘s’ which is another matter from the upper case ‘S’ you quote. Many artists in the past half century have embraced ‘socialism’ without being overtly related to a particular political party which I take to be your objection. The release does not say “sponsored by the Arts Council” but “funded by the Arts Council”

⁶⁵ The Founding Statement of the Anti-Nazi League is undersigned by a wide range of well-known personalities in various fields, like the writer and philosopher Iris Murdoch, football manager Terry Venables and conservative playwright Tom Stoppard. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/7/LEAGUE)

which is a simple statement of the fact that the company has received financial aid from the council since 1976. The amounts are listed in the Council's Annual Report which is a public document. However to save you the task of research the amounts are 1977/78 £14,000 1978/79 £16,000 1979/80 £20,000. The rise of the amount indicates the Council's satisfaction with the theatrical quality. [...] The council, in considering estimates of expenditure for individual companies, takes into account alongside other factors the balance between earned income and subsidy. If a company simply – and this I imagine is your objection – churned out political dogma its audience would soon melt away and there would be no case for subsidy. The Arts Council judges the theatrical quality without reference to tags, label or blazon. A good wine needs no bush. (ACGB 34/34/2/FAULKNER)

I have reported at length Faulkner's reply because it explains in easy terms the main economic criterion employed by the Drama Panel in granting and confirming subsidy, that is the ratio of state help to box-office receipts – Faulkner did not mention that CAST's box-office reports were not immaculate. It also shows how much the Drama Panel members were jealous of the independence of the body and ready to defend its choices. It was too easy with Denzel Job since he had no specific authority, and Faulkner could even resort to irony when pointing at the importance of accuracy, or affecting courtesy: "to save you the task of research". Things became more difficult with the change of political climate following Thatcher's victory and Delzel Job's letters achieved a sort of avalanche effect that put real pressure on the Drama Panel. That will be dealt with later on.

In December 1978 CAST had more pressing matters than Dalzel Job's letters: the end of the financial year was nearing, and the more important task was to convince the ACGB that renewing, and possibly raising, the subsidy was a good way of spending public money. To this end, Muldoon wrote to the Drama Panel a letter dated 29 December 1978. After acknowledging the failure of *Overdose*, Muldoon went on identifying *Confessions of a Socialist* and *What Happens Next* as the possible starting point of two different streaks in CAST's production, that is cabaret on the one hand, and more traditional political theatre, based on the usual Labour movement network, on the other. The big issue remained money: "We wish to further our penetration in the two directions mentioned above. To do this successfully we need to employ eight full time actors (splitting the company into two units); an administrator; improve the quality of the sets; step-up publicity and advertising etc.". (ACGB 34/34/2/DEC1978)

Muldoon's plans were precise as well as optimistic. As regards the Labour movement circuit he had in mind a full-length farce on the subject of feminism titled *Pain in the Arse*, which has never been produced. As for the 'cabaret' company he had even more ambitious ideas:

In our other equally vital area of work we are concentrating on three other titles. They are: –
'CONFESSIONS OF A HEALTH AND SAFETY OFFICER' (suitable for trade union gatherings etc.)

‘CONFESSIONS OF A MARIJUANA SMOKER’ (the long-awaited late, late, late comedy show aimed at a potentially huge market)
 CONFESSIONS OF AN OUT OF WORK TEDDY BOY (possibly for outdoor as well as indoor shows). (Ibid.)

None of the above titles has ever been used by CAST, but the underlying ideas were probably of some inspiration. CAST’s next play, *Killer on the Loose* (1979) focused on the issue of Health and Safety in workplaces; in *Sedition 81* (1981) Muldoon caused much controversy by smoking marijuana on stage; and CAST’s last production, *Personal conversation with Mrs T.* (1984) featured a rock group called the Left Wing Teds. So, no idea got wasted. Finally Muldoon expressed his request in the most accommodating way:

To accomplish all this, we need Forty Grand and Good Health. Claire Muldoon will lead the straight company and I the smaller (bent) one. [...] We realise that you might not be able to meet the request for funds we are making. But we would be prepared to draw up contingency plans that would enable us to start the ball rolling on a somewhat reduced budget. (Ibid.)

As we have seen in Faulkner’s letter, CAST received £20.000 in 1978/79, so what Muldoon asked for was the doubling of the subsidy. It may sound an exaggerated request, but aiming high was probably a bargaining tactic on Muldoon’s part. His tone also had changed from his earliest contacts with the ACGB and had become, if not really formal, at least adequate and polite. Probably Muldoon felt that the last two shows had strengthened his position with the Drama Panel and thought it was time to reap the rewards of his freshly acquired good name. Yet things were not so rosy, if CAST’s old friend Lamede felt it necessary to write on 24 January 1979 an internal memo to Faulkner in support of CAST’s grant, as if there was some mounting opposition to it. Lamede’s opening is cautious: “As we anticipate CAST being placed on revenue subsidy in 1979/80 I think it is important that we get past problems with this company into perspective”. (ACGB 34/34/2/LAMEDE2) What follows, more than an assessment of CAST’s activity, is an appraisal of Muldoon, as appreciative as possible:

The company is led by Roland Muldoon, who in my opinion and in that of members of the NAPS committee is a truly original talent and a man of immense vitality and intelligence. An artist of this calibre does tend to over-step the mark occasionally, although I do feel that Roland has done this less than some. We have had some reactions to the interview in *The Leveller*. It does stand to reason that statements made to *The Leveller* will be made on a slightly different plane for those made, say, to the *Daily Telegraph*. (Ibid.)

Delzel Job’s letter is directly acknowledged when Lamede states that “A retired Lieutenant Commander in the Scottish Highlands will naturally see (the same)”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Added in handwriting to the typed text.

remarks in a different context". Muldoon's independence of thought is stressed as a fundamental component of CAST's peculiar shows, as I have frequently underlined:

He [Muldoon] has a great aversion to dogma of any kind, and this certainly includes the left as well as the right. He will tell you with glee how shocking ultra-left-wing audiences will sometimes find CAST's work. [H]is work is of value to theatre in this country precisely because it stems from a political intelligence often far subtler and far more alert than that of many another theatre group. (Ibid.)

Lamede then goes on praising CAST for conforming, or trying to, with ACGB's requirement. As Lamede points out, the appointing of an administrator marked a turning point in CAST's life.

There have been administrative problems with CAST in the past. [T]hey have made strenuous efforts throughout this year to surmount the problems. Information from the company has been flowing in far more efficiently, and they have now taken a positive step in appointing an administrator to handle the company's affairs. (Ibid.)

Lamede ends his letter reinforcing CAST's need for stability (see letter of 10 May 1979) and implicitly supporting the required increase:

I am confident that, with something approaching proper funding next year, the company will continue to develop. I have no doubt that it is certainly at a stage we can no longer justify treating the company as a new applicant, but should place it on a more stable footing. In 1979/80 they plan four new productions, with a minimum of 140 performances, and have applied for £40,000. (Ibid.)

CAST had reason to be grateful to Lamede for his support but, as we will see, it will not always be the case. Anyway, at the end of the 1978/79 financial year – the minutes are undated – Muldoon was invited to the NAPS committee to advocate his case on the strength of Lamede's glowing introduction. In fact, the atmosphere was much less suspicious than two years before, when CAST had been invited to appear at the end of their first year as a subsidized company. As was customary, there was a brief discussion before the company's representatives were admitted: "Before the arrival of the company, members of the Committee reported on shows they had seen. The most favourable reports were on *Confession of a Socialist*. Roger Lancaster had liked *Goodbye Union Jack* too. Reports on *What Happened Next* were more mixed". (ACGB 34/34/2/NAPS) Muldoon presented his case using the same arguments of the letter of 29 December 1978, including the project of splitting the company to tour two plays simultaneously. He must have been convincing, since, after CAST's members left the meeting, the Committee expressed a positive judgement: "The committee agreed that CAST's work was of a high standard. The company had used their increases in subsidy well and their working was developing. The Committee agreed that CAST should be strongly recommended for annual revenue subsidy in 1979/80 at an adequate level". (Ibid.) In fact, CAST's

subsidy was raised to £27,500, and the onus was on them to fulfil the expectations of the Drama Panel.

According to CAST's work chronology attached to the appeal, in the first half of 1979 CAST produced a 35-minute play titled *Killer on the Loose*. (HE/CAST/ADM/3/10/APPEAL) In a 2014 interview with Susan Croft, partially reported in the unfinishedhistories.com site Muldoon called it "a disaster".⁶⁷ There were probably not many performances, since it left very scant traces. In a publicity leaflet in the UEL archive, the show is introduced by a series of questions in CAST's typical excessive/humorous style: "Can Management [sic] be trusted with Safety? Can Health and Safety Reps be trusted with Safety? Is the human race safe? Who is the Killer on the Loose? Who is Guilty?". (HE/CAST/SHO/2/10/KILLER) The leaflet goes on illustrating CAST's requests for their performances:

Our fee is always negotiable and usually depends on how far we have to travel and to how many people we play. *KILLER ON THE LOOSE* could come to your workplace, be part of a session on a trade union or W.E.A.⁶⁸ course, or feature as a short, sharp cabaret spot at your local social club – WHY NOT? (Ibid.)

At least the ACGB could not accuse CAST of being picky in choosing venues and audiences! Anyway, *Killers on the Loose* disappeared from view leaving CAST with the problem of a new play to perform in autumn and winter 1979. But the biggest problem was the change of political climate: on 3 May 1979 Margaret Thatcher won the General Election and was subsequently appointed Prime Minister. Muldoon was apparently aware that this event would be fraught with far-reaching consequences and discussed the future with the leaders of other companies:

When Thatcher came to power at the end of the Seventies, Gavin Richards of Belt and Braces, John McGrath of 7:84 and I met to discuss the way forward. Gavin said he was going to get out of touring, McGrath said he was retreating north of the border and we said the answer was Cabaret, working through the circuit we had created with CAST. So the seed for 'New Variety' was formed. (quoted in Rees 1992: 74)

Muldoon's apparent intent was to abandon one of the two streaks, that is the touring, large cast plays, in favour of stand-up comedy. The novelty was that he did not think just of himself, with the support of the company, but of a whole group of comedians that would be organized under the aegis of CAST. But this project, that would lead eventually to the Hackney Empire's takeover, was still two years away, as the first show tagged New Variety would be *Sedition 81* (1981). In the short-term CAST needed something to show to the ACGB, and they resorted to the staging of a classic, *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) by Clifford Odets.⁶⁹ The play is set in

⁶⁷ <http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/interviewees-1-q/roland-muldoon/roland-muldoon-topics-list/> last visit 12/08/2018

⁶⁸ Workers Educational Association.

⁶⁹ *Waiting for Lefty* was a big success at the newly opened Unity Theatre. The premiere was on 17 April 1936. (Chambers 1989, 59)

New York at the time of the Great Depression and consists of seven scenes –connected but not in chronological order – in the frame of a taxi drivers’ strike. In an undated press release, Muldoon explains the choice:

I believe that it is the most political play ever written. It never lets you off the hook, yet gives you plenty of room to think. Clifford Odets wrote the play for the legendary group theatre of New York of which he was a member along with Elia Kazan. [...] This great epoch of ‘Vernacular Drama’ ended when both Hollywood and the theatre world were attacked by McCarthyism and the House of Un-American Activities. Odets became a “friendly witness” along with many ex-Group Theatre colleagues. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/11/1/LEFTY)

The play was staged in collaboration with North West Spanner, a company based in Manchester. This joint venture went under the name of Union Circuit Theatre Promotions and was intended to experiment with a new way of organizing and rationalizing tours. As Muldoon argues: “If we can set an example by sharing our resources in order to organise at least a partial circuit, we can encourage other groups to follow suit”. (Ibid.) It was Muldoon’s old agenda of a theatre group as guerrilla unit⁷⁰ that resurfaced in a more mature and realistic form. The play opened on 18 September 1979 at the Warehouse Theatre in Croydon, London. As stated in the press release, it was the first professional staging of Odets’ drama in the UK. The Daily Telegraph of 19 September 1979 quite surprisingly – given the newspaper’s political leaning – published a positive review of this premiere by John Barber:

A raw play, an outraged play, a play like a brandished fist, Clifford Odets’s “Waiting for Lefty” has had to wait till now for its first professional production in this country. [...] The production at the Warehouse, Croydon, is by a new touring group called Union Circuit. Their acting has the vigorous simplicity required for Odets’s cartoon style, with notable work by Harry Percy as the union leader. I was less impressed by the long sequences of photographs before and after the play, intended to draw parallels between violence and poverty, past and present. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/11/2/LEFTY)

It is curious that Barber, an experienced critic,⁷¹ would not mention that Union Circuit was the brainchild, as Muldoon put it (HE/CAST/SHO/2/11/1/LEFTY), of North West Spanner and CAST. His appreciation of the performance is a proof of his intellectual honesty, since CAST and Muldoon were among *Daily Telegraph*’s pet hates. It is not completely clear how much CAST and North West Spanner respectively contributed to the staging of *Waiting for Lefty*. In the picture accompanying Barber’s review, Claire Muldoon is pictured together with Michael Kaye, who is also credited with the direction of the play. There is no sign of Roland Muldoon’s participation to this project, presumably because in autumn 1979 he was

⁷⁰ See pp. 22.

⁷¹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/dec/10/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries> last accessed 12/08/2018.

working on his solo show *Full Confessions of a Socialist*, the first experiment in CAST's possible development as cabaret.

While CAST were performing *Waiting for Lefty*, Dalzel-Job did not rest, and his complaints gained power and even reached the highest echelons of the ACGB and of the Government. In a letter dated 12 October 1979 the Chairman of the Arts Council Kenneth Robinson wrote to the Minister of Arts Norman St. John-Stevas, summarizing what had previously going on with Dalzel Job:

Dear Norman, you have received a somewhat strident letter from Lt. Commander P. Dalzel-Job [...] about Arts Council support for Cartoon Archetypical Slogan Theatre, a company usually referred to by its acronym CAST. The writer has copied his letter to me and I thought it may be helpful if I gave you a few of the facts. I had some correspondence with Lt. Dalzel-Job on precisely the same subject about a year ago and with his MP, Hamish Gray, to whom he had complained. Both the drama director and I dealt with the complaint in some detail. The company receives a grant on its merits as a drama company [...]. They perform in small halls, miners and Co-operative Society clubs and similar venues. Three years ago the company did present a play which was centred around the Prevention of Terrorism Act, but their current offering is a revival of Clifford Odet's [sic] classic "Waiting for Lefty". (ACGB 34/34/2/ROBINSON)

A little more than one year before, Faulkner had easily dismissed Dalzel-Job's grievances.⁷² Now the political climate had utterly changed and a complaint that reached the Minister of Art had to be dealt with seriously. Dalzel-Job's campaign against CAST gained momentum in the following year, as he found an ally in the Grand Secretary of the Grand Orange Lodge of Scotland⁷³ David Bryce who wrote on 26 May 1980 to St. John-Stevas complaining about CAST's subsidy, always in relation to "a play attacking the Prevention of Terrorism Act". (ACGB 34/34/2/BRYCE) The Secretary General of the Arts Council Roy Shaw was urged by the Minister to answer to Bryce on the minister's behalf, and he did so comprehensively with a letter dated 5 August 1980:

The play The Other Way Round⁷⁴ was presented for only a handful of performances in 1976 and has not been seen since that date. It was a harsh but, in our view, legitimate examination of the issues raised by the Prevention of Terrorism Act; then the subject of much public debate. [...] They [CAST] recently won an OBIE award in America. It is on these criteria, of artistic and theatrical quality, that the Arts Council bases its subsidy to the Company for the work it does on tour throughout this country. (ACGB 34/34/2/SHAW)

⁷² See p. 68-69.

⁷³ The Grand Orange Lodge of Scotland is the Scottish branch of the Orange Order, a sectarian Protestant association, very powerful in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

⁷⁴ Underlined in the original.

This far, Shaw argued his point from a theatrical perspective, maintaining that artistic value was the first criterion for granting ACGB's subsidies. But since Dalzel-Job and Bryce's opposition to CAST stemmed from the presumption that the company's work was subversive and therefore illegal, Shaw effectively challenged this assertion:

There exists in the law of the land remedies for both the state and the individual should any production Company as the 'publisher' of a play fail in its public responsibility and it is for the appropriate law officers to act if the law is broken. If there are defaults in the law it is for the legislator to remedy them. It would be quite improper for the Arts Council to usurp this function by including criteria other than artistic quality and administrative competence in its assessments. The Arts have always served many purposes, one of which has consistently been to challenge as well as to illuminate the values of society and its individual members. The Arts Council would never knowingly subsidise an illegal act nor would it continue to subsidise an activity once proved illegal; it would however be denying a proper function of art to refuse to acknowledge work which is challenging and difficult. (Ibid.)

Stringent and logical as Shaw's reasoning may have been, it did not stop the attacks on CAST, especially since MPs – including the notorious Teddy Taylor⁷⁵ – had got involved. The issue became even more complicated when CAST openly challenged a legislative measure – namely the 1980 Employment Act – in an act of civil disobedience. But this will be examined later on.

In his enthusiastic review of *Confessions of a Socialist*, Lamede observed that it was virtually a monologue, even if the other three persons on stage – two actors and one organist – had a part in the overall success of the piece. So, it must have been obvious that it could have been developed into a solo act, and CAST's project of a split in the company possibly derived from this realisation. The decision to stage it in the USA before UK, was probably due to the friendship with Chuck Portz, the leader of the New York Labor Theatre that would host the event, but also to the desire of being tested in the cradle of stand-up comedy. An undated and unsigned letter on CAST's paper stated a few requirements for the performance and included a drawing of the stage set. It can be gathered from the Labor Theatre programme that performances went on from 9 January to 8 February 1980. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/12/PROPS)

From a handwritten script kept in the UEL archive we can reconstruct what changed in the passage from *Confessions of a Socialist* to *Full Confession of a Socialist*. It consists of a "Full Confessions Brief A-Z", basically a list of scenes, followed by a more detailed outline including some selected cues. The plot follows the same pattern: horrible smell at home, night out with the lads, promise of redemption,

⁷⁵ Teddy Taylor (1937-2017) was a Tory MP. In his obituary in the *Guardian* he is described as "a tough-minded Tory, regularly calling for the restoration of capital punishment, birching and stiffer prison sentences, as well as a more conciliatory stances towards Apartheid South Africa". See <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/sep/21/sir-teddy-taylor-obituary> His opinions on theatre were consistent with his overall political views. See also p. 84.

getting sacked, holiday in Spain and revolution. On returning home, there is the first big change: *Confessions* was staged when the Labour Party was still governing, while in January 1980 Margaret Thatcher was in power and so she appeared on screen (interpreted by Muldoon himself) instead of Wilson. This is what Thatcher says:

Watch my trials as I deny being rude to Pakis
 “ “ “ “ “ “ torturing Irish prisoners
 “ “ “ “ “ “ telling Reagan to bomb Russia
 “ “ “ “ “ “ telling them to eat cake
 “ “ “ “ “ thank you for positive job
 + thank for not torturing me.
 Dieing of Leukaimia [sic] urgh. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/12/SCRIPT)

Muggins goes back to the factory and is asked to do one last Universal Gottlieb Junction Joint. He does it but, while leaving his workplace, his inner reaction is not as peaceful as in *Confessions*: “As I packed up – I thought little Hitlers – little Stalins – bureaucrats with folded handkerchiefs are the bosses”. (Ibid.) Then he is offered a chance to do whatever he wants, and he is pacified with the new regime. While he ponders on Socialism on the toilet he realizes that the revolution was a dream, but he had really been sacked. From then on, the plot takes a completely different turn from the early version: Muggins becomes an alcoholic until he finds again a job as Universal Gottlieb Junction Joint operator. He then plans to form a Union of Universal Gottlieb Junction Joint operators – more like a secret society – and starts recruiting, but the first recruit opposes a dream of National Socialism to Muggins’ Socialism: “We could build a wall – Arts council murals. [...] We’ll make Britain great again by getting the blacks”.⁷⁶ Sandy Craig, in announcing on *Time Out* the British debut of *Full Confessions* at Theatre Space from 25 to 29 March summarised it in this way: “But the first operator he meets is a fascist: the nightmare delusions of national socialism are pitted against the vision of international socialism”. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/12/TIME OUT) The finale has a probably involuntary lyrical quality and is not optimistic in any way:

What could I do?
 √
 A big Crap
 √
 Now I’m MAD
 √
 I shout in McDonalds
 √
 But I know why
 √
 end. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/12/SCRIPT)

⁷⁶ This part is a bit cryptic because of bad handwriting.

Some alterations to the original *Confessions*, such as Thatcher's presence, can be justified by the necessity of keeping the play up to date, while the concession to lavatory humour was probably dictated by Muldoon's penchant for *épater les bourgeois*.⁷⁷ The final addition possibly answered the need to offer a longer piece to the American market, even if *Full Confessions* appeared at the Labor Theatre in a double bill with *Dying to Make It* by Bentley Campbell, a play, like *Killers on the Loose*, on safety on workplaces. The change in the finale is more difficult to explain: *Confessions* ended with a sort of handover to younger generations, while in *Full Confessions* the dystopian undertones precluded any possibility of optimism. Terry Curtis Fox, in her review published by the *Village Voice* on 28 January 1980, underlined how Muldoon was part of a more American than British tradition, while his character, Muggins, was integrally English:

Roland Muldoon, though English and Marxist, is a sort of avant-garde stand-up comedian not entirely unfamiliar in New York; he works through a character, Harry Percival Muggins, who relates his *Full Confessions of a Socialist* in a scatter-fire approach far closer to Red Skelton⁷⁸ than any artist Leon Trotsky ever admired. Muggins is so pissed he is alienated from his alienation: he's got an old-fashioned sexist hate on for his wife and kids, a good bit of regional chauvinism in his thinking, and the usual irresponsible tendency towards abusive alcoholism. Indeed, without Muldoon, Muggins would be intolerable – a left-wing boor. Muldoon, however, gives him a sympathetic class identity without ever romanticizing his actions, and grafts on top of all this a comic perception which sparkles with rage. [...] And when Muldoon plays International Socialist, he takes for granted that his audience knows the former is an influential Trotskyist group and that Enoch Powell has made Nazism with a British face a palpable threat. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/12/VILLAGE)

This is a substantially positive review, even if Muldoon probably would not have been glad of the comparison with Skelton, an inoffensive TV entertainer; yet Curtis Fox seemed to miss that Muggins was not to be intended as a well-rounded character but as an archetypal clown, challenging all the certainties of the audience. Fox's misinterpretation can be partly explained by the cultural gap between USA and Great Britain, and partly by the fact of not having previously followed Muggins in his various shapes. By contrast, Sandy Craig in an article in *Time Out* of 21 March 1980 highlighted what had escaped Curtis Fox, that Muggins' naivety and commonness were an integral part of his political and theatrical relevance. The article, titled "Muggins no More", was intended as a celebration of Muggins' last incarnation – there will be no new Muggins after *Full Confessions*, since *The Return of Sam the Man*, 1983, reprised Samuel Keir Hardie Muggins from *Sam the*

⁷⁷ This kind of toilet humour had a glorious antecedent in *Where's That Bomb?* (1936), one of the biggest hits of the Unity Theatre. Written by Robert Buckland and Herbert Hodge, the play staged the attempts of a right-wing organization to have their propaganda printed on toilet paper, in order to influence the workers in the only place where they enjoyed some freedom. (Chambers 1989, 70-73)

⁷⁸ Red Skelton (1913-1994) was an American comedy entertainer of a very traditional kind.

Man – and as an introduction to the incoming run of *Full Confessions* at the Theatre Space in London from 25 to 29 March 1980:

Muggins was the vehicle through which Muldoon could ride the ideological switchback of the '60s and '70s. Muggins was the little man, the Everyman, the one who always put his foot in it, whose attitudes were the prehistoric ones those of us on the left had supposedly discarded years – or, at least, months – back. He was Muldoon's way – of making the audience laugh against themselves, against their own restrictions and beliefs. He pointed out the contradictions within the audience: peace and love in the middle of the Vietnam war, or, later, the arrogant irrelevancy of student sit-in and their critiques of consumerism to a newly-affluent working class. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/12/TIMEOUT)

Craig turns what Curtis Fox One considered Muggins' character faults into political qualities. One could almost perceive, in Craig's argument, the echo of what John McGrath wrote about the people attending the Saturday night shows at the Working Men's club in Chorlton-cum-Hardy: "In themselves [they] have many excellent qualities. These are the people who may well be making revolution". (McGrath 1996: 25) It is the old question, brilliantly resolved by CAST, of the dichotomy between working people as they are and as intellectuals would like them to be, which Craig further clarifies:

Muggins was working class, boozy, chauvinistic, wife-hating. But he was open and without pretence. At best, he admitted his own faults publicly; even at worse he was generous, and desperately, manically concerned. At all times he was totally class-conscious and believed in socialism and its vision of a future, better society which would make people better people. [...] As Muldoon explains: "There's a classicness in Harold Percival Muggins, but he's not me, and I'm not him. It's about playing a character in ultra-consciousness – that is, talking to the audience but in the character (Ibid.).

All verbs referring to Muggins are in the past tense, a sure indication that he was going to be consigned to the past. Muldoon, talking to Craig, also makes public for the first time his project of New Variety. As Craig puts it: "For 15 years he has talked to the audience through the archetype of Muggins. Now he'll be talking to them as himself". Basically, it was the realisation of CAST's project of a double theatrical way, one producing plays for four or five actors, and the other turning to cabaret. In 1980 CAST moved in that double direction, with Muldoon touring *Full Confessions* and the rest of the company staging, as we will see, *From One Strike to the Other*. But Muldoon's idea did not stop there, as it included other comedians performing around him or in the circuit created by CAST. This project would be implemented for the first time in 1981 with *Sedition 81*, a play that would start a turn for the worse in CAST's relationship with the Arts Council.

After its run at the Theatre Space, *Full Confessions of a Socialist* was toured around Britain raising a lively debate but also causing unexpected troubles: at the May Day rally in Edinburgh Muldoon was prevented from going on after a few

lines by the action of a group of feminists who objected to the monologue's alleged sexism. It was not the first time that CAST met with this kind of disturbance: according to *Time Out* of March 1970 a performance of *Auntie Maude is the Happening Thing* at the North Western Polytechnic in London was interrupted by students who found CAST's vision too one-sided. (HE/CAST/SHO/1/6/CASTIGATED) What was new was that this time opposition came from within the left. Muldoon passionately defended himself in an interview with Sandra Sheperd in the *Socialist Review*.⁷⁹ Muldoon stressed that the feminists' action was orchestrated and not spontaneous, before explaining his point of view:

At the moment the play began some women attacked it – put up a verbal barrage and made the play impossible to put on. I think they'd intended to barrack it up all the way through [...]. In my opinion those who attack the play suggest that a character like him could never be a revolutionary socialist or a comrade of theirs. If the play means anything it means that the people we're all supposed to be talking to at this May Day Rally are all something, somewhat, somehow, maybe a little like Harry Percival Muggins. He's supposed to be an archetype of a man in this modern society. But they must think that he cannot become a revolutionary alongside them or they can't share anything with him because they actually attack him. They show their ignorance of art and socialism. They really are mistaken because they're not trying to create a debate, they're censoring. They also associate Roland Muldoon with Harry Percival Muggins. Of course I'm not. I'm acting someone. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/12/SHEPERD)

In the same interview, Muldoon put into plain words the project that had been behind his productions throughout his career: “not portraying the perfect human being but the imperfect human being”. (Ibidem.) All seemingly easy to understand, but not in the case of *Full Confessions*: the monologue was the source of further bitterness as the *Leveller*, a journal of the left always on good terms with CAST, published in its July 1980 issue an article by J. Blythman defending the feminists' action in Edinburgh. The UEL archive holds CAST's reply, signed by Roland and Claire Muldoon, and the administrator, Warren Lakin. Their rage was enhanced, so to speak, by the feeling that they had been stabbed in the back:

Over the years, CAST Theatre Group has been attacked in ‘News’ papers where the policy of the ruling class is presented as news. But never did we expect, that we would be attacked by a biased fragmented-man-hating-autonomist in the *Leveller*, and that this demented person's opinions of what went on, on 1st May in Edinburgh, could be presented as News! Anybody who was there will tell you that the play had run only one minute, before the censors attacked, not ten as your ‘News’ article states. As obviously, you wouldn't believe “so-called socialists” like us – we invite you to hear tapes of the play. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/12/REPLY)

CAST argues that the action of the “now notorious ‘Play-Wrecking Mullahs of Edinburgh” (Ibid.) was planned in advance, while, seemingly, the *Leveller* article

⁷⁹ The paper cut has no date, but since there is a reference to Muldoon receiving the OBIE, the interview must have been made from June 1980 onwards.

presented it as a spontaneous reaction after ten minutes of sexist banter. Insults were freely exchanged, but the bloodiest, and hardest to bear by the Muldoons, remained “so-called socialist”. The verbal fight finished there and then, and no other cuttings regarding CAST or references to the *Leveller* are to be found in the UEL or ACGB archives; besides, the magazine ceased publications in 1982. Luckily for CAST, *Full Confessions*’ New York staging was also the source of great pride as Muldoon was assigned the *Village Voice* 1980 Off-Broadway Theatre Award, or OBIE, for script and performance. CAST’s administrator communicated this to Drama Panel Director John Faulkner (ACGB 34/34/4/OBIE) without receiving so much as an acknowledgment. Maybe one early sign that the atmosphere in the Drama Panel was becoming less favourable.

CAST’s next production was *From One Strike to the Other* that started its tour in September 1980. For the first time, neither Claire nor Roland Muldoon were on stage. The actors were Kate Rutter, Magdelene St. Luce, Bill McDonnell, Sharon Heare and Ray Meredith. Claire Muldoon was indicated in the programme (ACGB 34/34/4/STRIKE1) as the director and Roland Muldoon as the author together with The Company. De facto, in 1980 Muldoon and the rest of the company lived separate lives, since the former took *Full Confessions* to New York then round England and then again to the USA, in California, while the former rehearsed from *One Strike to Another* in summer and staged it in autumn. The subject of this latter play was contentious as ever, that is the newly approved Employment Act,⁸⁰ and its purpose was not to describe but to challenge it. The protagonists were five workers of the Smellnice toilet paper factory, who learnt through experience that keeping to the new rules gave a strike no chance of success. The presentation of the play is willingly provocative, suggesting that the company could also be guilty of infringing the law under the same Act:

‘From One Strike to Another’ is a play which poses a series of crucial questions about the role of trade unions, theatre groups, and the law, and could, in itself, become a test case under the government’s new Employment Act.

For instance:

Is it legal to suggest to others to break the Employment Laws as the Smellnice Strike Committee consciously does?

Will CAST also be liable to prosecution?

Will this now challenge the freedom of theatre i.e. in suggesting to audiences not to buy a product in support of a trade union dispute, and so be construed as a secondary action and lead to prosecution?

Is it acceptable for Arts Council-sponsored theatre groups to spend Taxpayers and Government money in presenting a contrary view of the Government legislation? (ACGB 34/34/4/STRIKE2)

In its attempt to be as controversial as possible the play created expectations that it did not fulfil, and the reviews of various provincial papers reflected these

⁸⁰ The 1980 Employment Act established stricter rules on strikes and especially on picketing. It was one of the first acts of the Thatcher government.

disappointed anticipations, albeit with different nuances: for instance the *Exeter Express and Echo* of 18 September in a review signed MB demolished the political content but praised the performance: “Self-indulgent and self-serving it may be; excellent theatre it certainly is”. (ACGB 34/34/4MB) Of the national papers, only the *Daily Telegraph* seems to have noticed the play, but its article, signed by Brian Silk, cannot be considered a review, since it never mentions a performance but goes straight to the target from the first sentence: “A fringe theatre company is using a grant from the Arts Council to produce a play in which strikers are urged to break the law”. (ACGB 34/34/4/SILK) The reports by Drama Panel officials are mostly negative, for theatrical quality and low attendances; the worst one is from David Rymer who, after attending a performance in Blackburn on 16 October 1980, finishes his review by stating: “I recommend this company be watched carefully (before further financial assistance is considered) for improvements in the standard of performance and product and also that attendance and ratio of earned income to subsidy be most carefully monitored and appraised”. (ACGB 34/34/3/ RYMER) But the most worrying of the reviews came from John Faulkner, not just for his status as Drama Panel Director, but also because he could not be suspected of being biased against them, given the effective defence he had mounted against Dalzel Job’s early letters. Actually, Faulkner’s report was not completely negative, since he acknowledged that the standard of actors was generally adequate, but he disliked the space left to improvisation, judging it as a sign of an amateurish approach: “The occasional burst of semi-improvised bickerings seemed like a piece of rehearsal process which they could never drop nor integrate”. (ACGB 34/34/3/FAULKNER) Faulkner found inadequate the use of dramatic form for examining the possible effects of a legislative act which had not yet been tested in reality, but more than anything he was deeply annoyed by the defiant attitude of the company:

Detailed examination through the medium of drama risks either leaving the characters two dimensional or the argument shallow [...]. In the end it [the script] settles for easier targets and the show closes with a bravado speech by an actress who says that they are suggesting we break the law; it adds nothing to the piece. The sooner whoever is appropriate determines whether this is an illegal, rather than a silly, act the better for everybody. (Ibid.)

Since we cannot doubt Faulkner’s intellectual integrity, the charge of sloppiness has to be taken seriously. Of course, the change of political climate has to be taken into account: the audiences also showed an increasing disaffection at this kind of theatre since all the reports from the Yorkshire area – Barnsley, Huddersfield, Rotherham, Sheffield – stressed that attendances were very poor – between fifteen and thirty-five spectators. Thatcher’s victory seems to have put in motion a double mechanism. The Arts Council started to be less tolerant and appreciative towards CAST’s gang, while the latter, feeling themselves on borrowed time, lost any restraint and became more and more provocative, not just for political purpose but – it seems – seeking scandal for scandal’s sake, leading to more protests and stretching the Drama Panel’s resistance to breaking point. Anyway, on 22 October

1980 Muldoon fled to California where he stayed for two months taking his solo show *Full Confessions* to S. Francisco and Los Angeles on the strength of his OBIE award. The California audiences seem to have appreciated Muldoon's humour and to have shown no sign of unease at Muggins' sexism. Judy Stone wrote an enthusiastic review, published in the *S. Francisco Chronicle* on 10 December 1980. Besides refreshingly re-affirming the distinction between author/actor and stage character, Stone pointed out that Muggins' Britishness added a sort of anthropological spice to the enjoyment of an American audience:

Only in Great Britain could a supper of eight-hour-long boiled cabbage and Wells Pork Pink Sausages drive a worker onward and upward through a stream of consciousness that starts with hating his wife and winds up with loving international socialism. Blimey! Harold Percival Muggins [...] is to his creator what the Little Tramp was to Charlie Chaplin: a slyly hilarious way of getting his own back at the System as elucidated and crocheted by Margaret Thatcher, but Moscow and Peking, too. (ACGB 34/34/3/STONE)

So the year 1980 finished on a high for Muldoon, as he successfully went on in his cabaret project. The future was a bit cloudier for CAST as the company was facing new internal difficulties, both creative and political. In later years Kate Rutter expressed her malcontent in an interview with McDonnell:

I expected when I went to CAST that there would be a more collaborative process, and that the creativity would be more evenly spread than it actually turned out to be. [The Muldoons] controlled the money: they controlled the process: there was only creative space within the parameters they had set: there was no way you could break out of those parameters. I felt restricted creatively and also politically. (quoted in Bull 2017:130)

It is plain to see that the requirements of a state-funded company were incompatible with the 'gang' ethos governing CAST's early years, and therefore the Muldoons' leading position was fully justified by the necessity of someone taking responsibility for the company as a whole. Yet Rutter's statement is a clear indication that Roland and Claire' leadership, even if never openly challenged, was becoming overbearing for at least some people.

1.4 The Rise and Fall of the Working-Class Hero

Lamede closed his report on the performance of *Full Confessions of a Socialist* of 6 June 1980 asserting: "I can't wait for Confessions of a Crazy Red Dope Fiend Living on an Arts Council Grant".⁸¹ (ACGB 34/34/4/LAMEDE) He was unaware that he was looking forward to a play that, with its definitive title *Sedition 81*, was going to be a consistent source of troubles for the ACGB. According to Muldoon:

⁸¹ Underlined in the original.

“*Sedition* was the second most complained-about funded show in 1981”.⁸² (Muldoon 2013, 29) In his interview with Susan Croft, Muldoon explained that, since CAST’s days were numbered because of Thatcher’s government, they wanted to go out with a bang, and therefore *Sedition 81* was meant to be as controversial as possible:

When I came back from San Francisco – we’d agreed to do a play, which was *Sedition* –so that was 1980, ’81, *Sedition 81* I think, yeah *Sedition 81* came... yeah. What happened was... Thatcher was in power now, and the writing was on the wall, and everyone, we, you know, they, we could see it was coming, you know, we were all gonna get done. [...] We had noticed now that our audiences increasingly wanted us to be more, in a way, comic and cabaret style than they wanted plays. [...] So *Sedition 81* was our realization that we were for the chop. [...] so we’d cut the Queen’s head off and we’d shot Lady Di and Prince Charles.⁸³

From the financial viewpoint, *Sedition 81* had a peculiar origin: in 1980 the company Belts and Braces had a long and successful run at the Wyndham’s Theatre with Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. The substantial sum earned during this West End stay put Belt and Braces in the position of having to return some of their ACGB subsidy. So Muldoon convinced Belt and Braces’ leader Gavin Richards to put some funds into CAST, underwriting their next production. The result was *Sedition 81*, which was initially staged with the caption “presented by Belt and Braces” (McDonnell 2010, 107) in the early part of 1981. I could find no reports of these early performances, as they were probably listed under Belt and Braces account. What is demonstrable it is that this early production of *Sedition 81* triggered a new campaign of political attacks on CAST. An internal memo of 26 May 1981 sent by the Secretary General of the Arts Council Roy Shaw to the Drama Director John Faulkner signalled that CAST was again at the centre of political attentions: “The Minister tells us that he is having great trouble about continued funding of CAST. Please let me have a considered review of CAST”. (ACGB 34/34/5/SHAW) To all appearances, Faulkner passed the buck to a subordinate, Michael Haynes, who was the officer directly dealing with CAST. Haynes answered to Roy Shaw on 28 May 1981, assessing CAST’s latest productions, and touching on the play which had caused the biggest controversy in the first year of ACGB’s subsidy, *The Other Way Round*:

The company’s production about terrorism in Northern Ireland was performed in 1976 along with two other plays. This particular play *The Other Way Round*⁸⁴ only received around ten performances.

During last year CAST main production was *From One Strike to Another*. Members of the company also took part in Belt and Braces production of *Sedition 81*.

⁸² Muldoon goes on: “The most complained-about that year was the National Theatre production of *Romans in Britain* [by Howard Brenton], in which Romans were seen to bugger ancient Britons, thus demonstrating the full force of imperialism. (Muldoon 2013: 29-30)

⁸³ <http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/interviews/interviewees-l-q/roland-muldoon/>

⁸⁴ All titles are underlined in the original.

From One Strike to Another received seven reports. [...] The various reports range from very good to suggestions that the company should be closely monitored – which is what is being done.

Sedition 81. This show has been seen by one officer and three advisers. Again reports vary widely. The drama officer who saw the performance thought the standard was high enough to merit our continuing support. [...] The political content of their productions is usually quite naïve, but though artistic standards do vary, it is felt that on balance they are well worth the subsidy given (£39,000). Sedition 81 has now been re-written, re-casted and re-directed. It will open at the Half Moon Theatre early in June.

Please find attached copy of your letter to Mr Bryce on CAST which may be of help to you. (ACGB 34/34/5/HAYNES)

The last paragraph of Haynes' message refers to a letter written by Shaw to Bryce, the Secretary of the Orange Order of Scotland on 5 August 1980, in which the former brilliantly defended CAST and arts in general from censorship. (see p. 74-75) The first paragraph, dismissing *The Other Way Round* as irrelevant for having been performed only a few times, is nearly paraphrased from Shaw's letter. It is not clear whether Haynes' intent was polemic in underlining that Shaw did not need his help to answer properly to political attacks. Another possibility is that he insinuated that Shaw had signed the letter without actually writing or even reading it. However, Haynes' answer is overall supportive of CAST; yet, in mentioning Shaw's letter of one year before he seemed to neglect that since January 1981 there was a new Minister for the Arts, Paul Channon, and therefore many issues had to be reconsidered. The new political offensive was reported in an article by Jeremy Jehu in the weekly magazine *Stage* of 28 May 1981. The headline "Political groups on Tory MP's 'hit list'" (ACGB 34/34/5/JEHU) is telling enough. The MP in question is the already mentioned Teddy Taylor:

Outspoken Tory MP Teddy Taylor is campaigning for the axeing of grants to almost 30 theatre groups he claims are political organisations, not artistic companies. [...] Taylor has only had informal talks with the Minister but believes the chance of withdrawing public money from radical actors are far higher under Paul Channon than his predecessor Norman St. John Stevas. And top of the blacklist which features some of the best-known companies is CAST, the radical group which opens its controversial anti-Royalist show "Sedition 81" at the Half Moon next week. (Ibid.)

Taylor's list is a *Who's Who* of alternative theatre, including, among others, Belt and Braces, North West Spanner, Counteract, Red Ladder, Monstrous Regiment, 7:84, Joint Stock, Broadside Mobile Workers Theatre, Pip Simmons Theatre Group, Inter Action. The presence in this list of Inter Action is interesting since, as it will be detailed, the founder, Ed Berman, did not consider himself a socialist and his company's work was political only in a broad sense: evidently Berman's libertarianism was annoying to Taylor or, more probably, the latter chose his targets indiscriminately, without paying much attention to their actual activity. If carried out, Taylor's plan would have brought British alternative theatre to an end in one go, but it did not achieve immediate results, perhaps for being so unfocussed. Yet

Taylor's continuous working behind the scenes could have been instrumental in bringing about the reorganization that led to the cutting of subsidy for CAST and other groups in 1984.

Muldoon described *Sedition 81* as "a pout pourri of anti-establishment vignettes, a cross between cabaret and variety". (Muldoon 2013, 29) McDonnell, who was part of the acting staff of *Sedition 81*, gives a more detailed account of it:

Sedition 81 was a showcase for Muldoon, a variety mixing songs, sketches, stand-up and ventriloquism. It brought the major themes of CAST's work together in one provocative and idiosyncratic mix – Republican irredentism, trade unionism, the relationship of class and party, and the perennial crisis of revolutionary hope were all placed under a satirical microscope. (McDonnell 2010, 107-108)

Muldoon was not Muggins anymore: he turned into the Crazy Red Dope Fiend, a character that, according to McDonald, was the synthesis of the tension expressed by the two souls of Muggins, "between the romantic and anarchist loner on the one end, and the Marxist collectivist on the other, between Lennon and Lenin". (Ibid., 107) Apparently, there was hardly a plot joining together the various sketches. Muldoon's character went through different events, including the beheading of the Queen and the intervention of Mrs Thatcher, impersonated by Claire, and ended being sentenced to death. McDonnell details this scene:

He asks, as his last request, to be allowed to sing Be-bop-a-lula, the Gene Vincent classic. He performs standing beneath a moose, silhouetted against a montage of slides depicting a century of global revolutionary struggle. The image is shot through with the paradoxes of Muldoon's oeuvre: the revolutionary iconoclast as terrorist, the working-class hero as pop icon, and a belief in socialism undercut by the reality of a compromised life and a confused praxis. (Ibid., 108)

According to Muldoon, the biggest scandal of *Sedition 81* was not political, but came from him smoking marijuana on stage and passing it over to the audience: "We gave away free a gigantic spliff, telling the enthusiastic audience that it was a rebate from the government, bought with our state grant. The Arts Council ruled that we mustn't claim we were giving away an illegal joint, so we told the audience they were sharing a leg of lamb". (Muldoon 2013, 30) In his interview with Susan Croft Muldoon claimed that he outsmarted the Arts council officers by offering them a cigarette made of perfectly legal coltsfoot tobacco while the rest of the audience got marijuana. Actually, one ACGB officer, who signed himself SE, reported that he smelt some herbal tobacco when he attended CAST's performance at the Teatro Technis on 1 July 1981: "Mr Muldoon opens the proceedings in a manner so laid-back and redolent, in the whiff of Potter's Asthma cure tobacco, of the early seventies that at first I thought he was going to base his act on an ironic take-off of the archetypal students union bar anarchist". (ACGB 34/34/5/SE) Unfortunately, the nature of the substance smoked on stage seems to be the least problem, as SE's review is the most ferocious Muldoon had so far received throughout his career: "As agit-prop his work is dated and unoriginal, though his

personal and rather pointless anger against the establishment gives a certain thrill at times. [...] It has all the appeal and shock of a baby displaying its excreta – you wish he'd put it away but you indulge his innocence". (Ibid.) SE concedes that Muldoon is a good entertainer, and that all the cast is adequate and professional, and the musical accompaniment nice. The rest of the report is a definite condemnation of the show and the company:

A well-written and nicely recited piece of Shakespearian blank verse⁸⁵ about the infamy of the present monarchy was also attractive in an evening where most of the dialogue is based on the idea that the words 'fuck' and 'shit' are incredibly funny. If I hadn't been working for the Arts Council I wouldn't have gone in the first place, at least I'd have walked out at the interval. [...] I think the company can only be judged by the appeal to the audiences who actually like this sort of thing – who are they? How many are they? I think attendance returns need close scrutiny. (Ibid.)

John Faulkner, maybe stimulated by Shaw's request of an assessment, had gone and seen *Sedition 81* in its run at the Half Moon Theatre on 3 June 1981. His report is, as ever, scholarly and articulate:

Roland Muldoon is trying to do something in theatre so complex that it can hardly succeed. He is trying to blend together the zany and emblematic forces of commedia,⁸⁶ the free and fantastic patter of music hall stand up comedians (notably Arthur English, Max Miller and perhaps Tommy Cooper)⁸⁷ the oblique cool irony of Brecht and the Rabelaisian quality of Jarry, give the whole a dash of John Cade⁸⁸ and turn it loose on the treasured values of 'the established order'. (ACGB 34/34/5/FAULKNER)

According to Faulkner, the task was made even harder by the joining together and overlapping of too many themes:

If the company simply chose an up-dated Joan Littlewood approach their task would be relatively easy. Roland however has studded the place with sections of autobiographical phantasy and of Shakespeare parody and has chosen so many targets (the present government; the monarchy; the trade unions; drug legislation; unemployment; health and safety at work; feminism; the police; the Establishment; moles; nuclear energy; fascism; 'high' culture; Northern Ireland; the Arts Council) that it teeters between collage and jumble. (Ibid.)

From the list of subjects touched upon in *Sedition 81* we may infer that it was a survey of all of CAST's previous work. Faulkner does not seem to have been shocked by marijuana smoking, and the mention of John Cade could refer to that. His criticism is essentially theatrical, even if in the finale Faulkner acknowledges the underlying political issue and the ongoing debate on CAST within the ACGB:

⁸⁵ In a private conversation, McDonnell told me that he was the author of the blank verses.

⁸⁶ Underlined in the original.

⁸⁷ All three of them were comedians in the music hall tradition.

⁸⁸ John Cade (1912-1980) was a psychiatrist who experimented with the use of drugs in the treatment of mental illnesses.

In case the statement needs⁸⁹ to be made, it is not seditious. To borrow a phrase from a send up vent act “that’s not seditious it’s tasteless”. [...] What it now needs is a succession of big audiences and an axe as ruthlessly applied to the less successful material as the one plied on the monarch by Roland. (Ibid.)

Probably Muldoon would not have been happy in knowing that the political impact of *Sedition 81* could be so easily dismissed; yet, Faulkner’s statement at least responded to the immediate need of calming down the mounting hostility towards CAST. Theatrically, Faulkner suspended the judgement, but overtly stated that the play needed much re-working. Even Lamede, who saw the play at Teatro Technis on 3 July 1981, could not find much to recommend the show for, even if his approach was not hostile:

Roland Muldoon is not so much a socialist as an anarchist. [...] Discipline, I would bet, is something Roland would rather leave to the British Army or a Soho brothel. [...] Now this is very fine when it’s just Roland himself up there, because he is a very good performer and his truly anarchic talent could do us all a lot of good. But when it comes to directing a company of performers (all of whom are actually pretty talented) in a script that he himself has written, he is his own worst enemy. (ACGB 34/34/5/LAMEDE)

Lamede had always appreciated above all Muldoon’s skills as a performer, but for the first time he expressed some doubts about his ability to direct his company. Up to then CAST’s productions, even if they left ample space to improvisation, followed some kind of plot, while in *Sedition 81*, the search for a cabaret-like style lead to a fragmented show. In fact, from this point on, the nature of CAST’s shows would be a matter of discussion between the company and the Drama Panel, since the latter was intended to subsidize theatre, not other forms of entertainment such as variety and cabaret. Though remaining largely sympathetic with the company, Lamede also aired some doubts about the political clout of the show:

As I saw it, the core of this shapeless review was the abattoir scene, which encapsulated the disgust of the company with Thatcher’s England. [...] The mock-Shakespeare scene, though overlong, had wit and point and followed up the other scene quite well. Roland’s own monologues were potentially good, sometimes biting. But he would insist on coming up behind himself and blowing raspberries at anything and everything, with the result that so much impact disappeared in the welter of static. To make in-jibes about the Arts Council is not to fulfil a satirical purpose, but rather to confuse your audience with matters of little importance to them. Rather worse was the supposedly seditious material about the Queen. Does CAST really imagine that satire about the Queen, in 1981, could possibly have any significance or force? (Ibid.)

Lamede was probably right in stating that attacks on the Arts Council in the show – SE mentioned a song saying “Bite the hand that feeds you” – were of no relevance to the general public. As for the claim that lampooning the Queen and the monarchy was an innocuous exercise, probably he was wrong, since the *New Standard* refused to carry an advertisement of *Sedition 81* because of its anti-monarchic content. In a

⁸⁹ Underlined in the original.

News Release of 22 July 1981, unsigned but carrying on top the name of CAST's administrator Warren Lakin as the only contact, this refusal is defined as an act of censorship:

The New Standard has refused point blank to carry a theatre advertisement for CAST's 'SEDITION 81' which read "the only anti monarchist republican show in town". After having had the advert originally accepted CAST's administrator Warren Lakin, was informed by a member of a newspaper's "management" that it was not acceptable. [...] The Time Out strike has left London fringe in an advertising dilemma. The New Standard is now the only comprehensive nightly guide to "what's on in London". The fact that it refused to accept the advertisement is tantamount to censorship [...]. CAST believes that the recent MARPLAN⁹⁰ shows there is a considerable minority that are anti-monarchist and therefore, pro republican. This is not a crime in Britain. [...] SEDITION 81 has been a controversial show that toured Britain and was attacked by Tory MP Teddy Taylor, and the company was placed as Number One on the hit list of the anti-Arts Council lobby. The subject of the complaint was the controversial handling of the Queen in the piece. CAST believes that this, and obviously the Royal Wedding and the uncharacteristic atmosphere in the land, has led to this clampdown of its right. (ACGB 34/34/5/LAKIN)

In his report Faulkner also mentioned the *Time Out* strike as a source of serious difficulties for small companies, and so CAST's hypothesis of a censorious intention is not unfounded, since the political leaning of the *New Standard* – now *London Evening Standard* – has always been on the right of the political spectrum. As for the evoked "anti-Arts Council lobby" it would have been more proper to speak of an "anti-CAST lobby" – whose existence could be documented – but that would have sounded too self-indulgent. CAST's message mentions the Royal Wedding (29 July 1981) as a possible source of hostility towards an overtly republican show. Yet the very title *Sedition 81* was very daring in a period – roughly spring-summer 1981 – in which Great Britain was marred by major riots caused by racial and social tensions. With the benefit of many years' hindsight, one almost feels that *New Standard's* commercial boycott was a very mild reaction on the part of the 'establishment' in a period in which many British cities were burning.

In the early 1980s the placement of NATO cruise missiles in the RAF base of Greenham Common in Berkshire caused a wave of protests outside the gates and all through the country. Reagan's confrontational attitude to the USSR was a source of disquiet for all the western world, since it was feared that it could lead to nuclear war. British theatre took notice in various ways of this issue. For instance, from a right-wing view point, Tom Stoppard in his *The Real Thing* (1982), a play devoted to the themes of love and betrayal in couples, did not miss the chance to make fun *en passant* of the protesters and their motivations; (Stoppard 1999, 175-183) on the left, David Edgar set the final dialogue between Amanda and Martin, two characters of his *Maydays* (1983) in a protest camp outside a base. This anxiety was also at the origin of *Hotel Sunshine*, the play CAST staged and toured in late 1981 and early

⁹⁰ MARPLAN was a market research company.

1982. The underlying political and psychological situation is summarized in an undated press release:

WE GUARANTEE

ONCE YOU have seen the true significance of the goings-on at the HOTEL SUNSHINE the value of your own life will take on a new meaning – one way or another!

ACROSS the World people can actually be heard asking one another “Is there going to be a future?” Even in Britain – never noted for panic – disconcerted rumblings have been heard. ARE WE all about to be blown up? Can we stop it? Is there hope? Will I survive? (ACGB 34/34/5/HOTEL)

For once, there is a whole typed script; Roland Muldoon is acknowledged as the author and co-director, in collaboration with Kate Rutter; the actors are Claire Muldoon, Ray Meredith, Pearl Chick and Bill McDonnell. The plot is quite simple: in a nuclear shelter divided into apartments set up by the American company T.I.T. of El Paso, live four persons, one married couple, Helen and Jim, and two singles, Arthur and Marcia. The company pushes to have the two singles marry each other, while they are actually having affairs with the married couple – a reminder of Unity’s *Squaring the Circle*. There is a further unseen character, Genie, a computer, whose voice brings about instructions by T.I.T.. After various skirmishes among the characters, Genie announces that T.I.T. has come to the conclusion that the Hotel Sunshine project is economically unprofitable and therefore due to be closed. The four characters decide to occupy the place and to invite more people to enjoy its protection, but then they come to question the very idea of accepting the threat of nuclear war as an unavoidable component of their lives. In the end the characters directly address the audience:

MARCIA: I began to consider the moral nature of these weapons ... and I realised that weapons which could maim and slaughter billions of innocent people had to be immoral ... and that what is immoral to do it must be immoral to threaten to do. ... So, that’s when I joined C.N.D., and decided to devote my life to getting rid of the plague of the people ... Mushy⁹¹ ... (realises her slip, smiles) ... I mean, the bomb.

[...]

HELEN: We have the resources to make this a world worth living in. A true Hotel Sunshine. [...] Get rid of the Cruise (Trident).⁹² Ban the Bomb. Please help me out of this mess I’m in. Good night and good luck. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/17/SCRIPT)

It can be understood that some ACGB reviewers found this kind of approach too direct and unnuanced. Jeremy Lane, in reporting on a performance at University of Sussex on 20 November 1981, commented on this lack of subtlety, but at least praised the company’s energy:

⁹¹ Mushy was the cuddly name Hotel Sunshine’s characters used referring to the bomb, on the company’s suggestion

⁹² Cruise and Trident were models of missiles.

I found the company lively and fairly well integrated. The production appeared the result of a competent if not especially subtle direction, involving, I would guess, a degree of improvisation linked, perhaps a little oddly, to a certain amount of more rigid technical work (use of tape and video, etc.). The house style seemed to be a slightly uneasy mix of agitprop and farce, energetic, effective at moments, if overall somewhat coarse. [...] The play itself [...] seemed generally to be insufficiently closely focussed, and its targets (nuclear holocaust and military-industrial complex, plus the bourgeoisie) too diffuse and/or unexceptionable to result in satire of much force or bite. (ACGB 34/34/5/LANE)

The report by Ben Bradnack of a performance in Saffron Walden on 25 November 1981 does not find a single redeeming feature in CAST's performance in one of the worst reports to that point about a CAST performance:

I am generally not at all averse to agitprop; but I found this show depressing: intellectually and theatrically devoid of interest, pretentious and condescending; embarrassing if one shared the political ideology which the show purported to align itself with; probably quite meaningless if one didn't. [...] While I would not absolve the production from responsibility for the disaster that resulted, I think the prime responsibility lay with the script, which seems to me appallingly self-indulgent, and with which the actors could do little. (ACGB 34/34/5/BRADNACK)

These are harsh words indeed and, since we will find Bradnack as the author of another disparaging report on CAST's *Sedition UK*, there could be the suspicion of some preconceived hostility. But he was right in saying that the script lacked in quality. The intricacies of the adulterous affairs of the married couple does not fit easily within the political content which, in fact, is explained separately in the last scene. As for the dialogues, they have none of the wit of the monologues in *Confessions of a Socialist*. Apparently, *Hotel Sunshine* was conceived as the obligatory yearly answer to the Drama Panel's request for 'real' plays. But Muldoon's heart was not in it, as the New Variety project was increasingly taking shape. In a presentation of *Hotel Sunshine* – undated but datable to mid-1981 – there is a patterned post-scriptum at the bottom of the page:

CAST is anxious to build a circuit for the type of work it is doing. It is also keen to act as an "agent" for people who would like to book **COMEDIANS BANDS FILMS THEATRE GROUPS VIDEOS** suitable entertainment for events from festivals to meetings. Why not contact us if YOU are arranging an event – we may be able to help. (ACGB 34/34/5/AGENT)

Therefore, New Variety was at the back of Muldoon's mind even when he was publicizing *Hotel Sunshine*. The turn in CAST's activity was dictated, or forced, by destiny as, in February 1982, Ray Meredith fell victim of hepatitis and CAST cancelled the February and March dates of their tour. An internal memo by Michael Haynes of 2 February 1982 informed the Drama Panel of the illness and that he had tried to convince the company to find a substitute and fulfil the schedule of performances. But, according to Muldoon: "We decided to bite the bullet, and run a New Variety show every Friday at Brixton's Old White Horse instead. [...] Our then administrator Warren Lakin was set the task of putting together a 'bill' for

every Friday night". (Muldoon 2013, 34) Lakin must have worked hard, as, according to a schedule for the whole month (ACGB 34/34/5/SCHEDULE), on 12 February the first New Variety night went on, with Ronald Muldoon as compere and, among others, Attila the Stockbroker, a punk poet and singer still active nowadays.⁹³ Muldoon claims that New Variety was an immediate success but, as it could be expected, it met with some perplexities from the Drama Panel regarding the quality but also the very nature of the performance. A report of 16 April 1982 by RP from the Old White Horse pub expresses all these doubts in a forceful way in addition to a general distaste for the show:

I can't claim to have enjoyed the evening a great deal, but it seems to me that any such assessment is entirely irrelevant to the Council. I saw nothing at all in the evening to justify Arts Council support. Whether it was good or bad is neither here nor there: it simply wasn't drama; nor, (with the possible exception of Atilla [sic] who perhaps deserves a literature bursary) was it anything else of interest to us. The poster persisted in saying that it was subsidised by the Arts Council. I sincerely hope it wasn't.⁹⁴ I do think we should check. (ACGB 34/34/7/RP)

In his *Taking On the Empire* Muldoon claims that Lamede opposed from the start the New Variety project for reasons akin to those expressed by RP. (Muldoon 2013, 34) I found no evidence of Lamede's aversion, but surely even Muldoon was aware that presenting various artists under a generic unifying label was not what ACGB subsidy was about. Consequently, Muldoon asked for, and obtained, some financial help for New Variety from the Greater London Council (GLC), a Labour-controlled administrative body that was to be abolished by Thatcher in 1986; at the same time he revived his 1976 success *Sam the Man* in order to appease the Drama Panel with the obligatory yearly play. The result was *The Return of Sam the Man*, which was staged from July 1982 to March 1983. Obviously, the situation was utterly changed in comparison with the first edition of the play. In 1976 Labour was in the government; in 1982, with Thatcher in power and the whole country in the throes of the jingoistic fever coming from the Falkland war, Samuel Keir Hardy Muggins' political impotence could be seen with a higher degree of sympathy. In a review published in the *Tribune* of 28 January 1983, Michael Stewart gives this description of Sam: "Roland Muldoon's Sam is a cuddly populist, a hard party worker who wears his deepest red political hearth on his sleeve". (ACGB 34/34/6/1/STEWART) Keith Nurse pays an apparently heartfelt homage to the (presumed) political adversary on the *Telegraph* of 9 February 1983:

Sam's devotion to socialism is as unwavering as any mans [sic] can be, given the vicissitudes that afflict Party in the post-war years. Unlike all those around him – the performers in jeans and white face masks who assume many other roles – Sam is no caricature. [...] The weary MP is seen to emerge from the Wilsonian era almost broken and beaten, a despairing MP who finds Mrs T. firmly in power, the Party in disarray and the working-class basking in the pages of *The Sun*. It is difficult not to feel some sympathy for him as he stands before us muttering rhetoric, talking of unfulfilled

⁹³ See <http://www.attilathestockbroker.com/> last accessed 22/09/2018.

⁹⁴ One anonymous hand has added: "I hope so too!". (Ibid.)

political promises and glumly confiding in an aside, that Labour is going to lose the next election. (ACGB 34/34/6/NURSE)

Apart from Muldoon, the cast included Pearl Chick – in the part of Harold Wilson – Andy Dalglish, and Claire Burnley impersonating Margaret Thatcher, a role she started in *Sedition 81* and continued to play in following productions. Since the Drama Panel felt they had to closely scrutinize CAST's work, there are two early reports of this new production. Curiously, neither of them mentions the previous version of the play, and are both quite positive. The first one, by K. (Kenneth) Chubb refers to a performance on 7 July 1982 at the Queen Mary College in London as part of a conference on Marxism. Chubb stressed Muldoon's role in keeping the audience involved: "It's down to Roland Muldoon. He talks directly to the audience like a stand-up comedian – sensitive to the whims and lapses and even when he disappeared into the action you felt him working the audience". (ACGB 34/34/7/CHUBB) The second, by John Scotney, is appreciative of the company in general, without particularly highlighting Muldoon's role; the fact that he did not mention Muldoon's name could suggest that the reviewer was new to CAST's theatre:

The small cast showed itself to be extremely versatile and very accomplished. The actor playing the socialist M.P. Sam Kierhardie [sic] was required to play in a more realistic style than the rest of the cast and gave an excellent portrait of a particular kind of Labour MP. The production was sometimes imaginative and the direction often very lively but generally the staging including costumes props and design was shoddy and of a vastly lower standard than the acting.⁹⁵ Apart from the M.P. the actors performed in unsuitable jeans, black shirts and denim jackets with crudely whitened faces, all of which reduced the potency of their political impersonations. (ACGB 34/ 34/ 7/ SCOTNEY)

In the underlined part, the line is by a different pen than the one which wrote the report. As often happened, the margins of the page became the field of confrontation between different opinions or factions. In fact, referring to the charge of shoddiness, someone wrote: "With low level of subsidy this can be expected". Someone else commented: "Nonsense! Shoddiness is nothing to do with cash"; and a third hand added "Hear! Hear!". It was a further evidence that the Drama Panel was not a monolithic body but, especially as regards CAST, had quite differentiated and nuanced opinions.

After the end of the tour of *The Return of Sam the Man*, in spring 1983 CAST staged a new version of *Sedition 81* titled *Sedition UK*. In a private communication, McDonnell explained the difference in the two productions with a change of cast:

Looking at the documents I can tell you that the first half of both shows was the same, but that the second half of *Sedition UK* was totally different. Which reflects the change in personnel. For example myself, Magdalene St Luce (later she renamed herself Jacqueline Rudet), Kate Rutter, and Sharon Hoare had all left. As the second half was

⁹⁵ Underlined in the original.

very much built around my/their contributions, it's clear that CAST re-conceived it. (McDonnell, 25/09/2018)

A typed schedule of the show (HE/CAST/SHO/2/20/TYPED) gives an outline of the performance; it seems to belong to a preparatory stage since, for instance, at point 8 it states “Suggest: Queen-judge courtroom scene”. (Ibid.) Point 6 reads in capital letters “WHOLE NEW TV STORY” which probably refers to a part not present in *Sedition 81*. There is a handwritten script of this scene: it consists in an imaginary Revolutionary News broadcast in which Claire, Pearl and Randy – maybe Andy DalGLISH – reports the spreading of revolution throughout the world. Among the reported events there are Jimmy Carter being executed – twice for being a born-again Christian – Ronald Reagan hiding in the Iranian Embassy, the owner of Hoffman-Laroche being forced to eat a salad sprayed with dioxin,⁹⁶ and the Royal family being reduced to pieces and sent round England as a touristic attraction: “Prince Charles ears have proved an enormous success in the North of England and already other former unemployed blackspots are phoning in asking for bits of the Monarchy so they can improve their tourist trade”. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/20/SCRIPT) It is quite irreverent stuff, not irresistibly funny to read, but, as Muldoon wrote referring to *Confessions of a Socialist*: “It must work in the magic way we tell it”. (CAST 1979, vi). Yet, not everyone liked it, even in performance.

1.5 The End

Talking with Roland Rees of his difficult relationship with Drama Panel officers, Muldoon predicted: “In the years to come, you will find in the cabinet minutes a note saying: “Get rid of that lot”. (Rees, 1992) Actually, I have found nothing so explicit, but the report signed PB of a performance of *Sedition UK* at Teatro Technis on 21 May 1983 goes quite near:

Mixture of agitprop and very limp variety turns. No plot to speak of. The Queen is beheaded, the revolution happens and Roland Muldoon appears to smoke a lot of marijuana. Nearly all the jokes, particularly those aimed at the Arts council, fall very flat. [...] The couldn't-care-less attitude put across by Muldoon was an insult to those who bothered to stay and watch. [...] Probably the most inconsequential evening I have ever spent in a theatre. (ACGB 34/34/8/PB)

At the bottom of the report one handwritten note added: “I saw what sounds like an identical production by this co. at this venue 2 ½ years ago. How long can they go on churning out this rubbish?”. (Ibid.) The remark is signed with the initials SE: probably the same officer who wrote the very negative report from Teatro Technis on 1 July 1981. An event that would make CAST's position even more precarious was the appointment, in late 1982,⁹⁷ of Yvonne Brewster as CAST's presiding

⁹⁶ The 1976 incident in the La Roche factory in Seveso is mentioned, but the name of the town is spelt Soweso.

⁹⁷ On 17 November 1982 Muldoon wrote to Brewster to update her on the company's situation. There is not an official date of her appointment.

officer, the role previously held by Michael Haynes. Yvonne Brewster was and is an experienced and respected theatre worker but her approach to CAST's theatre was unsympathetic from the start. Her report from the first CAST meeting she attended on 7 January 1983 starts unnecessarily highlighting her boredom: "This Board Meeting lasted 2 hours. It seemed much longer". (ACGB 34/34/6/BREWSTER1) After presenting CAST's claim to have New Variety recognized as theatre, Brewster goes on with the company's program for the incoming year:

April/May Possible visit for last two weeks in April and the month of May to America. They have booking there for Sam the Man

OR

Restructuring and touring Sedition UK and Sam the Man England

June/July: Regonomics tour

Sept./Nov: Frank and Joy tour.

December: C.A.S.T. New Variety Pantomime.

Jan./March Tour a new production (?) with newcomers to CAST – a trifle vague all this but I suspect that's because it is still vague to them. (Ibid.)

As seen before, these yearly programs were very tentative and therefore vague – in fact, the projected American Tour never materialized, nor the *Frank and Joy* play. Taking this into account, Brewster's underlying sarcasm seems somewhat arbitrary, and intended to shed a bad light on the company. Finally, she suggested also that CAST had too high an opinion of themselves: "C.A.S.T. see themselves in a light which they think is not reflected in this building". (Ibid.) It cannot be known if Muldoon was aware of her hostility then; he surely acknowledged it later on. In his *Taking on the Empire* he mentions Brewster, tongue-in cheek, as an unwilling influence on his Hackney Empire takeover:

When the Arts Council in 1985 finally cut our touring grant, our Presiding Officer was one Yvonne Brewster. She was also the officer for John McGrath's leading political theatre company 7:84 (7% of the people owns 84% of the wealth) which was also cut. I asked Yvonne if she had ever seen CAST. She said she hadn't: there wasn't much point in seeing it, as it was inevitable that companies like CAST would be axed. After leaving the Arts Council she set herself up with her own fully-funded black theatre company, Talawa. [...] It was this concerted attack which motivated us to go looking for our own place, leading eventually to the Hackney Empire – but I won't let Ms Brewster take the credit for it. (Muldoon 2013, 28)

Muldoon not too covertly accuses Brewster of having a vested interest in eliminating two possible competitors for the ACGB funds. Of course, this charge cannot be proved. We know for certain that Brewster's affirmation that she never saw a CAST show was untrue, but we cannot tell if this inaccuracy has to be attributed to Muldoon or to Brewster. Anyway, we gather from ACGB documents that Brewster attended all of CAST's shows produced while she was Presiding

Officer. Her reports were invariably negative, starting with the first one, a performance of *The Return of Sam the Man* of 18 February 1983 at the Half Moon Theatre:

I have not seen any of CAST's previous work and I was fearing the worst, having attended one of their Board meetings! The house was about half full and the mainly young audience seemed gently interested in what was going on. CAST's approach to radical theatre is about ten years out of date, and very predictable but Sam the Man was done reasonably well, with fine performances from the women, especially Claire Muldoon's Margaret Thatcher [...]. The men were rather weak. I am told that Roland Muldoon is a very clever man and a good actor. This may be so, but I cannot agree – not from what I saw in Sam the Man. (ACGB 34/34/8/BREWSTER)

This is the least destructive of Brewster's reports; yet it is quite malicious, for instance, in doubting Muldoon's personal cleverness. As we will see, all Brewster's later reports will be much more dismissive, which could reinforce Muldoon's suspicions of a preconceived aversion, but also mark a difference in theatrical taste. The question of a possible conflict of interest remains open. What is apparent is that Brewster's expertise in the inner working of the Drama Panel was a well-known asset of hers. In the chapter devoted to Talawa in *British Theatre Companies 1980-1994*, Kene Igweonu stresses that Brewster's near past in the Drama Panel played a role in the fortunes of her own company:

Talawa drew particularly on Brewster's experience as a Drama Officer with the Arts Council from 1982 to 1984 to develop and articulate a comprehensive artistic policy that anticipated the ever-changing funding priorities of the Arts Council. Brewster had a good understanding of how funding structures worked, and was able to exploit this to Talawa's benefit for a long time. (Igweonu, 2015, 242)

After the staging of the *Return of Sam the Man* and *Sedition UK*, CAST's activity went on according to the program presented to Brewster with the Regonomics tour. The actual title of the play was *The Bottom Line* and CAST did not perform but present it, that is "stage-manage, drive, market and co-produce this play", as can be read in the program for the 1983 activity contained in the minutes of an Extraordinary General Meeting of CAST, held on 7 January 1983. (ACGB 34/34/8/BOTTOM) The *Bottom Line* was staged by the New York Labor Theatre, the company that had hosted *Full Confessions of a Socialist* in New York in 1980 and now returned the visit. The play contrasted the life of President Reagan, depicted as more than a little senile, and his entourage with that of an American family dealing with unemployment. Its political content is overt, and political protest duly followed, especially referring to the possible ACGB financial assistance hinted at by the "CAST presents" heading of the poster. The complaint followed the usual chain of command: the Tory MP David Trippier wrote to the new Minister for the Arts Grey Ruthven, who in his turn wrote to the Arts Council, where an officer asked the Deputy Secretary-General Richard Pulford for advice; the latter pointed out that "CAST presents" was an unfortunate phrasing, and that the Labor Theatre received no financial assistance by the Arts Council. (ACGB 34/34/8/PULFORD) The show as such was not devoid of quality, as it was

appreciated by Drama Panel Officer Philip Hedley, who was not offended by the political content and also underlined CAST's role as organizers of the tour:

It was excellent. [...] The message was essentially socialist, anti-nuclear and anti-fascist, with the odd anti-Thatcher remark thrown in for a British audience. The setting was simple clean and attractive. [...] This was not of course a C.A.S.T. show as such, but the American company was full of praise for the excellent dates they'd played out of London and for C.A.S.T.'s organization of the whole tour. (ACGB 34/34/8/HEDLEY1)

Talking of CAST as producers, Hedley did not miss the chance to comment on a New Variety night he had attended months before:

FOOTNOTE: Six months ago I saw one of the C.A.S.T. New Variety Nights in a South London pub. [...] I was not impressed with C.A.S.T.'s presentation that night. There were long gaps between acts: we'd be left in the dark while the compere wandered about with the single follow-spot half on him. Acts when finally announced would then take ages to get started. It had that style-less, late Sixties casualness about it which always seems to me like a host being careless and almost rude about his invited paying guests. (Ibid.)

Hedley refers to the running-in phase of New Variety at the Old White Horse in Brixton and it is imaginable that the mechanism of the show was not yet working to perfection. The charge of excessive casualness was probably well-founded as it was present in the report by PB of 21 May 1983. Muldoon had to learn that the physical attitude he adopted when he performed a Muggins character was not acceptable when he was acting as a stand-up comedian or introducing other performers. As he wrote in *Taking On the Empire*: "I learnt to stand in front of an audience as myself (not that easy) and introduce the dynamic new generation of entertainers". (Muldoon 2013, 33) Anyway, on 21 December 1983 Muldoon wrote to the Drama Director Dickon Reed to assess the CAST activity during the year and, basically, to explain why CAST had been unable to stage a completely new production so far that year:

CAST has always felt under funded, especially in recent years; however paradoxically we are in a very healthy situation. In case this encourages the monetarist among you to claim this as some kind of victory, there are reasons for this. The biggest credit is due to the advent of New Variety. At this point, we wish to make plain to you the intention of CAST to withdraw itself from New Variety in a few years time. [W]e haven't found favour with the Arts Council for our New Variety project; so therefore we see it as a beneficial short-term project coming to an end. (ACGB 34/34/7/TOREED)

What Muldoon leaves unsaid is that CAST's healthy situation was not only due to the box office revenues of New Variety but also, and mainly, to the generous GLC financial help to this project. According to an undated and unsigned ACGB document titled "Briefing Notes"⁹⁸ (ACGB 34/34/7/BRIEFING), CAST, during the

⁹⁸ This document, even if unsigned, has been surely originated inside the Drama Panel since, for instance, it details the number of visits by its members to CAST's shows during the 1983/84 season;

financial year 1983/84, received from the GLC a subsidy of £ 185.752 that outweighed by far the 46.000 provided by the Arts Council. Therefore, it seems surprising that Muldoon should dismiss *New Variety* as a “short-term project”, though at the time it was common knowledge that the GLC, as other local authorities, was targeted by the Thatcher government, and therefore due to be suppressed in a near future.⁹⁹ Ignoring how long the GLC help for *New Variety* would last, Muldoon tried to keep all options open and to appease the Drama Panel by promising to concentrate on the production of ‘proper’ plays:

If we were cut by 25% in the next few years, assuming that to be beyond the end of the GLC, CAST would not be able to afford the programme it is now putting out. In fact, we could only envisage us able to put on one major production a year. And that would be a shame, for our National touring reputation is very good at the moment. [...] A 25% increase, on the other hand progressively developing would lead us to the position where we were a strong internal group, able to put on two major productions a year. [...] We would incorporate many of the artists we have met in *New Variety* – as in our current production ‘REDS UNDER THE BED’, in both our future productions next year. (ACGB 34/34/7/TOREED)

The announced play *Reds Under the Bed* was actually staged in January 1984, even if there is not an exact date for the premiere. The plot is summarised in John Wallbank’s report of a performance at the Woodford Parish Church Memorial Hall on 4 February 1984:

The story concerns the search for the red bed, which has the effect of transforming anybody who sleeps in it into a Socialist by Olive Branch McMuggins, recently arrived from America, who has heard rumours of the red bed and is anxious to purchase it to ship home in an attempt to get Ronald Reagan to sleep in it. Eventually Olive meets Otiz and Honesty and they set off for Rochdale to meet with ‘The Oldest Socialist in the World’ who hands out a list of eleven commandments to help turn the world to Socialism. [...] Towards the end of Act 1 the ‘Wickedest Person in the West’ arrives at the back of the hall demanding to know what on earth is going on. It is, of course, Mrs. T. brilliantly played by Claire Muldoon. In Act 2 Mrs. T. and her publicity machine ‘Goebbels & Goebbels’ visit the North to see what the problems are and eventually Mrs. T. sleeps in the red bed [...] and turns into a socialist in a very smart red suit. Buckingham Palace is closed down and turned into a red bed factory and we discover that Mrs. T. has reverted to her former political position. (ACGB 34/34/8/WALLBANK)

Some of the script can be found in typed form in the UEL archive, divided into two documents. Working script marked DAY 3 refers to a phase of preparation, since Olive Branch is called Arlene and there are many pen annotations and cancelled parts. The text follows closely the above summary and looks like a condensed script that was due to be enlarged during rehearsal. There are some stage directions; for

yet, it is inaccurate in stating that CAST first received ACGB funding in 1980, as it was in 1976 instead.

⁹⁹ GLC was suppressed by Thatcher’s government with the 1985 Local Government Act that came into force on 1 April 1986.

instance, referring to Otiz Cannelloni's entrance, it states: "Enters on rollers skates in a great hurry. [...] Needing help as he falls over". (HE/CAST/SHO/2/22/REDS1) A pen annotation adds "Groucho skating" (Ibid.). The second document is a less provisional script that records Thatcher's cues. Actually, the name "Thatcher" is handwritten at the top of the first page, but it is never mentioned, and even the programme refers to her as the "W.P. in the W. She first intervenes before the end of Act 1:

I'd heard you'd thought there had been a loss in my magic powers since there'd been a drop in my popularity ratings. But I'm here to tell you it's just not so. With Neil Kinnock as leader you thought things were getting slightly better for you didn't you. [...] The Ten commandments of Socialism eh – nipped in the bud. [...] If I can prove to you that all this is a lot of crap ... I'll eat my hat ... My handbag then ... I'll divorce Dennis ... I'll keep the GLC ... I'll ban the bomb. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/22/REDS2)

Act One finishes with a song sung by the W.P. in the W. Claire's impersonation can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqZoszQYfHw>¹⁰⁰:

They say I have no sense of humour

But that is just a socialist rumour

For when I take your hospitals away I'll laugh all night and then all day

Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha

You get this simply wonderful feeling when you're stealing from other people pockets

You get this sense of absolute power every hour of your reign

I really do enjoy my work, especially when I go berserk

The house of commons is my palace, it is my wonderland and I am Alice. (HE/CAST/SHO/2/22/REDS2)

Actually, Claire's Thatcher, with her manic smile and lust for absolute power, is more reminiscent of the Queen of Hearts than Alice. Anyway, according to Muldoon it was "the best Thatcher caricature of the age". (Muldoon 2013, 33) Even if it cannot be stated for sure to be the best, it is certainly a brilliant impersonation, including Thatcher's clutching to her iconic handbag. A certain physical resemblance contributed to the success of the impersonation, that was generally approved in all reports with various degrees of liking. Apart from that, the reports were divided and polarized more than ever. Wallbank, after the detailed summary reproduced above, stated: "This was a good fun evening of an anarchic kind and was probably the best entertainment of this type I have ever seen". (ACGB 34/34/8/WALLBANK) The American playwright and director Olwen Wymark¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Last accessed 28/09/2018

¹⁰¹ See <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/jun/23/olwen-wymark> last accessed 22/10/2018

found much to praise in a performance of 5 January 1984 at the Brabant Community Centre in London:

I liked this show a great deal though I wouldn't know how to categorize it. It sometimes seemed like a cabaret, sometimes like a revue, occasionally like a pantomime and from time to time like a rock concert crossed with a vaudeville show. [...] It seemed to me quite often to be in the Dario Fo territory of popular political theatre with a very strong emphasis on high spirits and entertainment. (ACGB 34/34/8/WYMARK)

Wymark unwillingly highlights one of the sources of CAST's trouble with Drama Panel, that is the uncertain nature of their shows. It is significant that Wymark would mention Dario Fo since in 1982 she had adapted for the National Theatre three short pieces by him and Franca Rame with the title *One Woman Plays*, and so she was well acquainted with the Italian playwright's work. As proof of the difficulty of assessing companies, Philip Hedley reviewed the very same performance in a completely different way:

The script was sloppy and unilluminating. It's too obvious to have Mrs. Thatcher as the witch and then do nothing at all revelatory with her. It seemed to me a self-indulgent evening and arrogantly I left at the interval because I didn't feel it was going to tell me anything. (ACGB 34/34/8/HEDLEY2)

Yvonne Brewster saw *Reds Under the Bed* the day after at the same venue and her report was negative. The only things she found to praise were the proficiency of every member of the cast, including the stage manager, in playing an instrument, but she thought that these skills were underused. For the rest, she found very little to recommend in the performance:

A sad evening: to see such energy, and the performance did have a commendable measure of energy, wasted on a concept which is at least ten years too late to be of any relevance. [...] This work is not politically acute neither is it dramatically effective as it falls between more than two stools to end up in bits and pieces of time weary agit prop, badly produced cabaret, and amateurish pranks. (ACGB 34/34/7/BREWSTER1)

Naturally, there was a question of personal taste behind such differing reviews, but also the fragmentary nature of the show contributed to making it difficult to assess it as a whole. Another Drama Panel reviewer, Ronald James, who attended a performance at Portsmouth Polytechnic on 16 January 1984, underlined the uneven quality of the show, defining it as "A sort of cabaret evening with a sort of story line, and with material varying from poor to fair to interesting". (ACGB 34/34/8/JAMES) In fact, *Reds Under the Bed* could be considered a vindication of Muldoon's project to run CAST and New Variety as parallel and mutually beneficial projects: of the actresses and actors involved, only Claire was a long-standing member of CAST. The others – Deb' bora, Andy Wilson, Otiz Cannelloni, Bernie Blanks and Andy Dalglish – all got in touch with CAST through the New Variety circuit. Whether the resulting theatrical production would meet the Drama Panel's standards remained to be seen. In a short while the question would become irrelevant, as subsidy was soon to be cut, regardless of considerations on quality.

The end of subsidy for CAST was communicated by a letter from the Secretary General Luke Rittner of 29 March 1984:

Further to my letter dated 14 March, I am now enclosing your copy of the policy document The Glory of the Garden, which describes the Council's strategy for the next decade. [...] I must regretfully draw your attention to Section VI of the document, from which you will see that Council does not envisage being able to provide subsidy for your organisation beyond the end of the financial year 1984/85. (ACGB 34/34/7/RITTNER1)

The Glory of the Garden, besides being a Rudyard Kipling poem, was an ACGB document that was intended to implement a reorganization of the subsidy system in arts in general and theatre in particular. It started from the consideration that subsidized companies had been growing in numbers, from thirty in 1950 to over eighty in 1984 (Saunders 2015, 40) while the sum made available by the government had been reduced since 1980: the consequence was that some companies had to be cut. There were obvious and widespread suspicions that these cuts were a form of censorship; ACGB former Financial Director Anthony Field challenged this view remarking that, financial problems apart, the idea that a Drama Panel subsidy was for life had blocked the development of new talents: "Many new excellent groups hav[e] to be turned down for subsidy while annual subventions were continuing to many groups who had run out of artistic impetus". (Quoted in Saunders 2015, 39) Be that as it may, the document resulted in the withdrawal of subsidy for ten building-based companies – the Tricycle among them – and five touring companies: CAST, M6, Mikron, 7:84 England and Temba.¹⁰² As can be inferred by many of Muldoon's previous statements, this cannot have come as a complete surprise. As Muldoon said to McDonnell in a private conversation in 2010, his intention was to make things as hard as possible for the ACGB, even if he felt a sense of relief: "We did everything we possibly could to make sure that, as Trotsky said, you get dragged out of the office, kicking – but I was relieved I didn't have to write any more plays. (Quoted in Mc Donnell 2010, 109) And so CAST wrote a long letter of appeal, dated 31 May 1984 and signed by the then members of the company: Rachel Clare, Andy DalGLISH, Roz Galbraith, Peter Moreland, Claire and Roland Muldoon, Brian Wren. In this letter CAST put the stress on the results achieved through the years both as individuals and as a collective:

Our strength is that our members learn all the skills involved in reaching grass roots regional audiences, be they technical, administrative or creative. What seems to us tragic in the proposed cuts will be the loss of the momentum that CAST has built up from the idea that art, especially theatre, can reach beyond the established perimeters set by more conventional methods, for in the last few years despite low funding, we have conscientiously swum against the tide, playing what can only be described as working-class or 'popular' venues where theatre is not normally shown. Whilst making sure that our shows 'work' and play in normal theatre settings, we have developed the

¹⁰² According to Saunders: "Even the Royal Court was put on notice that it may lose its annual subsidy". (Saunders 2015, 41)

unique skills of setting up and performing proscenium style theatre in the most differing and challenging of venues. (HE/CAST/ADM/3/APPEAL)

The claim that CAST's members learnt to perform technical and administrative roles is well-founded as, for instance, there are letters from or to the Drama Panel which are addressed to or signed by Ray Meredith, Andy Dalglish or Rachel Clare. As for creative participation, as we have already seen, this view was challenged by Kate Rutter, who thought that the Muldoons kept most of the creative power in their hands. (McDonnell 2017, 130) The many corrections in the script of *Red Under the Bed* (HE/CAST/SHO/2/22/REDS1) suggest that, during rehearsals, there was a lively debate that was reflected in the final version. As for the ability to take theatre to the most different venues, the ACGB reports bear witness that CAST's shows were performed in a wide range of spaces, such as pubs, community halls or working men's clubs.¹⁰³ The appeal also included a "Save CAST Petition" with 2700 signatures, but, as could be expected, it was to no avail. On 26 July 1984 Rittner wrote the final chapter of CAST's subsidy saga:

I am sorry to have to convey what I know will be bad news but I do so in the knowledge that the Council gave full and detailed consideration to your appeal. [...] Finally I do want to emphasise that the withdrawal of subsidy was made on strategic grounds. The Council would wish me to make it clear that there is much to commend artistically in the company's work and that while it cannot itself continue to provide funds, it very much hopes that other sources of income will be found to enable the company to have a viable and creative future. (ACGB 34/34/7/RITTNER2)

Given the circumstances, the final consideration about CAST's artistic standard could be intentionally ironic, since we know that reports were far from unanimously positive. To exclude saying that the cut was made on artistic grounds served, of course, the purpose of avoiding endless discussion on a theatrical quality impossible to be defined conclusively. Having said this, it is not clear on which "strategic ground" the choice of companies to be cut was made. In the case of CAST, the reference to "other sources of income" could point to the substantial aid the GLC paid to CAST. The GLC grant was intended only for activities in the greater London area, and therefore ACGB's cut marked the end of CAST as a touring company; in any case, with the suppression of the GLC in 1986, also its subsidy ceased. The sign of surrender arrived with a letter to Rittner of 7 September 1984, signed by Andy Dalglish who covered the role of administrator in addition to those of actor, musician and stage technician:

We will continue to accept bookings for our current production *DOUBLE BILL* where financially viable and will continue with the one production only through 84/85.

¹⁰³ As for the difficulty of touring and adapting shows to different venues, McDonnell, in a personal communication, wrote me about an amusing incident with Socialist Workers' Party militants: "The production was *Hotel Sunshine*, about the nuclear issue. The comrades felt that the relatively high-tech set was a form of petty bourgeois deviation and so on. They made the mistake of calling Claire Muldoon a petty bourgeois. Claire, a working-class woman from the mill towns of Lancashire, was so furious at being called bourgeois, she threw parts of the set at them until they dashed away." (McDonnell 2018)

However, the number of performances may not be met in total due to the added administration costs etc. involved in winding up the company. We would expect to have completed winding up this year activities by February 85. (ACGB 34/34/7/DALGLISH)

The above-mentioned *Double Bill*, consisting of *What's Funny* and *Private Conversations with Mrs. T*, was premiered at the Cricklewood pub on 18 June 1984. CAST's appeal against the cut was still under way, but this show evidenced that the company had little or no confidence in the success of their protest. The text starts with Muldoon introducing himself to the audience and informing them that CAST's subsidy has been cut. After that he tells an unlikely story:

I'd like you to imagine, if you are able to, the 5th of May 1985. I got in my truck, or as they say in England my van. [...] God I hit somebody. [...] I can't believe it... it looks like Jonathan Lamede. The Arts Council Officer... People are not gonna believe me when I ring up and say I've just run over the bloke who gave us the sack – by accident... (HE/CAST/SHO/2/23/DOUBLEBILL)

The story goes on with Muldoon threatening to finish Lamede off; the latter, to persuade him not to, promises to explain the true motives behind the cut and mentions a TV interview at a Channel Four fictional programme "Culture in the Afternoon"; the interview is recreated on stage and Muldoon is interviewed by a journalist called Crispin:

Crispin: You claim to play to Working class audiences. Now how can you substantiate that?

[...]

Roland: I mean what do you mean by working class... They are the stupidest words I've ever heard. You think if your [sic] working class somehow people have to be left wing Andy Capps don't you mean that is paternalistic patronising and fucking stupid anyway ... sorry I said fucking [...] OUR IDEA IS DEDICATED TO THE NOTION OF TESTING THE POSSIBILITY OF FREEDOM IN THIS COUNTRY THAT'S ALL TESTING

Crispin: What do you mean testing – aren't we on channel 4 now saying what ever we want to say. TROTSKY LENIN SEX BUGGERY GOBBLE FUCK. (Ibid.)

Muldoon then sees the apparitions of some of his heroes and models – Little Richard, Bob Dylan, Lenny Bruce – and then Shakespeare too, who convinces him to go and kill Luke Rittner. Muldoon kidnaps Rittner and tries to make him confess that CAST was cut for political reasons:

Luke: [I]f we were going to cut the coal boards and were going to privatise the BBC why would we carry on subsidising such a 60s anachronism as you.

Roland: THAT'S NOT GOOD ENUF. BECAUSE I WANT YOU TO CUT ME FOR BEING POLITICALLY PERTINENT.

Luke: Who cares whether your [sic] politically pertinent enuf. We're being much more political cos we're cutting everything.

Roland: What about my artistry that I brought to the scene. What about being able to play out front. Act in a stream of consciousness and talk while there [sic] talking and hold the play together. [...] OK GET IN THE BACK OF THE TRUCK. (Ibid.)

Here finishes the typed script but it is not possible to know if it was the end of the play. All the parts of *What's Funny* were performed by Muldoon, and so it was a real tour de force on his part. Muldoon's energy and acting qualities are well-known, but this script is not up to par. One gets the impression that Muldoon here tries to communicate his doubts on his political relevance to the audience, as if asking for their solidarity. As noted before, to put on stage characters like Lamede and Rittner, whose very existence the spectators probably were unaware of, was not likely to be amusing. As for Lamede, it is strange that Muldoon would single him out as responsible for the withdrawal of the grant. As we have seen many times, along the years Lamede had always been in the front line in defending Muldoon's work. Of course, not everything is written down, and so we cannot know for sure if there was some misunderstanding. Surely, in the light of the documents, it seems a case of plain ungratefulness on Muldoon's part.

The second *Part of Double Bill, Private Conversations with Mrs T.* is even more difficult to reconstruct, since the script available in the UEL is extremely fragmented, and partly handwritten. There are four characters, Yvonne, played by Claire, and a rock group, the Left Wing Teds, played by Andy Dalglish, Peter Moreland and Brian Wren. Yvonne is thus described in the characters' breakdown:

A 45 year old woman whose children have grown up and gone away used to live with her husband sick of it all ... lives in a council house in Southwark (or wherever). She has a deal with LWT at least they are real people they live in the world they have become a family – she hates them wishes they would all go away ... but if they went away who would she have in this council flat. (Ibid.)

All the action, if we may call it so, revolves about Yvonne quarrelling with the LWT. Sometimes she ridicules them for their musical skills: "RUBBISH RUBBISH. Your [sic] absolute rubbish – it sounds like a barber shop quartet". At other times she attacks them for playing American-style music while professing to be socialist: "Hoovers you just Hoover up everything you can possibly find – Culture Vultures". (Ibid.) When Yvonne is not berating the Teds, her soliloquy shows symptoms of psychic depression:

MY LIFE IS A VERY MISERABLE LIFE. LIKE MANY SO OTHER LIVES ON THIS COUNCIL ESTATE. IN FACT WHEN I GO OUT AND TALK TO OTHER PEOPLE I SEE THEM LIKE PISSHOLE IN THE SNOW LOOKING BACK AT ME AS MISERABLE AND AS GRIM AS I AM. (Ibid.)

At a certain point Yvonne starts to act as Margaret Thatcher and to bully the three boys, questioning their motives for being socialist Left Wing Teds: "And you left safeways [sic] to become a Punk star and ended up as a left wing ted". (Ibid.) At the end of the questioning, Mrs T. becomes Yvonne again: after a heated debate the Left Wing Teds decide to take on a more direct political commitment, and finally

Roland introduces their musical gig. If this is not a fair summary, the only journalistic report, signed HMJ and published on the *South Western Star* of 28 September 1984 with the telling title “Humour eludes the Cast” does not do much better:

Claire Muldoon and the three Left Wing Teds enacted “Private and Personal Conversations with Mrs T.” after the interval, involving lengthy discussions in raised voices between the socialist musicians, each with a different idea of their collective beliefs. Their landlady’s impersonation of the Prime Minister confused rather than clarified their stance as she grilled each of them in turn. Thankfully their musical skills were far better than their dramatics”. (ACGB 34/34/7/HMJ)

It is likely that the spectators were left as confused as the characters on stage. Plot apart, the script is so lame that it is hard to imagine that it could much engage the audience. Even conceding that some lines could be funny if appropriately said, I cannot imagine how, for instance, the following exchange between Pete and Andy could raise a laugh:

Pete: [Y]ou want us to pojng [sic] in the direction like some SOCIALIST REALIST TEDDY BOYS SAYING THIS IS THE WAY FORWARD and we haven’t had the bloody revolution yet and you’re STALIN ALREADY.

Andy: ALL RIGHT THEN WE’LL HAVE A MEETING THEN ...I’m not having anybody calling me a fucking Stalinist. I tell you this I mightn’t kick women in the bollocks but I’ll kick you in it.

Pete: WOMEN DON’T HAVE BOLLOCKS

Andy: RIGHTS THEN IT’S FUCKING LUCKY FOR THEM ISN’T IT.
(HE/CAST/SHO/2/23/DOUBLEBILL)

Once again, Brewster’s report of a performance at the Cricklewood pub on 26 June 1984 was very negative, but in this case quite rightly so:

The PERSONAL CONVERSATION WITH MRS T featured Claire Muldoon as a skizophrent [sic] middle-aged ex Rock and Roll/country and western singer, called Yvonne, who often thought she was Mrs T. I am at loss to know how to quantify or qualify this show, except to say that the “Left Wing Teds” (part of the New Variety Act) played some really good Rock and Roll at the end of the show which helped to alleviate the pain. Should we devolve to the Music Department? (ACGB 34/34/7/BREWSTER2)

This was an inglorious exit for a company whose adventurous theatrical life had lasted twenty years. Many factors may have influenced this unhappy ending, including Muldoon’s childish desire to take some sort of revenge on the ACGB. But the explanation probably lies somewhere else: with the early 1980s, that is with *Full Confessions of a Socialist* or *Sedition 81*, the company had run out of creative steam, and in fact since then their ‘plays’ had been based upon the recycling of New Variety material and the repeated use of topics such as Claire’s impersonation of Thatcher. In a personal communication McDonnell, commenting on some negative ACGB reports, expressed his agreement with this view: “The show reports are

fascinating and confirm what we thought within the company - that we were not developing aesthetically or politically”. (McDonnell, 2018) David Aukin, a founding member of the company Foco Novo, interviewed in Rees’ *Fringe First*, argued that this was a widespread problem of independent companies: “I have always felt about Fringe companies generally that they do not know when to stop. That there is a certain energy which lasts for a certain time, and without any loss of face they should stop”. (quoted in Rees 1992: 56) The state subsidy was a part of the problem since, inadequate as it may have been, it was simply too good to be given up light-heartedly, with the consequence that some companies, and possibly CAST among them, dragged their existence even when their heart was not in it anymore, or they had nothing new and valid to say. In the case of the Muldoons, the cut of the subsidy was a blessing in disguise, as it pushed them to take control of the Hackney Empire in 1986, establishing a stewardship that would last until 2005. McDonnell’s obituary for CAST is a heartfelt homage to their 20-year journey:

In a typical mix of quixotic risk-taking and political passion, they made a successful bid to take over the Hackney Empire London’s East End as a centre for New Variety. The revolutionaries, who had been expelled from Unity theatre for wanting to remake Music Hall for the Vietnam generation, were back in their spiritual home after a detour enjoined by history and grant aid [...] In their development from cultural ‘gang’ to subsidised professional ensemble to cultural entrepreneurs, they have exemplified the contradictions, crisis and transformation of British oppositional theatres in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. (McDonnell 2010, 109)

Chapter 2: David Edgar

David Edgar is arguably the author who more than any other has explored the expressive possibilities of political theatre in the period under scrutiny and in years beyond. In comparison with CAST, his approach to theatre came through more conventional ways. As the majority of left-wing playwrights of his generation, he came from a middle-class family and, moreover, with a direct theatrical connection.¹⁰⁴ A university education in drama was the direct consequence, and he gained a B.A. in drama in 1969 at Manchester University. Edgar underplayed University's influence on his playwriting, and stressed instead its importance in his personal growth, stating that he became a socialist during his studies, for ethical, and more down-to-earth, reasons:

I think many middle-class people become revolutionaries simply through an *instinct* against social injustice. And, obviously, there is also simply the entertainment value of being revolutionary at a particular time, which is one of the reasons why more students were revolutionary in 1968 than are now. (quoted in Trussler, ed., 1981, 159)

According to Edgar, the main influence on his playwriting was not provided by University but by the three years, between 1969 and 1972, he spent as a journalist at the *Telegraph and Argus*, Bradford's main newspaper: "The discipline which I did develop, which has had advantages and disadvantages, came through being a journalist. I think that three-year period in my life was much more important [than University]". (quoted in *Ibid.*, 158) The discipline Edgar refers to is the habit of checking facts and building plays on an ingenuous blending of facts and fiction, that he, among others, called "faction" (*Ibid.*, 167), a technique he employed, for instance, in *Destiny* (1976) and *Our Own People* (1977). Short as his journalistic career may have been, Edgar succeeded in leaving a long-lasting trace, as he took part in the exposing of the Poulson affair,¹⁰⁵ (*Ibid.*, 159) a bribery scandal that led to the resignation of the Home Secretary of the Heath government, Reginald Maudlin. Edgar's stay in Bradford was also decisive for his theatrical development, since at the time the Yorkshire city was a pulsating centre of alternative theatre, due to the presence of Chris Parr¹⁰⁶ at Bradford University and Albert Hunt¹⁰⁷ at the Bradford College of Art. As a consequence of this happy theatrical conjunction Edgar started his playwriting production in Bradford: while working full-time as a journalist he also produced an impressive corpus of short plays, that he himself tagged as agitprop. The watershed of his career came in 1972 when Edgar was

¹⁰⁴ "Both my parents and three of my grandparents, an aunt and various other slightly more distant relatives were involved in the theatre". (quoted in Trussler, ed., 1981, 158)

¹⁰⁵ John Poulson (1910-1983) was a Yorkshire architect who was found guilty of repeated bribes.

¹⁰⁶ Chris Parr (1943) is a prominent figure in British alternative theatre. Among other things, he directed various plays by Edgar and Brenton and was the artistic director of Traverse Theatre from 1975 to 1981.

¹⁰⁷ Albert Hunt (1928-2015) was a theatre director who collaborated with various companies including John Bull Repair Kit and Welfare State International. His main achievements during his stay at the Bradford College of Art were a reenactment of the Russian revolution in the streets of Bradford in 1967, and a multi-media theatrical piece, *The Destruction of Dresden* (1968) on the allied bombings of the German town in 1945. He also worked with Peter Brook in *US* (1967).

invited to take part with, among others, David Hare and Howard Brenton, in the collective writing of *England's Ireland*: consequently, he left journalism and embraced theatre full time. Besides being a very prolific playwright, Edgar was always keen to engage in the debate on political theatre and on the role of the playwright. The first part of this chapter will be devoted to Edgar's participation in this debate and to his general theory of political theatre. I will then closely examine *Dick Deterred* (1974) as the highest point of the satirical streak that characterized some of Edgar's agitprop plays; *Destiny* as the full realization of the state-of-the-nation play, and *Our Own People*, closely connected to *Destiny* and written for a fringe company.

2.1 Public Theatre in a Private Age

The following long quotation comes from an article published in edited form in the *Times Literary Supplement* of 10 September 1982 with the title "Viewpoint: Politics and Performance", and then in its definitive form with the title "Public Theatre in a Private Age" in the volume *The Second Time as Farce* (1988):

Principles and purposes which I think do unite many of my generation of British playwrights [are] a belief in collaborative production processes, an aspiration to an audience wider than the usual metropolitan coterie, an open attitude to form, a concern with the public world and its relation to the private world, and a commitment to radical social change. For we [...] are playwrights of a particular kind. Unlike, say, Arnold Wesker or Brendan Behan, we've tended to choose subject matter that is at some distance from our own experience; unlike Brecht or John Arden or Edward Bond, we've largely written about our own country in the present day or recent past; and unlike Shaw, we have been dealing with a world which, in our view, is, sadly, not teetering on the edge of the rational order. (Edgar 1988, 161)

Here Edgar touched upon the common features of the group of authors he felt part of, mostly defined by having been in their twenties in 1968. A preliminary explanation is necessary: the authors Edgar referred to were uneasy with the idea of being part of a movement or 'school' of playwriting. In the above-mentioned article, Edgar told how publisher John Calder, during a conference with some of these authors, caused hostile reactions by mentioning the possible existence of such a school: "All of us spurned with outrage the suggestion that our work might have developed in concert with anyone else's, or that we might have been influenced by each other, or even that we were aware that each other's work was going on". (Ibid., 160) With the benefit of hindsight Edgar changed his view a few years later: "In fact, however, I think there is a definable movement, even school, even if Mr Calder's attempt to impose a definition fell on stony ground". (Ibid.)

Basically, the authors to whom the above definition applies – at least the best-known ones – are, apart from David Edgar himself, Howard Brenton, Caryl

Churchill, David Hare, Snoo Wilson, Trevor Griffiths and John McGrath.¹⁰⁸ A point-by-point survey of Edgar's statement will be of some help in better defining the work and attitude of these authors while also highlighting Edgar's personal position.

2.2 A Belief in Collaborative Production Processes

According to Edgar, the idea of writing an article about his generation of playwrights came to him during a stay in the USA:

I spent most of 1979 in the United States, and was struck by the lack of any sense of community of playwrights in America. There are good new playwrights there, a few sharing our concern for the social and the political, but they are so isolated from each other, as well as from the process of theatre making, that they are forced constantly to work within a structure and an aesthetic that has been created by and for others [...] which seems to act not for their work but against it. Practically, this means that American playwrights are not supported, in the main, by directors and actors who have grown up with their work and understand it; still less have they been able to work with companies created to serve their work and new work in general. (Edgar 1987, 160-161)

Edgar does not delve much deeper into the reasons underlying this difference – even if the system of subsidy is mentioned in the remainder of the article: what Edgar means to stress is how much his experience of playwriting was affected and encouraged by being part of a community that included actors, companies and directors. In fact, his involvement in “collaborative production processes” characterized his production almost from the start. In a 1978 interview with Simon Trussler and Clive Barker, Edgar reconstructed his apprenticeship in collaborative playwriting. The play he mentions, *The National Interest* (1971), was the first he wrote for The General Will, the company he mostly collaborated with during his stay in Bradford:

The National Interest I wrote completely by myself. We then developed a system of writing which is really the way, broadly speaking, I've written with collective companies ever since – that is, I write the words, but the process of deciding what each scene is to say (and indeed, the way it is to be said) is a collective process. Though it must be said that the writer contributes more to the process than most other people. (Trussler, ed., 1981, 161)

Edgar goes into further details when describing the writing of *State of Emergency* (1972), also for General Will. This was a short play in the tradition of the ‘living newspaper’ of the soviet agitprop company Blue Blouse, that is “short skits [which] covered a selection of topics, with different styles for each skit” (Swain 1986, 22) with an essentially informative purpose:

¹⁰⁸ Trevor Griffiths (1935) and John McGrath (1935-2002) are included in this group for their theatrical and political kinship, even if they were both born in the 1930s and were therefore a in their early thirties in 1968.

With *State of Emergency* we developed a technique whereby I would bring in a great pile of cuttings, and people would look at different areas and report back. That was quite easy in the sense that it was a chronology play, so we knew we had to do the Upper Clyde Shipbuilders,¹⁰⁹ we had to do the 1972 miners' strike, we had to do the railwayman. So we'd talk and we'd range around ways of doing something, and get an idea, then I'd go away and write the scene and bring it back the next day. (Trussler, ed., 1981, 161)

These collective enterprises reflected both the *Zeitgeist* and the socialist beliefs of the above-mentioned groups of playwrights. As pointed out in the preceding chapter, CAST, in their early incarnation, did not even publish the names of the members of the company to avoid the charge of "bourgeois individualism". (Rees 1992, 69) Playwrights did not go to such extremes and we know the names of those who collaborated in the most important collectively-written plays of the period. In 1971 Howard Brenton, Brian Clark, Trevor Griffiths, David Hare, Stephen Poliakoff, Hugh Stoddard, Snoo Wilson co-worked in the writing of *Lay By*, which was staged by Portable Theatre in the same year and raised a huge scandal.¹¹⁰ The form assumed by this collective writing was thus described by Howard Brenton: "We had great rolls of wallpaper, and big children's crayons and the seven of us crawled around on the floor scribbling continuous text, and you looked down and saw the latest line, and there'd be an argument about the next line". (Quoted in Itzin 1980, 189) In 1972 a slightly different group, composed of Howard Brenton, Tony Bicat, Brian Clark, David Edgar, Francis Fuchs and Snoo Wilson collaboratively wrote an even more controversial play, *England's Ireland*,¹¹¹ which was staged by Portable Theatre in the same year and brought the company to an end for the ensuing financial problems. As stated above, this play was the turning point of Edgar's career; the working method was slightly different from *Lay By*, yet always strictly collective. As Edgar recalls "We wrote in twos and threes, we didn't sit in a big circle, but we didn't write anything on our own either". (quoted in Megson, ed., 2012, 227) This playwriting in a large group did not survive the early 1970s. Yet a mode of collaborative writing among these authors, even if never again in such large number, went on in the following years and even lead to remarkable results. To name some examples: in 1973 Brenton and Edgar wrote together *A Fart for Europe*, staged at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs on 18 January 1973 under the direction of Chris Parr, but never published; Howard Brenton and David Hare

¹⁰⁹ The so-called Upper Clyde Shipbuilders Work-in was a sort of reversed strike: in 1972 the workers occupied Glasgow shipyards, threatened with closure, and went on with the production. This form of struggle gained public sympathy to the workers and was at least partially successful, since the shipyards stayed open and, reduced in size, are still working today.

¹¹⁰ The scandal was due to the explicit sexual content of the play in general and to a simulated act of oral sex in particular.

¹¹¹ According to Simon Trussler and Malcolm Page's *File on Edgar* (1991) *England's Ireland* consisted in "Twenty scenes with songs, designed to force more awareness of the origins and nature of the Irish troubles upon British audiences" (21)

wrote *Brassneck* in 1973, and in 1985 they renewed their partnership in *Pravda*, probably the most prescient play of the period.¹¹²

This sort of collective playwriting was only one facet of “collaborative production processes”. Another recurring feature was one play being directed by a fellow playwright, as when David Hare directed Brenton’s *Christie in Love* (1969) with Portable Theatre. Less frequently one of the authors starred as actor in a play written by another one, as is the case with David Edgar who took on the challenging role of God Almighty in Brenton’s *Scott of the Antarctic* (1972). (Edgar 1988:162) The commonest mode of co-working remained the collaboration with the company that would stage the play. Edgar describes such a case in the introduction to *Wreckers* (1977):

Wreckers was written with and for the 7:84 Company England, but the show is not exclusive to 7:84, and could most certainly be performed by others. [...] Having decided on the subject and agreed an outline, we researched the show, everyone reading round the subject, and conducting interviews collectively. [...] At the end of the research period, I produced another outline, which was discussed and amended. I then went away to write the script, returning some weeks later with a draft, which was extensively re-written during its five-week rehearsal. [...] Finally, a point about the process of making *Wreckers*. There is a rather cynical argument that the kind of collective processes we employed are little more than a co-operative cosmetic for traditional, hierarchical methods of work, and that companies should either go the whole hog (and write, direct and design as a group), or go no hog at all. Certainly, real collectivity is hard work. There is a conflict between the individual skill and the general will, and group discussions often can (and did) prove unbearably tortuous, circuitous and frustrating. However, in the end, I believe that this is the most rewarding and genuinely creative way of making a show: and that the experience on this show proved it. All the virtues of the text came out of our method of work; its failings are caused not by too much democracy but too little. (Edgar 1977, np)

There is a contradiction in this statement: while magnifying the virtues of collective writing, Edgar reasserts in the first two lines, albeit obliquely and maybe unintentionally, the pre-eminence of his authorial rights over any possible claim by the company itself. This seems proof that an ideologically-based stress on collective creativity did not solve the issue of authorship. CAST had overcome the problem by hiding the names of the components and signing their only published play with the name of the company, even if it was no secret that most of it had been written by Ronald Muldoon. Even this approach was not unproblematic, since in CAST’s latest years it was disputed whether CAST was actually run as a creative democracy or an oligarchy. (McDonnell 2017, 130) Anyway, Edgar acknowledged that a mode of collaborative writing with and for an alternative company posed a whole series of problems deriving from the necessity of finding a synthesis of different ideas and

¹¹² *Pravda*’s main character, Lambert Le Roux, is modelled on Australian tycoon Rupert Murdoch who built his media empire in Great Britain during the 1980s and was instrumental in the consolidation of Thatcherism.

sensibilities. Sometimes problems arose unexpectedly, as Howard Brenton humorously reports on the writing of *Epsom Downs* (1977) for Joint Stock:

Joint Stock were going through their Maoist phase, where the company decided what to do, the policy, the programme. I had an idea for a play which was originally to be the successor of *Weapons of Happiness*. I went for an audition and I sold the company the idea of a play about the Derby set in the following year. They bought that. It was an extraordinary experience: the actor isn't auctioned, the writer is. It was a company of nine. But it then became apparent that, Maoist company though they were, they were also actors so everyone had to have an equal part, even down to line-counting. So I said "Right, you are each going to play five characters and we're going to have forty-five characters in this play", which put the damper on the whole thing a bit. That's how it happened, there are forty-five parts and the nine actors have five each, just about. This means that the play is frequently done by schools who have forty-five kids in it. *Epsom Downs* came out of so many things that were going on in the 1970s. (Quoted in Megson, ed., 2012, 219-220)

A playwright having to adapt a commissioned work to the size and characteristics of a company is not strange in itself; what was extraordinary was the actors having the main voice in it and not the director, or the theatre manager, and it was indeed a sign of the times.

Writing a play in collaboration with a company was a working method that became a characteristic of Caryl Churchill. She first experimented this method in 1976, writing almost contemporarily *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* for Joint Stock and *Vinegar Tom* for Monstrous Regiment. *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* marked the beginning of the collaboration between Churchill and Joint Stock that would take to *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Fen* (1983). The writing of *Vinegar Tom* will be the object of close scrutiny in the chapter devoted to Caryl Churchill. Her last collaborative production to date has been *Mad Forest* (1990), a play that resulted from a trip to Romania with a group of drama students in the aftermath of the revolution that had deposed Ceausescu. As for Edgar, in 1985 he wrote for the Dorchester Community Theatre, in strict collaboration with the director Ann Jellicoe (1927-2017), *Entertaining Strangers*, a play whose gigantic size imposed a cooperative creative mode: "The piece had a cast of 180, and featured a race meeting, a Grand Equestrian Parade (in support of our brave lads in Balaclava) and a major cholera epidemic". (Edgar 1988, 235) In Jellicoe's obituary, Edgar recalled how she had, jokingly or otherwise, suggested not to hurt local sensitivities: "She told me that, if I had to make the play about wicked capitalists, it would be best if they came from out of town".¹¹³ Jellicoe was instrumental in managing such a large cast. Initially, Edgar's idea was to divide the cast into the small groups that worked on the single episodes. Jellicoe successfully opposed this scheme: "We were, she explained, making not a pageant, but a play, a think of breadth, bulk and shape, to which all participants should have an equal relationship". (Edgar 1988, 235). This involvement with Dorchester Community

¹¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/sep/01/ann-jellicoe-obituary>

Theatre would have a deep influence on Edgar in showing him a possible development of his playwriting. Edgar would reiterate this experience in 2007, writing for Dorchester Community Theatre *A Time to Keep* in collaboration with Stephanie Dale, a play I will return to when discussing theatrical form.

2.3 An Aspiration to a Wider Audience

There were good and evident reasons behind left-wing authors' aspiration to enlarge their audiences. From the political point of view, it made sense to reach a larger share of the population in order to spread the political message more effectively; theatrically, there was a legitimate urge to overcome the limits imposed on one's creativity by alternative companies' size and possibilities. With commendable honesty, Edgar acknowledged that personal ambition also played a role: "I don't think that people can sit and go through the agony of writing eight hours a day if that kind of ambition isn't somewhere working away". (Quoted in Trussler 1981, 168) Howard Brenton was the first to break into the National Theatre, so to speak, with his *Weapons of Happiness* in 1976; two years earlier, he had expressed the reasons behind this choice: "You just can't write a play that describes social action with under ten actors. With fifteen you can describe whole countries, whole classes, centuries". (Quoted in Itzin 1980, 187) He later reiterated this reasoning, stressing the artistic side of the matter: "You can go on forever as a playwright earning your living in cultural cul-de-sacs playing to 30 people a night. I now want to be tested on a big scale and that means using the kind of money and resources that only the National or the RSC can provide". (Quoted in Bull 1994, 9) In fact, the early career of some of these authors was a long march from the fringe, both geographical and theatrical, to London's subsidized theatres – Royal Court, National Theatre and Royal Shakespeare Company's various venues – and the West End. Edgar himself expressed his need to work with larger stages and casts, arguing for the necessity of writing about "public subjects which did not take place in rooms but in areas [...]. Because streets are larger than houses, and battlefields are larger than bedrooms". (quoted in Trussler 1981, 168) Edgar's position is emblematic, as he seemed unaware of the contradiction he was facing, together with the other socialist authors. On the one hand he could not be accused of an elitist attitude since he had always tried to have his plays staged in the wider range of geographical locations and in the most different venues, as when he wrote for General Will and other alternative companies before *Destiny*:

I spent six years of my life writing and making shows which went around English [sic] in the backs of vans, which were performed in working men's clubs and upstairs rooms in pubs, and attempted – and in some cases achieved – the creation of a non-theatre-going working-class audience. (quoted in Swain 1986, 14)

On the other hand he seemed not to notice that the audience he would reach in the large subsidized theatres would necessarily and mostly be restricted to the "usual metropolitan coterie" he was keen to avoid. Where and when to present one's work for a more effective communication was a central object of debate among these authors and even generated some acrimonious confrontation. Essentially, there

were three positions, mainly championed by three authors: David Edgar, Trevor Griffiths, John McGrath. In summary, Edgar put no limit to the theatrical venues where he wanted his plays performed but he stressed that appearing in the London theatres had given to his plays a social and political relevance they had not achieved before:

There is absolutely no question that the play of mine which has had the most effect on the way people think about things is a play which was presented in the West End of London, *Destiny*. I wasn't asked to talk about the docks when I wrote *Wreckers*. I hadn't been asked to talk about housing when I'd written *Rent*. I wasn't asked to talk about industrial relations when I'd written *The National Interest* and I wasn't asked to talk about the politics of health when I wrote *O Fair Jerusalem*. But when I wrote *Destiny*, which went to the West End, within twenty-four hours the editors of three left-wing newspapers had rung me up asking me to write articles. (Ibid.)

In opposition to this, Trevor Griffiths thought that theatre was an outdated and elitist medium and only television could reach a significant number of persons with meaningful messages, as he overtly stated in an interview published by *Play and Players* in April 1972: "It's in television that I think, as a political writer, I want to be, because very large numbers of people, who are not accessible any other way, are accessible in television. (quoted in Megson 2012, 61. Emphasis in the original) Edgar countered that TV was an intrinsically reactionary medium: "The inherent problem with television as an agent of radical ideas is that its massive audience is not confronted en masse. It is confronted in the atomised arena of the family living room, the place where people are at their least critical, their most conservative and reactionary". (Edgar 1988, 38) John McGrath shunned both traditional theatrical venues and television in favour of non-theatrical spaces such as Community Halls and Working Men's club. McGrath was particularly vocal in asserting his position in *A Good Night Out*, first published in 1981, and other articles. McGrath blamed Edgar for giving theatre workers "a 'socialist' reason for deserting the working class and settling down to experimenting with 'the upending of received form' for the cosmopolitan cultural elite". (quoted in Megson 2012, 61) As for Griffiths, McGrath stated: "I finally came to the conclusion that the mass media, at the moment, are so penetrated by the ruling class ideology, that to try to dedicate your whole life – as distinct from occasional forays and skirmishes – to fighting within them is going to drive you mad". (Ibid.) These positions did not find a synthesis: Griffiths went his way, privileging TV as his expressive means, McGrath toured Scotland with his 7:84 (Scotland) until 1988; Edgar went on writing for a very wide range of theatres and companies that included the main London theatres. Especially between McGrath and Edgar the debate exceeded the limit of fair play and ended showing some animosity between the two, as can be seen in the following exchange. In his *The Second Time as Farce* Edgar cited McGrath's 7:84 as an example of a company that employed a form that did not belong to the tradition of the urban British working class: "7:48 [sic] Scotland's use of the *ceilidh* form [...] succeeded precisely because it drew on a rural folk form and, indeed, was directed at audiences in the rural highlands of Scotland". (Edgar 1988, 36) This statement was, quite

unfairly, translated by McGrath in his *A Good Night Out*: “This was not to be only with remote communities in the Outer Hebrides – though they are very important, and not to be under-estimated, or written off by David Edgar as ‘peasants’”. (McGrath 1996, 122) Paraphrasing Brenton it could be said that, socialist as they were, Edgar and McGrath were also playwrights. The choice of the venues in which to perform and of the theatrical form to be adopted were strictly connected, as will be seen in the following paragraph.

2.4 An Open Attitude to Form

An open attitude to form was an inevitable requirement for this generation of playwrights, since it originated from the underlying, unanswered question: which is the most effective way to convey a political message in a theatrical form? The question surfaced also in the already mentioned discussion – or quarrel – between Edgar and McGrath. It is not that these authors were treading completely virgin territory, as McGrath pointed out referring to the early 1970s:

A new, hard working and enterprising kind of theatre emerged, not from nowhere, but from a fusion of many past traditions and experiences – like those of Joan Littlewood, the Unity theatres, the Workers Theatre Movement of the 30s, the political theatre of Brecht, Piscator, O’Casey, Odets and many others – a fusion of these traditions and experiences firstly with a new, de-Stalinised, liberationist, activist way of working on the Left, and above all with an upsurge of militancy within the working class in Britain. (McGrath 1996, 103-104)

McGrath does not mention among past precedents other British dramas which were political in a broad sense, but he evidently did not consider viable models. For instance, J.B. Priestley’s *An Inspector Calls* (1946), that exposed the exploitation and privileges of Old Time England and voiced the mood that had led to the Labour triumph in the general elections of 1945; but the very traditional structure of the play – a well-made-play with an element of suspense, albeit with a quasi-absurdist finale – ¹¹⁴ made it terminally outdated for him and the 1968 class of playwrights. McGrath neither quoted Wesker and his *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958). This omission was understandable as the ideological consistency of the main character, Sahra Kahn, appeared old-fashioned and simplistic to him and the other playwrights of his generation; moreover, the sense of defeat going through Wesker’s Trilogy did not agree with the expectations of a generation that believed they were living in revolutionary times. As a very young Caryl Churchill wrote in 1960: “Wesker gives a warm-hearted chronicle of the [...] failure of socialist idealism”. (Churchill 1960, 443) On a more personal level, McGrath had accused Wesker of cultural imperialism for his Centre 42 project, and this charge had led to some animosity between the two.¹¹⁵ McGrath argued for a substantial continuity between theatrical

¹¹⁴ In the finale the Inspector, who had left after interrogating the upper-class Birling family on their mistreatment of a working-class girl, phones announcing another visit, thus suggesting a circularity of action.

¹¹⁵ The debate between McGrath and Wesker developed into a private correspondence between them, partially reported by Itzin in her *Stages in the Revolution*. (Itzin 1980: 103-109)

experiences of the inter-war period, variously influenced by the Third International, and a popular theatre which would encompass the best of two worlds, resolute militancy and libertarian instances. This approach was both politically and theatrically problematic, since it neglected the fact that the 1968 rebellion was fuelled as much by opposition to social inequalities as by generational antagonism, and was somehow constitutionally hostile to models tied to the experience of Soviet socialism, as the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, that would prove a watershed, was too near.

Among the suggested models, Joan Littlewood was to be an inspiration for the new wave of dramatists for her life-long engagement with political theatre and for having achieved general recognition with her Theatre Workshop – founded with her then-husband Ewan MacColl – without renouncing her principles. In particular, her *Oh What a Lovely War*¹¹⁶ (1963) would prove influential: it was a variety show that drew on the tradition of popular entertainment – music hall, vaudeville – to denounce the horrors of WW1 with songs of the period sang by a chorus dressed as Pierrots. Her example was followed, among others, by CAST who payed homage to the music-hall tradition, and by John McGrath himself, who drew inspiration from her work but, instead of music-hall, adopted the popular Celtic form of Ceilidh¹¹⁷ in his most successful show *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black Black Oil* (1973). David Edgar also adopted traditional popular forms as in *Tedderella* (1971), a Christmas pantomime with Edward Heath, the then prime minister, as Cinderella at the Common Market Ball, and *Rent or Caught in the Act* (1972), a melodrama describing the persecution of the Harddoneby family by, among others, Squeezem the landlord and Devious the lawyer. Yet these attempts were mostly carried out with a satirical intent and did not fulfil the need for a theatrically complex and politically effective drama. The more immediate answer to this need was provided by agitprop,¹¹⁸ an interventionist theatrical form adopted by independent companies that wrote their own texts, such as the Agit Prop Street Players, later to become Red Ladder, but had very little appeal for young playwrights. Edgar was the exception, since, as already stated, he wrote quite a few agitprop plays between 1970 and 1974, that is during Heath's government, when working-class militancy was at its peak. Sadly, nearly all of Edgar's works of that period remained unpublished¹¹⁹, and what we can find are synopses based upon personal attendance at the plays or the memories of the author. A partial exception is Elizabeth Swain's *David Edgar Playwright and Politician* in which large

¹¹⁶ The printed edition of *Oh What a Lovely War*, first published by Methuen in 1965 and then reprinted, is collectively attributed to the Theatre Workshop.

¹¹⁷ A traditional popular entertainment, diffused in Ireland and Scotland, with songs and dances in which the audience is encouraged to participate.

¹¹⁸ According to John Willet, quoted by Swain: "The term agit-prop derives from the Soviet Communist Party's Agitation and Propaganda Department which had performed short agitational sketches to the Red Army during the Revolution". (quoted in Swain 1986, 20)

¹¹⁹ In a personal communication dated 21/11/2016 Edgar wrote: "Some of them are supposed to be being digitalized (including *Rent*) and if and when that happens I'll send them to you".

excerpts from those unpublished dramas are quoted, since Swain had access to the manuscripts kept by the author: yet the fragmentary nature of these selections makes it hard to assess their theatrical quality. Anyway, to employ an agitprop form was just a provisional solution for Edgar. Some of his contemporary playwrights turned for inspiration to the theories of the French Situationists, which had gained wide currency with the publication in 1967 of Guy Debord's *La Société du Spectacle* and with May 1968 Evénements. As Edgar put it, the Situationists turned around the classic Marxist political analysis: "Revolutionary politics was seen as being much less about the organization of the working class at the point of production, and much more about the disruption of bourgeois ideology at the point of consumption. The centre of the revolution had shifted from the factory floor to the supermarket". (Edgar 1988, 26) The situationist approach had a strong influence on Howard Brenton, especially in his early works for Portable Theatre and Brighton Combination (*Gum and Goo*, 1969, *Christie in Love*, 1969, the collective *Lay By*, 1972) but showed its limits – the risk of elitism and political irrelevance – especially in a period of British history in which the factory became again the centre of attention, socially, politically and also theatrically. It came as a natural development that these authors, in their pursue of a politically relevant theatre, would turn to Brecht.

The Berliner Ensemble's 1956 English tour of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* is often quoted as a milestone in the history of English theatre. Yet its immediate influence on playwrighting seems to have been limited, with the exception of John Arden, arguably the most Brechtian of British playwrights.¹²⁰ Quite significantly, Arden is hardly, if ever, mentioned by the authors of the generation following his own – Arden was born in 1930 – and, as shown in the chapter on CAST, his ideological rigidity could even be considered a nuisance. The problem with Brecht was that the rules he imposed on playwriting and staging were perceived as too limiting a cage for the (partially) iconoclasts of 1968; nonetheless, his style was acknowledged as a standard to be reckoned with. In 1975 Howard Brenton expressed in the clearest terms this necessity to go beyond Brecht:

There is a lot of difficulty with playwriting in an epic style, which is very important to develop. An epic style that has nothing to do with Brecht. Bond has gone the furthest [...]. I'm an anti-Brechtian. A Left anti-Brechtian. I think his plays are museum pieces now, and are messing up a lot of young theatre workers. Brecht's plays don't work, are about the thirties and not the seventies, and are now cocooned and unperformable.¹²¹

¹²⁰ According to J.L. Styan "*Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* [...] can claim to be the most Brechtian play of the post-war English stage". (Styan 1996: 401) Russell Taylor's opinion is more articulate: "Arden paradoxically, is at once the most and the least Brechtian of all modern British dramatists: most, because their views on the proper relationship between the audience and what is happening on stage are almost identical; least, because one could readily imagine that Arden's plays would have been written in exactly the same way if Brecht had never existed". (Russell Taylor 1963: 77)

¹²¹ Howard Brenton, "Petrol Bombs through the Proscenium Arch", *Theatre Quarterly*, vol. V, no. 17, 1975, p. 14.

During his career, Brenton changed his judgement on Brecht's plays, and as early as 1980 he translated and staged at the National Theatre Brecht's *Life of Galileo*. As for Edgar, his *Destiny*, staged in 1976, extensively applied one of Brecht's principles, the episodic structure. Brecht had thus explained the necessity of this modality:

As we cannot invite the audience to fling itself into the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither, the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement. (quoted in Reinelt 1996, 9)

In *Destiny* the various episodes are not in chronological sequence: between one scene and the other there is always a gap, sometimes of years and sometimes of days, sometimes forwards and sometime backwards. There is no risk of the spectator getting lost since the "knots" are clearly visible and the logical connections clear, every scene being the consequence or the explanation of the former one. This chronological structure will be successfully employed again by Edgar and, among others, by Caryl Churchill in *Top Girls* (1982). Yet, the main problem with the Brechtian model were the limits it imposed to the writing of characters, unacceptable for this group of playwrights, as pointed out by Janelle Reinelt in her *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre*: "The role of the individual, the psychic construction of the subject [...] became a pressing concern in ways that were truly incompatible with a Brechtian dramaturgy which structurally resisted representation of the interior of the selves". (Reinelt 1996, 5) As an example of this attention to individual personality, one could mention the characters of Brenton's *Magnificence* (1973) who display a variety of attitudes that go beyond the reflections of social and political forces they represent; or the characters of *Destiny*, as will be pointed out in the following paragraph. These are full rounded characters, far from the extreme stereotyping of typical agitprop theatre but also from Brecht's powerful but somehow shallow characterization. The result is what could be termed British Epic Theatre, in which, even if the psychological analysis of the characters is not pursued, a simply two-dimensional characterization is avoided. Edgar explained this development of style in the Introduction to his first published collection of plays:

Most of the plays in this volume can be called social-realist pieces. That is, unlike symbolist or absurdist or agitprop plays, they present what aspires to be a recognisable picture of human behaviour as it is commonly observed – but, unlike naturalistic drama, they set such a picture within an overall social-historical framework. The characters and situation are thus not selected solely because that's how things are – but because they represent a significant element in an analysis of a concrete social situation. The most popular definition of this endeavour is by Lukács, who said that social-realism present 'typical' characters in a 'total' context. (Edgar 1987, viii)

This 'social-realism' became the main form of expression for these authors. In the programme of *Destiny*'s 1976 production, the drama critic Anthony Everitt gave a definition of the style of the play that could be applied to social realism in general:

The *thesis* is ‘bourgeois’ drama, which describes human behaviour but does not explain it. The *antithesis* is agitprop drama which portrays men and women as being totally determined by social and economic conditions. Edgar is now attempting a *synthesis* which explores the dynamic between individual motives and external conditions. (Quoted in Megson 2012, 63)

Simplistic as it may be, Everitt’s classification is effective in marking the different theatrical attitudes – even if, obviously, distinctions could not always be so clear-cut – and in defining this mode that would be predominant among political playwrights until the mid-1980s. In a speech delivered in November 1986, and published in his *The Second Time as Farce* with the title “Festivals of the Oppressed”, Edgar acknowledged that political theatre had reached a point of crisis and it was necessary to devise a reaction to triumphant Thatcherism by “developing a theatre that can explore and inhabit the contradictions of our time without either denying their existence or pouring scorn on all sides from a great height”. (Edgar 1988, 243) To this end, Edgar started with an assessment of the previous ten years of political theatre – a sort of update of his *Ten Years of Political theatre: 1968-1978*. Edgar did not deny the accomplishments of socialist theatre: “The so called ‘state of England’ play sought to analyse the social malaise in historical and cultural rather than crudely economic terms”. (Edgar 1988, 230) He also paid homage to feminist theatre¹²² in its capacity to spark a debate more than to transmit truths: “And the emerging feminist theatre took considerable pleasure [...] in using theatre not so much as a platform for the proclamation of eternal truths, but rather as a laboratory for the testing, under various conditions, of new ways of relating to each other and the world”. (Ibid.) Edgar expressed the need of a new theatrical form that would face the challenges of a time of political retreat: “What I suppose most of us are striving for, is a way of combining the cerebral, unearthly detachment of Brecht’s theory with the all too earthy, sensual, visceral experience of Bakhtin’s carnival”. (Ibid., 245) Edgar found an answer, albeit partial and provisional, in the plays he wrote for the Dorchester Community Play Association, the already mentioned *Entertaining Strangers* and *A Time to Keep* (2007). In the presentation of the latter, in *The Guardian* of 14 November 2007, he expressed his opinion, or hope, that this could be productive development:

Visual theatre is often pitted against text-based work. Community theatre not only challenges the division between performer, spectator, professional and amateur, but also between the two schools of postwar British theatre that are often placed in contention. Ever since I’ve been in the business, there has been a persistent chant from academics and critics, some claiming that visually based, site-specific, non-text-based performance theatre is about to take over; others praying that one day these two wings of postwar theatre might unite. Well, brilliant though they can be, I don’t think Desperate Optimists, Forced Entertainment or even Kneehigh¹²³ are going to displace theatre based on the written text. But if you were looking for one specific site where

¹²² Edgar’s relationship with Feminism will be dealt with in the following paragraph.

¹²³ Desperate Optimists and Kneehigh are companies mostly devoted to visual theatre. Forced Entertainment’s works are the result of a process “combining discussion, improvisation and writing” in rehearsal. See <https://www.forcedentertainment.com/how-we-work/> last visit 30/03/ 2019.

those two strands had, like the tributaries of a river, flowed into each other and mingled, then it would be the community play.¹²⁴

It is significant that the question of political effectiveness, not to mention the issue of reaching working class audiences, is not mentioned. The times they were a-changing, indeed, and revolution was not on the agenda, not even as a far prospect.

2.5 A Concern with the Public World and its Relation to the Private World

This concern carries an obvious resonance with the slogan “the personal is political” that was the expression of the – supposedly – new approach to politics of the late 1960s and early 1970s, in opposition to a Stalinist vision, that regarded individual lives as disposable in the struggle for Socialism. The 1970s brought on a new sense of the centrality of human being in her or his individuality, and the awareness that the mere appropriation of the means of production did not guarantee happiness for humankind. With the benefit of fifty years’ insight it is widely accepted that the main moving force of this new approach was the feminist movement. Yet, at the time, feminism was far from easily and generally accepted. I have already pointed out that CAST’s Muldoon was ill at ease with the idea that the struggle for socialism and for women’s liberation were not necessarily coinciding. As Edgar has recently acknowledged, he did not recognize at first sight the importance of feminism:

In this country women’s liberation proverbially starts at the Ruskin Conference in 1970,¹²⁵ and the disruption of ‘Miss World’, but there’s no doubt that feminism was delayed by the industrial upsurge and by the fact that a lot of people, including me shamefully, were saying that the miners were on strike, the Vietnam War is raging, this is not a time to talk about different sort of orgasm. (Quoted in Megson 2012, 132)

Edgar’s honesty is commendable and, of course, he was not the only one who did not recognize the importance of women’s movements from the start. Feminist themes started to appear, albeit quite cursorily, in his writing: for instance, in *Destiny* (1976) one character, Sandy, refuses to be introduced simply as the Labour candidate’s wife: “I do have a name, Bob. And being your wife isn’t the sum total of my existence”. (Edgar 1997, 381) More substantially in 1977 Edgar wrote for Pirate Jenny *Our Own People* which focused, among other issues, on women’s working condition in a factory and with the consequences of the Equal Pay Act;¹²⁶ in 1979 he co-wrote with Susan Todd *Teendreams* for Monstrous Regiment, a company that statutorily had a majority of female components. It is not self-evident

¹²⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2007/nov/14/theatre1> last accessed 20/08/2018.

¹²⁵ This conference, held at the Ruskin college in Oxford, saw the participation of women from all over the world and is commonly considered the official start of the feminist movement in the UK.

¹²⁶ The Equal Pay Act was an act of Parliament prohibiting gender-based salary disparities. Approved in 1970, it came into force on 29 December 1975. The struggle to gain wage parity between men and women has been romanced in the film *Made in Dagenham* (2010).

why Catherine Itzin, in the introduction to the 1982 *British Alternative Theatre Directory* singled out Edgar as an example of scant attention to women's theatre:

In a recent issue of the 'new' *New Socialist* magazine, playwright David Edgar surveyed 25 years of British theatre and mentioned women's work only once, in passing along with black and gay theatre groups, "who toured shows, designed (largely) for audiences suffering from sexual and racial oppression". Now when the National Theatre was approached by Women in Entertainment to ask if they were mounting anything special for the Women Live celebration of women's work in May 1982, the National Theatre's response was that it was not part of their policy to do special material about minority groups. It was necessary to draw their attention to the fact that half the population are women, therefore not a minority group. It is necessary to draw Edgar's attention to the fact that "audience suffering from sexual oppression" are half the population; that half of every audience suffers from sexual oppression. (Itzin, ed., 1982, 17)

The idea that women could be considered a minority group sounds funny today, or, better, positively ridiculous. Edgar's quoted statement is surely awkward, but it says more about the times than about Edgar's individual sensitivity. Life, both private and public, was changing more rapidly than the language that had to describe it, and sexual mores were at the vanguard of this rush of change. Edgar was both the witness and indirectly the protagonist of what is now considered a watershed in this new attitude towards the relationship between the public and the private sphere, and towards minorities: during a performance of his *The Dunkirk Spirit* by the General Will in July 1975, the one gay man of the company, Noël Greig, halted the performance and went on strike to protest at the company's neglect of sexual politics. (Megson 2012, 44) In later years Edgar considered Greig's "coup d'etat"¹²⁷ significant also from the theatrical point of view:

There were huge arguments about feminism and its importance or lack of importance, and gay rights, but the crucial thing for me was the General Will falling apart, which resulted from a conflict between the heterosexual men in the group and the one gay man in the group, Noël Greig. That was the moment when I realized that a kind of fragile unity had been broken. You could see the great historical division, in theatre terms, between art-college-based, visual, non-cerebral performance art and the political, university based, verbal, cerebral theatre. (Quoted in Megson 2012, 228).

Greig went on to become a member of Gay Sweatshop, a company whose activity was totally devoted to sexual politics. Around 1977, also Gay Sweatshop split between its male and female members, to show that choices were nowhere easy in those years of rapid change. The 1970s marked an intense development of what were later to be known as 'identity politics' and of the theatre connected to them. In UK the main figure of this growing theatrical movement dealing with sex-gender-race-related themes was Ed Berman, a USA expatriate who opened various London venues between the late 1960s and the late 1970s. His main theatrical vehicle was Inter-Action, a pioneer company of lunch-time drama; apart from that,

¹²⁷ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/sep/23/noel-greig-obituary> last accessed 22/06/2018.

his enterprises were too many to recount them all, including a trade union for Santa impersonators in department stores. As for his general influence on the theatrical life of his time, it is summarized by Megson:

Berman was a visionary of organisation and programming. In 1970, a 'black and White power' season was held at the Ambiance, giving valuable impetus to emerging black playwrights; a Women's Theatre season was organised in 1973 at the Almost Free,¹²⁸ leading to the formation of the Women's Theatre Group; a season called 'Homosexual Acts' was produced in 1975, triggering the creation of Gay Sweatshop; and a 'Rights and Campaigns' season, in 1978, focused on Jewish issues. As Sandy Craig put in in 1980, "the Almost Free, almost single-handedly, has transformed the idea of community from that of a geographical area to that of a minority grouping with a community of interests within society". In other words, the Almost Free became the principal site for the theatrical mobilisation and expression of identity politics in London at this time (Megson 2012, 40).

What makes Berman's achievements particularly noteworthy in the alternative theatrical landscape of the period is the fact that he was nor a revolutionary nor a Marxist, and, even if the economic structure of Inter-Action was based on socialist principles, nor a socialist in the strict sense. His criticism of political theatre of the period is quite scathing:

I am suspicious of statements on politics which are not borne out by actions. I believe that structure and personal action are more important than what you say. It doesn't really matter to me what statements you make. If you don't live it or put it into practice in the structure of your work or personal life, then the statement is just bourgeois titillation and self-deception. And that's really where the dividing line has come between me and most of the so-called political theatre which I think is usually posing. If not, they often postulate things which are either impossible to achieve or impossible to live by, by people who have never tried to do either. [...] It's clear to me that if you accept the *structure*¹²⁹ as 'political' as well as the intellectual and the verbal, then we are as 'political' as they come. 'Political' is not a code word for 'Marxist'. (Quoted in Itzin 1980, 51-52)

Ed Berman was, and probably still is, a close friend of Tom Stoppard,¹³⁰ and it is easy to see how his stress on the moral basis of political choices must have provided a solid basis for their friendship. This said, Berman's criticism was perhaps too severe since, as was the case with CAST, many alternative companies followed socialist principles in their structure and organization, at least from the economic point of view. Yet, one has to wonder if a Marxist analysis was of hindrance to the comprehension of new social and political phenomena, and therefore the lack of it an advantage.

¹²⁸ Both the Ambiance and the Almost Free were mostly lunch-time theatres. The latter owed its name to the pay-what-you-can policy.

¹²⁹ Emphasis in the original.

¹³⁰ Tom Stoppard had various of his early plays staged by Ed Berman and he dedicated him *New-Found-Land* as a celebration for him getting the British citizenship.

2.6 Unlike Arnold Wesker or Brendan Behan

“[W]e’ve tended to choose subjects matter that is at some distance from our own experience”. The lives of Wesker and Behan were widely different. Wesker (1932-2016) was a talented person who overcame the disadvantages of a working-class origin to become a – non-universally – acclaimed playwright and a public figure, engaged in political and theatrical debate, until his death in 2016. Behan’s (1923-1964) experience was much more extreme: jailed in 1939 as a sixteen-year-old tentative IRA bomber, he was in jail for seven years, and his theatrical production – only six plays – was interrupted by his untimely death, aged forty-one, due to alcohol abuse. What unites them is the shared feature of having drawn part of their theatrical production from their lives. As regards Wesker, *Chicken Soup with Barley* was strictly connected to his growing up in the East End of London, *The Kitchen* (1961) to his early working experience and *Chips with Everything* (1962) to National Service.¹³¹ As for Behan, *The Quare Fellow* (1954) is set in a jail and *The Hostage* (1958) stages the kidnapping of a British soldier by the IRA. As opposed to them, Edgar and the other playwrights of his generation – Barker excluded – came from middle-class families. The direct consequence was that the depiction of dockers’ strike in Edgar’s *Wreckers* (1977) or factory life in Brenton’s *Weapons of Happiness* (1977) relied on second-hand experience, or, in Edgar’s case, in an accurate work of documentation. The exceptions were plays set in the social-political milieu in which these authors lived, such as the intellectual class of Griffith’s *The Party*¹³² (1973) or the middle-class students-revolutionaries-terrorists of Brenton’s *Magnificence* (1973). The importance of Edgar’s statement lies in marking the difference with the previous generation, that of Osborne, Wesker and Bond, or, more generally speaking, of the Royal Court 1950s generation of writers, implicitly acknowledging an easier access to theatre by the younger generation. Whether the working-class origin of Osborne and Co. translated into a significant theatrical production for the working-class life is debatable. McGrath, himself a middle-class offspring, absolutely denied this hypothesis:

In 1956 John Osborne is said to have inaugurated a New Era; Revitalised various things; Heralded a new Dawn; Opened the Doors of the theatre to this, that and the other – (mostly the northern working class) and given a New direction to British Theatre. [...] Many another young writer has followed Osborne into the Royal Court or the Aldwych or the National Theatre. [...] This particular kind of theatre has become equally respectable, conventional and pernicious. [...] Its greatest claim to social significance is that it produced a new ‘working-class’ art, that it somehow stormed the Winter Palace of bourgeois culture and threw out the old regime and turned the place into a temple of workers’ art. Of course it did nothing of the kind. What Osborne and his clever director Tony Richardson had achieved was a method of translating some

¹³¹ National Service was terminated for those born after 1 October 1939, and so all those born in the 1940s were exempted from it.

¹³² The first production of *The Party* at the Old Vic was graced by a magnificent performance by Laurence Olivier in his farewell stage appearance in the part of John Tagg, a Glaswegian Trotskyite.

areas of non-middle-class life in Britain into a form of entertainment that could be sold to the middle classes. (McGrath 1996, 8-10)

As is often the case with McGrath, his view is well-argued but lacks subtlety, as it fails to recognize that the mere presence on stage of working men and women as main characters represented a novelty and a sign of a less economically-segregated society. Again, a shared definition of a theatre for the working-class between McGrath and Edgar, among others, would prove impossible.

2.7 Unlike Bond, Arden and Brecht we've largely written about our own country in the present day or recent past.

Or the near future, one could add, thinking, for instance, of the dystopian *The Churchill Play*. Edgar's point is clear: generally speaking, his generation of playwrights were not interested in distancing the audience by setting their dramas in past or undefined times, or in exotic countries. This focusing on contemporary Great Britain can be partly explained looking back at the 1950s. Referring to Berliner Ensemble's 1956 tour, Bull stressed that Brecht's theatre and the general attitude of the young authors – obviously McGrath would not agree that they were actually “committed” – of the time significantly diverged:

The predominant urge on the part of politically committed writers and directors at the time was towards social naturalism, towards an articulation of the disaffected voices not previously heard on stage; a concern with the local and the regional, rather than the larger world-views of Brecht's mature plays”. (Bull 1994, 44)

In the 1970s there were exceptions to this focus on the here-and-now. The most notable was Hare's *Fanshen* (1975), probably the most Brechtian play of the period, which tried to make some general points on the difficulty of building a socialist society through the collective vicissitudes of a small village in revolutionary China. Apart from that, the past was revisited with the intention of providing accurate accounts more than political sermons, even if, of course, the underlying political meaning was never to be lost. This was the case with Griffith's *Occupations* (1971) on the seizure by the workers of the Fiat factory in Turin in 1919; or Churchill's *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* (1976) based upon the transcripts of the so-called 1647 Putney debates among officers and soldiers' delegates of Cromwell's New Model Army.

I will note in passing that, as regards Edgar, what is said above is valid until the end of the 1980s. In the following years he considerably widened the scope of his works, starting with *The Shape of the Table* (1990), a play about the transition from socialism to capitalism in an unnamed country strongly resembling Czechoslovakia. The Yugoslav wars were the theme of *Pentecost* (1994) while *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (2001) dealt with ethnic conflicts following the dissolution of the USSR. All the three plays, therefore, were focussed on the aftermath and the consequences of the fall of Communism, the most important political event of the last decade of the twentieth century. It is not surprising that Edgar, in his desire to be “a secretary of the times through which I'm living” (quoted in Reinelt 2011, 265)

turned his eyes to Eastern Europe for the political relevance of the event, but also for its consequences, first and foremost the flow of immigrants and refugees that would also affect British public life. Edgar's plays of the first decade of the twenty-first century *Playing with Fire* (2005) and *Testing the Echo* (2008) would go back to the UK: the former would somehow re-enact *Destiny* and *Our Own People* staging racially-motivated riots in a fictitious town of the North, Wyverdale, and the subsequent inquest, in the context of tension created by international terrorism – *Playing with Fire* was premiered at the National Theatre on 21 September 2005, shortly after the bomb attacks of 7 July on the London Underground; the latter would explore the issue of national identity in contemporary Great Britain, questioning the efficacy and rightfulness of the British citizenship test.

2.8 Unlike Shaw

In 1982, when the first version of “Public Theatre in a Private Age” was published, neither Great Britain nor the world looked in the least as “teetering on the edge of the rational order”. In the United Kingdom the jingoistic emotion caused by the Falkland War was leading to Thatcher's second term in office; Reagan's America was leading the way to the world-wide triumph of monetarist economy, while the Soviet Union was entering its terminal crisis with the Afghan war; also new socialist states, such as Vietnam, Kampuchea and Cuba were turning into repressive, and, in the case of Kampuchea – explicitly mentioned by Edgar (Edgar 1988, 229) – even murderous regimes. The only glimpse of hope was offered by the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, a hope that nowadays appears to have been misplaced. A lack of optimism by a left-wing playwright was therefore fully justified. Of course, Shaw's hope of a future of progress for mankind was very much the effect of the general optimism that would not survive the two World Wars. Contemporary events apart, Edgar's statement did not refer to a particular moment in history but to the whole time of his activity as a playwright. In an interview with Theatre Quarterly editors Simon Trussler and Clive Barker in October 1978, Edgar put this lack of optimism in contemporary playwriting into the pattern of a British theatrical tradition:

It is such a cliché that it almost doesn't need saying, but our whole dramatic tradition has trained us very well to write plays about despair, despondency, missed opportunities, and failures. So we find it difficult to write positively, and if one was to name one's top ten most embarrassing moments in the English theatre over the last ten years most of them would be of people trying to be optimistic and positive – you know, the end of the agitprop play when the actors having shown yet another working-class defeat, stand with clenched fists singing a song about how it'll be all right next time, which is the moment when many people crawl under their seats, often never to come out again. (Quoted in Trussler, ed, 1981: 171)

Apart from the international situation, we know that October 1978 was a particularly ominous time for Great Britain, since it was nearing the famous “Winter of Discontent” that would underline Labour's inability to meet trade unions' demands, paving the way for Thatcher's victory of the following year. In his 1982

article, Edgar was even more explicit in expressing his scepticism on the possibility of political progress: “The barrier between human beings and the just city no longer looks like a diaphanous veil, simply waiting to be rent in twain by the cutting edge of Fabian analysis; but something more akin to an electrified barbed-wire fence or the Berlin Wall”. (Edgar 1988, 161) The mentioning of the Berlin Wall is not without significance, since it highlighted a general rejection of the Soviet Union socialism shared, with some nuances, by his fellow playwrights.¹³³ But their political pessimism directly addressed the Labour Party, too. Peculiarly, the Labour Party was not only criticized for being in collusion with the Tories, as in Brenton’s *The Churchill Play* (1974) and for having become part of a corrupted system, as in Barker’s *The Hang of the Gaol* (1978); it was also suspected of possible authoritarian intents, as in Barker’s *That Good Between Us* (1977). Brenton went even beyond that in his dystopian *Thirteenth Night* (1981) in which he imagined that a left-wing Labour leader mounted a coup d’état and established a Stalinist regime in Great Britain. Luckily (or not), on stage it turned out to be a dream, as was the socialist revolution in *Confessions of a Socialist*; yet it remains a peculiar symptom of disquiet by a socialist playwright during Thatcher’s first term. This far, these signs of lack of hope in the future were consigned to the stage. Edgar went even further in his above-mentioned 1986 conference address, calling into question some commonly accepted truths about working class militancy in the early 1970s:

Increasingly, the limits of economic militancy were becoming clearer, with even the more zealous Trotskyite beginning to suspect that, far from having struck to bring down the government, the miners might well have brought down the government to win their strike. [...] As the dockers marched against Heath [in 1972] it was conveniently forgotten that four years before significant numbers of the same dockers had marched for the racist ideas of Enoch Powell.¹³⁴ By the end of 1975 the 68 generation had lost its innocence, and the section of that generation that had gone into the theatre began to appreciate that anybody seriously attempting to represent the times that followed was inevitably going to be dealing with complexity, contradiction and even just plain doubt. (Edgar 1988, 229-230)

In this demoralizing landscape Edgar saw the only reason for hope in the combative attitude of the Asian workers: “While the white aristocrats of labour had withdrawn from the commanding heights of the struggle, black and Asian workers were demonstrating, in the sweatshops of the east Midlands and elsewhere, that they were not prepared to submit to exploitation”. (Edgar 1988, 229). This was the historical background and the political urgency that stimulated Edgar to write *Destiny* and, soon after and derivatively, *Our Own People*. The scrutiny of those two plays will

¹³³ This did not prevent McGrath from defining Stoppard’s *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977), on a dissident in the Eastern Block: “Tom Stoppard’s recent piece of right-wing propaganda”. (McGrath 1996: 19)

¹³⁴ Enoch Powell (1912-1998) was an MP belonging to the right-wing of the Conservative Party. He owes his fame to the so-called ‘rivers of blood’ speech, pronounced on 18 April 1968, in which he gave voice to the xenophobic feelings of part of the British population.

be preceded by an examination of Edgar's venture into Shakespearean territory with *Dick Deterred*.

2.9 Dick Deterred

In explaining the genesis of *Dick Deterred* Edgar referred to a previous play, *Tedderella*, staged in January 1973 to celebrate satirically Great Britain's entrance into the Common Market:

What happened with *Dick Deterred* was that the Bush [Theatre] had done a revival of *Tedderella*, and asked me to do a sort of *Return of Tedderella*. I wasn't frightfully interested in that, but they'd obviously commissioned something like it, and I happened to see a paragraph in *The Times* diary about The Society of the White Boar,¹³⁵ which was preceded by an item about Nixon, and the connecting link was another Richard who was vilified in his time. And I rang up the Bush and said Watergate Richard the Third. And they said wonderful, and I went back to whatever I was doing. I didn't, in fact, actually read *Richard the Third*, check whether it was going to fit, until the statutory five weeks before the play was due. In fact, it does fit, and it was mainly a mathematical task of fitting the two components together. So essentially form preceded content there. (Trussler 1981: 166)

In *Tedderella* Edgar had paired the characters of a typical Christmas pantomime with some prominent political figures of contemporary Great Britain and Europe. *Tedderella* has remained unpublished, but Elizabeth Swain had access to the manuscript and so some details and a few cues are reported in her *David Edgar Playwright and Politician* (1986). Since pantomime is a British genre, unfamiliar to the American readers, Swain starts by sketching its general features:

A well-known fairy tale is the basis of the plot. The characters are polarized into good and evil in much the same way as in melodrama, but the evil is rarely serious. The virtuous young hero is played by a long-legged woman, known as the "principal boy" in the tradition of breeches roles. The young heroine is a more fragile and equally attractive woman, usually an excellent singer. [...] Frequently a good fairy helps things along for the hero and heroine, who will inevitably marry and live happily ever after. (Swain 1986, 110)

Tedderella is based upon the story of Cinderella: the name *Tedderella* comes from the conflation of the name of the eponymous heroine of the fairy tale with the name of the then Tory Prime Minister Edward – Ted – Heath who promoted and presided over Great Britain's accession to the EC on 1st January 1973. The ugly sisters are named Harriet and Rowena – from the former Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson and Home Secretary Roy Jenkins – and the Prince Charmant, whose wedding with *Tedderella* will mark the United Kingdom's accession to Europe, is a thin travesty of Charles De Gaulle, the late French leader. There are also Brandini – Willy Brandt, the then German Chancellor – whom Prince Charmant keeps treating as his butler, and *Tedderella*'s loyal friend Enoch Buttons – Enoch Powell

¹³⁵ The Society, or Fellowship, of the White Boar was an association, founded in 1924, whose aim was to provide a more benign assessment of Richard III's life and reign. It was renamed the Richard III Society in 1959 and is still active today. See <http://www.richardiii.net/> last accessed 24/07/2018.

– whose heart Cinderella unintentionally breaks: in the spirit of happy ending, he will be rewarded with stricter laws on immigration. Edgar closely adhered to the norms and structure of pantomime while also succeeding in accounting for the political debate on the left on the issue of Britain’s entrance to the Common Market – the ugly sisters confront each other in a trifle fight, mirroring the Labour Party’s internal division on this issue. All in all, Edgar considered it a success: “It [*Tedderella*] turned out to be a very good spoof, and it gave me confidence in writing large-scale parody”. (quoted in Trussler 1981, 164) This confidence was the basis upon which Edgar based his *Dick Deterred* but, considering that *Tedderella* had a quite simple plot, *Dick Deterred* is a much more demanding piece of work. Edgar’s reference to “the mathematical task of fitting the two components together” seems to dismiss the writing of *Dick Deterred* as a rather mechanical effort, but superimposing the many rivulets of the Watergate affair onto the plot of *Richard III* has to be acknowledged as a complex creative achievement. Of course, a certain degree of imagination is required from the spectators or readers: for instance, the death of a character in *Dick Deterred* should not be taken literally, but indicates that the corresponding contemporary figure was forced to resign or met political disgrace. The size of the cast of *Richard III* – some fifty characters – allowed Edgar to give free rein to his creativity: there are twenty-six roles in *Dick Deterred*,¹³⁶ nearly all of them¹³⁷ with a correspondent both in *Richard III* and in American contemporary life, and the pairings are often very ingenious. The result is both entertaining and thought-provoking. As Victoria Radin remarked in the *Observer* of 3 March 1974 “the plot fits so closely it hurts”. (Quoted in Swain 1986, 118)

By contrast with *Richard III*, the action starts with two characters on stage. One of them, speaking with a strong Texan accent, states that he is the President of the United States while the other one, who does not speak, is the Vice-President. Their names are Edward The Fourth Part Two and Part Three respectively: their ascension to power was “due to de [*sic*] demise, which good taste forbids me to detail, of Edward de Fourt [*sic*]¹³⁸ Part One.” Even to a British audience it was evident that the pair were Lyndon Johnson and his deputy Hubert Humphrey, and that Edward the Fourth Part One was J.F. Kennedy. After declaring that he would not seek re-election, Part Two announces that the tragedy is going to start: “So. End of prologue. Go to show. De Tragic History of de life and near-death of the biggest bugger of dem all – King Dick De Tird”. (Edgar 1974, 13-14)

After the prologue, a spotlight reveals Richard-Dick at the back of the audience and follows him as he walks towards the stage, delivering his introductory monologue.

¹³⁶ In its first staging the play was performed by seven actors playing all the roles. Some doublings are suggested in the *Dramatis Personae* of the published edition. (Edgar 1974, 8)

¹³⁷ The exceptions are Edward the Fourth Part Two and Three, and the Cops in the finale who do not appear in *Richard III*; it has also to be noted that Brackenbury is present in both *Richard III* and *Dick Deterred* – in the latter as a riot-cop who escorts and is in charge of Clarence in Miami – but has no evident American political correspondent.

¹³⁸ These graphic irregularities are meant to underline Johnson’s Texan accent. They will not be evidenced hereafter.

Its length roughly corresponds to Gloucester's one, and Edgar skilfully fits into blank verse both references to the political situation and to Nixon psychology's – at least as it was popularly known – while also adhering to Shakespeare's text:

Now is the winter of our discontent
 Made glorious sun by this Texan bum [...]
 But I, that am not shaped for aught but tricks
 Nor made to court an amorous CBS¹³⁹
 I, that am rudely stamped, and want capacity
 To strut before a wanton East coast liberal;
 I, that was spurned by the electorate,
 Cheated in 1960 by dissembling forces
 Held as a has-been, spent before my time
 Out of this world before my star was set
 And seen so lamely and unfashionable
 That now they chuckle when I halt by them [...].
 And told the gloating press, with quiv'ring jaw
 They'd not have Dick to kick around no more
 Ad therefore since I could not prove a pointy-head
 And entertain the Washington elite
 I am determined to rise again
 And see these bums well ground beneath my feet [...]
 Setting the goodly Clarence and the king
 In deadly hate the one against the other. (Edgar 1974, 14-15)

The first and the last of these lines are taken verbatim from Shakespeare's tragedy. Nearly all the others echo the original lines, often shifting the focus from Gloucester's deformity to Nixon's political failures: "Cheated of feature by dissembling nature"¹⁴⁰ becomes "Cheated in 1960 by dissembling fortune", a reference to Nixon's defeat by Kennedy in the 1960 Presidential elections. The "Texan bum" referred to in the second line is President Johnson, whose unpopularity made the presidential post virtually vacant. The main stress is on what were commonly accepted as the main features of Nixon's psychology: inferiority complex, especially towards the intellectual elites ("And therefore since I cannot prove a lover"¹⁴¹ is turned into "And therefore since I could not prove a pointy-

¹³⁹ The CBS (Columbia Broadcasting System) is an American broadcasting network.

¹⁴⁰ *Richard III*, 1,1,19.

¹⁴¹ *Richard III*, 1,1,28.

head”), vindictiveness (“And see these bums etc.”) and paranoia (Shakespeare’s “That dogs bark at me”¹⁴² becomes “That now they chuckle”). The line “They’d not have Dick to kick around no more” is the transposition in blank verse of what Nixon actually said in a press conference in 1962, after being defeated in California gubernatorial elections, announcing his – short-lived, indeed! – intention to abandon politics: “You don’t have Nixon to kick around anymore”.¹⁴³ The show goes on in true music-hall fashion with Dick singing a song, the refrain of which “Would you buy/ a used car/from me?” is the first-person transposition of an anti-Nixon advertising poster in which he appeared at his most devious with the slogan: “Would you buy a used car from this man?”. At the end of the song, enters Clarence, who announces that he is going to be taken not to the Tower but to Chicago, where the Democratic convention is going to take place. Clarence stands for Eugene McCarthy, who would potentially have been Nixon’s most serious opponent, had he gained the Democratic nomination.

Nixon’s own nomination at the Republican convention in Miami is the subject of scene two: it comes in the form of the seduction of Anne (see *Richard III* 1.2) representing the Republican Party and is sealed by Gloucester/Nixon’s lines: “Was ever party in this humor woo’d/ Was ever party in this humor won?” followed by a nearly verbatim quotation:

I do mistake my person all the while
 Upon my life, she finds, although I cannot
 Myself to be a marv’lous proper man
 I’ll be at charge for a looking glass
 And entertain a score or two of sycophants
 To tell me what a super chap I am.
 Shine out, fair sun, till I have bought a glass
 I’ll watch my face while others kiss my arse. (Edgar 1974:,26)

Gloucester’s gloating over his seductive power in *Richard III* is mirrored by Nixon’s incredulity in front of the chance of a second political life. Here Shakespeare’s original text is modified in order to stress Nixon’s notorious sensitivity to adulation (“to tell me what a super chap I am”) and his tendency to swear (“while others kiss my arse”). Before the end of the scene a murderer – just one – introduces himself by the name of Richard Daley, the mayor of Chicago in 1968, and is dispatched to murder Clarence. The following scene 3 is closely based on *Richard III* 1.4, that is Clarence’s dream before being murdered; the action is transposed by Edgar to 1968 Chicago. There was no need to explain to British or American audiences in the early 1970s what the reference to Chicago was about, also because of Graham Nash’s hit song *Chicago*¹⁴⁴ which referred to these events. However, half a century later, a summary is necessary.

In August 1968 Chicago hosted the Democratic Convention that was due to choose the Democratic candidate for the Presidential elections of the same year, since president Johnson had decided not to run for re-election. The convention was

¹⁴² *Richard III*, 1,1,23.

¹⁴³ The speech is visible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JA1edgj1U5E> last accessed 01/07/2018

¹⁴⁴ It was included in Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young’s live album *4 Way Street*, recorded in 1970 and released in 1971.

held in one of the most difficult moments of American history since, in previous months, both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, who was due to run for the nomination, had been murdered. Moreover, outside the Convention, there were huge demonstrations of protest against the Vietnam war, promoted, among others, by the Youth International Party, a sort of political outlet of the hippie movement, whose members called themselves Yippies. These demonstrations were repressed with disproportionate violence by Police forces, who also burst into the hotel where the Convention took place in search of fugitive demonstrators and beat up some journalists. As a consequence of all this, the convention was held in an extremely tense atmosphere, and its political outcome was the defeat of the ‘progressive’ candidate Eugene McCarthy and the nomination of Hubert Humphrey, Johnson’s vice-president. As stated above, Eugene McCarthy stands for Shakespeare’s Clarence. This is probably the most effective of Edgar’s satirical pairings, since McCarthy’s, supposed at least, idealism – he had openly opposed Johnson’s policy in Vietnam – corresponds perfectly to Clarence’s innocence: Gloucester defines him as “Simple plain Clarence”.¹⁴⁵ The spectators have already seen Clarence/McCarthy in Scene One, when he was escorted not to the Tower but to the Hilton hotel in Chicago. Now he is again on the stage and tells his nightmare to Brackenbury, starting with Shakespeare’s unaltered lines in *Richard III* 1,4:

O, I have passed a miserable night
 So full of fearful dreams, of ugly sights
 That, as I am a Christian faithful man
 I would not spend another such a night. (Edgar 1974: 29)

Then the narration turns completely from Shakespeare: while Clarence’s dream was a harbinger of his own murder, McCarthy’s dream showed what actually happened outside the Democratic Convention:

Methought I had broken from my Hilton suite
 And landed was among a yippie throng
 Who crowded were into the Lincoln Park,
 At first ‘twas peaceful; all I heard the sound
 Of burning joints and gentle fornication
 And Allen Ginsberg humming mantras peacefully
 And Jean Genet joining in, in French, of course. (Edgar 1974, 29)

A nearly idyllic landscape, highlighted by the repetition of “peaceful” “peacefully”, while the “gentle fornication” and the lack of alarm and condemnation for “burning joints” make reference to McCarthy’s substantial tolerance, especially seen on the backdrop of Puritan America. The two mentioned writers were notoriously active in the anti-war movement: Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) was the most political of the Beat Generation poets, inspired both by left-wing politics and oriental philosophies, and Jean Genet (1910-1986), the last of the French *poètes maudits*, had joined the counterculture after a whole life of frictions with the law. The dreamy telling turns into a nightmare with the intervention of the police:

¹⁴⁵ *Richard III*, 1,1,118.

But then this peaceful scene
 Was broken by the coming of the fuzz [...]
 So fearsome was their aspect; then without
 So much as an excuse, in they went
 Their batons, gas, and water cannons
 Frightening the crowd, who screaming ran amok
 Caught in mid-mantra or, for some, mid fuck [...]
 And Norman Mailer¹⁴⁶ quietly throwing up
 Whether from gas or scotch I could not tell. (Ibid., 30)

The police are called with the old-fashioned American slang “fuzz” that, in its indeterminateness expresses effectively the image of a wild force which had been given free rein. The whole scene is both terrifying and funny, as oriental meditation and sexual intercourse – both peaceful activities – are paired with each other and counterposed to violence driven by political and, maybe, generational hatred: also vomiting is presented as a quiet and dignified activity in comparison to police brutality, even if it is humorously left unstated whether sickness was due to police action or drinking. In the following lines violence becomes unstoppable and affects also those who believed themselves to be on the safe side of the barricades:

And chased were some into this very street
 And crushed were some into this same hotel
 The place glass shattering, the police enforced
 Their way into an erstwhile peaceful bar [...]
 And social columnists now take the blows
 Reserved hitherto for blacks and yips
 And Ginsberg humming mantras in the rain
 And Norman Mailer throwing up again. (Ibid.)

Edgar notes that even social or professional status is not a shield against State violence. To further prove this point he mentions that also social columnists, that is the representatives of frivolous and gossipy journalism, got their fair share of blows. Incidentally “Ginsberg humming mantras in the rain” corresponds to what actually went on: Ginsberg himself testified at the trial against the so-called ‘Chicago eight’ –the organizers of the demonstrations – held one year after the events, that he kept chanting “o-m” during police charges in order to pacify souls and avoid an escalation of violence.¹⁴⁷ After Mailer’s repeated sickness, we go back to Shakespeare. The following six lines are nearly verbatim *Richard III* (1,4,58-63) the only difference being “And still” for Shakespeare’s “With that”:

And still, methought, the legion of foul fiends
 Environed me, and howled in my ears
 Such hideous cries that with the very noise
 I trembling waked, and for a season after
 Could not believe but that I was in hell,
 Such terrible impression made my dream. (Ibid.)

¹⁴⁶ Norman Mailer (1923-2007) was a novelist and a journalist. In 1955 he founded *The Village Voice*, a left-wing weekly magazine still active on-line today.

¹⁴⁷ <http://www.famous-trials.com/chicago8/1324-ginsberg> last accessed 22.06.2018.

As in Shakespeare, Clarence's nightmare is followed by his murder. In Edgar, as already stated, the murderer is Richard Daley major of Chicago and right-wing Democrat. He announces to Clarence/McCarthy his political defeat before stabbing him:

Ay murder thee
 Or tell thee news to have the same effect
 That will consign thee to the wilderness
 Destroy thy chances as a candidate [...] [you] who turn our loved party to a throng
 Of fags and parasites, the great unwashed
 The sunflowers of hated Ashbury
 Who chant obscenities like "love" and "peace".(Edgar 1974, 32)

Ashbury, or better, the Haight-Ashbury area of S. Francisco, was considered the cradle of the so-called Flower Power, that is the American pacifist movement. By Daley's words, Edgar made explicit that many Democrats shared the Republicans' hatred towards the pacifist movement, a corollary being that a large part of the Democratic Party – especially in the South – preferred the victory of a Republican candidate to a pacifist Democratic one.¹⁴⁸ This explains the nomination as Presidential candidate of Hubert Humphrey, whose conservative credentials ruled out a conversion to pacifist politics, but who had very slight chances of victory given that he had been the vice-president of the unpopular Lyndon Johnson. Humphrey's acceptance of Democratic candidacy is staged showing his counterpart, Edward the Fourth Part Three, entering majestically and putting his foot in triumph on Clarence's body. Yet his victory is short-lived since, as expected, he proves not good enough to be a serious contender for the presidency. And indeed, Elisabeth, a Democratic militant, enters and mournfully announces Edward's death and Gloucester/Nixon's crowning/election. Richard, crowned, appears on a TV screen downstage for his acceptance speech. He starts trying to justify the USA's intervention in neutral Laos and Cambodia, which were among the first acts of his presidency:

This peaceful operation was designed
 Against the enemy, not neutral innocents
 But as you know it's difficult to tell
 The difference between a friend or foe
 These gooks looking very much the same
 So till a dink his neutral nature proves
 We'll have to napalm everything that moves. (Ibid., 35)

The use of these racist terms – gooks, dink – by Nixon is not documented. The release of Nixon's conversations on tape in later years showed some occurrences of derogatory comments towards ethnic groups, mostly Jews and blacks: whether this was proof of racist feelings or just of a careless and vulgar way of expression is still

¹⁴⁸ In 1972 this was made even more explicit when the "Anybody but McGovern" movement was formed in the Democratic Party, contributing to Nixon's landslide victory.

debated.¹⁴⁹ Anyway, after examining the foreign situation, Nixon turns to the home front, referring to the four students who were shot dead by the National Guard on 4 May 1970 during a demonstration against the invasion of Cambodia:

And I would like to make it very plain
That, as in Indochina, those four kids
Who died at Kent State¹⁵⁰ have themselves to blame [...]
That we Americans have had enough
Of protest, peaceniks, Panthers, parasites
Of liberation, female, black or gay
Of those who'd spell their country with a 'K'. (Ibid, 36)

This list of America's enemies belongs very much to the Seventies, as attested by its references to the various movements, like the Black Panthers, which started or had their height in that decade; also the choice by pacifists to write "Amerika" as a way of distancing themselves from the foreign politics of their country is very much a thing of the past. Yet the annoyance expressed by Richard for everyone who does not embrace wholeheartedly the American Way of Life is an attitude that keeps resurfacing in American politics, and probably played a decisive role in the election of Donald Trump. The scene ends with a song, sang by Margaret Plantagenet, a yippie militant, which raises another issue that has not lost its cogency today, that is the presence and the influence of the extreme Right in the presidential entourage and in the state apparatus in general:

How many Ks in the
Kountry of Amerika
How many KKKs
How many KluKluxKlansmen [...]
In the White House [...]
How many Ks in the Kollege of Kent State
How many KKKs
How many KluKluxKlansmen
In the National Guard. (Ibid., 36-37)

In scene Four the story shifts slightly from Shakespeare's plot, as Gloucester's manoeuvres to be crowned become Nixon's schemes to be re-elected. We find Nixon in his residence in Key Biscayne, Florida. Even if he is president in office, his position is not safe, as his loyal servants Hastings and Buckingham, with whom we have already been acquainted in Scenes One and Two, bring him bad news: "Little Edmund, youthful Duke of York/and Democratic Senator for Maine" (Ibid., 40), that is Senator Edmund Muskie, has surpassed him in the polls for the incoming Presidential elections of 1972. They suggest therefore a complex strategy consisting of undermining Muskie's position, and favouring the nomination of "The child like Prince of Wales/Poor George, the Senator for South Dakota" (Ibid.) that is George

¹⁴⁹ See <https://edition.cnn.com/videos/us/2013/08/22/tsr-intv-ben-stein-richard-nixon-racist-remarks.cnn> last accessed 13/07/2018.

¹⁵⁰ On 4 May 1970 the National Guard opened fire on an antiwar demonstration at Kent State University, Ohio, killing four students. This massacre is remembered in Neil Young's song *Ohio*, released in 1971 in the *4-Way Street* LP.

McGovern, who, because of his libertarian stance, was unlikely to attract the vote of the majority of American citizens. Their plan is to establish an independent association that would promote Nixon's re-election without involving him directly:

Buckingham: My lord, our schemes will hardly recommend
 Themselves unto th' Republican machine
 Some independent body is required
 Better to bent the electorate will
 Say – the Committee to Re-elect the King
Hastings: Or CREEK
Richard: I like it greatly. (Ibid.,42)

We know from the dramatis personae that Hastings has to be identified with John Mitchell, Attorney General during Nixon's first mandate, and Buckingham with 'Bob' Harry Robbins Haldeman, the Chief of Staff of the White House. The Committee to Re-elect the King is the equivalent of the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, a fund-raising and propagandistic organisation connected to Nixon's campaign. This committee was mockingly referred to by Nixon's adversaries as CREEP – easily recognizable behind the acronym CREEK: for brevity's sake I will adopt hereafter this acronym. CREEP will be the source of all of Nixon's troubles, since the Watergate affair had origin in it, but also provided his main line of defence: Nixon argued that, since CREEP was a nominally independent body, he was not aware of everything that was going on inside it. As pointed out by Buckingham/Haldeman, CREEP's initial aim was to preserve Nixon's image as a statesman, uninterested in the less noble aspects of politics:

Buckingham: And, my liege
 It might be best if you yourself did not
 Involve yourself directly in the fight
 But stood above it, as a holy king,
 More closely watchful of affairs of state
 That mere electoral advantages. (Ibid.)

The meeting ends with a diversion into another of Shakespeare's plays: the three politicians' farewell is moulded on *Macbeth* 1,1:

Richard: So – when shall we three meet again
 at S.Clemente or Key Biscayne?
Hastings: When the hurley-burley's done
Buckingham: When the next election's won
Hastings: And we've all had lots of fun
Richard: For who are we?
All three: We're three fat cats
 Who aim to scotch the Democrats [...]
 Fair is foul and foul is fair
 There's no distinction anywhere.
Buckingham: Fair is foul, and CREEK's the thing
 To gain the re-election of the king. (Ibid.)

After these greetings, Buckingham and Hastings have a conversation *incognito* with an anonymous citizen, from which they gather that the President is even less popular than they thought; even worse, they come to know that it is common knowledge that some journalists had their phones tapped. When this is reported to Richard, he defends himself from this charge with a travesty of Hamlet's monologue:

To bug or not to bug, that was the question
 Whether 'twas nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of the *New York Times*
 Or, 'neath the veil of national security,
 By surveillance end them? To bug – to tap –
 No more! It's not my fault. I'm not to blame
 It's Kissinger what did it. (Ibid., 49)

As a reaction to the spreading of these news, Gloucester/Nixon resolves to form a new unofficial White House special branch meant to prevent the leaking of embarrassing news and therefore nicknamed 'The Plumbers'. (ibid., 51) Hastings/Mitchell is appointed at its head. His first act is to send on a special mission a former FBI agent, Gordon Liddy, referred to with the name of Shakespeare's character Tyrrell: "The task is one that touches close the state/Know you a flophouse called the Watergate?". (ibid., 55) Scene four finishes with this ominous question. A 1974 audience was certain to know what Watergate was. Even today this name is sure to ring a bell in any spectator/reader because, since then, the suffix -gate has been widely used to designate scandals, mostly of political nature such as Irangate – the selling of weapons to Iran in order to finance the Nicaragua Contras during Reagan's presidency – or Monicagate – Clinton's adulterous affair with Monica Lewinsky. Anyway, summing up: Watergate was a residential complex in Washington where the Democratic candidate for the 1972 presidential elections George McGovern had established his headquarters. The breaking into these offices in an attempt to place bugs marked the start of the scandal that would lead to Nixon's resignation on 9 August 1974.

At the opening of Scene Five these are the stage directions: "*Ethereal light on the Watergate, Washington, June 17, 1972. A mock bed with a curtained backing. The Prince of Wales and the Duke of York, two small boys, are in the bed*". (ibid., 57) The small boys stand for George McGovern and Edmund Muskie, the two most likely contenders for the Democratic nomination – eventually won by the first one – and the whole scene is a re-creation of the murder of the little Princes in *Richard III* 4,2, carried out by Dighton and Forrest, and masterminded and narrated by Tyrrell. The difference is that the two intruders do not kill the boys, but clumsily attempt to bug them by passing various wires around them, in a lengthy scene that verges on slapstick:

The Princes clamber out Dighton's side, both stepping on him. Forrest climbs over the bed after them. The Crooks¹⁵¹ follow the Princes, affixing wires to them. All four go around the back of the bed in procession, and downstage. The Princes are in front of the Crooks. [...] The Crooks are down on the floor on either side of the Princes. The Princes step over them and peer off-stage either side. [...] The Princes step back

¹⁵¹ The term "Crooks" designate Dighton and Forrest when they act together.

over the **Crooks** to center and the **Crooks** exit backwards to either side, trailing wires.
(Ibid., 60)

At the end of the scene the two intruders are caught in the act and arrested by Brackenbury, who once again fulfils the role of a policeman. The arrests mark the end of Act One: from this point on the action follows closely the plot of the Watergate affair which, to be precise, was started by the arrest of five burglars instead of two.

Act Two begins with Hastings/Mitchell and Buckingham/Haldeman in a Beverly Hill hotel, anxiously waiting for news from Tyrrell/Liddy about his mission. Tyrrell finally arrives and makes his report. Here is one major change in respect to Shakespeare's tragedy: in *Richard III* 4,2 Tyrrell reports just to Buckingham, since Hastings is already dead. (*Richard III* 3,4) Only a few words are changed in Tyrrell's monologue to accommodate the 20th century situation:

The tyrannous and bloody act is done
The most arch deed of underhand surveillance
That ever yet this land was guilty of. [...]
"O thus" quoth Dighton "lay the gentle babes"
"Thus thus," quoth Forrest "girdling one another
Within their alabaster innocent arms;
Their lips were four roses on a stalk
Which in their summer beauty kissed each other
The Constitution on their pillow lay" [...]
Hence all o'er gone with conscience and remorse
They could not speak; and so I let them both
Within the keeping of the FBI. (Ibid., 70)

Tyrrell pretends not to understand the gravity of the event, but then he has to concede, in the face of Hastings and Buckingham's astonishment, that the situation could have unforeseeable consequences. The last line of the quotation "So, gentlemen, etc." is a perfect iambic pentameter, a good example of how Edgar has succeeded in adapting slang into blank-verse:

Did I forget to say?
The crooks were busted early today [...]
The false name they have given won't last long
For in their pockets hundred dollar bills
Show they were paid from funds Republican
So, gentlemen, the shit has hit the fan. (Ibid., 70- 71)

Scene Two, as stated in the stage directions, is set in summer 1972 and recreates a meeting between Gloucester/Nixon and some of his collaborators when the Watergate scandal was still building up and before Presidential elections, that were due on 7 November 1972. The obvious purpose of the meeting is to devise a cover-up of the scandal or, at least, to keep the President-in-Office out of it. There are four characters on stage. Three are already known to the audience, that is Richard, Buckingham and Hastings, while the fourth, the Bishop of Ely, makes his first appearance. According to the stage directions he is "*in full gear, carrying a crook*" (Ibid., 73) that is, he looks like a real bishop; it is also stated that "*when not*

busy, he is engaged in card tricks with himself" (Ibid.), which contributes to making him look like a bit of a fool. Since Buckingham addresses him as "Holy John" it is easy to identify him with John Dean, counsellor to President Nixon. The four characters sit around a table, and a red light above it signals when the conversation is recorded. This refers to the recording on tape by Nixon's order of all that went on at the White House between 1971 and 1973: Nixon's refusal to deliver these tapes to the prosecutors contributed to making him lose the little remaining favour of the public opinion. Initially only Buckingham is aware of the recording, and he goes to great lengths to remind Richard of it: "**Buchingham** points frenetically at the little red light above Richard's head. [...] **Richard** looks up, realizes the light is on and winks at **Buckingham**". When Richard understands the danger, he quotes nearly verbatim *Richard III* to ask Dean to empty Tyrrell/Liddy's safe: "My lord of Ely, when I was last downtown/I saw good strawberries in your garden there/ I do beseech to send for some of them". (Ibid., 75) The Bishop is slow in understanding what Richard means, with comic consequences: "I have no strawberries. [...] The content of the Tyrrell safe, my liege? [...] (*crossly, not knowing what's going on*). All right then, I will get the 'strawberries'". (Ibid., 75-76) The scene ends with Mitchell being offered as the first scapegoat to public opinion by being forced to resign. He comments on his resignation using Hasting's words on his way to execution at the end of *Richard III* 4,4 with very small changes:

Oh bloody Richard! Miserable estate!
I prophesy the fearfull'st time to thee
That ever wretched age hath looked upon.
Come, lead me to the judge, bear him my head
They smile at me who shortly shall be dead. (Ibid.,84)

Scene Three is also set in the White House: on stage there is Catesby reading the *Washington Post*. In *Richard III* Catesby is King Richard's most loyal servant, and his main contribution to the plot is showing Gloucester to the citizens while immersed in conversation with two clergymen, in a successful attempt to depict him as a holy man, uninterested in power and reluctant to accept the crown. In *Dick Deterred* Buckingham addresses him as "Sir Ronald Catesby, chief press aide". (Ibid., 86) This is therefore an explicit reference to Ron Ziegler, Press Secretary of the White House. The parallel becomes even more explicit when he shows the Press King Richard in conversation with two nuns:

He doeth entreat the worthy columnist
To visit him tomorrow or next day
He is within with two reverend mothers,
Divinely bent to international peace. (Ibid., 87)

The two nuns carry before their faces placards portraying Brezhnev and Mao Zedong: Nixon's visit to Moscow and Peking in 1972 had been major P.R. successes, promoting the image of Nixon as a man of peace, and contributing to his re-election. But now the Watergate scandal can no longer be ignored and Richard is urged by Catesby and Buckingham to devise a defensive strategy. The mounting of the affair is reconstructed by Edgar by making Richard pronounce several of Nixon's public statements made between August 1972 and April 1973. All these

speeches are received quite coldly by Buckingham and Catesby, who question their effectiveness. The last one is dated 30 April 1973 and seems at last to hit the target:

Looking back at the history of the case, two questions arise. How could it have happened? Who is to blame? [...] I will not put the blame on subordinates – on people whose zeal exceeded their judgement. In any organization, the man at the top must bear the responsibility. The responsibility therefore belongs here, in this office. I accept it.

Catesby and Buckingham applaud. He says quickly:

Today the Counsel to the President, John Dean, resigned. Also today I accepted the resignations of two of my closest associates in the White House – Bob Haldeman, John Ehrlichman – two of the finest public servants it has been my privilege to know.¹⁵²

Buckingham looks at Richard in horror. (Ibid., 91)

Buckingham flees to join the enemy, and Richard, who thinks that his worst troubles are over, cheerfully meets Stanley, Earl of Derby i.e. Elliot Richardson, General Attorney in place of Hastings/Mitchell. Richard's enthusiasm considerably cools down when he is informed by Stanley himself that he has appointed a new prosecutor for the Watergate case, that is Archibald Cox. His humour darkens further when he is informed by breathless Catesby that both Ely and Buckingham have joined Richmond, that is, that Dean and Haldeman are collaborating with the Senate Watergate Committee, presided by Sam Ervine/Richmond. And, worst of all, that Haldeman is aware that all the Oval Room conversations of the last two years have been recorded on tape.¹⁵³ Stanley proves his naivety by pointing out to Richard that this is the chance to conclusively prove his innocence. (Ibid., 94)

In Scene Four, Anne and Elisabeth, representing the Republican and the Democratic Party respectively, mourn the state of American democracy; yet, when Richard enters, Anne seems quite reluctant to leave him, though she eventually does, leaving the impression that Richard Nixon was exactly what Republican America deserved. Then Richard turns to Elisabeth and tries to convince her that to help him out of the mire will be in the national interest, and Elisabeth promises to consult others on the matters, showing that the Democrats are as gullible as the Republicans. Richard gloats on his partial success with Shakespeare's words: "Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman". (Ibid., 99) He then decides to appoint general Haig as White House Chief of Staff because "for as Allende¹⁵⁴ and the Greeks¹⁵⁵ could tell/It's best to have the army on your side". (Ibid.)

In Scene Five the events of *Richard III* 5. 3 are staged, that is the night before the battle of Bosworth, when Richard is visited by the ghosts of some of his victims, followed by Richard's death. In Shakespeare's tragedy the stage is alternately occupied by Richard and Richmond and their respective courts. In *Dick Deterred* there are two tents on stage:

¹⁵² The text of the whole speech can be found at <http://watergate.info/1973/04/30/nixons-first-watergate-speech.html> last accessed 09/07/ 2018. In the drama the order of the two parts of the speech is inverted.

¹⁵³ As we have seen in Act 2 Scene 2 Buckingham/Haldeman was the one who reminded Richard that when the red light was on it meant that a recording was under way.

¹⁵⁴ Salvador Allende (1908-1973) was the President of Chile before a coup, brought about by the USA, overthrew him in 1973.

¹⁵⁵ Following a coup in 1967, Greece was led by a military government until 1974.

Stage right: the caucus room of the Senate – a tent.

Stage left: Camp David, Maryland – another tent.

Stage center: the Supreme Court – a field.

*Enter **Richmond**, an elderly southern Senator. (Ibid., 103)*

The caucus room of the senate was the meeting-place of the Watergate Committee, represented by Richmond, i.e. Sam Irvine, Senator for South Carolina. The Supreme Court was where the final battle would be fought. Camp David was, and is, a country residence for the serving President of the United States, where Nixon tried to orchestrate his reaction to the Watergate scandal and kept the tapes he did not want to deliver to the Committee. In fact, Richard busies himself on stage with erasing the embarrassing parts of the tapes, and then goes to sleep. This is where the procession of ghosts starts. The presence of both tents on stage allows Edgar to clearly show that those who felt betrayed by Nixon went straight away to testify against him. The first ghost is McCord, a former CIA agent who was arrested in the Watergate break-in:

Let me sit heavy on thy soul
 I curse thee from my prison cell
 I did what I was told
 Your slimy secrets I am going to sell
 (to **Richmond**)
 No, it's not true
 Of course, of course he knew
 And offered us a fee
 And royal clemency
 I'm just the sprat
 No more than that
 So don't you don't you don't you
 Let the carp go free. (Ibid., 106)

McCord is followed by the ghosts of Dean and Haldeman – here referred to with their actual names, while in the course of the drama they are called by their Shakespearean names, Ely and Buckingham – who both swear revenge on Richard and start to collaborate with the Watergate committee. Richard wakes up from his troubled sleep with Shakespeare's lines: "Give me another horse, bind up my wounds!/ Have mercy, Jesu – soft, I did but dream"; (Ibid., 107) then he goes to his last battle with the support of his only remaining ally, loyal Catesby/Ziegler. Richard fights fiercely, "*clutching his tapes to him, wielding a studded ball on a chain*" (Ibid., 109) but defeat is inevitable. Unlike Shakespeare's Richard, Nixon does not look for a horse:

A goat! A goat! My kingdom for another Scapegoat! [...]
 Slave I have set my life upon a cast
 And I will stand the hazard of the die
 Against protesters, demonstrators, blacks
 Against the press, the Congress and the courts
 Against the people, all my countrymen
 Against the world before I'd abdicate

The state? The state? I, Richard, am the state
And nobody – leaves – the – bunker. (Ibid.)

The final duel with Richmond follows: Nixon tries to defend himself by throwing tapes to Richmond “*as if he were tossing a crust to a dog*” (Ibid.), but he is finally overcome and slain. Richard is put in a coffin by two cops, and Richmond sings a final triumphant hymn:

And it’s over
Lucky ducky
All over now
It’s all over
Four-leaf clover
All over now
It’s all over tricky-Dicky
Now. (Ibid., 111)

It seems all over, but there is a surprising end:

Suddenly a hand appears out of the coffin. The Cops turn back. Another hand. The Cops return to stand at either side of the coffin, pointing their carbines into it. Richard rises to kneeling position. He reaches out for the crown and puts it slowly on his head.

Richard: Wanna bet?

In one beat, like lighting, the Cops whip around to point their carbines to the audience. Blackout. (Ibid.)

In his *New British Political Dramatists* (1983) John Bull plays down the political relevance of this finale: “Dramatically it is a stunning conclusion, but politically it suggests an almost desperate straining after a possible message”. (Bull 1983, 162) This opinion seems to originate in a general misunderstanding of *Dick Deterred*. Bull writes: “Shakespeare’s *Richard III* was twisted, mangled and rewritten to provide an account of King Richard Nixon and his dealings, before, during and after Watergate”. (Bull 1983, 159) The point is that *Dick Deterred* was not written “after Watergate”, but while things were still happening. In February 1974, when *Dick Deterred* was premiered in London, Nixon was in trouble but still fighting. The main issue had become the recorded tapes, and so between October 1973, in which Nixon delivered some tapes – that proved later to be partially erased¹⁵⁶ – and April 1974, in which Special Prosecutor Leon Jaworski issued a subpoena for the remaining sixty-four White House tapes,¹⁵⁷ the situation had been developing almost on a day-by-day basis. I single out this time span because it corresponds, roughly, to the rehearsal and actual staging of *Dick Deterred*, that was premiered at the Bush Theatre on 25 February and then transferred to the ICA Theatre on 5 March 1974. The point I want to make is that Edgar, while writing, did not know how the Watergate scandal was going to end and, since Nixon resigned on 9 August 1974, could not even be sure that his Presidential career was over. Therefore, suggesting that Nixon could resort to a military coup was not completely outlandish,

¹⁵⁶ See <http://watergate.info/chronology/1973-chronology> last accessed 22/09/2018.

¹⁵⁷ See <http://watergate.info/chronology/1974-chronology> last accessed 22/09/2018.

especially considering that Pinochet's coup had been just six months before, on 11 September 1973; furthermore, this finale constituted a strong political statement on the frailty of liberal democracies. It is worth of note that Swain, for her study on Edgar, claims to have accessed a manuscript of *Dick Deterred*, dated November 1973, in which the finale starts with Nixon's resurrection, but has a completely different development:

Suddenly Richard sits up... He reaches for the crown, and slowly puts it on as all turn to him. Silence.

Richard: *Hmm.*

At an instant, simultaneously, the company freeze, the tableau snaps into silhouette, and a Spot at the side finds Margaret Plantagenet, strangely dressed in modern clothes.

Margaret: Pray, gentle all, if you would kill a king

Make sure the venom's drawn, not just the sting:

Because we'll only expurgate the leech

When Ford and Chase Manhattan are impeached

The tyrant dies, the tyranny's the same

The King departs, the King-Makers remain. (quoted in Swain 1986, 123)

In Swain's reconstruction, the statement is made even more precise and stinging by a voice offstage reading a list of individuals and corporations that contributed to Nixon's campaign. (Ibid.) Probably this finale was not staged because of the almost unlimited possibilities of lawsuits against the author and the theatre. This caution was particularly well-founded since in September 1972, at the same Bush Theatre, the staging of Arden and D'Arcy's *The Ballygombeen Bequest* had been stopped by the legal action of an individual who was mentioned in the program as the exploitative landlord who had inspired the drama. (Megson 2012, 67) A bit of caution on Edgar's part was therefore fully justified. Anyway, even in the sophisticated envelope of blank verse and Shakespearean plot, *Dick Deterred* is far from being a simple exercise of style. Obviously, dealing with American politics, *Dick Deterred* was not focused on British political and social actuality: nonetheless its interventionist intention is clear, since it stages the danger that financial and economic powers and over-ambitious individuals pose on liberal democracies, an issue that has not lost its agency today. In Act one Scene three, Margaret Plantagenet expresses a criticism of the American political system, and indirectly, of the working of liberal democracies in general, with a funny mixture of American (out of sight) and British (wank) slangs in blank verse:

Like, man, it's out of sight to be a Yank

And go through this four-yearly White House wank

This paradigm of all democracies

Spews up a pair of mediocrities. (Ibid., 34)

As already stated, in 1974 the Heath Tory cabinet entered its final crisis, which aroused great expectations but also fears of unforeseeable consequences. It may be a coincidence, yet an interesting one, that on 8 May 1974, almost contemporarily with *Dick Deterred*, Brenton's *The Churchill Play* premiered at the Nottingham Playhouse. The subtitle reads: "As it will be performed in the winter of 1984 by the

internees of Churchill Camp somewhere in England'. (Brenton 1974, 3) The play assumes that in 1984 Great Britain would be ruled by an authoritarian government – a Conservative one, but with the acquiescence of the Labour Party – and dissidents would be locked-up in camps. Brenton imagines that the inmates of one of these camps stage a play based upon the figure of Winston Churchill for the entertainment of a group of visiting MPs. In the opening scene of the play, dead Churchill resurrects from the coffin to the astonishment of the four soldiers forming the guard of honour. The situation is introduced by a series of noises coming from inside the coffin which cause bewilderment and fear in the soldiers, and some less-than-flattering considerations on Churchill's moral stature by a Welsh soldier:

He'll come out, he'll come out, I do believe that of him. Capable of anything, that one. (*Fiercely*) To bugger working people. [...] We have never forgiven him in Wales. He sent soldiers against us, the bloody man. He sent soldiers against Welsh mining men in 1910. Three were shot. (Ibid., 12)

Finally, Churchill breaks out of the coffin and presents himself to the audience as a grotesquely comic figure: "*Churchill bursts out of his coffin, swirling the Union Jack. The Churchill actor must assume an exact replica. His face is a mask. He holds an unlit cigar*". (Ibid.) When Colonel Ball, the head of the camp, interrupts the scene for being disrespectful to the Great Man, the audience is abruptly made aware that this is the rehearsal of a play-within-the-play inside a detention centre. Thanks to the mediation of captain Thompson, an official of liberal feelings who is in charge of the detainees' welfare, the play-within-the-play is eventually staged in front of the guests: the performance, initially conceived by Thompson as a means to keep the detainees busy, results in an act of defiance and in an unsuccessful attempt at escaping from the camp. The performance is even more provocative than the rehearsed scene. In one of the most hard-hitting moment, one of the guarding soldiers draws a parallel between the ruling class and the undead of Bram Stoker's novel:

Like Dracula, come back for blood and young women's necks. Take a stake through the heart to get him back in the grave. [...] Maybe they're all living dead. All the leaders of the world. Vampires. Imagine them in the Gents Toilet at the United Nations, sucking each other's necks. (Ibid., 70-71)

Edgar does not go this far: yet the images of the resurrection of powerful men in *Dick Deterred* and *The Churchill* are effective metaphor of the indestructibility of power; both plays, in their different modes – satirical the former, dystopian the latter – pass the message that democracy and dictatorship are separated by a very thin line. In the absence of any declaration to this end by the authors, I will not suggest an interrelation between the two plays, even if Brenton and Edgar had been working together in various projects in the previous years, the last one being the co-writing of *A Fart for Europe*¹⁵⁸ staged in January 1973. I just mean to underline that *Dick*

¹⁵⁸ Incidentally also *A Fart for Europe* had a Shakespearean connection: according to a review by Jonathan Hammond, published in *Play and Players* of March 1973: "It started with a send up of a scene from *King Lear* [...] displaying a Left-wing, anti-EEC Labour MP in the role of Poor Tom,

Deterred, while apparently innocuous for being a Shakespearean spoof dealing with a foreign country, did not lack political clout in a troubled moment of British life, and shared with an interventionist play as *The Churchill Play* an overt preoccupation for the insecurity of representative democracy.

Dick Deterred was the last comic work by Edgar, but it was not his last play inspired by the Watergate affair: later in 1974 Edgar edited the transcripts of the White House tapes into a 45-minute TV drama, that was broadcast by Granada on 10 July 1974, one month roughly before Nixon's resignation, with the title *I Know What I Meant*. According to *Files on Edgar* the characters were President Nixon, John Dean, Haldeman, Ehrlichman and Ron Ziegler (Page, Trussler, eds., 1991, 33-4) and so for Edgar it must have been like working with old friends. Edgar came back to this TV drama in his *The Second Time as Farce*:

I can, perhaps, lay claim to having been the writer of the purest drama-documentary ever written [...] in which every word spoken on screen had been actually spoken in reality, and we had the transcripts to prove it. [...] I'm sure that our act of turning those documents into drama, or showing one way in which those words *could*¹⁵⁹ have been spoken by real human beings, had the effect of deepening our audience's understanding of those extraordinary events. (Edgar 1988, 62-3)

Edgar did not use again this technique of transposing recorded speech into drama action.¹⁶⁰ Yet, as already stated in the first paragraph, an accurate research work based upon written or recorded sources has remained Edgar's working method all along his career. For Edgar this strict connection with actual events is a generational feature: "The things that binds [sic] together my generation of playwrights is an almost unhealthy obsession with explaining things and particularly, with explaining those big public events which have created our contemporary public life". (Swain 1986, 45-46). This working method found its fullest and most successful expression in *Destiny* and its spin-off *Our Own People*. These two plays, in their different sizes and ambitions, responded to Edgar's pressing need to explain contemporary events and their roots, starting from a careful work of observation and documentation, with the final goal to remind British audiences that "there was no God-given reason why a national socialist movement should not arise in Britain". (quoted in Trussler 1981, 171)

2.10 Destiny

Destiny is Edgar's best-known and most influential work. Premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Other Place, Stratford-upon-Avon, on 22 September 1976, it was then transferred to the Aldwych Theatre, London, on 12 May 1977 and broadcast by BBC on 31 January 1978. *Destiny's* transfer to the

with traumas at finding himself using the same chauvinistic objections to the Common Market as Enoch Powell". (quoted in Page, Trussler, eds., 1991, 24)

¹⁵⁹ Emphasis by the author.

¹⁶⁰ *Destiny* is opened by Pandit Nehru's declaration of independence, and closed by a brief extract of Hitler's address at the Nuremberg rally in 1933. Both speeches are not part of the stage action, but serve as prologue and epilogue.

Aldwych was particularly noteworthy, as it marked the progress into the West End of an author who, until that moment, had worked mostly for small agitprop companies; the importance of its TV release has already been stressed in the Introduction. (see p. 13) The time of broadcasting was also significant: *Destiny* went on air only twenty-four hours after Thatcher's already mentioned TV interview in which the future Prime Minister maintained that British people were afraid of being "swamped by people of a different culture".¹⁶¹ Thatcher's statement confirmed one of *Destiny*'s central concepts, that racism was going to be a long-standing problem of British society. Paradoxically, it also contradicted the assumption that the Tories were shy in embracing race and immigration as an electoral issue. As Edgar put it: "It became clearer and clearer that my gently paternalistic Tory candidate in *Destiny* was a charming anachronism". (Edgar 1988, 12)

Edgar traced *Destiny*'s early origin back to the period he spent as a journalist at the *Telegraph and Argus* between 1969 and 1972:

Destiny came out of that. *Destiny* was inspired by a group called, first of all, the Yorkshire and then the British Campaign to Stop Immigration which eventually got folded into the National Front. [...] I attended the meeting which is the basis of the chaotic 'Patriotic League' meeting in *Destiny* – in fact it wasn't that the microphones fed back (as happens in the play), it was that they were trying to show a film which kept breaking down. All that was very important and I think that *Destiny* wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been at the Bradford *Telegraph*. (quoted in Megson 2012, 24)

Edgar started writing *Destiny* in 1973 and the first version was ready by that year: it would have lasted five hours and included some fifty characters, and was therefore rejected by the Nottingham Playhouse as unstageable – in later years Edgar expressed his agreement with their opinion. (Swain 1986, 194) The text went through various re-writings and was again rejected by different companies, until the Royal Shakespeare Company accepted it for their smallest venue, The Other Place. According to Edgar, *Destiny*'s writing process was typically agitprop: "The way I wrote it was that I said I wanted to make this point in this act, these points in this scene, other points in the overall order. I then constructed a plot to fit that. And that is a technique of agitprop writing". (quoted in Itzin 1980, 146) At this point it seems useful to provide a brief outline of the plot before going on with the discussion.

The action starts in a British Army barracks in India on 14 August 1947, the day of India's independence. Four characters are busy moving the Army properties with the prospect of vacating the premises: they are, in order of appearance, sergeant Turner, a Sikh servant named Khera, colonel Chandler and major Rolfe. All of them have major parts in the development of the plot. Colonel Chandler will become a Conservative MP, whose death prompts a by-election in which Nation Forward – a fictional disguise of the National Front – will get an astonishing 20%

¹⁶¹ <https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485>.

of the votes; sergeant Turner will start an antiques business and will enter Nation Forward after being evicted from his shop; major Rolfe will be successful in business and turn to the extreme right after failing to be designated as candidate by the local Conservative Party, and Khera will emigrate to England and work in a foundry in the West Midlands. Most of the action revolves around two contemporary events: the above-mentioned by-election, in which Chandler's nephew, Crosby, is the Tory candidate who tries to keep the Parliament post in the family, and a strike at the local foundry where Khera works, the Baron Castings, on the request of a salary raise by the night shift, mostly composed of Asian workers; the struggle receives no support from the majority of white workers, influenced by Nation Forward. Many more characters take part in the action: Bob Clifton, the Labour candidate at the by-election, his wife Sandy, his political advisor and Labour militant Paul, the owner of the factory Kershaw, the work manager and secretary of the local Conservative Club Platt and the Sikh worker Patel, plus various Nation Forward militants. It is left unstated if the strike succeeds in the end, but Nation Forward breaking through the pickets in a highly-charged scene, suggests a negative outcome. As for the election, Crosby wins the parliament post defeating Clifton. It is soon evident that Nation Forward's votes probably shifted the balance, as Clifton acknowledges in a final exchange with Platt:

CLIFTON: Well done, Jim. Think we can conclude, they won you the election.

PLATT: Only if, took more from you than us, Bob. And who knows where the buggers come from. (Edgar 1997, 398)

This is the final and most pressing political question: did Nation Forward's votes come more from former Labour or Tories voters? Both in the stage fiction and in political life, the immediate impact of a Fascist party on the British long-established two-party system remained the big issue. The exact year of the main action is never stated: having gone through different re-writings, *Destiny* was started under a Conservative government and finished under a Labour one. It seems logical to place the action in the year of the first staging, 1976, because the final scene, staging a meeting between businessmen and Nation Forward representatives to devise a possible coup d'état, makes more sense in the context of a Labour government.

As already stated, the first scene gives the general imprint to the whole drama. Two other scenes stand out for their importance in the economy of the play. Scene 6 of Act 1 is set on 20 April 1968.¹⁶² It is the day on which Enoch Powell pronounced his infamous "River of Blood" speech, and also the date Hitler was born in 1889. Edgar plausibly imagined that a group of English Nazis, who had met in the upstairs room of a pub to celebrate Hitler's birthday, read the speech on an evening paper and understood that a new political horizon was opening for them. This scene presents the political basis of the whole story and explains how a fascist party came to have a significant position in British public life; yet, if the drama has a centre, it is Act 2 Scene 2. This is the scene directly inspired by Edgar's work as

¹⁶² Scene 1 and 6 of Act 1 are the only ones with a precise chronological reference.

a journalist: in a half empty hall, a local association, the Taddley¹⁶³ Patriotic League, holds a meeting to decide the merger into the Nation Forward party. The meeting is presided over by former sergeant Turner, now a dispossessed and angry ex shopkeeper and current secretary of the Patriotic League, and attended by David Maxwell, representing Nation Forward. The Patriotic League members who hold the floor are emblematic figures: an elderly woman, disappointed with the Tories and worried about the erosion both of traditional British values and her bank savings; a lower middle class lady whose husband, a teacher in the local Polytechnic, is unpopular with both colleagues and students for being “ a patriotic person, and mak[ing] no secret of it” (Edgar 1987, 352); a worker at the Baron Castings, Attwood, who could be called a downright racist, if not for the overt social-economic roots of his racism. His speech is particularly interesting as he refers to the ongoing strike at his factory; a former Labour voter and trade union militant, he deplors blacks’ militancy, maybe with a bit of envy for their unflinching solidarity: “And if one of ‘hem gets the push, they’re all up in arms, shrieking about discrimination. It’s happening now. And I’ll be quite frank about the blacks, I hate ‘hem”. (Ibid., 354) Finally Tony, an unemployed young guy formerly working in Turner’s shop, attempts a synthesis among the different positions, but lacks the dialectic tools to do so, and is helped out of the impasse by Maxwell, the NF representative who skilfully handles the situation. Edgar underlined the centrality of this scene, arguing that its potential faults were overcome in the staging:

On the page it probably looked rather mechanical – the characters were selected very carefully to be representative of the various different groups and interests, and at the end of the scene a leader of the party made a speech in which he cleverly brought together all the disparate and indeed contradictory interests and fears, weaving them neatly into the classical Nazi conspiracy theory of history. On the page, as I say, I’m sure the scene looked as if it had been written from a chart, which, as it happens, was the case. But on the stage, I think what happened was that the recognizability of the characters in that situation – the drafty hall, the empty seats, the feed-back microphone, the echoing silences, and bowel-shrivelling crossed purposes – gave flesh and substance to my analysis of their subsequent behaviour. (quoted in Swain 1986, 198)

Even if these characters were not deeply investigated, they have their individuality and are not ‘types’ in a pure agitprop fashion. Edgar’s intent was to show that fascist ideas can appeal to a wide range of persons: “It is facile to say that all the members of the National Front or the National Party wander about in jackboots, siegheiling all the time [...]. It is not only facile, it is counter-productive to create monsters (though there are some monsters in those parties). I wanted to create believable people”. (quoted in Itzin 1980, 148) Interestingly, in *Destiny*, only the Nazi characters are faithful to themselves throughout the drama, while the others often act in an unexpected way. For instance, Platt, a local Tory politician and works manager at the Baron Castings, pushes his devotion to the firm as far as denouncing an Asian worker, Patel, as an overstayer with a student visa, thus prompting his

¹⁶³ Taddley is the fictional West Midlands town where most of the drama is set.

deportation; yet he is not shy in mocking the factory's owner, Kershaw, using economic jargon with a shade of Marxism when the latter laments the consequences of the strike on production:

Platt: [...] Not my fault, that they're coming out on strike.

Kershaw: Not my fault, sadly true, that with no manifolds or brake-drums, can't make motor-cars.

Slight pause.

Platt: Think that's called the hyper-mutuality of capital-intensive high technology.

[...]

Kershaw: Can see my point? Three plants, dead stop. Tough, economically, for us.

Platt: I see. I think that's called a contradiction.

Kershaw: Jim, for heaven's sake... (Edgar 1997, 368)

Also Paul, the Labour candidate, is quite contradictory, as he considers himself in the left wing of the Labour Party, but refuses to give any support to Patel on the issue of deportation, arguing that, right or wrong, the law has to be obeyed. His wife Sandy is the most surprising as, irritated with her husband Paul for having a patronising attitude to people who resent the high number of coloured people living in the area, she brings the example of a widow she meets on her rounds as a social worker: "Widow I visit. Only white face in the street. No English shops any more. Can't buy an English newspaper. The butcher's gone. The kids smash up her windows". (Ibid.,384) This is the same example that Enoch Powell mentioned in his 'Rivers of Blood' speech to explain the necessity of stopping immigration: "Eight years ago in a respectable street in Wolverhampton a house was sold to a Negro. Now only one white (a woman old-age pensioner) lives there. [...] She lost her husband and both her sons in the war.¹⁶⁴ [...] The quiet street became a place of noise and confusion. [...] She is becoming afraid to go out. Windows are broken".¹⁶⁵ The unexpected behaviour of Sandy and other characters attests to Edgar's choice of abandoning agitprop's two-dimensional, and therefore predictable, characters, as part of a general understanding of the inadequacies of that form: "I was increasingly thinking that the politics you could get across were very crude, whereas the world around us was becoming more complicated. Or perhaps we were getting more complicated and just noticing that that's the way the world had always been". (Quoted in Trussler 1981, 166-167) In the treatment of

¹⁶⁴ The existence of this widow has been questioned. The *Daily Mail* claimed to have identified her in a Mrs. Druscilla Cotterill, who died in 1978, but the latter had no children. See <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-433497/Widow-Enoch-Powells-Rivers-Blood-speech-really-did-exist.html> last accessed 22/08/2018.

¹⁶⁵ <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html> last accessed 22/08/2018.

characters, Edgar seems to follow Brecht's indication, as outlined in *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1948):

The bourgeois theatre's performances always aim at smoothing over contradictions, at creating false harmony, at idealization. Conditions are reported as could not be otherwise; characters as individuals, incapable by definition of being divided, cast in one block, manifesting themselves in the most various situations, likewise for that matter existing without any situation at all. If there is any development it is always steady, never by jerks; the developments always take place within a definite framework which cannot be broken through. None of this is like reality, so a realistic theatre must give it up.¹⁶⁶ (Brecht 1948, 17)

Yet, even employing more complex characters, Edgar maintained that he was not interested in psychological introspection. Therefore, he avoided to give information about their personal life – apart from the strictly necessary: Bob and Sandy being married, and having a small child, and Rolfe having a son in the army whose killing by a sniper in Belfast will definitely consign him to the extreme right – that could direct the audience's attention towards a psychological analysis and distract it from the social forces in action. Nonetheless, Edgar did not just pursue a rational acceptance on the part of the audience, but the whole involvement deriving from a satisfying theatrical experience:

The element that you couldn't get from a pamphlet discussing the class nature of fascism, is the actual emotional draw – the realization of the appeal of it, and the actual connection to oneself. So I'm very pleased with *Destiny* as a play. I'm not retracting any of it, but I think if it has a major fault of which I'm aware, it's that the complexity of the characters and the complexity of the language is to a certain extent imposed on the structure, which is perhaps slightly too skeletal, slightly too meccano-like. (quoted in Trussler 1981, 169)

The reference to “emotional draw” is interesting as it marks a break with Brechtian tradition. I have already dealt in general terms with Edgar and his contemporaries' attitude towards Brecht, and this issue is particularly compelling as regards *Destiny*. As stated above, the general structure of *Destiny* is Brechtian, as the twenty scenes, divided into three acts, are not in chronological order but are logically connected – Edgar defined this technique, “rather uglily”, according to him, as “thematic linking”. (Ibid., 166) Non-chronological order apart, in *Destiny* there are two Brechtian features worth examining: *Verfremdungseffekt* and *Gestus*. What *Verfremdungseffekt* – often translated as alienation effect or estrangement – is, and how to achieve it, is a much-debated issue among scholars and practitioners. I will accept the definition by Stephen Unwin who, in his *A Guide to the Plays of Bertolt Brecht* (2005), argued that its main purpose is to stimulate the audience's critical faculties by preventing identification with characters on stage as if they were real persons:

¹⁶⁶ See http://tenstakonsthall.se/uploads/139Brecht_A_Short_Organum_for_the_Theatre.pdf last accessed 22/08/2018

Essentially, the alienation effect is achieved when the audience is encouraged to reexamine its preconceptions and to look at the familiar in a new way, with an interest in how it can and should be changed. This requires the actor both to inhabit his character and remember that he is showing it to the audience. The danger with identification, Brecht argued, was that it prevented the actor from commenting on his character and stops his performance from having an active purpose. It also prevents the audience from looking at the action with any degree of critical distance. (Unwin 2005, 58)

Contrarily to naturalistic drama, Brecht aimed at continuously reminding the audience that they were in a theatre and not in real life. In this sense *Destiny's* attempts at estrangement are manifest: the most evident is having the four characters already presented in the first scene, introduce themselves with a composition in rhyming verses of fourteen syllables in the next scene in which they appear. For instance, Turner expresses his bewilderment at England's changes after coming back from India with these verses:

TURNER: In '47. Came on home.

Sergeant Turner to a Midlands town

Another England, brash and bold

A new world, brave and bright and cold.

The Sergeant looks at England, and it's changed before his eyes;

Old virtues, thrift and prudence are increasingly despised;

Old values are devalued as the currency inflates,

Old certainties are scoffed by the new sophisticates. (Ibid., 336)

These verses anticipate what will be highlighted all through the play, that Turner's embracing fascist ideas is caused more by a sentimental feeling of loss than by an ideological choice. Differently, Khera stresses that economic reasons were behind his decision to emigrate to England, but that also a sense of belonging originated in the colonial past played a part. England, that Colonel Chandler's imperialistic rhetoric defined as "the mother country" (Ibid., 322), will be far from welcoming to her returning sons:

In '58. Came on home

Gurjeet Singh Khera. To a Midland town.

Another England, another nation,

Not the England of imagination.

The labour market forces have an international will,

So the people of Punjab people factory and mill,

[...]

Gurjeet Singh Khera

Once a slave

Returns to haunt the empire's grave. (Ibid., 346)

Other typical means of estrangement are asides, and Edgar employs them in topical moments: I will turn my attention just to some of them. The first I consider is by Monty, the Jewish real-estate agent who communicates to Turner that the Metropolitan Investment Trust has bought the building and that he is going to be evicted. In their conversation, Monty's asides are intended to underline Turner's helplessness in the situation:

Turner (*stands*): Who are you?

Monty: Didn't I present my card? (*He stands, gives Turner his card. Out front*) I told him to ignore the company. It being what you might call defunct.

Turner: You what?

Monty (*out front*): Quite elegant, the system, as it happens. Buy a name, in our case several, firms that've stopped trading [...] and buy a series of adjacent properties, separately of course, complete the deal, wind up the firm.

Turner (*sits*): I don't get what you mean.

Monty (*out front*): So I told him. Idea was to conceal a whole row being bought by one developer. [...] (*Sits, to Turner*) That you, Dennis Turner, are now a tenant of the Metropolitan Investment Trust.

Turner: You what?

Monty: They've sold the building, love. (Edgar 1987, 338)

Turner, panic-stricken and reduced to stuttering, is a veritable portrait of the isolated – as opposed to organized – individual confronted with the full force of capitalism, and Monty's asides are instrumental in highlighting his humiliation. Equally important is Khera's aside when Nation Forward militants attempt to break through the pickets on the gate of Baron Castings. The first confrontation is between Khera and Attwood who, working in Baron Castings, could give semblance of legality to Nation Forward's attack:

Attwood: Well, half past seven. Time for work. [...] Please let me pass. (*suddenly, pulling at Khera*) Come on, Harry Krishna. Clear my road.

Freeze action

Khera: And I nearly did. When he said move, I nearly did, as reflex action, move to let him through. But then –

Patel (*to Attwood*): You scab.

Khera: And then again –

Patel (*pushing Attwood*): You bastard scab.

Khera: And then again.

Patel (*pushing Attwood*): You bastard blackleg scab.

Attwood: Get your filthy hands off me, you dirty nig black scum.

Patel (*takes Attwood by the throat*): The name: the name's Prakash Patel. And, brother, we are staying in your road.

Freeze breaks (Edgar 1987, 388).

Edgar's point is clear. Khera is conditioned by his past as a colonial subject to the point of nearly obeying Atwood out of automatic reflex. Patel, who is in his mid-twenties, has not been through colonial dominancy, and is therefore quick to react, using the same words that a British striker would use. In a personal communication, Edgar explained that showing the no-longer passive attitude of Asian workers was part of the appeal of writing *Destiny* and *Our Own People*: "It was good to show that British Asians were not just victims of racism, but fought back, particularly in the industrial sphere". (Edgar 2016)

Another significant aside is pronounced by Paul when he meets his old mate Tony in a police station, after the clash at the Baron Castings picket line resulted in their arrests. Initially Paul and Tony merrily greet each other, until it dawns on them that they were on the opposite sides in the fight. The conversation becomes awkward as Tony foregrounds racist concepts such as blood and race to explain his choice, and Paul resorts to irony, shouting off: "Hey, Sergeant! Did you know, you got the bleeding Master Race in here? You can't do him for causing an affray". (Edgar 1987, 390) What follows is mostly an exchange of slogans between the two with no communicative purpose:

Paul: All history's the struggle of the classes.

Tony: No. All history's the struggle of the races.

Pause.

Paul: The workers of all races must unite.

Tony: The workers of all classes must unite. (Ibid., 391)

At the end of this hopeless confrontation, Paul communicates directly to the audience his human and political dilemma, the same which underlies the whole drama:

Suddenly, PAUL out front:

PAUL: And, you know, it was like looking in a mirror, looking at him, me old mate. Tony. All correct, the same identical. Just one thing wrong. Left's right. Class – race. As different as can be. The opposite. The bleeding wrong way round... (Edgar 1997, 392)

When Tony first appears on stage in Act 1 Scene 5 he introduces himself with another aside: "Turner's Antiques. Employee: Tony Perrins. Like the work. And

learn a trade. Investment for the future”. (Ibid., 337) He develops then from timid apprentice to dangerous bully, becoming a thoroughly hateful character. In his last appearance on stage, in Act 3 Scene 5, he starts the attack of a group of Nazis on Paul and Khera by a disgusting racist remark: “Hi Paul. [...] And hallo, Paul’s pet monkey”. (Ibid., 398) Indeed, as Edgar put it: “By virtue of becoming national socialists, people do not suddenly grow horns”. (quoted in Trussler, 171) Through the character of Tony, Edgar effectively argues the idea that a fascist ideology can appeal to a wide range of individuals, even in unlikely social conditions.

Gestus is another pillar of Brechtian theatre, as problematic to define as *Verfremdungseffekt*. Stephen Unwin provides his own synthetic definition of *Gestus*: “A physical embodiment of the relationships between people in society. Each *Gestus* captures a particular set of interlocking attitudes and the sum total of these provides the audience with a chart of the society that is portrayed”. (Unwin 2005, 61) Janelle Reinelt goes into further details:

A hungry beggar eats soup differently from a wealthy king. An individual actor develops the proper *gestus* for eating, which reveals her/his character’s relation to the social and political power structure. Brecht gives the audience a lesson in *gestus* in *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* when Azdak gives the Grand Duke a lesson on how to eat his cheese as a poor man. Brecht wrote about the nature of *gestus* that “not all *gests* are social *gests*. The attitude of chasing away a fly is not yet a social *gest*, though the attitude of chasing away a dog may be one, for instance if it comes to represent a badly dressed man’s continual battle against watchdogs. [...] The social *gest* is the *gest* relevant to society, the *gest* that allows conclusions to be drawn about the social circumstances”. (Reinelt 1996, 8-9).

It is clear that *Gestus* has mostly to do with performance; yet, even in the text, it can be detected where it is suggested that a gesture – as *Gestus* is sometimes simplistically translated – or a physical activity has a particular social relevance. In *Modern British Playwrighting the 1970s*, Reinelt drew attention to Khera’s obtuseness in responding to orders in the first scene of *Destiny* as an example of *Gestus*: “Khera is quite purposefully slow in his responses (in a perfect Brechtian *gestus* of his resistance), seeming not to grasp what he is asked to do – infuriating Turner but amusing the Colonel”. (Reinelt 2011, 188) In fact, Khera is quite selective in his attitude, as he is sharp enough in obeying the Colonel while feigning slowness of mind at Turner and Rolfe’s orders, showing a thorough understanding of the rigid division into classes of British society, prompting Colonel’s comment: “Quite a bright little chap, that one. Half devil, quite possibly, but hardly half child”. (Edgar 1987, 321) Rolfe does not recognize Kipling’s quotation and it looks as though Khera’s *Gestus* has put in motion and exposed an inner contradiction in British social structure:

Colonel: Kipling. Don’t you know it? [...] We used to have to learn it by heart at preparatory school.

Rolfe: I didn’t go to a preparatory school, Colonel.

Colonel: I know you didn’t, Major. (Ibid., 321-2)

Great Britain's class system is again the subject of *Destiny's* second scene. The four characters on stage: Crosby, Platt, Kershaw and Mrs Chandler, the Colonel's widow, meet for the funeral of the latter. Broadly speaking, being all Conservatives, they represent the same political force, yet social differences among them are manifest. Mrs Chandler and Kershaw are on the same level, even if they represent two different strata of upper-upper class, ancient money and nobility the former and entrepreneurial class the latter. Crosby, though belonging to the same class, is altogether from another planet, being a young conservative and a stockbroker. His aunt, the Colonel's widow, mockingly and half-disapprovingly describes his social and political group, the young Conservatives: "Now it's all sharp young men with coloured shirts and cockney accents, reading the *Economist*". (Ibid., 327) The real outsider in the group is Platt, work manager at Kershaw's factory. As soon as he appears on stage he looks out of his depth: "*Enter Platt, middle-aged, West Midlands accents, unsure of his surroundings. About to speak to Crosby when he sees he's phoning, so looks at the portrait [of the Colonel]*". (Ibid., 324) Platt, otherwise a commanding figure in Baron Casting, is here reduced to the awkwardness of a shy teenager. The following action, which I consider a clear example of *Gestus*, is occasioned by food, as in Reinelt's example. When offered milk and sugar with coffee by Crosby, Platt answers with an instant of indecision, as if struck by his own audacity in making a choice: "Just – milk". (Ibid.) Again, a simple action is charged with a deep social meaning that is certainly not lost on the audience. What makes Platt's uneasiness more interesting is that he is a political relevant figure since, as Secretary of the local Conservative Club, he is in the position to offer Crosby the candidacy to the by-election caused by his uncle's death. Political standing is of little or no consequence in a society in which the power is based upon a blend of birth and money, and Edgar does not lose the chance to remind the audience of the divided society they live in.

This far I have stressed Edgar's consonance with Brecht's teaching: yet there are also fundamental diversions from the Brechtian mode. The most apparent is that what happens in the various scenes is often unpredictable: for instance, the group of persons that are reunited in the pub are initially presented as simple party-goers and are then revealed step by step to be Nazi militants. Another example: the audience do not know for certain what the results of the by-election will be until the major reads the polls figures. Even more importantly, only in the last scene will Turner, and the audience, discover that the company of his former superior in the Army, Major Rolfe, that is proposing to finance Nation Forward, is the same which terminated his antiques business by evicting him. Edgar addressed the subject of suspense, or, more generally, of unpredictability in dramas in his "Ten years of Political theatre 1968-78". Without referring directly to *Destiny* or any other of his own work, Edgar singled out five contemporary plays whose climactic and somehow surprising ending did not subtract, and indeed added, both to their theatrical and political relevance: they were Bond's *Lear* (1971), Brenton and Hare's *Brassneck* (1973), Griffith's *Comedians* (1975), Barker's *Claw* (1975) and Barry Keefe's *Gotcha* (1976). Edgar was aware that such technique opened a rift

with Brecht's precepts: "The use of suspense and shock is, of course, a fundamental break with Brechtian tradition. Brecht's concern was always to demonstrate *how* events unfold (already having revealed *what* was going to happen in the heading to the scenes)". (Edgar 1988, 42) Edgar was quick to stress that this different approach did not imply that playwrights gave up on provoking a social analysis in the audience:

As in Brecht, the aim is to force the audience to respond analytically; but instead of distancing the audiences from the occurrences, these writers involve the audience, provoking them into thought by the very surprise and shock of the image. Conscious, perhaps, of the degeneration of Brecht's techniques to the condition of theatrical cliché, these writers are forging a style that uses opposite methods to the same end. [...] The techniques of shock and disruption, therefore, have the same function today as Brecht's method performed 40 years ago: they pre-empt the degeneration of realism into naturalism, and preserve a genuine dynamic between the surface and essence of society". (Ibid., 43-44)

It is unnecessary to point out that Brecht did not face the competition of TV. Therefore, that political playwrights would adopt a technique of suspense was maybe un-Brechtian but fully justified by the will to reach audiences that were used, if not addicted, to the narrative mode of TV and commercial movies. This capacity to adapt to new challenges comes a long way in explaining the survival of an oppositional theatre all through Thatcher's years.

2. 11 Our Own People

Our Own People was premiered at the Half Moon Theatre in London in November 1977 by Pirate Jenny, a small independent company mostly devoted to feminist themes. In a personal communication, Edgar reconstructed the genesis of *Our Own People*:

I've always tried to shift between institutional theatres (like the RSC and the National Theatre) and smaller experimental and touring theatres. [...] I was asked by them [Pirate Jenny] to write a play. *Destiny* concentrated on the white side of the racial divide in 70s Britain, and I wanted to write something about the victims of racism. While researching *Destiny*, I had come across a series of industrial disputes involving Asian workers, particularly in the East Midlands (indeed, the Baron Castings dispute in *Destiny* is loosely based on those disputes). I decided to write a whole play about such a dispute. I got hold of one of the leaders of the Mansfield Hosiery strike and he let me have the transcript of the public inquiry, which was the basis of the play. (Edgar 2016)

Our Own People is therefore a by-product of Edgar's thorough work of documentation in writing *Destiny*. The tight relationship between the two plays is apparent even at a first reading: in fact, *Our Own People* may be considered a spin-off, or even a sequel, of *Destiny*. Unlike the latter, which embraces a time span of thirty years, the main action of *Our Own People* is compressed in two days, the length of time of the Court of Inquiry set by the Department of Employment to investigate a strike that created a divide between white and non-white workers in a

weaving mill in Yorkshire. What is fascinating in *Our Own People* is that, while apparently narrowing the focus on a particular case, it actually widens the range of issues it faces, developing themes that are just hinted at in *Destiny*.

“The three Asian actors were excellent, way above the average standard one expects from coloured actors apart from the exceptional few”. (ACGB 34/125/2/HEDLEY) This comment is extracted from an ACGB report on the performance of *Our Own People* at the Half Moon Theatre on 30 November 1977. The review was generally very appreciative and the comment was surely well-meant, but it is still embarrassing in its mentioning the ethnicity of some of the actors as a handicap to be overcome. This remark does not come from a bigoted Tory or worse, but by Philip Hedley, a director who would be Artistic Director of Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Royal Stratford East, that is one of the centres of left-wing theatre in London, from 1979 to 2004. True to fact, the reviewer went on providing a socially based explanation of “coloured” actors’ lower status: “It [their performance] added weight to the argument that the reason coloured actors have not got a high reputation in this country is from lack of good opportunities and enough sheer experience”. (Ibid.) Yet this does not subtract from the fact that the first statement is extremely awkward, and would be perceived today as openly racist. I do not want to go into the question of political correctness – even if I think that those who deplore it do not consider the alternative – but simply to stress how much racial prejudice was present in every layer of British society, providing the backdrop of both *Destiny* and *Our Own People*. A criticism that can be moved – especially by today’s standards – to *Destiny* is that it looks at racism mainly through the viewpoint of white people,¹⁶⁷ exploring it as a political issue, and not at a personal level. Edgar was aware of this difficulty, and in *Our Own People* the Asian workers and their lives, both in and out of the factory, are at the centre of the action.

The location – Yorkshire instead of West Midlands – and the produced goods – textiles instead of iron – are different in *Destiny* and *Our Own People*. But the big difference is that in the textile factory a number of the workers are women, and among them only the Asian ones go on strike. Since much of the action happens in court, there is an abundance of technicalities both regarding, for instance, the trade union’s inner regulations and the different kind of looms employed in the factory. As Jonathan Lamede, in his review for the ACGB, remarked: “The sheer density of the material and the enormous complexity of the details presented to us often led to confusion, at least in my mind. (ACGB 34/125/2/ LAMEDE) I will try to give an account of the plot keeping to the main track and skipping the technical minutiae.

The events that preceded and caused the Court Hearing are summarized by the actors at the start of the first scene:

Dawson: In the late spring and early summer of 1975, there was a strike at a weaving mill in Beckley, a small textile town near Bradford in Yorkshire.

¹⁶⁷ See *Five Approaches to Political Theatre* (1990) by Martin H. Peacock p. 148.

Bhandari: It wasn't a very big dispute. The firm employed under 200 people, less than half of whom came out on strike.

Hussein: What made this strike special, however, was that all the strikers were Asians, and all the people who stayed at work were white.

Hussein sits

Lateef: The strike began as a dispute over pay, but it soon escalated into a bitter conflict over the treatment of Asian workers by the company, the union, and their fellow employees. Pickets were mounted and several ugly incidents took place.

Lateef sits

Clifford: In the seventh week of the strike, the Department of Employment set up a Court of Inquiry to investigate the affair. (Edgar 1997: 5)

The Court is chaired by the Baroness Cockburn, formerly a junior Minister of a Labour government, elevated to the peerage after the 1970 electoral defeat. The case of the strikers is defended by Jill Watts, a barrister often involved in radical causes. In the first five scenes Watts examines various Asian witnesses who describe the uneasy relationship of female Asian workers with overlookers, and the general distrust towards the shop stewards: this is meant to explain why the Asian workers went on strike, forming their own strike committee, without waiting for the union's approval and without giving the obligatory two-week notice to the management. The union's point of view is then presented by the secretary of the National Union of Weavers, a fictional trade union, George Jowett, while another barrister, Nicholas Clifford represents the company, defending the management's decision to hire new workers during the strike with the consequence of making some of the strikers redundant. Afterwards two shop stewards are interrogated, Mr Kitchen and Mrs Dawson. Both support the Union's line, but while the former is not completely unsympathetic with the strikers' reasons, the latter clearly shows signs of racial prejudice, and in fact her testimony ends in an acrimonious confrontation with Sandhu, an Asian worker, which forces the Chair to adjourn the Court to the following day. The first act ends with two scenes whose significance will be clear at the end of the play: Kitchen tries, unsuccessfully, to reach a political and human contact with the strikers, and Dawson receives in her home an unnamed visitor who leaves her some books and magazines.

In the second act, the Chair examines Mrs Ridley, a representative of the Race Relation Board, a body meant to control the application of the Race Relations Act. She testifies that the Board have investigated the causes of the strike finding no evidence of discrimination by the management; she also adds that the Asian workers had not denounced specific episodes, because of their bad relationship with the Union, thus making the Board's intervention ineffective: "It is true that, on the face of it, the Race Relations Act 1968 would find it extremely hard to find racial discrimination in the Republic of South Africa". (Ibid. 60) Maybe unintentionally, and maybe not so, she triggers the final turns of events, by casually mentioning that a large number of Asian workers had abandoned the strike and gone back to work.

It is consequently revealed that many of them were blackmailed, directly or indirectly, by the firm for being overstayers under the 1971 Immigration Act. During the following debate Dawson cracks down and, after proudly announcing she is a member of the National Front, pours out a stream of Nazi conspiracy theories, presumably the result of the literature she received from her visitor in the last scene of Act 1:

They say, the bosses and the communists are locked in struggle for the world. They stop you seeing that it's bankers and financiers who give the money to the communists. See how it's them encourages this lot to come here. Live here. Breed. And inter-breed. It's a conspiracy. No doubt in my mind. It's a conspiracy to undermine our race. By bringing them. By other things. The unemployment. Common market. Mucky magazines. The general... rot. Pollute our nation from within. (Ibid., 70)

Dawson's rant piles on Kitchen's doubts and causes him a crisis of conscience; as a consequence, he exposes to the Court a gentlemen's agreement between the management and the Union to bar promotions for the Asians in exchange for the Union accepting some redundancies. Thanks to a hint by Kitchen, Watt puts the squeeze on Harper, the factory's owner, and forces him to admit that the planned redundancies were going to hit just female workers in order to limit the consequences of the Equal Pay Act,¹⁶⁸ due to come into force the following January. Notwithstanding the final perorations by the representatives of the company and the Union, it looks as the striking committee has conclusively proved the point that Asian workers were subjected to racial prejudice both by the management and by their colleagues. But the Chair's final report is lenient both towards the company and the union. In Act Two Scene Twenty-Three Clifford reads the report to Harper, commenting that the damage had been minimal:

In general, from your point of view, it's fairly predictable. Um... "The company in my view showed insufficient courage... Unduly timid... occasionally unthinking and precipitous... errors of judgement..."

Slight pause

Oh, money? Well, I'm afraid she wants an interim bonus and piecework changes. Not all they demanded, but... (Ibid. 87)

In scene Twenty-Four Jowett is both triumphalist and mocking when he reads the report to a union meeting attended by Dawson but not by Kitchen:

Right, brothers and, sister. I hope you've had a chance to cast your eyes across the oracle. I think its general conclusions are what we'd have thought. We are for instance... um... "sometimes unmindful of our overall responsibility"... um... "unwise counsel... poor communication that perhaps could have been..." cetera etcetera "misjudgement rather than a conscious ill-intention". I should point out that the strike committee is accused of being irresponsible, and outside militants, and all

¹⁶⁸ See note 126.

that kind of thing [...] and we're left with, shall we say, a rather vague exhortation to see that everyone is represented equally. (Ibid. 87-88)

In the same scene, Watts and the strike committee are left to comment on what is actually a Pyrrhic victory:

Watts: Well. I think the first thing to say is that in general this is excellent. It accepts almost all our arguments. Although it does make predictable remarks about irresponsible advice and so on, it is much more critical of the other parties than of you. [...] Well there's a problem. You see, she recommends that the choice of which workers are or aren't to be retained during the redundancy should be made on the basis of merit and experience, regardless of race, colour, creed etcetera. The problem is the word experience. [...]. So, in effect, what's bound to happen is, the whites will get first pick. And the only way to stop that would be some kind of quota system, which –

Bhandari: Which is illegal.

Watts: Yes. It's not her fault, of course. Law of the land.

Hussein: Of course. The law of the land. (Ibid 88-89)

As Sandhu had previously put it: "This fetish with the law". (Ibid., 65) Once again, as in *Destiny*, the Asian workers feel that law and justice are not synonymous, and that the observance of legality seems sometimes an excuse for even well-meaning white people not to risk too much of their status. In *Destiny*, the point was made more forcefully by Khera when he tried to convince Clifton to take action against Patel's deportation: "There is a story, 'bout the rule of law. In Amritsar. 1919. A Brigadier-General, Dyer, ordered his troops to fire on unarmed Indian demonstrators. Nearly 400 killed. [...] Then, of course, Dyer was investigated. Strict legality. Censured. Asked to resign". (Edgar 1987, 394) Here, Hussein limits himself to an ironical comment, but the meaning is the same: British law is not neutral nor God-given, but a means to keep other people – as opposed to our own people – subjugated. In the last scene the actors enumerate a few real cases which were behind the play. The last one, according to Edgar, had the strictest relationship with the plot of *Our Own People*:

8th PERFORMER: At Mansfield Hosiery Mills, Loughborough, the National Front was also active during an Asian strike against discrimination in promotion to high-paid knitters' posts. During the strike, the white knitters accepted a productivity and redundancy agreement that they had previously rejected, and the company appointed a number of white knitters brought in from outside. During a subsequent Court of Inquiry, it emerged that the company had entered into a covert agreement with the knitters not to promote black workers.

1st PERFORMER: After the Inquiry, the Hosiery Workers' Union President commented: "We helped the Asians far more than we helped our own people. This is what stuck in my craw all the time we were trying to get a settlement".

2nd PERFORMER: It all depends on who are whose own people. (Edgar 1997, 91)

The final question is left open for the audience to answer. Race and class are again the central issues, as in the confrontation between Paul and Tony in *Destiny*. All through *Our Own People* the pronoun “we” is given different meaning by the various characters. For Jowett, it means the members of the Union and by implication white workers; for Dawson it means whites in general, even if the dividing line between “us” and “them” is blurred by the conspiracy theory expounded above; Kitchen finally decides that “we” means the working class, regardless of ethnicity. For the Asian workers of the committee there is some ambiguity, since when they say “we” and “our own people” it means Asian workers, but their position has been in some way forced on them by the situation. In fact, Hussein, when interrogated by the Baroness, gives a small lesson on the basics of class consciousness:

Chair: I have to ask if all the strikers were Asian.

Hussein: Yes.

Chair: And a large number of them, I mean, the Sultzer¹⁶⁹ people and the non-weavers, had nothing to do with the dispute.

Hussein: Not directly, no.

Chair: So can I ask you why they joined the strike?

Pause.

Hussein: They joined the strike because it is normal that when there is a dispute in a factory everyone is involved. That is normal even when people are not directly affected. Or that is what we thought. (Ibid., 13)

The Chair’s question is quite naïve, yet it is functional in underlining how much the race issue challenged the very basis of industrial relations. Hussein’s answer is firm and self-assured, but the use of the past tense “we thought” indicates that the dispute made him doubt his idea of class solidarity. *Our Own People* examines the various social and political issue raised by a multi-cultural society to a greater depth than *Destiny*, and the limited number of characters allows, or forces, Edgar to scrutinize their personality more accurately than as the mere result of social forces. In fact, in the case of Dawson, the National Front shop steward, the author even gets close to a psychological analysis. For a start, she is pregnant and her state adds to the impression of frailty under the armour of racial hatred. During the Court hearings Dawson tries to appear monolithic in her hostility to Asian colleagues but, as we have seen, she approaches hysteria in her reaction to challenging situations, even if, due to her state, she is never really pressured. When, in the last scene of Act 1, she receives at her home the visit of a National Front militant, she reveals the full extent of her unhappiness. The conversation between them is virtually a monologue in which the Visitor interposes just some short sentences to Dawson’s stream of consciousness. After lamenting the general state of affairs as regards her relation to

¹⁶⁹ A brand of looms.

Asian workers (“I mean you’d not believe the things they’re saying. Think we owe them everything”, *Ibid.*, 50) Dawson turns to her private life, exposing all her loneliness to a virtual stranger:

Dawson: We know what happens. Area like this. I mean, it’s just the facts of life. They come in, and a place just drops apart. It’s just a fact of life.

Slight pause.

Dunno where John is.

Slight smile.

Never do.

Visitor smiles sympathetically.

I sometimes feel split off. Detached from things around. All look the same. Same streets, and full of people. But it’s like you are in a Perspex box. Can see, but reach out, you can’t touch them. Don’t know who you are. (*Ibid.*, 51)

The visitor’s boredom is fully revealed when she stands up and leaves quite abruptly, and Dawson is left speaking to an absent guest: “You see... I’ve grown up since you came”. Dawson has much in common with Liz of *Destiny*. But the latter, apart from becoming a Nation Forward militant, was notable only for her love of order and tidiness verging on the maniacal, and maybe a relation is suggested; (Edgar 1987, 374-375) Dawson is a character who is meant to raise some sympathy because of her vulnerability and, in fact, Bhandari, a female striker, attempts to be friendly with her. When she is violently rebuked, Bhandari is clever and insightful in her reply:

Dawson: First, I’m a white woman. First, I’m a white worker.

Bhandari: Mm. Sometimes, you know, I think ...

Dawson: Yuh. What d’you think?

Bhandari: That they give you whiteness so that you can put up with the rest. They give you such a dreadful life, but say, at least you’re white. At least, in that, you are superior. You know, if you’re the bottom of the pile, the real dregs, black woman ... We’ve grown up, through this strike. We won’t put up with dreadful things, now, any more. From overlookers. Husbands. Foremen. Fathers. You. (*Ibid.*, 75)

Bhandari is a specimen of the Asian woman searching for self-realization without renegeing on tradition. In the strike committee she is not subordinate in the least to the male members, and her fighting spirit is testified by the Chair: “I have heard rumours that you yourself get quite angry, Mrs Bandhari. I have heard lurid tales about umbrellas on picket lines”. (*Ibid.*, 17-18) An umbrella is a very British and lady-like weapon, and brandishing it on a picket line suggests, albeit humorously, a high degree of integration. The Chair’s remark is slightly patronizing – the Chair has this kind of patrician attitude to everyone all along the hearing – but is not censorious. In those years British public opinion was acknowledging with some

curiosity the presence on picket lines of women in their sari who claimed salary raises, but also the right to work in their traditional dress.¹⁷⁰ Of course, this kind of female liberation attitude aroused sympathy in a white liberal as the Chair but was a source of spite for the Front militant Dawson:

Dawson: Keep them locked up. Don't want them, get polluted by our filthy Western ways.

Bhandari: Oh, not just Western ways. In fact, it's happening in India and Pakistan. Women campaigning. 'Gainst arranging marriages. Fighting for rights. In fact, it's not just here.

Slight pause.

But it is harder here. Because if you do not belong inside your own community, there's nowhere else you can belong. (Ibid., 73)

In the character of Bhandari, and especially in these last lines, Edgar shows a deep understanding of the mechanism that makes it harder to oppose religious fanaticism abroad than in one's homeland. Dawson remains untouched by Bhandari's reasoning and her aggression goes on until Bhandari surrenders to the impossibility of opening a channel of communication:

Bhandari (*suddenly hard*): Then we were right. You are a chancha.

Dawson: Sorry, don't speak Urdu.

Bhandari: Gujerati.¹⁷¹ Scab. (Ibid., 75)

In a much more well-meaning way Kitchen also questions the male strikers on their relationship with tradition: meeting them in a pub he asks if their religion does not forbid them to have a pint. Hussein replies light-heartedly: "Oh, I'm not a good Moslem. In fact, I'm a terrible Moslem. And Ranjit here's a Sikh, and they do anything". (Ibid., 48) Maybe there was a bit of wishful-thinking on Edgar's part in endowing the male characters with such a relaxed attitude to religion and lifestyle. Anyway, this is a pleasant reminder of the pre-Khomeini, pre-*Satanic Verses*¹⁷² years when Islam was a much more private matter than today, even in immigrant communities in UK. It is a fact that in recent years religion has increasingly become a public affair and a matter of hostility between communities, especially after the terrorist attacks of the early twenty-first century and of the so-called war on terror. This new situation will be a source of inspiration for Edgar nearly to the present day in writing *Playing with Fire* (2005) and *Testing the Echo* (2008), two plays which deal with the coexistence of different communities, touching also on religion.

¹⁷⁰ See for instance the story of Jayaben Desai, a leader of the Grunwick strike at <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/jayaben-desai-striker-sari/> last accessed 19/09/2018

¹⁷¹ Urdu and Gujerati are languages spoken in the Indian subcontinent.

¹⁷² Ayatollah Khomeini seized power in Iran in 1979, establishing a theocratic republic. In 1988 he issued a fatwa, that is a death sentence, against Salman Rushdie for having written a book considered blasphemous, *The Satanic Verses*. See <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jan/11/salman-rushdie-satanic-verses>. last accessed 19/09/2018.

As we have already seen, Kitchen is the *Deus ex Machina* of the dispute. He is basically a good fellow and a dedicated Union man, yet he seems somehow subdued and not brilliant intellectually. His search for a common ground with the Asian strikers in the pub is reminiscent of a comic double-act:

Sandhu: My uncle got shot too. In Burma. 1943.

Kitchen: Oh, ay. I know 'bout that. Sikh regiments. The best of all.

Pause

Where d 'you actually come from?

Sandhu: Me? I come from Bradford.

Kitchen: Sorry, no, I mean: before that.

Sandhu: For a bit I was in Leeds.

Kitchen: Sorry, I didn't, meant, where did you come from.

Sandhu: Oh, sorry, see what you mean. Where was I *born*.

Kitchen: That's right.

Sandhu: Southall. (Ibid. 49)

Evidently, appreciating the military value of Sikh regiments is not considered a good enough motive for fraternization, and even if Kitchen tries to show his class solidarity calling the strikers' demands "our claim" (Ibid., 48) the strikers remain suspicious – again, what is meant by "we" "us" "our" is the central question. Sandhu's response to Kitchen's approach is ice-cold: "Look. Ok. It's very nice, you come and drink with us. We're very touched. But, really, don't tell us, you do not wish repatriation. Go and tell your Mrs Dawson. [...] Cos we are not the problem. She's the problem. And she's not our problem. She is yours". (Ibid., 49-50) Kitchen is not surprised by Sandhu's rudeness as such, but by the feeling that he had been treated as if he was the class enemy. Later on, he confesses to Dawson his uneasiness:

Bloody edgy. Fact, they was bloody rude. [...] The tone of voice, you know, the style of talking. *Déjà vu*. [...] Sounded just like I do when I'm locked in some great barney with the management. A kind of, sullen. Sarkey. Clever. And distrustful. [...] Just don't expect to hear it used at you. (Ibid., 66)

As could be expected Dawson is dismissive of Kitchen's doubts, even pretending not to understand the meaning of the French expression "*déjà vu*". But when something clicks inside Kitchen, she notices it and tries to restrain him from taking action:

Dawson: Frank, for Christ's sake, not getting sentimental.

Kitchen: Sentimental?

Dawson: Brotherhood of man. That lot.

Kitchen: Oh, no. Not brotherhood of man. Far from it. Naked, crude self-interest. Not just mine and all.

Dawson: Is this your bloody déjà vu?

Kitchen: I'm sorry. Don't speak Urdu. Love. (Ibid., 76)

What Kitchen calls self-interest is actually class-interest, as he explains to the chair when she questions him about the motive of his late denounce:

Chair: Can I ask why you've said this now?

Kitchen: Oh, yuh. A reasonable question. Cos it was a lousy deal. Because of what we lost. Because the thing was bad right through.

Chair: You mean, ethically?

Kitchen: Practically. Bad, for us. (Ibid., 79)

Kitchen has made his choice, and by "us" he evidently means the working class in general, with special reference to his factory, without ethnical distinctions. It will be clear in the remainder of the play that he also makes no distinction between the male and female workforce. As seen above, sex equality is dealt with in *Our Own People* more centrally and openly than in *Destiny*, as economic and personal gender-related issues are intermingled all through the play. Predictably, male attitude was an obstacle that Asian women had to overcome, as Bhandari stated: "A lot of them, you know their husbands said, when they were on picket duty, said, oh you can't do that. With all those men. Stay home, my girl, and catch up on the laundry". (Ibid. 72) More unexpectedly, the sexist attitude of the British working class is also exposed in the figure of Jowett. His rustic attempt at charming the opposing lawyer is funny in its awkwardness, nonetheless it is clearly offensive:

Jowett: Oh, now, Mrs Watts, can't fault me there. I'm one hundred percent on women's lib. After all, without it, not be up against a charming lady like yourself. It's such a pleasant change.

Watts: Ah, well. Mr Jowett, it's even worse than lady lawyers now, you know. Next year, there's equal pay.

Jowett: Well, glory be. All this and Maggie Thatcher too. (Ibid., 20)

Both in 1975, the year the play was set, and in 1977, when it was staged, Margaret Thatcher was just the leader of the opposition, and her electoral triumph was still two years away. Evidently her figure was already looming large on the political horizon¹⁷³ and here Jowett apparently mentions her as an example of the undesirable side effects of feminism. "Glory be. All this and Maggie Thatcher too" (Ibid., 83) is also what Kitchen scribbles on a piece of paper and passes to Watts partly as a private joke but also to call her attention on the fact that the deal signed by the company and the union implied a reduction, and eventually an elimination,

¹⁷³ As we have already seen, also Muggins mention her in 1978 in his vision of a future nightmarish Great Britain.

of female workforce, as Harper, the owner of the factory, must reluctantly concede: “Look, it’s just the facts. That if you’ve got to pay the same... You lose the flexibility, they can’t be moved to shifts¹⁷⁴... And, frankly, it does cost to train them. And then they do, get married. Pregnant”. (Ibid., 83) This aspect of the deal had escaped everyone – except Jowett and Harper who signed it – including the strike committee and their lawyer. Therefore, Kitchen is revealed to be not just an honest chap, but also a bright one. Since in the scene of the final Union meeting Kitchen is not present, the audience is brought to think that he paid for his honesty by being ostracized by his fellow workers and trade-unionists, as happens to Muldoon’s Ralph in *What Happens Next*. Contrarily to Dawson, Kitchen is not psychologically investigated, as his final denunciation is dictated just by class consciousness: a character fully responding to Edgar’s purpose not to call too much attention to individuals as such. In the case of Kitchen, maybe the intention got out of hand and Edgar created, if not a romantic hero, at least a heroic Everyman. This is not the only time that Edgar, for all his social realism, indulged in creating characters who look too good to be true. Two examples spring to mind: Pavel Lermontov in *Maydays* (1983), a Soviet Army officer who, after suffering the gulag for being a political dissident, succeeds in fleeing to the West and, once there, refuses to collaborate with a think-tank of the Reaganian right; and Josef Lutz in *The Shape of the Table* (1990), the secretary of the Communist Party of a country strongly resembling Czechoslovakia who, being removed by a peaceful revolution following the fall of Berlin’s Wall, reacts in a dignified manner and, as a novel Lear, ends being more sinned against than sinning. In the case of Lutz, maybe Edgar’s difficulty in accepting the end of Communism in the East of Europe played a part, as Michael Billington reported: “Edgar was accused by some of writing an elegy for communism; and it was true that Stratford Johns¹⁷⁵ elicited a measure of sympathy in his transition from Stalinist ogre to powerless martyr”. (Billington 2007: 329) Anyway, all three characters are proof to a modicum of romantic idealization in Edgar’s playwriting that could be attributed to the unconscious drive to meet the audience’s need to identify with the character, at the risk of missing his or her social and political relevance. Edgar was aware of this danger as regards authors like Griffiths writing for television but seemingly did not notice that he was exposed to the same risk:

The danger of a project like *Brand*¹⁷⁶ is that, by the end of eleven episodes, the audience is identifying with Brand exclusively as the pivot of the story (my hero right or wrong) and sympathizing with his actions only insofar as is necessary to a satisfactory dramatic experience. In other words, identification with Brand’s socialism is equivalent to the identification with certain chauvinistic ideas that it is necessary to share in order to enjoy Shakespeare’s *Henry V*. (Edgar 1988: 39)

¹⁷⁴ At the time in Great Britain, night work was prohibited for women.

¹⁷⁵ Stratford Johns (1925-2002) was the actor impersonating Lutz in the first edition of *The Shape of the Table*, opened on 8 November 1990 at the Cottesloe Theatre.

¹⁷⁶ *Billy Brand* was a TV series by Trevor Griffiths broadcast by ITV in 1976. The eponymous character is a left-wing Labour MP.

In summary, in *Our Own People* Edgar has succeeded in including all the themes present in *Destiny* – except the electoral issue – even enlarging the spectrum and adding the feminist perspective that was just hinted at in the latter. Edgar also foregrounded effectively the unease of the immigrant population in a country that rejected them after using them as work-force:

Hussein: Well, Mr Jowett said earlier that a worker is a worker is a worker. White or black or brown or green with yellow stripes. Mrs Ridley said earlier that we should be the same as other workers. Don't be a tribe, and they won't be a tribe.

Slight pause.

But we are not the same as other workers. Because white workers do not have to take their passports when they go to work. That is the point.

We are not like whites because they are not working side-by-side with people who desire to put them all on boats to go back where they did or didn't come from. That's the point.

Pause

We are not over here because of some great conspiracy. We are over here because you wanted us to come here. We are over here because, dear Mr Kitchen, you were over there.

Sandhu: And if they divide us, they're dividing you. (Ibid. 71)

In *Our Own People* Edgar paid a greater attention to the characters' subjectivity than in any of his previous plays. This signaled a new trend in Edgar's production: in fact, in the following years, he wrote plays in which the main characters were closely scrutinized. For instance, *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs* (1978) is mostly based on the monologues of the main character, an anti-racist white lawyer jailed in segregated South Africa; *Mary Barnes* (1978) is the chronicle of a psychiatric case; *Teendreams* (1979) deals with the relationship between two teenagers and their teacher. This may plausibly be attributed to Edgar acceptance of the "personal is political" approach. In the case of *Our Own People*, being a commissioned work, it can be inferred that this new attitude resulted also from the policy of the commissioning company, Pirate Jenny.

Pirate Jenny was the offspring of another London independent company, the West London Theatre Workshop (WLTW). In 1976 Bruce Birchall, the leader of WLTW, decided to leave the company and move to Sheffield in search of more sympathetic audiences; there, he founded another company, Itinerant Theatre. Three WLTW's members, Jenny Rees, Diane Lambert and Siobhan Lennon (Bull 2017, 64) decided to start another company, Pirate Jenny, and continued WLTW's activity with a stress on sexual politics and an open challenge to existing left-wing theatre companies. Their program is expounded in a document titled "Pirate Jenny asks for more", addressed to "The drama department and possible new members". From various references it can be placed in early 1977, but the exact date is unreadable:

What's wrong with left-wing theatre is tied up with what has gone wrong in the socialist movement. Hypnotised by economic issues, the left ignores whole areas of people's lives. Sexual feelings and sexual roles, how children are brought up, cultural tyrannies and race hatred – these and much more are deemed 'irrelevant' by the radical theorists, but are no less keenly felt by the people who live and struggle with them. [...] Within the group there's a sharp awareness of sexual politics. That means that attacks that cultural habit inflicts on women and homosexuals in the company are openly confronted. (ACGB 34/125/2/MORE)

The document summarizes the activity of the company in the previous year, quoting two plays performed in the 1976/ 77 season, *Are You Sitting Comfortably* and *The Breaker's Yard*. No author is mentioned for these plays, since "The performers had a major part in creating the script" (Ibid.) and they were therefore considered collective creation. For the incoming year, Pirate Jenny's plan – there is no individual signature – was to stage a cabaret-like show, *Bouncing Back with Benyon*, in opposition to a new, more restrictive Abortion Bill, *Whistling at Milestones* by Alex Glasgow,¹⁷⁷ about the so-called Jarrow March,¹⁷⁸ and *Our Own People*. The idea was to split the company in two, one staging plays, while the other one, named Team Two, would do cabaret. These plans were actually carried out, albeit for a short time and among all the difficulties facing companies which had to rely on ACGB's help.

Administratively, Pirate Jenny had an adventurous life from the start. The problem was that Birchall intended to pass the Art Council's grant on to his new company, while Pirate Jenny considered themselves the legitimate successors and therefore the beneficiaries of WLTW's subsidy. The dispute was resolved in favour of Pirate Jenny, but the relationship with the Drama Panel remained strained through the three years of Pirate Jenny's life. The lowest point of this uneasy relation was reached in a letter sent by Rees to Anton Gill, the Drama Panel officer in charge of Pirate Jenny on 13 March 1978. The issue is the size of the incoming grant and Rees, apart from making an unpleasant comparison with another company – Foco Novo – is very aggressive in form and content:

Does the acgb think were [sic] a bunch of useless idiots, because at the moment that's how we feel we are being treated. Foco Novo are now on £42,000 we will more than likley [sic] be on £24,000 if rumour has it correct, what the fucks [sic] going on. I will stand up to any of the people in drama to tell us straight what they don't like about us. I will also want to know how they decipher the quality of work or whatever they say is the reason for us being downgraded yet again. We are not going to take it, they will be articles in all papers and what ever power we have we will use. (ACGB 34/125/2/REES)

Complaining about the size of subsidy was a common exercise for independent companies but, for instance, in similar circumstances Muldoon resorted to humour.

¹⁷⁷ Alex Glasgow (1935-2001) was a socialist writer, singer and songwriter. See <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/may/17/guardianobituaries1> last accessed 22/09/2018.

¹⁷⁸ In 1936 a group of unemployed workers marched from the town of Jarrow in Tyneside to London to present a petition to Parliament, asking for remedies against unemployment.

It is not surprising that Rees' letter caused some irritation in the Drama Panel, as attested by Faulkner's reply of 15 March 1978:

Before dealing with any specific points raised by your letter of 10th March I must make clear to you that if in the future you write a letter similar in tone or content to me or to any of my staff you will receive no reply. We are dealing with intimations of subsidy to well over a hundred companies. We are acutely aware of the tension and worry which precede the announcement of grants and we have, regrettably, become accustomed to being the first line of contact for the majority of potential recipients who believe that the sum allocated to them is insufficient. Abuse and hysteria should however have no place in this, nor do they add anything positive to the assessment of whether a group or individual can properly be granted a sum in excess of twenty thousand pounds. (ACGB 34/125/2/FAULKNER)

Apart from the general tone of Rees's letter, the remark "what ever power we will have we will use" sounds like an awkward attempt to intimidate the Drama Panel officers. In fact, in the ACGB archives there are a few letters addressed to the Drama Panel by various individuals supporting Pirate Jenny's case. I have found, among others, letters by Frank Gloversmith (ACGB 34/125/3/GLOVERSMITH), lecturer in English at the University of Sussex, Rosemary Heeson,¹⁷⁹ (ACGB 34/125/3/HEESON) a theatre manager, Jad Adams, a journalist of the South East London Mercury. (ACGB 34/125/3/ADAMS) None of these names were in fact likely to intimidate, or even to impress, the Drama Panel officers, quite used, as we have seen, to receiving complaints from MPs and ministers. In particular, Adam's letter of 16 June 1977 prompted a somehow piqued reply by Clive Tempest:

Thank you for taking the trouble to write in support of Pirate Jenny. [...] In fact Pirate Jenny's grant is no more "in danger" of being withdrawn than the grants of many other companies. The Council has a duty to continually assess and monitor the way in which subsidy is used. [...] I do not however think that you can fairly draw from the (particular)¹⁸⁰ case of Pirate Jenny – the implication that the Arts Council is blind to the need to support theatrical experiment by new Writers and Directors. (ACGB 34/125/3/TEMPEST)

The end came in autumn 1979 when the company failed to produce a new play after eight weeks of rehearsal, and after having accepted bookings and issued a list of performances. The title of the aborted play was *On Good Authority*, its theme the system of media information, press and television, and the authors were Jean Hart and Charlie Stafford, for whom the company had also received an extra grant for an original script. The end of subsidy was communicated to Jenny Rees of ACGB General Secretary Roy Shaw with a letter of 12 November 1979:

The decision of the council was that no further subsidy should be paid to the company for the financial year 1979/80 and that no applications for revenue subsidy in 1980/81 would be considered. The Council took this decision in the light of the inability of the

¹⁷⁹ Rosemary Heeson was Circuit Promotions Manager of North West Arts, an organization which had promoted two of Pirate Jenny's tour. Therefore, there is more than a whiff of conflict of interests in her recommendation.

¹⁸⁰ Handwritten.

company to match the available funds to the programme of work on which the application had been based. [...] The cancellation of the tour of “On Good Authority” increased the concern already felt by the officers of the council that the company did not act early enough when it was apparent that circumstances might prevent the project going ahead. (ACGB 34/125/4/SHAW)

The cancellation of the tour was the tombstone of the company and it was heard no more of Pirate Jenny. As can be seen, Roy Shaw’s letter was sent at the start of Thatcher’s first term in the government, yet it seems unlikely that there was an intention of political censorship. Reading ACGB’s papers one gets the impression that Pirate Jenny’s general problem, more than their political stance, was an incapacity of matching revenues and expenses on a long period. Of course, knowing the amount of the subsidy on a year-by-year basis did not help planning. In Pirate Jenny’s case a certain delusion of grandeur also played a part. In the already mentioned document titled “Pirate Jenny asks for more” one can read: “We are already recruiting the most talented theatre-workers we can, and paying the highest wages we can afford”. This phrase is highlighted by a lateral crayoned black line, a clue that this attitude sounded dangerous from the start to the Drama Panel. (ACGB 34/125/2/MORE) Unsurprisingly, one recognizable reason of Pirate Jenny’s increasing deficit seems to be the constant reliance on workers from outside the company. In fact, in the production cast of *Our Own People* there is no one of the founding members, not even Jenny Rees whose role was just that of manager administrator. As for artistic results, they were uneven. The report of Anthon Gill is altogether negative. “Although this is an improvement on ‘Whistling at Milestones’, this is only because it has a capable director, rather than no director at all, and even Walter Donohue has not been able to subdue the awful Victoria Plum”. (ACGB 34/125/2/GILL) Victoria Plum played the part of the Chair of the Court and therefore her role was an important one. The report called then into cause Pirate Jenny’s necessity to hire people from outside the company:

As for Pirate Jenny, they will only ever be as good as the people they employ to do their show for them. An Edgar/Donohue combination is quite strong, so you get quite a strong production, but there is no sense of company, I think. What we have to do is look at Pirate Jenny’s performance over this year, taking into account their Review difficulties, and then ask ‘are they worth it’. (Ibid.)

On the script Gill remarked: “David Edgar’s documentary plays are always interesting in their subject matter, but his writing qua writing is getting pretty boring, I think”. (Ibid.) Interestingly, one anonymous hand has scribbled on the margin: “Hear! Hear! On this one at least I agree”. (Ibid.) Jonathan Lamede’s report was positive for the script, but only partially so for the *mise-en-scène*:

Strong stuff, fairly well written. [...] The Asian actors in the cast were particularly good, showing a convincing simplicity and truthfulness. This was often in sharp contrast to the ‘white’ members of the cast, particularly Victoria Plum and Sue Glanville, as Chairman and Counsel respectively, who descended to abysmal level of caricature and mugging. I found the evening a rather heavy one, though I must say a fairly full audience received the play well. (ACGB 34/125/2/LAMEDE).

Poor Victoria Plum was singled out by both Gill and Lamede as an example of bad acting. In newspapers reviews she is not mentioned, but, probably, it would have been considered inelegant to point the finger at one performer. Journalistic reviews were generally positive, and some of them glowing. A review signed D.F.B. on *The Telegraph* of 30 November 1977 stated: “A strong court room drama always makes effective theatre and in the case of David Edgar’s “Our Own People” has the additional advantage of contemporary relevance”. (ACGB 34/125/2/DFB) Michael Coveney wrote on the *Financial Times* of 9 January 1978: “Director Walter Donohue has done a cool and measured job [...] eliciting beautifully judged performances from the strike committee’s barrister (Sue Glanville), the committee chairman (Tariq Yunus) and the General Secretary [...] (John Gillet)”. (ACGB 34/125/2/COVENAY) Philip Cohen in *The Morning Star* of 2 December 1977 defined *Our Own People* as “an exciting drama, and a big advance on ‘Destiny’, not least in the way the women are central to the play and not merely sideshows”. (ACGB 34/125/2/COHEN)

The remark “There is no sense of company” by Gill goes straight to Pirate Jenny’s main weakness. As can be seen in the press releases (ACGB 34/125/4/EMIGRANTS; ACGB/34/125/4/SIR) of the last two plays, *Emigrants* and *Sir Is Winning* (both 1978) the only sign of continuity is the presence of Eddy Heron as Designer and Lighting Technician. There is a complete turnover of actors: only one, Jim Findley, is credited with working in *Our Own People*, but, since his name does not appear in the original cast (Edgar 1997, 3) it can be inferred that he was an understudy. Two other actors in *Emigrants* are said to have worked before with Pirate Jenny, Brian Looney and Kevin Whately, in *Breaker’s Yard* (1976) and *Whistling at Milestones* respectively. Apart from them, many of the other actors and actresses have quite impressive CVs,¹⁸¹ but it is evident that relying on theatrical journeymen was not conducive to building the community spirit that allowed other companies to go through thick and thin. Not to mention, of course, the costs of employing first-class professionals such as David Edgar and *Emigrants*’ director Pam Brighton. Summing up, Pirate Jenny fell victim of too high ambitions and poor administrative sense. All alternative companies had to face administrative and financial difficulties, but, as we have seen with CAST a strong artistic leadership was essential to guarantee survival.

The main published contributions this chapter is based upon are Itzin’s *Stages in the Revolution*, Bull’s *New British Political Dramatists*, Megson’s *Modern British Playwrights: the 1970s*, Reinelt’s *The Political Theatre of David Edgar*. Apart from these, Swain’s *David Edgar Playwright and Politician* can be singled out for the completeness of information of Edgar’s work up to 1986, including ample synopses and quotations from his unpublished work. As regards the single works, *Dick Deterred* is accorded some attention in Bull and Swain’s

¹⁸¹ For instance, Veronica Quilligan is credited with experiences with The Royal Court, The National Theatre and The Royal Shakespeare Company. Even if it is not stated in *Emigrants* press release, in 1977 she appeared in a feature film, *Candlehoe*, starring David Niven.

books, and hardly mentioned otherwise. My analysis has pointed at the skilful juxtaposition of the play with Shakespeare's *Richard III* while stressing the possible political implications – marking a significant shift with Bull's view –also by comparing it with Brenton's *The Churchill Play*. Some substantial space has been devoted to *Destiny* in all the above studies; my aim has been to stress the potentiality of the text in the passage to the stage: the TV production of *Destiny*¹⁸² has been of some help, also in solving some translation difficulties. *Our Own People* is briefly examined in *Stages in the Revolution*, and more extensively in *David Edgar Playwright and Politician*; my contribution has to be considered an original one. A brief outline of the life of Pirate Jenny can be found in *British Theatre Companies 1965-1979* edited by Chris Megson; my study has been based upon the original documents in the ACGB archive. Much of the considerations about Edgar's theatrical concept come from a re-working of his own *The Second Time as Farce*.

¹⁸² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtXFfzI9qZ0&list=PLmRu2axUu2LGteVt8bkxgrUrtt-5kotxy&index=6&t=0s>

Chapter 3: Caryl Churchill

In the foreword to the *British Alternative Theatre Directory 1982*, titled “Breaking and Entering”, the playwright and director Michelene Wandor tells the story of a girl who decides to earn her living working in the theatre:

She had been exhilarated by Joan Littlewood’s Theatre Workshop at Stratford East, she had strained eyes and ears to listen to the beauty of Shakespeare from the top gallery of the Old Vic, she had watched Wesker, admired Arden, enjoyed Jellicoe and delighted in Delaney. Now, she decided, the theatre was the place for her. She spent a long quiet evening trying to decide what to do: actress? Writer? Director? Finally, she gave up: drank her Ovaltine and made for the Land of Nod. (Wandor 1982, 5)

The *Directory* was published in 1982, but the mentioned authors show that the girl came to be acquainted with theatre in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and was about the same age as Wandor, born in 1940. Arden and Wesker were unavoidable names for the period. As for Ann Jellicoe (1927-2017) and Shelagh Delaney (1938-2011), they were the most remarkable female presences in the so-called Angry Young Men generation; the former won critical appraisal with her *The Sport of my Mad Mother* (1956); the latter achieved both commercial and critical success while still in her teens with *A Taste of Honey* (1958). Joan Littlewood, being born in 1914, belonged to an older generation and was already an influential figure in the late 1950s, especially for her patronage of new writers at her Theatre Royal, Stratford, which, with more limited means, established itself as a competitor to the Royal Court in the production of new writing. According to Russel Taylor, a fortnight after the premiere of *Look Back in Anger* “a new play by a new dramatist was produced at the Theatre Royal, Stratford, which was to create almost as much stir as John Osborne’s: *The Quare Fellow*, by Brendan Behan”. (Russel Taylor 1963, 100) It is worth pointing out that Littlewood was also instrumental in starting Delaney’s career. (Ibid., 112-113) After this introduction, the tale goes on in a fairy-tale form reminiscent of Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*:

In the early blue hours of morning she was awakened by a figure. It wore a flowing white gown, and before its face it held two masks, one smiling, the other frowning. [...] “Follow me” it said, “and I will show you your future”. “This seems very unusual, but what the hell. What’s your name?” “I need no labels, not of sex, race or class” said the figure “I am the Muse”. (Wandor 1982, 5)

The Muse encourages the girl to take on a ‘feminine’ job in theatre, such as administrative clerk or designer; even the career of actress is offered her, but she shows to have already discarded this seemingly appealing option after careful consideration:

“I could” she said “but I’d be out of work far more than my actor friends, and I’d earn less. Besides the competition is fearful”. [...] “Great plays simply have very few women in them” “Is that because they’re all about men?” she asked. “You have a lot to learn” said the Muse. “They are about Great Issues, and about people”. (Ibid.)

The Muse shows then two groups of actors in rehearsal, one directed by a male director and the other by a female one, pointing out the superiority of the former:

Now look at him. Strong, yet sensitive; passionate, yet creative; intelligent, yet in touch with the concerns of the common man. One of our foremost directors. Now look at her. No authority. Loses her temper. Very difficult to work with. She won't make it, I'm afraid. Hasn't got the stamina. (Ibid., 6)

After these encounters, the girl makes clear that she has made up her mind and decidedly states: "I shall write plays". (Ibid., 7) Naturally, the Muse feels an obligation to warn her of the problems a woman playwright necessarily meets:

Look, let me give you some advice. If you want to write a play make sure it has lots of action. We all know that women are the passive sex, so a play with action must be a play about men. If you have too many women characters who talk to each other a lot, you'll find that they simply don't develop. Also, don't make jokes about men; it's not in good taste. I think your best bet is to write a play about the anguished middle-class individual – male, of course. If you insist on being obstinate and writing about women, make sure they're sexy, perhaps take their clothes off, and then you might stand a chance. Of course, it would be easier for you to write about women if you were a man. They have more experience than women. (Ibid.)

Finally, the girl grabs the Muse's masks and finds behind them "the perfectly nice, friendly face of a man". (Ibid.) So, after discovering that the Muse has a gender, the girl decides to go her own way, ignoring his suggestions: "After all, I shall simply do what you've been doing for centuries: trying, where possible, to work with members of my own sex. That's the only way to even things out a bit, wouldn't you agree?". (Ibid., 9) The alarm clock rings and put an end to the dream. The girl wakes up and sits down at her typewriter, having decided to follow her call to playwrighting.

Wandor highlights in an amusing way all the difficulties a woman playwright had to face to muscle through the male-dominated theatre environment. It is not as if it was impossible for a woman to be successful as a playwright, as Jellicoe and Delaney had proved, but the amount of prejudices a female aspirant dramatist or director had to confront was discouraging, and anyway detrimental to her creativity. In the Introduction to the same *Directory*, titled "Shakespeare's Sister", Catherine Itzin tackles the same issues in a more down-to-earth form, providing facts and figures:

The **British Alternative Theatre Directory** for 1982 lists 71 women playwrights, 40 women theatre directors, 27 women theatre designers. Of the 101 new entries this year to the listings of alternative theatre companies, 11 are women's companies and two are men's companies promoting feminist ideas. There are 16 companies devoted entirely to women's and/or feminist work. (in 1973 there were none: in 1976 there were two: in 1979, 3). [...] Now there are more women working in the theatre than ever before in its history. Not just in the traditional servicing (administrative) roles, or the sex-stereotyped/ sex-object (actress) roles. But as writers, designers, directors, technicians, artistic directors (occasionally). It is a major achievement. And yet, the **BATD** 1982 lists 365 male playwrights, 209 male directors, and 67 male designers. (Itzin 1982, 15)

These data referred to the alternative or fringe theatre, to which the *Directory* was devoted. Fringe apart, Itzin remarks that until 1980 “the National Theatre had not produced a single play by a woman either living or dead” and since then had produced only three, including Olwen Wymark’s *One Woman Plays*, an adaptation of three short pieces by Franca Rame and Dario Fo. The situation was not better in commercial theatre, since “of the 42 shows running in the West End in one week in February 1982, only five were written, and none directed, by women. (Ibid., 17) After polemically referring to David Edgar (Ibid.), Itzin recounts the tragic story of the imaginary Shakespeare’s sister, as told by Virginia Woolf – running away from home to go to London, trying unsuccessfully to work in the theatre, getting pregnant, and finally committing suicide – making a comparison with women’s condition in contemporary times: “The conditions under which women live and try to work today are often different in degrees, and in certain areas (e.g. among working class woman [sic]) not even all that much different. We are still oppressed”. (Ibid. 19) To prove this point, Itzin presents the case of Buzz Goodbody, a director at the Royal Shakespeare Company, who committed suicide in 1975. The motives of Goodbody’s suicide have never been conclusively ascertained: Itzin connects it to the strain of working in an all-male environment, and quotes another critic, Colin Chambers, who studied the Royal Shakespeare Company in his *Other Spaces* (1980):

As a director with the Royal Shakespeare Company, Buzz Goodbody felt the disadvantage of being a woman in an overwhelmingly male company run, however sympathetically, by men. The Royal Shakespeare Company was used to women in front of audiences or typewriters, taking voice or dancing classes, casting or planning, making wigs, hats and costumes, but on the rehearsal floor it was a different matter. Buzz Goodbody blamed herself when things went wrong, and felt that if she were successful they would say “what a good director” but if a failure “the woman can’t do it”. (Chambers 1980, 21)

Itzin also points out that, theatrical environment apart, women had to deal with the pressures put on them by society in general, especially as regards their role as mothers, and this affected women playwrights’ activity, too:

So all women are concerned, directly or indirectly, with the demands of bearing and rearing children – with social attitudes and social provision for it. [...] Thus ‘motherhood’ determines whether women can work, and when. Michelene Wandor recently made a plea for attention to be paid to women who begin their creative work in middle-age, after their children have ‘grown up’. Certainly four of our most successful women playwrights – Pam Gems, Caryl Churchill, Olwen Wymark and Michelen Wandor herself – have been in precisely this position. (Itzin 1982, 21)

Itzin ends her introduction presenting the forthcoming festival Women Live, due for May 1982, “a celebration [...] featuring work by women, about women produced and performed by women in all areas of the media. Simply, women are taking charge of making themselves visible”. (Ibid.) This was the general situation of women in theatre in the early 1980s: they had gone a long way, but they were still, so to speak, in midstream. Caryl Churchill experienced all the above prejudices

and difficulties in her early career, including motherhood, even if childbearing did not prevent her completely from working: during the 1960s, when she had three children and a number of miscarriages (Itzin 1980, 282), she succeeded in writing for the radio, thanks partly to the good contacts Peggy Ramsey, her agent, had inside the BBC. (Luckhurst 2015, 14) Yet the watershed of her career came in 1972 when she and her husband decided not to have any more children, showing how much one woman's career depended on family arrangements. Churchill made no secret that her husband underwent a vasectomy in order to implement this plan, as this is mentioned both by Itzin (Itzin 1980, 279) and Luckhurst (Luckhurst 2015, 15): for such an intimate detail to be openly discussed shows how much the “personal is political” slogan was put into practice by Churchill not just in her work but also in her private life.

Churchill was born in 1938, the only child in a middle class but unconventional family: her father Robert was a political cartoonist and her mother Jan a fashion model and actress. Both parents have influenced Churchill's vision of life: her mother with the example of a woman harmonizing family and professional life, and her father with his creative work that had much in common with theatre, as Churchill remarked: “Cartoons are really so much like plays. A picture with somebody saying something”. (Quoted in Luckhurst 2015, 8)¹⁸³ According to Lina Fitzsimmons' *File on Churchill*, her first produced play was *Downstairs*, staged in 1958 by a students' company. (Fitzsimmons 1989: 12) After her amateur stage debut, as early as 1960, Churchill published in the *Twentieth Century Magazine* a polemical essay “Not Ordinary not Safe”, in which she assessed the state of British theatre at the beginning of the 1960s. Churchill took on the two supposedly innovative streaks in contemporary theatre, so-called absurdism and “kitchen-sink” drama. As for the former, Churchill stressed its lack of social significance, as synthesized by Luckhurst: “Churchill argues that Beckett and Ionesco present unhelpful dystopias”. (Luckhurst 2015, 11) As for the latter, her attacks were especially aimed at John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, whose lack of theatrical and social innovative power she effectively addressed:

When *Look Back in Anger* came out it was exciting, but already the working-class intellectual cracking at his wife's caricatured Daddy is a stock-character. We know the English are still snobbish about accents, we're not happy about the British Empire, suburban life is often dull and many middle-aged men are unfulfilled. We can't communicate with each other, have a lot of illusions and we don't know what if anything life is about. All right. Where do we go from here? (Churchill 1960, 445)

What annoyed Churchill, according to Mary Luckhurst, was the main character, Jimmy Porter, and particularly that “the misogyny of Porter's psychological and physical abuse of his wife goes unquestioned – indeed it is even celebrated as a legitimate vehicle for his political frustration”. (Luckhurst 2015,12) It was a bold standpoint on Churchill's part in years in which Porter's attitude to women was

¹⁸³ Churchill's father's work may have also influenced Churchill political choices since, as she recounted: “I grew up with the cartoons of the war – of Goebbels and Mussolini. (Quoted in Luckhurst 2014, 8)

overlooked and the ground-breaking quality, both political and theatrical, of *Look Back in Anger* universally accepted, as proved by Russel Taylor's introduction – not to mention the title – to his *Anger and After*, “a guide to the new British drama” up to 1962:

The whole picture of writing in this country has undergone a transformation in the last six years or so, and the event which marks ‘then’ off decisively from ‘now’ is the first performance of *Look Back in Anger* on 8 May 1956. (Russel Taylor 1963, 11)

Churchill showed a remarkable polemical clout in challenging the common view that *Look Back in Anger* had been a turning point in British theatrical and social life; she added to her argumentation a highly expressive metaphor of what a playwright should do to promote theatrical and social change, arguing that Porter's aimless anger had no political significance:

It's as if the playwright has a special prefabricated view of the world which he doesn't like so he goes round picking out loose stones with his penknife and writing rude words on the wall, instead of pulling the wall down, designing a better building – not designing a new society but finding a better, broader way of looking. This doesn't mean facile optimism – if we don't like society or life let's write lashing satires or despairing tragedies, but not this everlasting flat depression. (Churchill 1960, 445)

The search for new subjects, new forms and new questions would be Churchill's guiding line all along her career. In an article published by *The Guardian* on 29 June 2015 with the title “Caryl Churchill: the playwright's finest hour” playwright Moira Buffini summarized Churchill's journey through different theatrical styles up to the present:

Churchill, who in the 70s and 80s was the daughter of Brecht, has become the daughter of Beckett. Her writing is distilled to its very essence. She has the epic sweep of the former: the alienation (your emotions never manipulated); the bare bones of the theatre constantly visible. And she has the distillation, the humour of the latter: the human condition writhing on a pin.¹⁸⁴ (Buffini 2015)

This is an interesting view, even if somehow reductive as it singles out Beckett as a late influence on Churchill's production, while, as we will see, his impact was felt from the very start of Churchill's playwriting, especially for the radio. The three plays I focus on are *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* (1971), *Vinegar Tom* (1976) and *The After- Dinner Joke* (1977). *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen* will be examined as an early presentation of environmental issues in a dystopian perspective, that will be at the core in Churchill's later works; it also offers glimpses of Churchill's experimentalism with language that will be developed in the 1990s. *Vinegar Tom* is the first overtly feminist of Churchill's plays, having been written for and in collaboration with a women's company, Monstrous Regiment. *The After- Dinner Joke* is Churchill's only comic work; it questions the social and political roles of charities, while also offering an incisive criticism of the inner working of

¹⁸⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/29/caryl-churchill-the-playwrights-finest-hours>
last accessed 01/10/2018.

capitalism based upon an original re-reading of Bertolt Brecht through Pythonesque lenses.

3.1 Far from the Madding Crowd

As stated above, in the 1960s, while Great Britain and the world at large seemed on the brink of dramatic changes, Churchill was at home, raising her children and writing for the radio. In later years Churchill expressed her regret for having missed out on the direct experience of what was going on in British public life in those years: “I didn’t really feel a part of what was happening in the sixties. During that time I felt isolated. I had small children and was having miscarriages. It was an extremely solitary life”. (quoted in Itzin 1980, 279) Yet it was not wasted time, as writing for radio was not just a welcome means of escape from this secluded life, but also provided Churchill with the possibility of experimenting with this medium and with playwrighting in general, as she remarked: “Radio is good because it makes you precise. Then there’s the freedom – you can do almost anything in a radio play, whereas you’re tied to the possibilities of the set and the stage in the theatre”. (quoted in Fitzsimmons 1989: 85) In her radio dramas of that period, Churchill gave voice to a pessimism that recalled the hopeless vision of absurdism: “I focused on the awfulness of everything, rather than on the possibilities of change”. (Ibid.) Churchill’s attitude was in sharp contrast with her above-mentioned negative judgement about Ionesco and Beckett. As for the latter, what Buffini had branded as Churchill’s latest way of expression, that is a Beckett-like conciseness, according to Churchill was present also at that early stage of her playwrighting:

I... reached the point of finding it hard to make people speak to each other – there would simply be monologues delivered, say, by one twin and then the other. I felt this... Beckett thing happening:... I was going to finish up with a play that was two words and a long silence. Then things began to get better. These plays weren’t necessarily depressing: some were fairly funny, but they had to do in some way with difficulties of being”. (quoted in Fitzsimmons 1989, 85-86)

As Churchill stated, these radio plays, even if they have funny moments, mostly deal with people in great distress. In *Ants* (1962) a child is convinced by his grandmother to destroy a colony of ants he has grown fond of: their destruction is presented as a metaphor of nuclear holocaust. (Darren Gobert 2014, 38) *Lovesick* (1966) is about a psychiatrist who tries unsuccessfully to conquer the woman he loves by using his psychiatric skills, against the background of other complicated personal relationships, including an incestuous affair between mother and son. (Churchill 1993, 22-36) In *Identical Twins* (1968) Clive and Teddy, the twins of the title, find it impossible to distinguish between each other, until the former commits suicide and the latter takes over his farm and his family. (Darren Gobert 2014, 83) *Abortive*, broadcast by BBC 3 on 4 February 1971, is particularly interesting as the

confrontation at the centre of the play is not limited to the private sphere, but is seen on the backdrop of class differences, and it marks a step towards Churchill's more mature works. The initial situation is described concisely: *Roz and Colin are in bed. Silence. Colin sighs heavily.* (Churchill 1993, 23) All there is to know will become clear during their conversation: the two in bed, Colin and Roz, are a married couple with children, they are quite well-off – different *au-pairs* are mentioned – and they are trying to get over the wife having terminated a pregnancy which originated in a sexual encounter that started as rape but then became something else, as Roz is perhaps too eager to underline: “It started as rape. I might as well have lied to you about it. There was no need to tell you how it ended”.¹⁸⁵ The dialogue between the two is almost naturalistic if not for some moments in which it becomes incommunicative in an almost absurdist way, as in the following example in which Roz and Colin discuss Billy, the alleged rapist and father of the unborn child:

Colin: He distinctly told me the first night at the station that his father was black.

Roz: He never saw him so he wouldn't know.

Colin: His father used to visit them sometimes. [...] He used to beat Billy up. You remember the story about when he was thrown out of the window. You've told it yourself at dinner.

Roz: I thought that was the Irishman. His so-called stepfather.

Colin: No, it was his father. He used to come and see them when he was drunk.

Roz: I thought he was blind, Paddy.

Colin: How could a blind man throw him out of the window?

Roz: Paddy certainly used to beat him up.

Colin: Perhaps he was only blind in one eye. (Ibid., 25)

The drama is mostly about Colin's jealousy for the ambiguity of the situation that took to the pregnancy, while Roz does not seem interested in dissipating his doubts. During the dialogue, it becomes increasingly clear that, personal feelings apart, there is a social issue at stake. Billy is a dropout whom the couple hired as handyman out of pity and then threw out after the misdeed. There is some morbidity in the way the two characters relish the details of Billy's disposal:

Roz: What I shudder to think of is the night he came here, soon after we'd finally got him out of the house. How can a grown man cry so much? What did he expect us to believe? That he'd really come to love us so much he couldn't bear to leave us? [...] So he finally made you pull him by the feet. I can see him now, on his stomach clutching at everything he passed, at my ankles, but I kicked him off. [...] Out of the front door at last, down the steps with a horrible bump. [...]

¹⁸⁵ There is no need to stress that in this play the issue of consent in a sexual relationship is touched upon in a way that would be unacceptable today.

Colin: You know when he came to see me in the office? We had a bit of a skirmish [...]. By the time they [the police] came he was unconscious. They had to carry him off. I'll have to appear at his trial and give evidence.

Roz: You weren't hurt?

Colin: Hardly at all. (Churchill 1993: 35-36)

Much as the absent Billy may be a despicable character – but it becomes less and less likely that he may have carried out a rape – he appears the victim of a class system in which, for instance, of the two parties involved in a fight, the one knocked down is arrested while the unscathed one is just asked to appear in court as a witness. Eventually, Roz and Colin find a conciliation of sort, though it seems more the closing of ranks of the upper class against an outsider than the overcoming of a personal grief. Roz is left in a limbo in which she cannot sort out her feelings to Billy and the unborn child:

I never dream of Billy or the child. I sometimes think though, one of my children was so small, only an inch or so, stupid, the mental age of eight week from conception, what kind of mind is that? Even less of a person than Billy. (Ibid., 36)

The trauma of abortion, social discrimination and personal resentment form an indistinguishable maze in Roz's confused mind. At the end of the play all the questions about the relationship between the two characters remain unanswered and their future uncertain. This intertangling of familiar and social tensions will provide the basis of Churchill's next radio drama, *Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen*, aired by BBC two months later, one of the last plays produced by Churchill for this means.

Not Not Not Not Not Enough Oxygen (from here on *NEO*) was broadcast by BBC Radio 3 on 31 March 1971. In contrast to *Abortive*, in *NEO* both the characters and the set are described in detail. Since Churchill's first professionally staged play, *Owners*, would be premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company in the following year, on 6 December 1972, this attention to visual aspects can be considered a sign of Churchill's increasing interest in writing for the stage.¹⁸⁶ In *NEO* the time of the action is 2010. The characters are three. Mick is sixty years old and "has dressed carefully in his best clothes. [He] was young in the seventies. [...] Perhaps he liked the bright colours of his youth, now old-fashioned." (Churchill 1993, 38) Viviane is thirty, but "her face looks older, very pale and ill". (Ibid.) Claude is nineteen and "beautiful. His clothes are expensive but crumbled and dusty". (Ibid.) Also the set is thoroughly described:

The place is Mick's one room in a tower block. It is small, brightly painted and very cluttered. Bed, table, chairs, etc, including one large old-fashioned armchair; TV; books; music; games; puzzles; large jigsaw unfinished on the table; jug of water and

¹⁸⁶ The most celebrated staging of *NEO* was at the Royal Court in 2002 in a treble bill with *Identical Twins* and *This is a Chair* (1997). Famously in this production, directed by Ian Rickson, the windows of the theatre were opened to let in the noise and the smell of London's traffic. See <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2002/oct/03/theatre.artsfeatures> last accessed 12/09/2018.

glasses; intercom by the door for speaking to the front door downstairs; one window, shut, looking out to foggy sky. (Ibid.)

A noteworthy detail is that Mick's flat is in a tower block, as opposed to any other building. Since the 1950s, tower blocks had become a component of the British urban landscape, especially in the less affluent parts of towns. Buildings extending in height seemed the obvious solution to housing problems due to war destructions but also to the existence of unhealthy and overpopulated slums in pre-war Great Britain. Unfortunately, the tower blocks, mostly council-owned, in a few years would show signs of decay, caused by poor-quality building material and lack of maintenance work; they were also blamed for the increase in crime rate in working-class neighbourhoods, both for having severed long-standing ties among families in the traditional terraced houses and for their architectural structure, whose common spaces – the classical railings, or “streets in the sky” – facilitated the formation of gangs more than promoting friendly relationships among neighbours.¹⁸⁷ In brief, they became a symbol of bad urbanism and short-sighted social planning. From the initial lines spoken by Vivian we get a glimpse of how life goes on in 2010 in one of these tower blocks:

Shall I tell you what what I bought today. Not enough enough oxygen in this block, why always headache. Spoke caretaker, caretaker says speak manager, manager says local authority local authority won't give us won't give us the money. Said I said what's the no point giving us faster – all be dead corpses in the faster lifts if there's not not not not not not not enough oxygen. (Ibid.,39)

The listener is soon in *medias res* and is informed that oxygen has become a commodity that has to be bought: it is but the first shocking revelation of the play. Vivian's speech is fragmented and syncopated, and, while at the start this could be attributed to her being short of breath for having run or walked quickly, her utterances will remain the same throughout the play. This way of speaking is instrumental in communicating a sense of anxiety; furthermore, it seems to be synthetic, since it cuts out articles and personal pronouns, but at a closer look shows it is uneconomical for the continuous repetitions and the overlapping of different expressions, as in the last phrase of Vivian's speech, which could be more efficiently said: “What's the point of giving us faster lifts as we will all be dead corpses if there's not enough oxygen”.

Initially Mick only responds to Vivian, saying that he is waiting for his son, also expressing his worry that the latter could be late. When Mick speaks at length, he is calm and articulate, and we get to know that his son is a popstar from whom he expects some financial help to escape life in the tower block; an absent mother is also mentioned: “Claude will see his poor old dad knows how to live. He can give

¹⁸⁷ For the debate on social aspects of the tower blocks see <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/architecture-the-rise-fall-and-rise-of-the-tower-block-peter-dormer-explains-why-multi-storey-homes-1395911.html> last accessed 28/08/2018. As an example of how much housing was felt as an important issue in the UK in the 1970s, it is interesting to consider the 1972 song *Get 'em out by Friday* by the rock group Genesis, contained in the album *Foxtrot*. See <https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/genesis/getemoutbyfriday.html> last accessed 28/08/2018.

me all the money he likes and be sure I'll make good use of it. Not like his mother, who won't take a pound from him". (Ibid., 40) Vivian lives in the same tower block with her husband, whom she cannot leave because Mick does not want to share his little room – even if rooms are all the same size – with her. Vivian seems really in love with Mick, but it is noticeable that the possibilities offered by Claude's money play a certain role:

But you know I feel nothing nothing I feel nothing for him only you. Mick, I shall stay I shall stay with you because I want to get out of the Londons¹⁸⁸ and not live in a tower tower block and you would have enough room you would you would have enough room for me there. And though you're in the middle late late middle age I shall I shall I shall stay with you though I'm still young and look look younger than I am if you want if if you want me if you want me. (Ibid., 41-42)

Actually, Mick and Vivian do not have in mind some extreme luxury, but just wish to buy a cottage in the so-called park, where some grass is still to be found, the air is less polluted, and life seems altogether more bearable. Yet, the park is not a bucolic paradise, as Vivian remarks:

My sister told me she went went went went to, four days four days days days to get and the crowd was the crowd was the crowd was just like home. [...] The grass in the park the grass can only be seen over the over the over the heads heads of the crowd and fenced off so you can see see some because of course where the crowd walks where the crowd walks it's just mud. (Ibid. 39-40)

The pair try to peer from the window at the traffic in the street to see Claude's car, but the air is so polluted that street level is hardly visible. Surprisingly, Vivian spots a bird, maybe a sparrow, which sparks a brief discussion about when birds ceased to be a common sight. When they distinguish a fire in the distance, Vivian and Mick talk about the fanatics who commit suicide by setting fire to themselves, sometimes involving, perhaps unwillingly, other people. Mick mentions that an action of this type could be planned for the same day: "Those fanatics said they'd do something or other today. Did you see on the news?". (Ibid., 43)

Finally, Claude arrives: he comes in walking unsteadily and nearly faints, but soon recovers after drinking some water. After some small talk in which we are informed that Claude came on foot, Mick tells his son, trying not to sound whiny, that his life is wanting in comforts:

I make the best of what I can get. The little room is hard to bear because of course I remember the old days when people had more than one room. I don't get out of course. But I change the colour scheme from time to time. It's not a bad block. Large television. Lots of music. We complain about the air but the plumbing works. We've no sewage problem. There's no water of course but that's the same anywhere. (Ibid., 47)

¹⁸⁸ This is the name London is referred to in 2010, possibly suggesting a conglomeration of different cities.

Claude is unimpressed or uninterested and lets the matter drop. Instead he asks his father if he has been in touch with his mother, and gives him the latest news about her:

She's gone off, hasn't she? Gave up all her things. Not that she had much, she was never – Tried to give her – when I first earned – but she wouldn't. February she wrote me she'd formally relinquished her room, burnt her cards, just gone. So many do. (Ibid., 47)

Vivian reacts with the kind of horror a respectable, tabloid-reading citizen holds for deviants: “Not many in the normal way only fanatics. [...] It's a madness they say sweeping the country sweeping all the countries they say”. (Ibid., 47-48) Mick is much more sympathetic with his former wife:

I never did understand your mother. She was always sad about one thing or another. I used to turn the news off, it upset her so much. Twenty years ago. The news is very much worse now and it must have turned her mind, poor woman. (Ibid., 48)

The point of crisis is reached when Claude makes it clear that he is penniless for having given away all his large patrimony the same day: “Did it this morning. Got rid of all my things and sent the telegram I was coming to see you”. (Ibid., 50) This is the end of Mick's dream of a better life, and he reacts indignantly:

You didn't think? You didn't think of me? Of course you did. Your father sitting here in his little box? [...] How dare you give five million pounds away to strangers? [...] When I was young we had more sense. [...] Do you think no one was starving then? In the sixties, seventies, eighties? Do you think there weren't any wars when I was a young man? You're not the first person to see horrors. We learnt to watch them without feeling a thing. We could see pictures of starving children and still eat our dinner while we watched. That's what we need to survive. (Ibid., 51)

Vivian starts panicking, fearing that Claude, being to all appearances a fanatic, may have come to kill them, but he reassures them, in his dreamy, almost apathetic way, that he has come only to say goodbye to his father before going away for good:

Not going to kill anyone else. Just came to see my father. Thought he'd be glad afterwards that he saw me once more first. Not happening till this evening so there's been the day to fill with last things. You've nothing to be frightened of. (Ibid., 53)

Everything points at Claude intending to commit suicide as a part of a larger demonstrative action (“Not happening till this evening”) as that previously mentioned by Vivian: “[I] saw last night on the news a hundred hundred in a burning block some singing singing and some screaming and today today they say there are more more something going to happen”. (Ibid. 50) Claude finally leaves and Mick and Viviane are left to put together the pieces of their broken dream. Their final exchange is a poignant promise of mutual help, if not true love:

Vivian: Though the park the park is mostly rows of cottages mud a little little grass if you like we could go this spring this spring we could go this spring to see see to see the grass and flowers flowers in the park.

Mick: I'm too old.

Vivian: No no not too not too old because I would come too I would come and it would be an adventure to go together and enjoy enjoy ourselves in the park.

Mick: You'd better move your things into this room.

Vivian: Yes I will I will and I'll get some new puzzles new harder harder puzzles for you [...]. We can do that we can do that tonight and listen to music. We'll see news news of Claude on telly we'll see news of Claude.

Mick: Yes I think his death might get a mention. Switch it on. (Ibid., 55)

Vivian and Mick's mild interest in Claude's possible death provides a chilling, yet appropriate, ending to a play in which indifference and cynicism are presented as the only key to survival for the average human being, not particularly gifted nor generous nor rich. By contrast, idealists, or fanatics, who cannot stand this state of things, have two options in front of them. Some of them choose a form of self-sacrifice, reminiscent of Buddhist monks' suicides by fire during the Vietnam war,¹⁸⁹ and this is probably what Claude is going to do. Others give up a 'normal' life, leave so-called 'civilization' and are destined to starve to death in the nondescript wilderness that surrounds the cities. This is the fate that expects probably Claude's mother. When Mick recounts his last encounter with her, initially he has a mocking attitude to her choice: "[S]he's gone off to die in a jungle gnawing a leaf or some nonsense". (Ibid., 51) But then there is more than a trace of respect and tenderness in his telling:

She came at night. I was frightened when I heard the bell but I let her in. Do you know what she said? "Come and let us end our lives together". I was always fond of her. I said she could move back in here with me but she wouldn't do it. She would be off. She looked older than me. She said, "Let me listen to some music and have a really good drink of water because I won't be able just to turn on music and water any more". I turned on some music and gave her water with ice in it. "I could almost stay" she said. Then she got up and out she went without a word. (Ibid. 51-2)

Another story told by the characters through their conversation is that of Alexander, Mick's son from his first marriage, who followed his mother when she re-married to a rich man. When Mick talks about him, he remarks that Alexander was too sensitive: "He was always too full of ideals". (Ibid., 48) Alexander has studied to become a doctor and his wife is a doctor, too. In their talking, Mick and Claude provide important preliminary information: if a woman gets pregnant in the Londons, she is forced to abort unless she buys a very expensive licence or wins it in a lottery. Even if Alexander's family was rich enough to buy a licence, he and his wife decided, on ethic ground, to go for the lottery. Not having won, they resolved to have the baby and go to Africa to avoid regulations. It seems a high moral choice – even if the possibility of travelling depended on having money – but the story has a disconcerting finale. After child-birth, as Claude recounts: "They killed it. They changed their minds. It cleared their conscience. It wasn't a licenced child". (Ibid.) To Vivian's question if they were sentenced to jail for this, Claude

¹⁸⁹ In Itzin's *Stages of the Revolution*, Churchill said that NEO had "sort of to do with the Vietnam protests at the time". (Itzin 1980, 281)

answers: “Five years for evading abortion but suspended since the child was dead [...] Gone as doctors to one of the epidemic areas now no more to hear of them”. In summary: Alexander and his wife refused to take advantage of their money, disobeyed what they thought was an unjust law, but afterwards they acknowledged that, in limiting overpopulation, it was somehow justified, or simply decided that they did not want to spend the rest of their life on the run, and belatedly obeyed it; finally, they felt the guilt of what they had done and atoned by facing sure death while helping other people. It is a complete reversal of Antigone’s myth, and a moral maze with no way out. The very idea that infanticide could be considered an extenuating circumstance of the crime of evading abortion gives an idea of how mind-boggling the legislation and the public concept of right and wrong are in the Londons. For once, the only truthful words are spoken by law-abiding, simple-minded Vivian:

Babies are always always pretty and make you want one if you see if you see a baby I want one but they shouldn’t evade I’ve never dared never dared evade the regulations. But if I did if I did have if I did one have a baby I couldn’t kill it more than kill myself I couldn’t kill. (Ibid.)

The theme of fertility and motherhood is central in *NEO*, and it is difficult not to connect it to Churchill’s personal experience in those years. Claude’s mother is the real absent hero of the drama, since, after constantly rejecting the possibility of getting a better life by her son’s money, her refusal of an inhuman way of living does not involve violence to others or herself. She makes a striking contrast with another mother mentioned in passing in the conversation between Claude and Mick, that is Alexander’s mother, Mick’s nameless first wife. Claude has sometimes met her in his journeys as a popstar and describes her and her stance in few lines: “Very striking still from a distance. Armed guard always of course because stones are thrown. But laughing it off”. Interestingly, even if stone-throwing is evidence of some hostility towards the privileged few, politics are never mentioned in the play, and the only form of organized opposition is co-ordinated self-sacrifices. It looks as though a certain amount of social welfare is still in force, as attested by Mick when he tries to convince his former wife to stay with him: “There’s rations of food and water for each room. We can stay alive if we stay in the blocks”. (Ibid., 51) Therefore basic needs are guaranteed, but life quality is so low that for some, or many, life is simply not worth living. I would not go as far as to suggest that *NEO* is a criticism of social democracy: its central thesis is that environmental disaster and moral chaos are mutually dependant, regardless of political regime. It was quite a prophetic view in years in which an environmentalist consciousness was still at an embryonic state in the UK and all over the world. Environmentalism, as we will see, will be one of the issues touched upon in Churchill’s *The After-Dinner Joke* (1978), in which the political roots of so-called natural disasters in developing countries are exposed in a satirical, albeit realistic, way. The association of environmentalism and dystopia, suggested in *NEO*, will be more fully explored in two of Churchill’s later plays, *Far Away* (2000) and *Escaped Alone* (2016).

Far Away was first performed at the Royal Court on 24 November 2000 under the direction of Stephen Daldry. The play has three characters and is divided into three parts, separated from each other by several years. The first part consists of a dialogue between a child, Joan, and her aunt Harper, who tries to reassure her about strange events she has witnessed, including her uncle, Harper's husband, locking some people in the garden shed and beating some of them up with an iron bar. Aunt Harper convinces the child that it was part of a plan to save those people from worse dangers, and even convinces her to help remove blood stains from the ground. The drama unfolds in the second part: it is set around a workbench at which two characters, Joan, now a young woman, and a young man, Todd, sit and make enormous, colourful hats. At first their exchanges turn mostly around the making of hats in an atmosphere of gentle flirtation. Televised trials are mentioned in passing, without elaborating much on them, only as late-night shows with a certain aura of morbid fascination about them; this communicates to the audience the feeling that the characters live in somehow troubled, but not necessarily tragic, times. As their conversation develops, the main topics seem to be the difficulty of getting higher wages, the risk of losing their jobs and the corruptibility of their firm managers: hence, one would be justified in thinking that the main social and political issues at stake are labour's defence and the difficulty of organizing trade unions. It comes as a real shock for the spectator, as for the reader, to realize that the handmade hats are to be worn by death-row prisoners on their way to execution. It is left unsaid whether wearing the hats is part of some ritual, or is just intended as a way of humiliating the prisoners to the last; what is apparent is that the ultimate use of these crafts does not cause the slightest pang of guilt or moral self-questioning to the characters on stage. The third part consists mostly of a dialogue between Harper and Todd – in the intervening time Todd and Joan have got married – while Joan is sleeping; their conversation revolves around a strange world war going on outside Harper's house, in which various species of animals, like cats, crocodiles and deer take side with some human groups against others. ("The cats have come in on the side of the French". Churchill 2008, 153) This sort of free-for-all verges on the surreal, or the paranoid, when natural elements are claimed to take part in the fight ("But I didn't know whose side the river was on, it may help me swim or it may drown me". Ibid., 159) and also physical gravity is supposed to be used for military purpose. ("The Bolivians are working with gravity. That's a secret, as not to spread alarm". Ibid.) In *Far Away* the main character, Joan, moves from childhood to girlhood to womanhood in the three short acts into which the play is divided. In a sort of reversed *Bildungsroman* she goes not so much from innocence to experience as from having ethic principles to completely losing them. What is fascinating, and distressing at the same time, is that *Far Away* portrays the 'banality of evil' at its simplest and purest. The reference to Hannah Arendt's report of Eichmann's trial is not casual, as in this play we see that human beings simply get used to evil, almost without being aware of it. As Mary Luckhurst pointed out: "[t]he actors performed Todd and Joan as classic examples of the banality of evil: as two workers just doing their jobs, which happen to involve the annihilation of other human beings". (Luckhurst 2015: 150) Significantly, Michael Billington has

assigned to this play top position among his five favourite dystopian dramas.¹⁹⁰ In *Far Away* as in *NEO* a link is suggested between moral chaos and environmental disaster, as the whole situation seems to be the consequence of a universe in which the very idea of Good – including common sense and rationality – has totally gone missing: an apocalypse with no religious or supernatural connotations.

Escaped Alone was premiered at the Royal Court in January 2016 under the direction of James Macdonald. There is not much action on stage: four ladies, in their late middle age, sit and chat more or less cheerfully in a garden. Every now and then one of them, Mrs Jarret, leaves the group and directly addresses the audience, assuming a Cassandra-like role and describing a chain of catastrophic events that humankind is due to face, supposedly in a near future. She makes it very clear that the disasters she tells are always caused by or linked to some human activity, even when they involve stones falling from the hill: “Four hundred thousand tons of rocks paid for by the senior executives split off the hillside to smash through the roofs”. (Churchill 2016:8) Mrs Jarret uses the economic and financial jargon to describe and explain the various calamities, thus suggesting a direct connection between them and a deregulated economy: “The wind developed by property developers started as breezes on cheek and soon turned heads inside out”. (Ibid., 28) So, even a flood is described in financial terms, achieving in performance a comic effect: “[L]ifebelts and upturned umbrellas, swimming instructors and lilos, rubber ducks and pumice stone floated on the stock market”.

There is a direct link connecting *NEO*, *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone*. *NEO* is almost realistic in its description of a not too far future in which the problems already visible in the early 1970s¹⁹¹ reach breaking point; *Far Away* is a moral fable in which nature going mad matches and reflects the human chaos; in *Escaped Alone* the immaterial and apparently unstoppable forces of the free-market lead to a grotesque apocalypse that seems to come straight out of Hellzapoppin’. This regression in realism corresponds also to a progressive disappearance of an ethic point of view: in fact, moral questioning is present in *NEO*, is reduced to political means in *Far Away* and disappears in *Escaped Alone*, in which market forces seem to live a life of their own, regardless of human action. Max Stafford-Clark remarked that Churchill had “developed her own response to a political agenda which she has discovered she cannot effectively address any more”. (quoted in Roberts 2008: 146) This comment referred specifically to *Far Away*, but it can apply to all of Churchill’s productions from the mid-1990s onwards. This difficulty in relating to contemporary reality is a fundamental component of Churchill’s journey – back journey, actually – from Brecht to Beckett. Her experimenting with language will

¹⁹⁰See <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/feb/19/top-five-theatrical-dystopias-1984> last accessed 15/09/2018. As a matter of interest, the other plays are *Henceforward...* (1987) by Alan Ayckbourn, the trilogy *The War Plays* (1985) by Edward Bond, *Happy Days* (1960) by Samuel Beckett and *RUR* (1920) by Karel Čapek.

¹⁹¹ “It’s slightly unnerving to read *Not . . . Oxygen* twenty years later. It’s more obviously relevant now than it was then.” (Churchill 1993, n.p.)

be another facet of her continuous search for means of expression that would match an increasingly elusive reality.

3.2 Churchill's Newspeak.

I have already mentioned that in *NEO* Mick and Vivian speak in two different ways: Mick speaks standard English while Vivian speaks a both simplified and repetitive variant, as can be seen by the various examples reported. It could all be down to Vivian's sluggishness, but also Claude's English has some traits in common with her idiolect: "Didn't know how far how far it would be". (Ibid. 46) In the course of the conversation, Claude becomes less repetitive but his expression remains very concise in a sort of careless way: "Be better off with my mother walking about. Still open country some places". (Ibid., 50) Before Claude's arrival, Vivian offered to go away, leaving father and son alone; Mick rejected her offer, adding that her presence could be useful: "You must stay. I haven't seen him for five years. You're still young. You can help us speak to each other". At first this seems a request for inter-generational cultural mediation but during the conversation it becomes plausible that Mick could think he would need a real translation. One would be justified in thinking that there has been an anthropological mutation, and that articulacy has disappeared, or has been discarded, at the same time as birds ceased to live in the Londons. It is suggested in *NEO* that in 2010 clarity of speech, and not accent, has become the main linguistic marker of social differences, and in fact Claude, to all appearances a cultivated boy and an artist, talks in a more accomplished way than Vivian. Since Vivian's rudimentary English does not cause any surprise in the other characters it can be inferred that it does not sound strange being spoken by a large part of the population; in its simplification it seems to mirror her inability to formulate complex thinking and conceive a possibility of change, an inability that, being shared by many others, is imbued with political implications. It is curious, but also disturbing, to note how much this synthetic language sounds like the one used today in texting.

Twenty-two years after *NEO*, the issue of language would be further explored by Churchill in *The Skriker* (1994). In this play the eponymous character is a fairy, connected to English traditional folklore, that can assume many forms and haunts two teenage single mothers of the present time. She speaks in a broken language that Churchill describes like this: "A bit like someone with schizophrenia or a stroke, where the sense is constantly interrupted by the other associations of words". (quoted in Gobert 2015: 20) This is an example of the working of the Skriker's language:

Heard her boast beast a roast beef eater, daughter could spin span spick and spun the lowest form of wheat straw into gold, raw into roar, golden lion and lyonesse under the sea, dungeonesse under the castle for bad mad sad adders and takers away. Never marry a king size well beloved. [...] Eating a plum in the enchanted orchard, cherry orchid, charted orchestra was my undoing my doing my dying my undying love for you. (Churchill 1998, 243-245)

As can be seen, the speech progresses through both phonic and semantic associations, often adding an element of estrangement in the general fairy tale atmosphere (“[F]or bad mad sad adders and takers away. Never marry a king size well beloved”). The Skriker’s often long speeches are apparently incoherent, but a general sense can be detected in the free flow of words, and in fact the two girls, Josie and Lily, succeed in communicating with her:

Skriker: Lovely lively lads and maiden England, succulent suck your living daylight, sweet blood like seawater everywhere, every bite did you good enough as good as a feat.

Josie: And now no one tastes any good?

Skriker: Dry as dustpan. Foul as shitpandemonium. Poison in the food chain saw massacre. (ibid., 271)

The “poison in the food chain” must have strongly resonated in the audience, since in 1994, when *The Skriker* was written and staged, Great Britain was in the midst of the Mad Cow Disease crisis, caused by herbivores being fed with products of animal origin. And so, even if the subject of the conversation is the Skriker’s hunger for human flesh and blood, Churchill reminds the audience of the danger of transgressing natural order. In *The Skriker*, environmental preoccupations are expressed in terms of nostalgia for the ancient times when fairies were feared and respected, and the fairy herself becomes a symbol of trespassed nature: “Now they hate us and hurt hurtle faster and master. They poison me in my rivers of blood poisoning makes my arm swelter”. (Churchill 1998: 246). Even in the generally fantastic atmosphere, the reference to the “rivers of blood” keeps the audience’s attention alert to the poisonous nature of xenophobic politics. Language is bent and transformed, but this experimentalism is never an end in itself, as environmental problems are hinted at, even if cryptically.

A completely different experiment with language is carried out by Churchill in *Blue Heart* (1997). Under this title are included two different plays, *Heart’s Desire* and *Blue Kettle*, born independently but intended to be performed together. *Blue Heart* was premiered by the Out of Joint company under the direction of Max Stafford-Clark at the theatre Royal, Bury St. Edmunds on 14 August 1997. Churchill called it “an anti- play” (quoted in Darren Goberts 2014, 177) in that it puts into question both structure and language of drama. In *Heart’s Desire* the initial situation is quite simple: two parents, Brian and Alice, and an aunt, Maisie, are waiting for the return of the daughter, Suzie, who has been in Australia for fifteen years. In the course of the play, the action keeps resetting to a previous point – it happens twenty-six times – giving different possible developments of the plot. For instance, in one of these possible turns, the daughter is detained by an accident on the tube; in another two gunmen burst in and kill everyone in the room. Sometimes

the reset is signaled by a linguistic stumbling: other times by one unexpected event, such as the killings or the bursting in of a group of children:

Alice: Are you pleased she's coming back?

Brian: What's the matter with you now.

Alice: You don't seem pleased you don't seem pleased.

Reset to after 'coming back'.

Brian: What's the matter with you now.

Alice: You don't seem pleased, you seem cross.

Maisie: The tube's very quick. She'll be here in no time, I'm sure.

A horde of small children rush in, round the room, and out again.

Reset to after 'of course she'll come again'. (Churchill 1997, 14)

Interestingly, some of the phrases are reduced to their minimum terms with a procedure similar to that of *NEO*, without changing the words' morphology but reducing the phrase to its keywords. For instance, in one scene Brian scolds his wife for having refused to go and meet their daughter at the airport:

It's not that you don't have a sense of occasion. You know exactly what an occasion is and you deliberately set out to ruin it. I've thought for forty years you were a stupid woman, now I know you're simply nasty. (Ibid., 31)

In one of the following resets, the phrase is reduced to this: "It's not occasion occasion deliberately ruin it forty years stupid nasty". (Ibid., 32) In *Blue Kettle* the manipulation of language is more daring. The plot is straightforward enough in its development: one guy, Derek, tries to convince separately four elder ladies that he is their biological son, with the intention of gaining some advantage; his girlfriend Enid tries to deter him, to no avail, while his senile mother has no objection to his plan. During his conversations with the four ladies, the language deteriorates and random words are increasingly substituted by "Blue" and "Kettle": "I am getting a horrible kettle from this situation, Derek. I think you need to blue us what's kettle on". (Churchill 1997:66) Even "Blue" and "Kettle" are then increasingly decomposed into their component letters, creating exchanges such as this:

Derek: What blue me the kettle was that I met your son. I did really.

Mrs Plant: My bl? You ket him bl?

Derek: I was bl Indonesia, his ket was John. We got bl and he told me he was adopted bl bl bl trying to find his mother and he'd gone quite a long blue with it. Bl bl died you see.

[...]

Mrs Plant: Ket b tle die of?

Derek: B don't really b, I got sick and he ue a temperature, and k k k b l hospital. (Ibid. 67)

Surprisingly enough, the play enjoyed an unreserved success, both critical and commercial, and was even transferred to New York. Critics stretched their vocabulary and their imagination to describe this strange theatrical creature, and so did the director:

Ben Brantley called its two parts 'self-sabotaging'; Gerard Raymond adjudged that 'each carries the seed of its destruction within it'. Stafford-Clark himself likened *Heart's Desire* to a 'naughty play that doesn't behave' and to a 'frisky pony', and he understood *Blue Kettle* as infected with a 'language virus'. (Gobert 2014, 179)

Charles Isherwood, a *Variety* critic, also argued that linguistic oddities caused "scant loss in power or meaning". (quoted in Gobert 2014, 185) This surely bears witness to the actors' virtuosity and Stafford-Clark's ability in directing them. In a way, *Blue Heart* is a factual, yet paradoxical, demonstration of the subordination of text to performance, since, for instance, the phonemes /k/ and /b/ acquire a sense only in performance, but are anyway pre-existent and fixed in the text as the corresponding graphemes <k> and . (Ibid., 180) The *Guardian* critic Mark Lawson, in his presentation of Churchill's *Here We Go*, stressed that the interpretation of Churchill's later plays was down to directors and performers, quoting director Macdonald: "[C]hurchill, especially in her later work, has, as her regular director James Macdonald puts it, 'almost dispensed with instructions altogether. The director and actors are granted extraordinary freedom'".¹⁹² Extraordinary as this freedom may be, it is not because Churchill has given up on asserting her authorial will in performance. To this end, Churchill built stable working relationships with a restricted number of directors she trusts. In the last twenty years – that is after *Blue Kettle* – Churchill has collaborated almost exclusively with three directors: Stephen Daldry (*Far Away*, 2000; *A Number*, 2002), James Macdonald (*Drunk Enough to Say I Love You*, 2006; *Love and Information*, 2012; *Escaped Alone*, 2016) and Dominic Cooke (*This is a Chair*, 1999; *Seven Jewish Children*, 2009; *Here We Go*, 2015). In the *Escaped Alone Resource Pack* published by the Royal Court Theatre, Macdonald's assistant director Roy Alexander Weise gives an interesting account of Churchill and Macdonald's co-working, stressing the importance of an established relationship:

In rehearsals, she's very present as the playwright, she doesn't try to be invisible at all. [...] Caryl and James have worked together for such a long time they have a mutual understanding of the way that they work, I think negotiation is probably too strong a word to use, in terms of their relationship, it just sort of happens and they're very easy

¹⁹² Quoted in <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/nov/20/caryl-churchill-conquered-british-theatre-here-we-go> last accessed 22/09/2018.

and comfortable about talking about things. [...] Sometimes, Caryl gives acting notes and James is absolutely fine with that but it doesn't feel like it's very defined.¹⁹³

Words being substituted by “blue” and “kettle”, which in their turn cascade into their component letters, seems the result of an informatic virus, a common if unpleasant presence in today's life. In *NEO* language's corruption mostly depended on material causes, that is lack of oxygen; in *Blue Kettle* to immaterial ones. Once again, Churchill turns social phenomena into theatre. In *Cloud Nine* (1978) and *Top Girls* (1982) she had dealt with sexual mores and politics; in *NEO* and *Blue Heart* language becomes a metaphor of social organization, recording the journey occurred in the span of time between the two plays from an industrial economy to a post-industrial one.

3.3 Sometimes it's Hard to be a Woman

Vinegar Tom was premiered at the Humberside Theatre, Hull, on 12 October 1976 by the company Monstrous Regiment under the direction of Pam Brighton. In her *Monstrous Regiment A Collective Celebration* (1991), Gillian Hannah, one of the founding members of the company, tells how the company came to be:

I had been working with the socialist touring company Belt & Braces. We were recasting a play about the Kent coalfields in the 1930s. Naturally enough there wasn't an enormous number of parts for women in it. Two, in fact. And I had the only good one. The other one was a cough and a spit. At the auditions, I was amazed at the women who came to see us. They were so talented, so full of energy and ideas. It was outrageous that the scarcity of work for women meant that they were prepared to audition to what amounted to a 'bit part'. (Hannah 1991, xx)

Hannah kept in touch with some of these actresses and called a meeting on 14 August 1975 in north London, in which “a handful of disaffected and fed up actresses and musicians were supposed to be getting together to talk about setting up some kind of music theatre company”. (Ibid., xvi) Unsurprisingly, this group of women found that they had much in common:

Rarely we were able to play women who lived on stage in their own right. We were always someone's wife, mother or lover. (*Someone* being a man, of course). Our theatrical identity was usually defined in terms of our relationship to the (more important) male characters. We only had an existence at all because we were attached to a man. The male protagonist gave us a reason for existing on stage. As Mary McKusker was often heard to muse: “If I have to play another tart with a heart of gold in a PVC skirt, I'm going to throw up”. And in bands we were required to be the

¹⁹³ <https://d19lfjg8hluhf.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/25191802/Escaped-Alone-Resource-Pack.pdf> last accessed 22/09/2018.

attractive front: wear sexy clothes and sing. Musicians, real musicians, were axiomatically male. (Ibid., xvii)

This meeting took to the formation of the company: the name Monstrous Regiment came from the sixteenth century's misogynist pamphlet *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* by the Scottish theologian John Knox. To find a partial remedy to the subordinated role of women in the theatre was the openly declared goal of the company. As stated in the programme of *Vinegar Tom*, Monstrous Regiment was "[a] company that will never contain more men than women". (ACGB 96/23/2/PROGRAMME) In their first application for an ACGB subsidy, dated January 1976, they went deeper into the issue of sex discrimination in the theatre, substantiating in figures the motives expressed by Wandor's fictional character in shunning a career as an actress:

We are a group of professionals (at the moment eight woman and two men) who have an urgent desire to redress the balance of male/female status and opportunities in the theatre. At any one time, 91.5% of the Equity membership are unemployed. The latest survey shows that average annual earnings were £ 835; this average was based on male average annual earnings of £ 1031, while for women it was £ 583. These figures force us to review the whole question of women in the theatre. The imbalance that we have all experienced is not only in the scarcity of work but also in the quality of the work that is offered: there is no challenge, no satisfaction and above all no truth in representing women by an endless parade of stereotypes. (ACGB 96/23/2/APPLICATION)

A small subsidy was granted and the company had its stage debut with *Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing*, premiered in April 1976 at the Chapter Arts Center in Cardiff. The play staged the story of a group of Paris women who, during the Commune, took over and managed the laundry in which they were employed. The text had been commissioned to two writers, Claire Luckham and Chris Bond. The initial plan was that the final version would result from a collaborative process but, since the authors had to move to Liverpool and could not always be present at rehearsals, the company felt free to alter extensively the text. Hannah thought the performed version substantially respected the writers' script:

Our original intention in commissioning Claire and Chris was to establish some kind of process whereby they would write and we would then discuss it with them. Or we would have discussions out of which they would go away and write. We were all reading and researching like mad. When they moved to Liverpool and consequently assumed the role of 'outside' writers, as opposed to being part of the group itself, that process was stretched in a way none of us had ever imagined. [...] The main structure of the play – written by Claire and Chris – was as we finally performed it. [...] Under Susan's [Todd] direction, we improvised, we discussed, we argued, we went away and wrote scenes and bit of scenes. We also added more songs. (Hannah 1991, xxxiv)

The writers were not happy at all with the result because, regardless of material conditions causing it, they felt that their authorial will had been betrayed:

We were commissioned to write a play, not a ‘working script’, and that was what we delivered. The play was fundamentally altered in two ways: firstly because there were fewer performers available than we had agreed to write for, which was understandable; and secondly because the company wanted, in our view, to romanticize the story we had written, which was not. They did so without any consultation whatsoever, hence our surprise and anger on going to see the show. (Ibid, xxxv).

The authors did not withdraw their signatures, but the published version carries the caption: “by Claire Luckham and Chris Bond with additional material by The Monstrous Regiment”. (Ibid., 1) In general, the play was well received by the critics, especially female ones, such as Catherine Itzin in the *Tribune* n.d., Beatrix Campbell in the *Morning Star* of 17 May 1976; Beth Chesney in the *Journal* of 28 October 1976.¹⁹⁴ By contrast, many male reviewers showed various degrees of anti-feminist bias, bearing witness to the prejudices Monstrous Regiment had to face. At their mildest, they were expressed in the *Guardian* of 12 May 1976 by critic Jeff Nuttall, who opened his review of a performance at the Sheffield Crucible Studio with an anti-feminist remark disguised as a left-wing political statement: “To use the Paris commune as a vehicle for sentiments as simplistic and modish as those of the Women’s Liberation Movement might seem to be politically irresponsible but proves in this production to be creatively perceptive and rich”; (Nuttall 1976) at their worst in the *Manchester Evening News* of 26 May 1978 by critic Alan Hulme, who, before conceding that “It’s an excellent production”, launched into an embarrassing piece of misogyny:

Women – bless their singed little bras – aren’t just curvaceous sex objects or baby producing machines: they can actually think for themselves and have been doing so from at least the time of the Paris Commune in 1871. That anyway is the claim of the fringe group Monstrous Regiment. And it would be a brave man indeed who dares to question the sincerely held beliefs of a company formed specially because of dissatisfaction with the opportunities offered to women working in the theatre. (Hulme 1978)

All in all, *Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing* was a success, and in fact it was kept in repertory until 1978. While touring it, Monstrous Regiment embarked on a new project, which materialized as a consequence of a happy coincidence, a chance encounter with Caryl Churchill.

In their first application to the ACGB, Monstrous Regiment – or “the Monsters” as they affectionately came to be known – besides *Scum*, had announced

¹⁹⁴ See <https://monstrous-regiment.s3.amazonaws.com/uploads/1976/01/Scum-1976-Words-1-Reviews.pdf>

two still untitled shows for the incoming 1976/77 financial year: one, intended to be set in a contemporary industrial context and “probably including a (by then) retrospective look at how the Equal Pay and Sex Discrimination Acts are working” (ACGB 96/23/2/APPLICATION) would be *Floor Show*, a cabaret-style show staged in 1977; the other one “about Witchcraft – subversion and madness” (Ibid.) would become *Vinegar Tom*, expressly written by Caryl Churchill for the company. Quite fittingly, Churchill and Monstrous Regiment met at a feminist march, as Hannah recalls:

We had been introduced to Caryl (in Hyde Park, after a march, NAC (National Abortion Campaign) I think) and she talked about how in researching her English Civil War play *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* for Joint Stock, she had come across a mass of material relating to women and witchcraft, and wanted to write a play about it. Her ideas fitted with ours, and we commissioned her to write it. (Hannah 1991, xxxvi)

For Churchill the writing of *Vinegar Tom* was a way to escape the confinement of the years she had spent at home raising her children, and to experience first-hand what had been going on in the feminist movement; for Monstrous Regiment it was a chance to try and work in close contact with the author of the text to be performed, which had not been possible with *Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing*. Churchill recounts this first encounter in the introduction to the published edition of *Vinegar Tom*, stressing that it was a new and exciting challenge for her:

Early in 1976 I met some of the Monstrous Regiment, who were thinking they would like to do a play about witches; so was I, though it’s hard now to remember what idea I was starting from. I think I had already read *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* by Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English. Certainly it had a strong influence on the play I finally wrote. Soon I met the whole company to talk about working with them. They gave me a list of books they had read and invited me to a rehearsal of *Scum*. I left the meeting exhilarated. My previous work had been completely solitary – I never discussed my ideas while I was writing or showed anyone anything earlier than a final polished draft. So this was a new way of working, which was one of its attractions. Also a touring company, with a wider audience, also a feminist company – I felt briefly shy and daunted, wondering if I would be acceptable, then happy. (Churchill 1995, 129)

The mentioned *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* is a pamphlet – self-published by the authors in 1975, and then re-published by Feminist Press in 2010 – which deals with the historical roots of male control on female bodies, tracing it back to the repression of the activity of female healers and midwives in early modern western Europe. As acknowledged by the authors in the introduction to the second edition, the booklet was very much the product of the political climate of the period: “*Witches, Midwives and Nurses* is a document from the second wave of feminism in the United States. [...] By the early 1970s feminists were becoming aware of a

variety of ways women were abused or treated unjustly by the medical system". (Ehrenreich English, 2010, 7-8) A large part of the essay is devoted to the witch-hunts between the fourteenth and the seventeenth century in Europe, seen both as an instrument of class control and an early clash between the unofficial curing activities of the 'wise women', based on experience and sometimes effective, and the official medicine, respectful of classical authorities more than experimental data, hence often verging on superstition. In the introduction to the second edition, the authors recognize that some of the assumptions the pamphlet was based upon were proved wrong, such as the theories of the anthropologist Margaret Murray who postulated the existence of a sort of network among these female healers, connecting it to pagan religious worship. (Ibid., 18) Yet, Ehrenreich and English maintain that the essay's main argument has held its validity along the years. Surely it was a ground-breaking work in the mid-1970s: *The Village Voice* branded it as "an underground bestseller". (Ehrenreich, English 2010, 12) The convergence of Monstrous Regiment and Churchill's interest on witchcraft was only partially fortuitous, as the issue was much at the centre of debate in the mid-1970s in the feminist movement.¹⁹⁵ More coincidental was that Churchill was already researching the social history of the seventeenth century in England for writing *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, a play that focused on the revolutionary movements, such as the Ranters and the Levellers, inside Cromwell's New Model Army:

I was about to do a play for Joint Stock, who excited me for some of the same reasons, some different. There wasn't a lot of time, and the two plays, *Vinegar Tom* and *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, overlapped both in time and ideas. All I knew at this point about the Joint Stock project was that it was going to be about the English Revolution in the 1640s, what people had wanted from it, and particularly the millennial expectations of the Ranters. A lot of what I was learning about the period, religion, class, the position of women, was relevant to both plays. (Ibid.)

Churchill showed a considerable hindsight, as she anticipated the conclusion the authors came to in the second edition of *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*, that pre-Christian cults carried little weight in explaining the roots of witch-hunts; she embraced instead an analysis of economic relations that owed much to Marxist thinking – even if Marx is never mentioned – revisited through feminist lenses:

I rapidly left aside the interesting theory that witchcraft had existed as a survival of suppressed pre-Christian religions and went instead for the theory that witchcraft existed in the minds of its persecutors, that witches were a scapegoat in times of stress like Jews and blacks. [...] The women accused of witchcraft were often those on the edge of society, old, poor, single, sexually unconventional; the old herbal medical

¹⁹⁵ See, for instance, *La Signora del gioco* (1977) by the philosopher Luisa Muraro on witch-hunts in the north of Italy in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

tradition of the cunning woman was suppressed by the rising professionalism of the male doctor. (Ibid. 129-30)

Even if the two plays were written in the same months, as stated by Churchill, the final texts showed little signs of overlapping. Witchcraft is not mentioned in *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire*, even if the two main female characters, Brotherton and Hoskins, live unconventional lives: the former is a vagrant who, at one point, is condemned to be stripped to the waist and whipped all the way to the bounds of the parish, and returned parish by parish to where she was born (Ibid., 194) – the judges considered this to be a very lenient sentence, without noticing that in fact it was a re-enactment of Christ’s route to Golgotha; the latter is an itinerant preacher who is beaten up by a church congregation for having interrupted the Sunday office. So, even if the Civil War is in the backdrop of both plays, in *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* the focus is on events of national relevance, and much of the text is based upon original documents, such as the transcripts of the so-called Putney Debate, and even some characters had historical correspondents; by contrast, *Vinegar Tom* is set in a small community and the characters are fictional. An echo of the national events can be heard in the first scene in which an unnamed Man – the occasional lover of one of the female characters, Alice – tells how mores are changing in London as a result of the preaching of non-conformist sects, showing also how confusing for a common man could be the clash of diverging religious beliefs:

There’s some in London say there’s no sin. Each man has his own religion, nearly, or none at all, and there’s women speak out too. They smoke and curse in the tavern and they say flesh is no sin for they are God themselves and can’t sin. The men and women lie together, and say that’s bliss and that’s heaven and that’s no sin. [...] But then I believe with Calvin that few are saved and I am damned utterly. Then I think if I’m damned anyway I might as well sin to make it worthwhile. (Ibid., 136)

In *Vinegar Tom* much of the action revolves around Ellen, a “cunning woman”, i.e. a female healer: partly apothecary, partly physician, partly psychologist, her “herbal home pharmacy is as busy as a GP’s surgery”. (Itzin 1980, 285) Almost all the villagers turn to her for help and counselling in the most various problems: Alice, a single mother, asks for a love potion that could turn a one-night stand with a man into a long-lasting love affair; Susan, a young mother of three, tries to avoid a further childbirth; Betty, the adolescent daughter of an affluent family, seeks a way out of an arranged marriage. In most cases, Ellen’s advice is sound and rooted in reality: she offers an abortive potion to Susan, making it clear that the ultimate choice is up to her; she refuses to Betty any potion that could kill her husband-to-be and suggests that the girl should consider calmly the proposal of marriage, offering in the meantime a sleeping potion for more clear thinking; she claims that she cannot help Alice unless she can get some hairs or a drop of blood from her lover – unlikely, since Alice does not even know his name – recommending the

usual sleeping potion instead. Among Ellen's patients there are also Margery and Jack, a married couple of tenant farmers who live next to Alice and her mother Joan. Social rise is Margery and Jack's main preoccupation – they want to enlarge the farm, and therefore are very obsequious to Betty, the landowner's daughter – resulting in a range of neurosis. Margery is sexually frigid and unhealthily afraid of her neighbour Joan, Alice's mother, whom she believes to be a witch; Jack is obsessed by Alice, so much so as to become sexually impotent, and assumes that Alice, a witch by implication, has stolen his male organ. Jack and Margery ask Ellen if they could have been bewitched by Joan and Alice, and Ellen makes a big mistake, as her cryptical answer – they are paying customers, after all – is interpreted by the couple as a confirmation of their suspects:

I've a glass here, a cloudy glass. Look in the glass, so, and see if any face comes into it. [...] Not for me to say one's a witch or not a witch. I give you the glass and you see in it what you see in it. [...] Saw what you come to see. Is your mind easy? (Ibid., 157-158)

Ellen is maybe too careless in dealing with such a delicate matter, as she states that she is not able to recognize witchcraft, but does not deny that it exists, and that Joan could be a witch. Jack and Margery enthusiastically embrace this hypothesis, since witchcraft provides an explanation to every problem, small or big, affecting them, while keeping them safe from the accusation of being punished by God for their sins:

Margery: If we're bewitched, Jack, that explains all.

Jack: If we're bewitched ...

Margery: Butter not coming. Calves swelling. Me struck in the head.

Jack: Then it's not my sins. Good folk get bewitched.

Margery: Good folk like us.

Jack: It can happen to anyone.

Margery: Rich folk can have spells against them.

Jack: It's good people the witches want to hurt.

Margery: The devil can't bear to see us so good. (Ibid.,153)

The characters of Jack and Margery are presented as representatives of the rising Calvinist middle-class, for whom social status is considered a consequence of benevolence by the Lord, and vice versa: it can be noted that in their conversation "rich folk" and "good people" are used as synonymous. Events take their tragic turn

when a professional witch-finder on-tour visits the town, as announced by a Bellringer on the public square:

Whereas if anyone has any complaint against any woman for a witch, let them go to the townhall and lay their complaint. For a man is in town that is a famous finder of witches and has had above thirty hanged in the country round and he will discover if they are or no. (Churchill 1995, 164)

Both the announcement of the Bellringer – a commercial in its own right – and the subsequent action of the witch-finder provide a peculiar mixture of middle-age superstition and modern entrepreneurial spirit. In fact, as Churchill specifies in the stage directions: “The pricking scene is one of humiliation rather than torture and Packer is an efficient professional, not a sadistic maniac”. (Ibid., 134) The pricking mentioned above is the search for a spot insensitive to pain in the body of the suspected witches by conscientiously pricking all the body surface, as prescribed by the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the handbook of witch hunters, written by the Dominican monks Heinrich Sprenger and James Kramer in the fifteenth century. The action is carried out on the public square by the witch-finder Packer with the assistance of Goody, an elder woman who is eager to support the activity of her employer, while also showing a firm grasp of the economic basis of witch-hunting:

There’s no man finds more witches than Henry Packer. He can tell by their look, he says, but of course he has more ways than that. He’s read all the books and he’s travelled. [...] He’s well worth the twenty shillings a time, and I get the same, which is very good of him to insist on and well worth it though some folk complain and say ‘what the price of a cow, just to have a witch hanged?’ But I say to them think of the expense a witch is to you in the damage she does to property, such as a cow killed one or two pounds, a horse maybe four pounds, besides all the pigs and sheep at a few shillings a time, and chickens at sixpence all adds up. For two pounds and our expenses at the inn, you have all that saving, besides knowing you’re free of the threat of sudden illness and death. (Churchill 1995, 168)

In her wisdom, Goody shows to have well understood that, assisting a witch-finder in his search, apart from a way to earn a good living, is also a useful means to avoid being caught on the wrong side of the barricade:

Yes, it’s interesting work being a searcher and nice to do good at the same time as earning a living. Better than staying home a widow. I’d end up like the old women you see, soft in the head and full of spite with their muttering and spells. I keep healthy keeping the country healthy. (Ibid.)

Predictably, the witch-hunters achieve their goal, and Joan and Ellen are hanged on stage; Alice and Susan attend the execution and are likely to face the same destiny in a few days. While Susan is almost willing to be hanged, as, in her simple-mindedness, she is convinced that this will take her to eternal salvation, Alice

expresses all her impotent rage while also commenting on the position of women, especially economically disadvantaged ones, in society:

I'm not a witch. But I wish I was. If I could live I'd be a witch now after what they've done. [...] Oh if I could meet with the devil now I'd give him anything if he'd give me power. There's no way for us except by the devil. If I only did have magic, I'd make them feel it. (Ibid., 175)

All through the play, women think rationally and act, or at least try to, accordingly; in contrast, men are driven by superstition, greed for power, irrational impulses or, one could say, plain stupidity. The already mentioned first scene is exemplary in this respect: in it we see the conversation of Alice with the nameless stranger she has just been making love with. The latter claims to be the devil for no visible reason if not for a kind of childish boasting; the former demolishes his phantasies while trying not to be too judgemental, as one would do with a spoilt child:

Man: I'm the devil. Man in black, they say, they always say, a man in black met me in the night, took me into the thicket and made me commit uncleanness unspeakable. [...] Have I not got great burning eyes then?

Alice: Bright enough eyes.

Man: Is my body not rough and hairy?

Alice: I don't like a man too smooth.

Man: Am I not ice cold?

Alice: In a ditch in November.

Man: Didn't I lie on you so heavy I took your breath? Didn't the enormous size of me terrify you?

Alice: It seemed a fair size like other men's. (Churchill 1995: 135)

Alice does not need any further spice to enjoy this moment of intimacy, while the man's vanity needs to be nourished. It becomes increasingly clear that the devilish fantasies are sexually arousing for the man, while they are just silly for Alice:

Man: Will you do everything I say, like a witch with the devil her master?

Alice: I'll do like a wife with a husband her master and that's enough for man or devil.

Man: Will you kiss my arse like the devil makes his witches?

Alice: I'll do what gives us pleasure. Was I good just now? (Churchill 1995: 136)

All through the play Ellen is the embodiment of female wisdom, and even when the witch hunt is already underway she keeps her wits about her: she advises Betty to

accept the arranged marriage in good grace, while also urging her to go home immediately, since to be caught in her hut could support the suspects of witchcraft, and then gives a lesson of stringent, rational reasoning when she plans how to challenge the charge of witchcraft:

I could ask to be swum. They think the water won't keep a witch in, for Christ's baptism sake, so if a woman floats she's a witch. And if she sinks they have to let her go. I could sink. Any fool can sink. It's how to sink without drowning. It's whether they get you out. No, why should I ask to be half drowned? I've done nothing. I'll explain to them what I do. It's healing, not harm. There's no devil in it. If I keep calm and explain it, they can't hurt me. (Ibid., 169-170).¹⁹⁶

As can be expected, rational thinking is no use in facing an irrational charge, and it will not save Ellen from the gallows. According to Itzin, this Catch 22 women are subjected to – if a woman sinks she drowns, if she floats she is burnt – is an effective metaphor of female condition in all ages: “The play showed that sinking without drowning was the art of survival as a woman, whether in the seventeenth or the twentieth century”. (Itzin 1980, 285) The only way out of this situation is social-economic status, and in fact Betty avoids the charge of witchcraft despite being a frequent visitor of Ellen. The escape is provided by the male doctor who has her in cure for hysteria and his authority is enough to save her from trouble, as Betty herself tells Ellen in their last conversation: “But the doctor says he'll save me. He says I'm not a witch, he says I'm ill. He says I'm his patient so I can't be a witch. He says he's making me better. I hope I can be better”. (Ibid., 169) Again, the economic basis of the witch-hunt is stressed, as being a paying customer automatically puts official science on your side. Yet, even for Betty safety comes at a cost, as she is subjected by the doctor to repeated bleeding sessions by applying leeches and, finally, she is forced to accept the unwanted marriage.

The female condition in all ages is the underlying theme of the whole play, especially underscored by the songs that are sung between scenes. In Gobert's words “[s]ongs intersperse and break up the action to insist that women's oppression is not consigned to the historical past but rather needs to be addressed as an urgent contemporary issue”. (Darren Gobert 2014, 208) Churchill stressed the importance of keeping the songs separated from the action:

The songs, which are contemporary, should if possible be sung by actors in modern dress. They are not part of the action and not sung by the characters in the scenes before them. In the original company all the actors could sing so it was no problem for some members of the company to be out of costume at any time to be in the band. Obviously

¹⁹⁶ Given Churchill's declared admiration for the Monty Python, it is possible that she might have been acquainted with Bevedere's reasoning on witch-finding in the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yp_15ntikaU

this may not always be possible. But it is essential that the actors are not in character when they sing the songs. (Churchill 1195, 133)

The seven songs – the lyrics are by Caryl Churchill, with the exception of “If You Float”, which is by Helen Glavin, while music is by the latter, who also composed the music of *Scum: Death, Destruction and Dirty Washing* – are mostly connected to and comment on the stage action preceding them. For instance, the first song, “Nobody Sings” follows a mother-daughter conversation in which Joan laments her lowly status and comfortless life as an ageing widow. The song describes the pains in women’s life and in particular the consequences of getting old; the language and the imagery are direct and crude:

Do you want your skin to wrinkle
 And your cunt gets sore and dry
 And they say it’s just your hormones
 If you cry and cry and cry.
 Oh nobody sings about it
 But it happens all the time. (Ibid., 142)

The song “Oh doctor” follows the scene in which Betty is tied and bled by the doctor, who explains this action with an example of seventeenth century’s medical prognosis: “Excessive blood causes an imbalance in the humours. The noxious gases that form inwardly every month rise to the brain and cause behaviour quite contrary to the patient’s real feelings”. (Ibid., 149) The song tackles the central issue of male control on female health; according to Aston: “The song functions as a critique of mechanistic male medicine in which women are denied ownership of their bodies and cannot be represented as a whole”. (Aston 2001, 28) The use of the taboo word indicating the female genitalia points at the company’s will to overcome any suggestion of shame connected to female body and sexuality:

Where are you taking my skin
 Where are you putting my bones
 I shut my eyes and I opened wide
 But why is my earth on the other side?
 Why are you putting my brain in my cunt
 You’re putting me back all back to front. (Ibid., 150)

The song “Something to Burn” is sung after Jack and Margery decide to burn a sick calf which they think to have been bewitched by Joan, expecting the burning of the

poor animal to eliminate witchcraft while also showing that they are ready to fight back. As we have seen the depiction of witches as scapegoats in times of social stress was one of the ideas from which Churchill started. Cruelty, ignorance and preconceived hostility are shown to be at the roots both of witch-hunts and racist violence:

Something to burn

Sometimes it's witches, or what will you choose?

Sometimes it's lunatics, shut them away

It's blacks and it's women and often it's Jews.

We'd all be quite happy if they'd go away.

Find something to burn

Let it go up in smoke.

Burn your trouble away. (Ibid., 154)

The song "If everybody worked as Hard as Me" presents a viewpoint, that could be attributed to one particular character, Margery. Starting with the title, it expresses the female work ethic that develops into an unhealthy obsession for a spotless house, perfect children and a loving husband. It goes without saying that this attitude is charged with political implications:

If everybody worked as hard as me

If our children's shirts are white,

If their language is polite

If nobody's stays out late at night

Oh, happy family.

Oh, the country's what it is because the family's what it is because

The wife is what she is

To her man. (Ibid. 159-160)

In its connecting national decadence with family life, this song is almost prophetic in anticipating Thatcher's programme of rejuvenating Great Britain starting from the families. In fact, Margery's horror for social deviance originating at home can also be perceived, for instance, in Thatcher's words pronounced in 1982: "The fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a permissive society in which the old virtues of discipline and self-restraint were denigrated". (Quoted

in Edgar 1987, 94) Thatcher's words were echoed by a junior minister of her cabinet, Rhodes Boyson: "We have created our own plagues by the break-up of stable families, with a malignant effect on many of our children, while many of our city streets and entertainments flaunt debased morals and false values". (Ibid., 94-95) All in all, the song functions as a sort of manifesto of a model of femininity that, passé as it may be considered by feminists, is constantly resurfacing in British and western society in general. As regards continuing public attitudes to single mother, Packer's pressing questioning of Alice on her son is also interesting:

Then you should have stayed home at night with him and not gone out after the devil. [...] How could a mother be a filthy witch and put her child in danger? [...] Night after night, it's well known. [...] He should have a father. Who's his father? Speak up, who's his father. (Churchill 1996, 171)

Clearly, Packer is after making Alice confess that the child's father is the Devil, and the destiny of the poor boy is left uncertain, as the witch-hunter declares that he wants to examine him personally. Aston argues that Conservative politicians did not mention devilish interventions, but their attitude to single mother did not diverge much from that of Packer:

Packer's cross examination of Alice bears a frightening remembrance to the 1990s crusade against 'lone mothers' and 'home alone' children by right-wing politicians who, for example, have argued that it is "good Christian doctrine" to stop single women having children [...] before they formed stable relationships. (Aston, 30)

As Itzin comments in the *Tribune* of December 1976: "In today's welfare jargon she'd [Alice] be on the files as an unmarried mother, or a single-parent family, and still be as statusless as a woman and a person as poor Alice. Plus ça change...". (Itzin 1976, n.p.)

The song "Lament for the witches" is the one that draws the more immediate parallel between female condition in the seventeenth and the twentieth centuries, as it invites the female audience to consider how much public morality has changed, yet women's life is still conditioned in many ways. The song comes soon after Joan and Ellen's hanging and the conversation between Alice and Susan after the execution, that is at the end of the action proper, and it functions as the summary and conclusion of what has been going on on-stage:

Look in the mirror tonight.

Would they have hanged you then?

Ask how they're stopping you now.

Where have the witches gone?

Who are the witches now?

Ask how they're stopping you now.

Here we are. (Ibid., 176).

This song is followed by a complete change of scene and atmosphere: two gentlemen – two women, actually – in top-hats and tails enter the scene and start a vaudeville routine. They introduce themselves as Kramer and Sprenger, the authors of the *Malleus Maleficarum*:

Sprenger: He's Kramer.

Kramer: He's Sprenger.

Sprenger: Professors of Theology.

Kramer: Delegated by letter apostolic

Sprenger: (here's a toast, non-alcoholic).

Kramer: Inquisitors of heretical pravitities.

Sprenger: we must fill those moral cavities. (Ibid., 176)

The Sprenger/Kramer double act could be termed a comic relief after the most emotionally charged scene of the play or, as Amelia Howe Kritzer suggests, a “Brechtian distancing immediately after the emotional climax of the story. (Quoted in Bull 2012, 115) In the stage directions, Churchill stresses the importance of cross-gender casting for Kramer and Sprenger:

Kramer and Sprenger should be played by women. Originally they were played by Chris Bowler and Mary McCusker who, as Ellen and Joan, had just been hanged, which seems to be an ideal doubling. They played them as Edwardian music hall gents in top hats and tails, and some of the opening rhymes and jokes are theirs. The rest of the scene is genuine Kramer and Sprenger, from their handbook on witches and women, *Malleus Maleficarum, The Hammer of Witches*. (Churchill 1995, 134)

In fact, the exchange reported below between Kramer and Sprenger comes nearly verbatim from the canonical translation of the *Malleus Maleficarum* by Rev. Montagu Summers¹⁹⁷ (Kramer Sprenger 1971, 46) a singular figure of clergyman who in the early twentieth century tried to restore the public image of the witch-hunters:

Sprenger: To conclude

¹⁹⁷ Summers's *The History of Witchcraft and Demonology* is mentioned in the bibliography of *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*: “Written in the 1920s by a catholic priest and defender – really! – of the witch-hunts. Attacks the witch as ‘heretic’, ‘anarchist’ and ‘bawd’”. (Ehrenreich English, 2010, 105)

Kramer: All witchcraft

Sprenger: comes from carnal lust

Kramer: which is in women

Kramer/Sprenger: insatiable

Kramer: It is no wonder there are more women than men found infected with the heresy of witchcraft.

Sprenger: And blessed be the Most High, which has so far preserved the male sex from so great a crime. (Churchill 1995, 178)

Even if religion is not a target in *Vinegar Tom*, in foregrounding the figure of Kramer and Sprenger – Dominican friars whose actions were approved and blessed by Pope Innocent VIII (Ehrenreich English 2010, 36) – Churchill cannot avoid the connection between Christianity and witch-hunt: “I discovered for the first time the extent of Christian teaching against women and saw the connections between medieval attitudes to witches and continuing attitudes to women in general”. (Churchill 1995, 129) Quoting these particular lines from the *Malleus Maleficarum* underlines that both witch-hunts and modern attitudes to women were based upon “[a] misogynistic Christian tradition that insists on the inferiority of women to men. That inferiority is premised on the supposed biological perversity of the female body and its associated uncontrollably debased sexual appetites”. (Luckurst, 65) Kramer and Sprenger’s act is followed by the song “Evil Women”¹⁹⁸ which closes the play. After ridiculing in the figures of Kramer and Sprenger the self-righteousness of the witch-hunters and males in general, Churchill turns the table on them by connecting the discourse of witchcraft to male erotic phantasies. Again, language and imagery are unavoidably explicit:

Evil woman

Is that what you want

Is that what you want to see

On the movie screen

Of your own wet dreams

Evil woman

If you like sex sinful, what you want is us.

¹⁹⁸ For a recording of this song see <http://monstrousregiment.co.uk/productions/vinegar-tom/> last accessed 22/02/2019.

You can be sucked off by a succubus. (Ibid., 178)

The play closes with this song, a last sneer to male double standards. Hannah was aware that the songs could present a problem, as, in their juxtaposing past and present, they could be interpreted as an over-simplification of issues and a didactic effort, but considered them necessary:

We had a very real feeling that we didn't want to allow the audience to get off the hook by regarding it as a period piece, a piece of very interesting history. Now a lot of people felt their intelligence was affronted by that. They said: "I don't know why these people have to punctuate what they are saying by these modern songs. We're perfectly able to draw conclusions about the world today from historical parallels". Actually, I don't believe that and, in any case, we can't run that risk. For every single intelligent man who can draw the parallels, there are dozens who don't. It's not that they can't. It's that they won't. (Quoted in Aston 2001, 29)

In fact, the songs were the source of some negative reactions by the critics. In the *Guardian* of 8 December 1976, Nicholas de Jongh wrote that the songs were "a grossly vulgar and mistaken commentary to the intelligent and interesting script". (de Jongh 1976) David Zane Mairowitz based his review in *Plays and Players* of February 1977 on a comparison with Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, concluding: "The playtext is not strong enough to withstand the breaking of its rhythm and antagonism of the musical interludes". (quoted in Bull 2012, 111) Indeed, as will be seen below, *The Crucible* and *Vinegar Tom* have very little in common, apart from dealing both with a witch-hunt, and the comparison is uneasy. As Elaine Aston suggests: "Because Churchill does not choose to draw into a harrowing, tragic study of a persecuted (male) individual, but [...] looks to a collective representation of woman-centred oppression, the scenes are dismissed as 'only sketched'. (Aston 2001, 26) Paola Botham is even more explicit: "The fact that Mairowitz compared Churchill's play to *The Crucible* insinuates gender and political bias rather than stylistic preferences". (Botham in Bull 2012, 111) This said, even a sympathetic reviewer as Michelen Wandor on the pages of *Spare Rib* – a feminist magazine – pointed at the songs as a dissonant note in the play:

To my mind some of the songs are problematic– the only criticism I have of the play. [...] Here the songs are sung very explicitly as commentary – not by characters, but by different members of the cast at different times. The music is modern and melodic – no apparent links with seventeenth century music. This in itself works as an effective contrast; a theatrical device which provides variety. But some of the words are sung to us as a straight gloss on the condition of women in the twentieth century, set side by side with the seventeenth century representations we see in the play. They imply a simplistic one-to-one correspondence between the condition of seventeenth century women and women today which, ironically is the very opposite of the play's actual achievement – to unfold and explore conditions of life which are very different from our own. (Wandor 1976)

Wandor's reaction partly confirmed Hannah's preoccupation that some of the spectators could feel affronted for having the meaning of the play too explicitly explained to them. Yet Wandor seemed here to have missed the point, since she maintained that *Vinegar Tom*'s achievement was exactly what Hanna did not want, that is to provide "a piece of very interesting history". (quoted in Aston 2001, 29) According to Wandor the contrast between stage action and songs is too sharp to obtain the required effect: "When both music and words are utterly twentieth-century, the shock of dislocation, meant to make the audience *think* about what we are seeing, is in danger of momentarily alienating us completely". (Wandor 1976) Wandor does not mention Brecht, maybe not to be too scholarly in a magazine review; but the reference to Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* or alienation effect is quite explicit. Some years later in her *Post-War British Drama* Wandor defined it in the following terms: "Brecht's desire to challenge audiences to think rather than passively absorb, led to his theory of 'alienation'. [...] Alienation implies a distancing from the event perceived, so as to stress understanding and the raising of political consciousness". (Wandor 2001, 33) In her review Wandor seems to suggest that Churchill achieved the wrong kind of alienation, maybe too overt and mediated to result in an enhanced political consciousness. Churchill herself acknowledged Brecht's influence on her playwriting, even if she denied having studied his work in depth:

I don't know either the plays or the theoretical writing in great detail but I've soaked up quite a lot about him over the years. I think for writers, directors and actors working in England in the seventies his ideas have been absorbed into the general pool of shared knowledge and attitudes, so that without constantly thinking of Brecht we nevertheless imagine things in a way we might not have without him. (Quoted in Reinelt 1996, 86)

In her *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre* Janelle Reinelt devotes a chapter to the relationship between feminism and Brecht, with the telling title "Brecht and Feminism: Strange Bedfellows?" (Ibid., 82) before focusing on Churchill as a case study; in the general part of the chapter, she makes an interesting list of shared attitudes between "materialist" (as opposed to "bourgeois" and "cultural") feminist theatrical practice and Brechtian dramaturgy:

[t]hey seek (1) to rupture the seamless narrative wherever a tightly knit, closed system of casual connections implies the inevitability of event; (2) to expose ideological assumptions carried in the terms of system or representation, whether this is the property system or the gender system; and (3) to deconstruct the integrity of "character" in order to show the subject as a site of contradictions, a position within an ideological field of social practices, neither unified nor stable and certainly not eternal. (Ibid., 83-84)

All these modalities are to be found in *Vinegar Tom*, the rupture of the seamless narrative being the most evident: the twenty-one *Vinegar Tom* scenes are in

chronological order but not in continuity, so that every passage in the development of the plot can be subjected to scrutiny. This technique has been employed by Churchill all along her writing career – the chronological structure of *Far Away* being a recent example – and particularly in her ‘epic’ dramas, as Reinelt asserts: “Churchill composes her epics through ‘decoupage,’ which is Roland Barthes’s term for Brecht’s structural technique, in which, as Brecht has it, ‘one can . . . take a pair of scissors and cut it into individual pieces which remain fully capable of life’”. (Reinelt 1996, 89) Also point 2 is present, as the ideological and economic basis of gender and economic relationship are constantly exposed; and the deconstruction of characters as site of contradiction is constantly carried out, excluding or underplaying a psychological representation while stressing the economic forces in action. Following this general treatment of Brechtian dramaturgy, Reinelt takes on one of its specific principle, that is historization:

Brechtian historicization actually works in three modes simultaneously. In representing the past, the specificity of its conditions, its “Otherness” from now, and the suppressed possibilities through which it could have been otherwise are presented. Then the relationship of the past to the present is shown to consist of analogous conditions, unchanged and /or unexamined legacies that make the latent possibilities of the past as a springboard of present possibilities. Finally, the representation of the present must be such that it is seen from a distance similar to the way the past is seen, that is, historically. (Ibid., 87)

In fact, *Vinegar Tom* could be considered a case study of Brechtian historicization as above defined. All the suppressed possibilities – the Brechtian not/but – are exposed, especially as regards the socio-economic background – a post-feudal and not yet capitalist society – and the characters: if the latter seem sometimes to have no choice – could actually Ellen escape death once the witch-hunt had been started? – it is because they clash with overbearing social forces based on the underlying economic structure and not with a tragic destiny. Again, the “decoupage” has to be called into cause as “Besides positioning the present [...] this technique represents the discontinuous and dialectical nature of history, marking the spaces in which something else might have intervened to change the course of events”. (Ibid., 89) Going back to the disputed songs, they are instrumental in showing women’s present condition in relation to the past as historically determined, not as the culmination of an automatic progress. Moreover, in the songs it is stressed that women’s condition, nowadays as in early modern times, is not simply ‘the way things are’ but can be seen critically as the result of a historical process. In summary, what appears to Wandor the play’s main weakness is an important means for achieving a full communication of the feminist message – which does not mean that a Brechtian mode is the only or best way to do that. As Botham argues in a final assessment of *Vinegar Tom*: “[t]he play shares with the best of Brechtian drama that mixture of clarity and ‘defamiliarisation’ which invites the audience to

re-examine their assumptions, and to look at both past and present in a new light". (Botham in Bull 2012, 115)

As stated above, the critic de Jongh based his review in *Play and Players* on a comparison between *Vinegar Tom* and *The Crucible*. He was not the only one as, for instance, Robert Orchard in the *Western Mail* of 10 June 1977 defined *Vinegar Tom* as "a British version of *The Crucible*". As I have already stated, I think it to be an uneasy parallel. Both plays deal with witch-hunts, and both are set in the seventeenth century – one in England and one in Salem, Massachusetts – but they do not share deeper affinities. For a start, the relation to history of the two plays is very different, as *Vinegar Tom* is based upon a general research on the period, and the characters are completely fictional, while *The Crucible* has a stricter relation with historical facts, as the author stresses in a "Note on the Historical Accuracy of the Text", premised to the published text:

This play is not history in the sense in which the word is used by the academic historian. Dramatic purposes have sometimes required many characters to be fused into one; the number of girls involved in the 'crying out' has been reduced; Abigail's age has been raised. [...] However, I believe that the reader will discover here the essential nature of one of the strangest and most awful chapters in human history. The fate of each character is exactly that of his historical model, and there is no one in the drama who did not play a similar – and in some cases exactly the same – role in history. (Miller 1978, 11)

It is highlighted here that the approach by the two authors is completely different: while Churchill's focused her interest on socio-economic forces at play, Miller viewpoint is openly moral, as his aim is to make of Salem's witch-hunt an exemplary case of the presence of evil in a community. As a consequence, the adherence to historical facts and figures serves the purpose to build psychologically well-rounded characters and to stress the invariability of moral dilemmas they face: basically, the opposite of Churchill and Brecht's idea. To this end, in the published version Miller introduces at length the characters. For instance Parris, the clergyman whose daughter and niece will start the witch-hunt, is described in this terms: "At the time of these events Parris was in his middle forties. In history he cut a villainous path, and there is little good to be said for him". (Miller 1978, 13) More intriguing is the description of Proctor, the tragic hero of the play:

Proctor was a farmer in his middle thirties. He need not have been a partisan of any faction in the town, but there is evidence to suggest that he had a sharp and biting way with hypocrites. [...] But as we shall see, the steady manner he displays does not spring from an untroubled soul. He is a sinner, a sinner not only against the moral fashion of the time, but against his own vision of decent conduct. (Miller 1978, 27)

Miller voluntarily confuses the historic figure with the persona in the drama, so much so as to confuse a reader who has no other source of information. In fact,

Proctor's resolute character, which made him clash with the other villagers is historically correct, (Hoffer 1997, 109-111) while that he might consider himself a sinner derives entirely from him having had an affair with Abigail, which is a dramatic invention. Miller conceded that Abigail's age was raised (Miller 1978, 11) – from eleven to seventeen (Hoffer 197, 50); he did not mention that Proctor's age was reduced – he was probably in his sixties (Ibid., 109) – to make the whole romantic development credible. Abigail is the character who will take the male hero to his perdition. Her description in the stage directions when she first enters the stage says much of the author's attitude: “A *strikingly beautiful girl, an orphan, with an endless capacity for dissembling. Now she is all worry and apprehension and propriety*”. (Miller 1978, 18) As Siàn Adiseshiah rightly points out, Abigail displays “the qualities of beauty, lust, guile, fickleness, and deviousness – typical constructions that comprise the object of the male gaze”. (Quoted in Bull 2012, 109) Therefore, while bending historical truths to dramatic ends is not problematic in itself, it is undeniable that the perspective in *The Crucible* is strictly and openly male. Consequently, I agree with Botham that any critical appraisal of *Vinegar Tom* based on a comparison with *The Crucible* is inherently flawed. One final, albeit minor, point could be made. It is well known that Miller wrote *The Crucible* as a metaphor of and a protest against the working of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and the anti-communist hysteria in the late 1940s and early 1950s in the USA. As Miller wrote in the overture to *The Crucible*: “Old scores could be settled on a plane of heavenly combat between Lucifer and the Lord; suspicions and the envy of the miserable toward the happy could and did burst out in the general revenge”. (Miller 1978, 17) This narrative fits as regards the Hollywood witch hunt: even if artistically gifted individuals, such as Elia Kazan, were among the ‘friendly witnesses’ i.e. accusers, the allegation of holding communist sympathies could be used as a weapon to eliminate more talented competitors in the film industry. Of course, nothing of the kind happens in *Vinegar Tom*, as, in this play, it is the well-off who take it out on the poor and destitute. In summary, a comparison between the two plays results in a series of antitheses: female versus male viewpoint; economics versus ethics; social dimension versus individual freedom. All in all, if a comparison is deemed necessary, *Vinegar Tom* could be branded as *The Crucible* turned upside down.

3.4 Snakes and Ladders

The After-Dinner Joke was first transmitted by BBC 1 on 14 February 1978 under the direction of Colin Bucksey. In the introduction to the collection of her short plays, Churchill explained how the idea was conceived:

The *After-Dinner Joke* (1977) was written because Margaret Matheson¹⁹⁹ wanted to produce a series of Plays for Today for the BBC on public issues and suggested I look

¹⁹⁹ Margaret Matheson was the artistic director of BBC series *Plays for Today*.

at charities. I admired two extremes on TV, extreme naturalism and extreme non-naturalism – (Loach, Joffe; Monty Python). I went for the second — no of course it's not as funny as Monty Python. (Churchill 1993: n.p.)

The examples in brackets are two opposites indeed. The directors named by Churchill on the naturalistic side were mostly renowned in the 1960s and 1970s for their TV dramas exploring social issues with an almost documentary style. Both would be better known in later years for their works in the cinema, and Joffe's *The Killing Fields* (1983) even won three Academy Awards, but in those years their more interesting works were broadcast by BBC television. Loach's most influential TV drama was *Cathy Come Home*, written by Jeremy Sandford and aired in 1966, which had a great impact in foregrounding the issue of homelessness in Great Britain. On his part, Joffe – apart from directing some episodes of Griffith's *Billy Brand* – was at the centre of controversies for his *The Spongers* – broadcast by BBC in the Play for Today series three weeks before *The After-Dinner Joke* – which presented the life of a single mother against the backdrop of the Silver Jubilee, and even more so for *The Legion Hall Bombing*, written by Caryl Churchill and aired on 22 August 1978, which dealt with the Special Criminal Courts in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. On the opposite extreme Churchill places The Monty Python: their *Flying Circus*, broadcast by BBC between October 1969 and December 1974, fitted into a British tradition of surreal humour with a satirical aim, which was started on radio in the 1950s by the *Goon Show*²⁰⁰ and was at the origin of the so-called 'satire boom' of the early 1960s with *Beyond the Fringe* (1960)²⁰¹ in the theatre and the already mentioned *That Was the Week that Was* (1961) on TV. In Billington's words: "Blessed, at the time, were the piss takers". (Billington 2007, 130)

As stated by Churchill, *The After-Dinner Joke* focuses on the working of charities. It is divided into 66 scenes, some very short, consisting of just one image or one action. There are more than 50 characters, plus an unspecified number of extras. After the long list of characters, Churchill gives a piece of advice for theatre companies, suggesting that the play could also be suitable for stage production: "The only parts of any size are SELBY, PRICE, MAYOR, DENT. The others can be doubled, trebled, quadrupled".²⁰² (Churchill 1993: 167) The character of the Thief should be added to this list of main characters, as he appears in many scenes, even if he speaks just in one. Selby is the protagonist: she is played by Paula Wilcox, a very attractive actress, far from the stereotype of the plain-looking do-gooder. In the first scene she hands her notice to her employer, Mr Price, arguing that she is leaving her secretarial job to do something about world poverty, moved essentially by a sense of guilt. (Churchill 1993: 170) When her boss asks her if she is a Christian, she answers: "Not any more. But I feel guilty as I was". (Ibid.) Mr Price

²⁰⁰ The *Goon Show* was broadcast by BBC between 1951 and 1960. Among others, Peter Sellers (1924-80) started his career with that show.

²⁰¹ *Beyond the Fringe* was written and acted by Alan Bennett, Peter Cook, Jonathan Miller and Dudley Moore.

²⁰² The *After-Dinner Joke* was staged at the Orange Tree Theatre in London in 2014.

offers her a job in his own charity and reassures her: “You can stop feeling guilty about world poverty, Miss Selby. You’ve started doing something about it”. (Ibid.) Selby starts her work with the charity collecting donations from the most affluent citizens of her town – with some success – but she still feels she is not doing enough; she is then employed in devising an advertisement campaign, less successfully, since she finds great difficulties in conceiving a slogan which does not transmit her sense of guilt, and finally she is sent around the world in search of a worthy cause in which to spend an unexpected substantial contribution. When she arrives in a hurricane-stricken country she is kidnapped by guerrillas whose motives she sympathizes with, but at the end she is rescued and all the guerrillas are killed. Finally, Selby accepts Price’s offer to go back to business in a higher position than before her experience with charities.

The narrative is fragmented into the many scenes forming the play, and the main plot is entwined with other stories and situations. The main sub-plot, going on through all the play, is provided by Selby’s conversation with the Mayor of the town. Initially Selby is just interested in knowing from him where the well-off citizens live, in order to rationalize her search for donations; in doing so she shows a frankly classist attitude towards the less prosperous citizens: “[I]m not wasting [...] valuable leaflets on unemployed nerks who won’t give a good return for time and motion spent”. (Ibid., 173) As an answer, the Mayor vigorously challenges the view that the richest people, and by implication the Tories, are the most generous:

Just because the conservatives have more money that’s no reason to think we in the labour movement aren’t as generous as anyone else. Just because Ted Heath conducts Christmas carols [...] and Margaret Thatcher supports Help the Aged and Prince Charles makes a jubilee appeal [e]veryone thinks they’re so kindhearted, and I’m every bit as kindhearted as they are, just because they’re crowned heads, I’d be generous if I had a palace full of royal heritage and my mug on mugs, and a certain conservative councillor I can name keeps his wife on such a tight allowance she had to ask for an extra half-p when the postage went up so she could write to her lover. (Ibid., 172)

At the centre of their dispute there is Selby’s idea that charitable work is by definition non-political and politics non-charitable. The Royal Family is the first example she uses in support of her view, but her argument backfires as she notices that her own point makes little sense:

What’s political about royalty? [...] You’re going to try and tell me that a queen and dukes and an honours list and men on the moor banging away at grouse and thousands of pounds’ worth of shares that are undisclosed have something to do with politics, but that only goes to show how wrong you are. (Ibid., 173)

The Mayor remarks that in a sense everything is political and challenges Selby to name something non-political. He has an easy job in demolishing Selby’s naïve views on various matters:

Selby: House. No, wait a minute, not a house. Car. No, not a car. Tree. Tree.

Mayor: Tree. Timber. Price of. Building industry. Need I say more?

Selby: Rain.

Mayor: Rain. Leaks. Section 99 of the Public Health Act calling for repairs to substandard housing. The number of prosecutions in this town last year – (Ibid., 181)

The Mayor's reasoning becomes even more stringent and convincing when he takes into consideration the political roots of natural disasters, the so-called Acts of God:

Act of God. Earthquake. Guatemala. Shockproof houses, wealthy inhabitants, mostly all right. Shacks on ravines, in Guatemala City alone 1,200 dead, 90,000 homeless. In the whole country 22,000 dead, mostly the poor. [...] City official shot dead after suggesting homeless people should rebuild on unoccupied private land. (Ibid., 215-16)

The Mayor could be considered a sound political figure since he rigorously argues his point and, in fact, he will be proved right by Selby's experience in the unnamed hurricane-stricken country. What makes the Mayor a comic character is his insane passion for snakes in general and pythons in particular, that he considers the only non-political creatures in the world: "[S]nakes are completely non-political and I have a very interesting collection of pythons and boa constrictors". (ibid 173) He shows real affection when he talks of his reptiles: "A favourite pet of mine is the rubber boa, [...] the only trouble is, being a burrowing snake, he's usually under the earth in his pen and I don't see as much of him as I would like". (Ibid., 202) The argument between Selby and the Mayor will be interjected to the other events until the end of the play. In scene 65, the second to last, Selby scores a partial success in making the Mayor acknowledge that also snakes can be political:

Selby: Snake. Snakeskin. Handbag. Rich.

[...]

Mayor: Everyone has his little blind spot. I love my snakes. Relatively speaking, I would still go as far as to say a snake is not essentially political. A live snake is hardly political at all compared to anything you like to name. Name something. (ibid., 220)

This is the last speech of the play – the last scene is mute and shows Selby sitting at a large desk in her new managerial role – and it suggests that the dialogue and the underlying issues could start again, becoming virtually a never-ending story. Even the Mayor, for all his acute analysis, is caught in the dichotomy between political and non-political that haunts Selby all through the play. As regards the risk of trespassing on political ground, Selby is constantly under the scrutiny of Dent, her senior, much more business-minded colleague, who controls that her enthusiasm does not overcome her better judgement. Staying away from politics is particularly tricky when it comes to devising an advertisement campaign, partly due to Selby's sense of guilt, and partly because it becomes difficult to avoid facts:

Selby: I thought a picture of a dead child. You can see its ribs sticking out, its swollen stomach, clearly it starved to death. Or a child that died of an illness, say measles, it could be covered with sores, whatever you like, this is a rough draft, you get the idea. And the caption: 'This is your fault'.

Dent: Look, Miss Selby, people don't like to be made miserable. If your advertisement makes them feel bad, they'll put it out of their minds as fast as they can. You want something that makes them feel good. [...]

Selby: An advertisement about people starving that's going to make people feel good?

Dent: Exactly. (Ibid., 192)

Selby's second attempt, an advertisement bringing attention to working conditions in developing countries, gets even worse, as she cannot help mentioning Great Britain's colonial past:

Selby: A cup of coffee, you see, and the caption, Does coffee cost too much? And the reader thinks yes yes, it costs me a pound a quarter, or whatever it is by the time this is printed, you've got him on your side. Then you let him have it: You can afford coffee even at this high price but the people who pick it can't. What does it cost them in suffering? [I]t all started because Britain was a colonial power and made people in those countries grow tea and coffee for you to drink instead of food for themselves, and sugar too. [Y]ou have the nerve to complain about immigration when they come here looking for a better standard of living and I hope you feel pretty sick every time you drink a cup of tea or coffee and put sugar in it and think where it comes from and give a whole lot of money to charity because you're no better than slave dealers and you're not drinking tea and coffee you're drinking human blood, sweat and tears. (Ibid., 193)

It is noticeable how much her approach has changed from the start of her work, when she disdainfully dismissed the inhabitants of low-income neighborhoods as slackers. Dent is ready to put her back on course insinuating that she may have become political:

Dent: Wouldn't you say it was a little bit political?

Price: Was it, miss Selby? Oh dear. That's not what I expected of you at all. You always seem such a nice girl.

Selby: Political? Oh no no no no no. I wouldn't dream. [...] I just got carried away by the facts. (Ibid., 194-95)

Selby is caught in the contradiction of trying to remedy world's injustices without touching their political roots; so much so that in her last attempt her sense of impotence leads her to use a profanity that does not suit 'such a nice girl':

Selby: I did have this third idea, I don't expect you want to hear it, it is hard hitting, well we could polish it up. I thought – it's just an idea – well what it is ... is a big poster with big red letters saying Fuck you, greedy pigs – no. No no no no no. Just off the top of my head. No. Haha. No. (Ibid., 195)

At the end of the session with Price and Dent, Selby regains control and starts thinking about more viable ideas. Dent is of great help with his very practical vision of charity: "Charity is a business. [...] Charity is inseparable from capitalism". (Ibid., 199) As a result, Selby produces some sketches, acceptable for Price but verging on the ridiculous, like the following one:

Cowboys; a Child

The Cowboys shoot it out.

*A lone survivor walks out. He sees a **Child** with a begging bowl. He tosses money into it.*

Voice: *A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do – give. (Ibid., 199)*

Yet this is only a provisional truce in Selby's inner fight on how to do good. The only character of the play who has clear and definite ideas about how to carry out effective charitable actions is the Thief. His criminal career provides another subplot to the play: we see him picking a pocket in scene 11 (Ibid., 179), stealing a camera in scene 19 (Ibid., 183), burgling a house in scene 22 (Ibid., 185), robbing a bank in scene 29 (Ibid., 190), a train in scene 35 (Ibid., 196) and finally kidnapping sir Arthur at gunpoint in scene 38. (Ibid., 198) After this last criminal act, it becomes clear how his story fits into the play: all these activities are intended to raise funds for charities. In scene 45, the last in which the thief appears, he talks to Selby through a locked door, while the kidnapped Sir Arthur is with him in a bare room. The Thief summarizes his previous activities:

Twenty thousand, five hundred and ninety-six pounds I've got to you already. That's the train robbery, the bank robbery and various odds and ends. And when they pay the ransom you'll have another half million. [...] Think what it's going to buy. Wells. Tractors. Eye operations. (Ibid., 200)

Selby tries to convince the Thief that money to charities should come from voluntary, and not forced, donations but he is unmoved by her objections:

You don't deny that Robin Hood is a folk hero. [...] Look, the reason I went into this. I've got friends who do the same thing but in their case for political motives. They rob banks for liberation movements. But I'm a pacifist. I don't want the money I steal spent on guns. I'd rather have it spent on medicines. I'd rather give it to poor farmers to buy equipment. I'm aiming to personally redistribute the wealth of the world. (Ibid.)

The thief reacts indignantly to Selby's timid objection that she and her charity are not supposed to accept money coming from criminal activity:

Then what are you in charity for? You sound like my friends in liberation. But I don't agree. I believe in charities. If every man, woman and child in the western world stole a thousand pounds a year – [...] How else? I'm not interested in politics. I believe in charities. If his company doesn't pay the ransom by midnight I'm going to shoot him. And if your charity doesn't accept the money I'm going to shoot him. And if you stand out there saying stupid things I'm going to shoot you. So think about it. (Ibid., 201)

The end of the kidnapping is not shown nor told, but the money actually reaches the charity. In scene 45 we see Selby, Price and Dent discussing how to use a large money surplus left at the end of the financial year, the origin of which is explained by Dent: “[With] Sir Arthur's legacy we have a greater surplus than usual”. (Ibid., 203) This could hint at Sir Arthur's death during his kidnapping – assuming that the charity was mentioned in his will – or discretely refer to his ransom. Both ways,

it looks as the Thief has succeeded in having it his way, demonstrating that the boundaries among business, charity and crime can become very blurred.

Churchill pointing at the Monty Pythons as a source of inspiration leaves no doubt that *The After-Dinner Joke* was meant to be a comic play. Also the Mayor's love of pythons can be considered an overt homage to the comic group. Apart from that, the Python's influence is evident in characters, humour and structure. As for the characters, for instance, the Thief could be linked to a Monty Python character, Dennis Moore, who appears in the eleventh episode of the third series of the *Flying Circus*, broadcast on 4 January 1973. Dennis Moore is a seventeenth-century highwayman whose intent is to redistribute wealth single-handedly. Unfortunately, he is efficient as a thief but inept as a planner, and so he bleeds nobles dry reducing them to poverty while making poor peasants rich: unperturbed, he goes on robbing the former. Initially as Dennis Moore gallops to his ventures he is accompanied by the chorus: "Dennis Moore, Dennis Moore/ [...] he steals from the rich and/gives to the poor". (Chapman etc. 2, 196) He understands that something has gone wrong when the lyrics become:

Dennis Moore, Dennis Moore
 Riding through the land
 Dennis Moore, Dennis Moore
 Without a merry band.
 He steals from the poor and gives to the rich
 Stupid bitch. (Ibid., 208).

Dennis asks the chorus to repeat what they have just said and finally understands his mistake: "Wait a tic ... blimey, this redistribution of wealth is trickier than I thought". (Ibid.) Obviously, the lone hero who aims at putting the world to rights is not a Monty Python invention; yet the recurrence of the idea of single-handedly redistributing wealth, and not just providing for the immediate needs of the poor, is intriguing. Apart from this and other characters, it is apparent that Churchill had the Monty Python's brand of comedy in mind when she wrote *The After-Dinner Joke*: despite dealing with social and political factual problems, Churchill resorts to a surreal humour that has much in common with what Monty Python did in their sketches.

In the *Flying Circus* the maximum degree of surrealism is provided by Terry Gillian's animations, in which anything may happen. For instance, this is what goes on in the second episode of the first series:²⁰³

ANIMATION: We see a cowboy just having been shot. This leads into a cartoon film, which include a carnivorous pram and music from Rodin's statue 'The Kiss'. Then a protest march appears carrying banners. Close in on banners which read: End

²⁰³ Visible at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYgqdaI-NRg> last accessed 30/09/2018.

discrimination; Mice is Nice; Ho Ho Ho Traps Must Go; Hands Off Mice; Repeal Anti-Mouse Laws Now. (Chapman etc. 1990 1, 25)

In *The After-Dinner Joke* there are no animations and such extremes are not reached but, for instance, in scene 13 the costumer of a liqueur shop orders a bottle of whisky and is given a pig instead, the underlying joke being that Selby has just observed that sending a pig to a poor country costs as much as a bottle of whisky in a shop. (Churchill 1993, 180-181) Visual surrealism apart, Monty Python often perform actions and situations that, absurd as they may be, are nonetheless connected to and satirize some British engrained social features. An example is to be found in Monty Python's eleventh episode of the third series, in which a fictitious TV programme titled "Prejudice" is introduced by Michel Palin with this speech:

Good evening and welcome to another edition of "Prejudice" – the show that gives you a chance to have a go at Wops, Krauts, Nigs, Eyeties, Gippos, Bubbles, Froggies, Chinks, Yidds, Jocks, Polacks, Paddies and Dagoes. [...] SUPERIMPOSED CAPTION: 'ALL FACTS VERIFIED BY RHODESIAN POLICE'. (Chapman etc. 2 1990, 208)

Needless to say, such a TV programme was never broadcast. Yet the very wide choice of racially derogatory terms is a fact of the English language – the most common one is not even mentioned here, probably for being too offensive to be joked about – and so is the insular mindset of a part of the British population; also the ambiguous, to say the least, attitude of the Tory government then in office towards openly racist Rhodesia was hardly disputable. Similarly, the Upperclass Twit of the Year contest of episode 12 of series 1 is not realistic, but, since it includes such trials as Kicking the Beggar, Waking the Neighbour – by slamming the door of a sport car – and Insulting the Waiter (Chapman etc. 1 1990, 155-58), it reflects – at least according to the Monty Python – some habits of the British upper-class, demonstrating that the borders between real and absurd can become very thin. It is worthy of note that Churchill employs the same absurd-yet-real, and vice versa, techniques when dealing with the British upper-class. In scene 10 Selby is seen conversing with Bruce Wingfield, a rich manager, while the latter practices golf in his lawn. Selby is asking for a contribution to her charity, but Bruce objects that he is already funding a few:

Bruce: There's one to support Eton College and one to support the London Clinic²⁰⁴ and one –:

Selby: But those are charities that help the rich. I thought charities had to help the poor.

Bruce: Are you getting political?

Selby: No no no.

[...]

²⁰⁴ The London Clinic is a private hospital.

Bruce: I've found something the government hasn't covered and I'm setting up a charity to benefit company directors called Bruce Wingfield, five foot ten, brown hair, living in Englefield Avenue, and playing golf.

Selby: Would you be a beneficiary of this charity?

Bruce: As it happens, yes, I would.

Selby: You can't do that. It has to be a broader category. The charity commissioners would never allow it.

Bruce: Are you quite sure?

Selby: Almost. [...] You've already got a two-car garage.

Bruce: Are you getting political?

Selby: No no no no no, I'm not getting political, no – (Churchill 178-179)

It is absurd that one individual may devote a charity to himself, but it is only slightly less so that institutions servicing the upper-class such as Eton College and the London Clinic may be considered charities. The implied question is that of tax deductibility of donations, which is touched upon by Price when he warns Selby of its importance before a meeting with some businessmen: "I'd like you to learn all about tax concessions so you can talk to them". (Ibid., 189) Churchill suggests that tax deductions, making it almost profitable to donate to institutions that may ultimately benefit the donator, are an absurdity of enormous proportions. And, incidentally, it looks as if Bruce Wingfield could be a worthy contestant for Upperclass Twit of the Year.

In the above examples, the focus is on the absurd basis of social and political reality. Another common feature in the *Flying Circus* is a surreal treatment of real issues. In the thirteenth episode of the second series a shipwrecked crew on a lifeboat turns to cannibalism in order to survive. This prompts a letter of protest by a TV viewer:

As a naval officer I abhor the implication that the Royal Navy is a haven for cannibalism. It is well known that we now have the problem relatively under control and that it is the RAF who now suffer the largest casualties in this area. And what do you think the Argylls²⁰⁵ ate in Aden. Arabs? (Ibid., 42)

In the sixth episode of the third series the issue of cannibalism is touched upon again by a Vice Admiral, this time in preparation of an expedition to a mysterious Lake Pahoe:

[M]ay I take this opportunity of emphasizing that there is no cannibalism in the British Navy. Absolutely none, and when I say none, I mean there is a certain amount, more than we are prepared to admit, but all new ratings are warned that if they wake up in the morning and find toothmarks at all anywhere on their bodies, they're to tell me

²⁰⁵ The Argyll Highlanders fought what is considered the last battle of the British Empire in Aden in 1967.

immediately so that I can immediately take every measure to hush the whole thing up. (Chapman etc. 2, 130)

It is realistic that human beings in extreme conditions may turn to cannibalism; and it is so that military authorities may cover up potentially embarrassing situations – in fact, some clues suggest that cannibalism here may be a code name for homosexuality. The comic effect is born out of the trivializing of cannibalism as a mere cause for embarrassment, suitable for polemical use in discussing the respective merits of armed forces. Something of the kind happens in scene 16 of *The After-Dinner Joke*, in which a collector tries successfully to overcome the diffidence of a potential donor explaining that this is the only way to keep Africans quiet:

Man: Money to the blacks? [...] If I give them money they'll recover and land on the Sussex coast at dead of night and come and live next door.

Collector: No, if you don't give they'll get angry and all the ones that haven't died will get the atom bomb from Russia and drop it on you. [If you give] they'll be very grateful and stay where they belong and take O level English Literature and buy all our exports and wish they were still in the Empire and remember you in their prayers and think you're great, man". (Churchill 1993, 182)

The premises of the Collector's speech are utterly serious and sound: large parts of the African population were starving at the time – as nowadays, actually – which caused mass migration: therefore, reducing poverty could reduce migrations and lead to a future of peace. Also, the USSR supporting and financing liberation movements in Africa is a historical fact. The Man apparently trivializes the issue of famine in Africa, turning it into a problem of respectability of his neighborhood; in reality he uses the same argument as Enoch Powell in his "Rivers of Blood" speech, that the arrival of a black person is enough to attract many more, turning a street into a "place of noise and confusion" (see p. 148); the collector follows his argument, hyperbolically underlining the respective consequences of a policy of hostility or solidarity. It is apparent that, while humouring the audience, Churchill never fails to remind them that xenophobic thinking is not just wrong, it is also counterproductive and dangerous.

Apart from these shifts between reality and absurdity, a common strategy in the *Flying Circus* is the final statement that contradicts and reverts all that had been said before. A well-known example in the *Flying Circus* is the *Lumberjack Song*, in which the eponymous character, after describing his virile life cutting trees in British Columbia, with the same enthusiasm tells of his night-life as a transvestite. (Chapman etc. 1990 1, 114-15) An imaginary letter of protest for this sketch uses the same final reversal to achieve a comic effect:

Dear Sir, I wish to complain in the strongest possible terms about the song which you have just broadcast, about the lumberjack who wears women's clothes. Many of my best friends are lumberjacks and only a few of them are transvestites. (Ibid.)

In *The After-Dinner Joke* we find a similar unexpected turn of speech in the letter of a woman protesting against a too strong Oxfam advert:

Dear sir, I have given to your charity for many years but I will demand my money back if there are any more disgusting appeals blaming me for the state of the world. I don't mind being told a rich person has a duty to give crumbs off his plate to the poor man at the gate, but I won't stand for being told I'm wrong to be rich, especially when I'm not. (Ibid., 194)

It is funny that the lady would feel touched even without being rich, but it also holds a deeper truth: that one effect of colonization was to create in the British lower classes the feeling to be on the side of the rich for belonging to the same ethnic group. This is, in comic terms, the same idea expressed in Edgar's *Our Own People* by the Asian woman Bhandari in her confrontation with NF militant Dawson: "They give you whiteness so that you can put up with the rest". (Edgar 1997, 75) Again, for Churchill causing laughter is never an end in itself, but an occasion to raise, if not political consciousness, at least critical thinking.

Strategies of humour apart, *The After-Dinner Joke* shares its fragmentary structure with the *Flying Circus*. In the latter, short scenes are shown in succession, and the unifying pattern is usually provided by the repeated appearance of a character or of a simple image. For instance, in the eighth episode of the first series we see actions as different as a Colonel in conversation with two Mafiosi offering protection for his army base, an engaged couple trying to buy a bed, two hermits discussing their lifestyle and a customer trying to return a dead parrot to the pet shop. The unifying pattern is provided by the Colonel truncating every sketch for being too silly. (ibid., 96-108) In the *After-Dinner Joke* there is a similar variety of characters – among others, a group of people taking part in a sponsored fast, (Ibid., 176) a paedophilic popstar (Ibid., 187) and an old-fashioned lady with a knitted hat (Ibid., 189) – and situations, as the images of a sponsored walk (Ibid., 181) or a hurricane (Ibid., 209). What keeps all these different elements together is on the one hand the progression of the main plot, that is Selby's vicissitudes; on the other the dialogue between her and the Mayor, which is outside a chronological frame, since it goes on until the end of the play but has to be placed in the very early phase of Selby's charitable work. In the first series of the *Flying Circus* a further element of unity was provided by the "It's" man, who appeared at the beginning and the end of every episode: played by Michel Palin, he was usually dressed in rags and caught in extremely difficult circumstances, such as on the point of drowning or falling from a cliff, and had only the time to pronounce the phrase "It's" that was then completed by a professional-sounding announcer saying: "Monty Pythons Flying Circus". At the end, he appeared again in the same predicament.²⁰⁶ Similarly, Selby appears at both the beginning and the end of *The After-Dinner Joke* in a reverted position: "**Price** is sitting behind a large desk; **Selby** is standing in front of it". (Churchill 1993, 169); "**Selby** sitting behind a large desk". (Ibid., 221) The protagonist is in a higher

²⁰⁶ The "It's" man was present in the opening scenes of all the four series of the *Flying Circus*, but only in the first series he also closed the show.

social and economic position, since she is sitting at a desk instead of standing in front of it, but this promotion has come at the cost of bitter disillusionment and of personal defeat. This seeming happy ending in effect reinforces the idea of the uselessness of charities' work since the reappearance of the "large desk" as the alpha and omega of the whole story suggests a circularity of action that gives no hope that things can actually be changed by charitable action. Churchill's strongest suggestion of the uselessness, or worse, of charities comes in scene 61, in which Selby relives her rescue from the kidnappers in a dream form. The whole scene is blackly funny, but the image is not less disturbing and desperate:

The Guerrillas and the Peasants stand at the back of a rifle-range being shot at by Businessmen. As they are wounded they crawl off and are replaced by others. Behind the stall, Price, Dent and Selby are bandaging wounds and sending them back in.

Selby: I'll have you patched up in no time and then you can go and be shot at again. (Ibid., 219)

Selby's surreal task of bandaging peasants only to have them shot at again is the tombstone on the idea that charities may be substantially useful. When we next see Selby she is in a hospital bed after her rescue, visited by Price. During his visit, he is eager to make it clear that she said something unpleasant or improper while burning with fever, adding that he will forget it, provided she does the same:

It's lucky those soldiers rescued you when they did because we'd already allocated the quarter of a million, [...] so we couldn't have paid the ransom if we'd wanted to. And you weren't even caught in the crossfire. [...] And you're feeling better, are you? Because when you first arrived back in England you were quite delirious. I'm sure you've forgotten the things you said to me. And I've decided to forget them too. (Churchill 1993, 219)

Price is an avuncular figure and he seems genuinely interested in his charities, even if when it comes to business he knows, so to speak, which side his bread is buttered on. This is particularly evident in the remainder of this scene, in which what he proposes to Selby is just short of a bribe, that is a secure and lucrative employment in exchange for her silence about her newly acquired perspective on the problems of the poor countries. As clearly shown in Selby's nightmare, she had understood a thing or two about post-colonial exploitation. This sort of epiphany for Selby is triggered by a chance encounter on a plane in scene 55 with the representative of a banana company. He is a funny character, since he is so obsessed with the fear of a possible hijacking as to always take a cyanide pill with him; yet he has a dark side, as he is extremely worried for the well-being of his banana plantations, and not in the least for human beings. He even blames the destruction of his precious bananas on the victims of the hurricane for having deforested the hills, regardless of the fact that they were forced to do so to grow some food for themselves. The causes of the

disaster are explained in terms which leave no doubt about their economic, and not 'natural', roots, and Selby loses her composure for the first time:

Selby: Are you saying the 8,000 deaths in this hurricane were caused by the landowners and the banana companies taking the valleys to grow bananas?

Passenger: Are you some kind of communist? Are you going to hi-jack this airplane?

Selby: No.

Passenger: Why don't you hi-jack this airplane and go to Cuba?²⁰⁷

Selby: Why don't you take your cyanide capsule?

[...]

Passenger: Stewardess. I've caught a hi-jacker.

Selby: No, really, there's been a misunderstanding. (Ibid., 213)

After all her adventures, Selby goes back to business, a dejected figure for all the economic advantages she may have gained. The character of the morally defeated do-gooder is not an absolute novelty in contemporary theatre: one only has to think of Harry Trench in Shaw's *Widowers' Houses* (1892). Yet, given what have been said about Churchill being "the daughter of Brecht" (Buffini) in the 1970s, it is intriguing to consider that she may have drawn some inspiration from Brecht's *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachthöfe* [*St Joan of the Stockyards*], especially examining what the two plays have in common. Brecht's play was broadcast by German radio in 1932, but never performed on stage during Brecht's lifetime, as it was premiered in Hamburg in 1959. This is the plot: Joan Dark, a committed member of the Black Straw Hats – a travesty of the Salvation Army – opposes revolutionary violence with Christian values against the backdrop of a harsh industrial dispute in the meatpacking district of Chicago. Spurred by a genuine will to remedy social ills she starts a journey of discovery that gets her in touch with both the striking workers of the stockyards and with the meat tycoon Pierpont Mauler. After many traumatic events, she has to concede that she was wrong in believing in a peaceful solution, and that violent action is the only way to better things, but it is too late, as the strike at the stockyards has failed. In the end she dies of pneumonia and the Chicago industrialists turn her into a saintly figure with the aim of keeping social peace while offering lower wages to the workers. The most apparent similarity between Selby and Joan Dark is that both are wide-eyed idealists – too idealistic for their own good – whose naivete is endearing until it becomes dangerous. Their political and social education takes the form of a progressive disillusionment in the basic goodness of humankind, as both of them suffer at the hands of those whom they wanted to help: Joan has her precious scarf stolen while standing outside the gates of the stockyards, which results in her catching pneumonia, and Selby is kidnapped by starving peasants turned guerrillas. Furthermore, both Joan and Selby draw death and pain on the very people they intended to help. Selby does so indirectly, as her kidnapping

²⁰⁷ The hijacking of a plane is the subject of a Monty Python's sketch, with the difference that the hijacker tries to divert to Luton a Cuba-bound flight. (Chapman etc. 1, 210-212)

prompts a military action; Joan is more directly responsible for what happens as she does not deliver to the workers a message of the striking committee urging them to continue the strike, for fear of causing violent actions. And both are turned into heroines by unscrupulous journalists. In Brecht's play Joan is accosted by some reporters under a snowfall outside the gates of the stockyards, and she is reluctant to talk with them.

The Reporters: We've got the story right here, you can read it in bold type on the front page: [...] Joan Dark, Our Lady of the Stockyards, says God is on the side of the packing house workers.

Joan: I never said anything of the kind.

The Reporters: We want to tell you, Miss Dark, that public opinion is with you. [...] This'll give your Black Straw Hats a big boost.

Joan: I'm not with the Black Straw Hats any more.

The Reporters: That can't be. As far as we're concerned, you'll always be a Black Straw Hat. (Brecht 1991, 77)

Selby's conversation with a journalist could be considered a reversal of Joan's interview, as it takes place in the hot climate of a tropical country, so hot that she sometimes hallucinates, and she is keen to talk, since she wants to send a message to her charity. The atmosphere is altogether bizarre more than tragic, yet the journalist shows the same will to distort what she says:

Selby: Are you really there? [...] Because sometimes I see things. [...] This is the message. Our share of the disaster emergency fund should be divided between the peasants' league and the liberation movement. [...] So tell Mr Price, the best way to help the people here is to help them with what they're doing, which is to organise to fight oppression, and the quarter of a million pounds should all be given to help that struggle.

Journalist: They are demanding a quarter of a million pounds ransom and have submitted you to a gruelling session of brainwashing.

Selby: Tell them I'm getting a bit bored sitting here under the tree. It gets very hot. (Churchill 1993, 217-8)

At the end Joan dies, and Selby goes back to business. *The After-Dinner Joke* is not a tragedy, yet the finales of the two plays convey the same message, that capitalism can make everything profitable, including tragic experiences and death itself, as shown in the chorus of the capitalists to cover Joan's last words in *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachtöfe*. (Brecht 1993, 108) Price is not less cynical in hinting that Selby's misfortunes may result in a valuable development of her business skills: "You've gained a great deal of experience and bring more to your work". (Churchill 1993, 220) In absence of a declaration by Churchill it would not be justified to establish a straight relationship between *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachtöfe* and the *After-Dinner Joke*, yet, given the above point of contacts, I think that it would

not be too far-fetched to connect this play with “Brecht’s general influence on her work that is informal and often unconscious”. (Reinelt 1996, 86)

The published contributions about Churchill this study is based upon are: Itzin’s *Stages in the Revolution* as regards her work up to 1979; Aston’s *Caryl Churchill*, Luckhurst’s *Caryl Churchill* and Gobert’s *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill* as regards Churchill’s overall career, plus the third chapter in Reinelt’s *After Brecht: British Epic Theatre* on the relationship between socialist feminism and Brechtian dramaturgy. As regards the single works, *NEO* is accorded some short space in all these studies. *Vinegar Tom* is mostly dealt with in Aston’s book, especially as regards the songs. As for *Vinegar Tom* and *Monstrous Regiment*’s works, I have relied also on the new *Monstrous Regiment* web-site <http://monstrousregiment.co.uk/> started in January 2019, in which a few reviews from newspapers and audio recordings can be found. *The After-Dinner Joke* is accorded very little space in all the above, with the exception of Darren Gobert’s book, in which the plot is described, with some details about the BBC production. Despite Churchill’s declared admiration for the Monty Python, the relationship between *The Flying Circus* and *The After-Dinner Joke* is not explored in any of the above essays; in the same way, despite the much studied influence of Brecht’s dramaturgy on Churchill, the points of contact between *The After-Dinner Joke* and *Die Heilige Johanna der Schlachtöfe* have never been touched upon, at least to my knowledge.

Chapter 4: Howard Barker

In the introduction to her already quoted *David Edgar Playwright and Politician* Elisabeth Swain recorded the result of the long march – or “strategic penetration”, an expression coined by Trevor Griffiths and quoted by Edgar (Edgar 1988, 37) to which Itzin objected (Itzin 1983, 19) – of Edgar’s generation of playwrights from the theatrical fringe to London’s subsidized theatres:

[M]ost of the established political writers such as Edward Bond, David Hare, Steven Poliakoff, Howard Barker, Howard Brenton, Caryl Churchill, Barrie Keeffe, and David Edgar, today have their plays performed in ‘establishment’ theatres (less so in the United States) where a larger audience can be reached. (Swain 1986, 14-15)

In the light of Barker’s production in the last thirty years, it is somehow surprising to see him classified as an “established political writer” alongside, among others, Edgar and Brenton; yet until the mid-1980s this label was well-founded as, for instance, interviewed by Itzin for her *Stages of the Revolution*, he had been straightforward in defining his political leanings:

[U]nquestionably a socialist writer. I’ve always been a socialist, and have actually been on the Stalinist wing of socialism. A lot of my work is quite clearly pessimistic and I think the reason for that is that it is very difficult to be an optimistic socialist in England [...] My father was an active trades unionist, an old hard-line Stalinist. I was brought up to be interested in politics. (quoted in Itzin 1980, 250)

One difference with the playwrights of the above-mentioned list – with the exception of Edward Bond – was that Barker did not come from the middle-class, but from “a stable working-class background – relatively prosperous and socially ambitious, with my parents who believed passionately in the idea of ‘good education’”. (quoted in Tussler 1981, 184) As a consequence of his working-class origin, Barker was not politicized by the events of 1968, that even had a contrary effect on him:

Then I went to university and read history. I found it a shock, a vast and alien environment peopled by baying public schoolboys. I began a process of withdrawal which made me suspicious of, and ignorant of, the politicization of 1968. This was peculiar because I had very strong political instincts. I had a fundamental Stalinist education from my father who was a shop steward, and a very developed sense of class – class conflict if not class struggle. (Quoted in Brown, 2011, 20)

In point of fact, a few of the plays he produced in the 1970s can be considered political in a strict sense: *That Good Between Us* (1977) dealt with a possible authoritarian turn of a Labour government; *Fair Slaughter* (1977) staged the life-long struggle for socialism of a communist militant; *The Hang of the Gaol* (1978) showed how much the Labour Party had lost its socialist inspiration, becoming a structure of power. In a 1980 interview with Malcolm Hay and Simon Trussler,

Barker gave an early sign that he considered closed his season of political playwriting:

*Downchild*²⁰⁸ is my final play on English society and politics. I hope I've made a significant contribution in describing a society and a time. I think, taken as a body, my 'English' plays amount to an indictment and a compulsive collection of writing. But, of course, I cannot and do not want to go on doing this. (quoted in Brown 2011, 35)

Barker did not give up completely on 'English' plays, since in 1983 he produced *Crimes in Hot Countries*, set among English expatriates in an unnamed English colony, and *A Passion in Six Days*, a play directly dealing with the inner life of the Labour Party. Furthermore, a few of Barker's plays from the first half of the 1980s resonated with political themes, even if they were not set in contemporary England. For instance, *The Power of the Dog* (1984), was a meditation on power based upon a meeting at the Kremlin between Stalin and Churchill; *Scenes from an Execution* (1984) staged the struggle of a sixteenth century Venetian female painter against the rulers of the city; *The Castle* (1985) dealt with a group of women who create an alternative society while the men are away for the Crusades. The watershed in Barker's production came with his "Fortynine asides for a tragic theatre" – published in *The Guardian* of 10 February 1986 – a manifesto in which Barker expressed in epigrammatic and often paradoxical form, his working programme for the time coming:

The time for satire is ended. Nothing can be satirized in the authoritarian state. It is culture reduced to playing the spoons.

The authoritarian art form is the musical.

The accountant is the new censor. The accountant claps his hands at the full theatre. The official socialist also hankers for the full theatre. But full for what?

After the carnival, after the removal of the masks, you are precisely who you were before. After the tragedy, you are not certain who you are.

Some people want to know pain. There is no truth on the cheap.

People will endure anything for a grain of truth.

But not all people. Therefore a tragic theatre will be elitist.

The theatre must start to take its audience seriously. It must stop telling them stories they can understand.

You emerge from tragedy equipped against lies. After the musical, you are anyone's fool. (Barker 1993, 17-19)

These "asides" start from a general reassessment, on Barker's part, of theatre production in the context of Thatcher's second term in office. Barker quotes three theatrical forms: satire, musical and tragedy. Essentially, satire attacks power by making fun of it, and much of Barker's production of the 1970s could be labelled

²⁰⁸ *Downchild* was written in 1977 but remained unperformed until 1985.

as satirical, especially his greatest commercial and critical success, *Stripwell* (1975). As Barker himself put it, satire came naturally to him: “[s]atire had been one of my foundations, a skill I brought with me to the theatre, ready-made”. (Ibid., 21) By decreeing the end of this form, or at least of its usefulness, Barker implied that the authoritarian state was too strong to be bothered by it. The musical, with its highly professionalized casts, splendid costumes and sets, and escapist ideology, was the big sensation of the 1980s. According to Michael Billington: “The musical was Thatcherism in action”. (Billington 2007, 284) Its capacity to accumulate vast profits – especially in the capable hands of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Cameron Mackintosh – was held up by Thatcher herself as an example of what theatre should do to avoid depending on state assistance. (Ibid.) The label of “authoritarian art form” is therefore arguably historically accurate in the frame of triumphant Thatcherism. Moreover, Barker’s suggestion that financial solvency had become a new form of censorship was spot-on in a decade in which, quoting Billington again: “[b]ums on seats’ changed from a vulgar Barnumesque mantra into a form of ministerial holy writ”. (Ibid., 322) The only remaining meaningful theatrical form was tragedy, which Barker adopted as his only way of expression. In a successive article published by the *Guardian* of 22 August 1988 with the title “The triumph in defeat” Barker outlined the features of his personal tragic form, that he baptized “Theatre of Catastrophe”:

The abolition of routine distinction between good and bad actions, the sense that good and evil co-exist within the same psyche, that freedom and kindness may not be compatible, that pity is both a poison and an erotic stimulant, that laughter might be as often oppressive as is rarely liberating, all these constitute the territory of a new theatrical practice, which lends its audience the potential of re-assessment in the light of dramatic action. The consequence of this is a modern form of tragedy which I would call Catastrophism. The fallacy most warmly embraced by the entertainment industry in times of moral uncertainty is the one which insists depressed people hunger for song and oblivion. But as many hunger for the problem to be embraced as hunger for its abolition. A theatre of Catastrophe [...] inhabits the area of maximum risk, both to the imagination and invention of its author, and to the comfort of its audience. (Barker 1993, 52)

Since then Barker’s playwriting decidedly took to the path sketched above, and in the same year 1988 he founded The Wrestling School, a company wholly devoted to the staging of his plays. This study will concentrate on two plays of the early phase of Barker’s production, *One Afternoon on the 63rd Level of the North Face of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great* and *Cheek*, and on the above mentioned *A Passion in Six Days*, Barker’s farewell to satire. The two early plays – both performed in 1970 – focus on the issue of work, on which Barker had a quite original viewpoint:

It’s very important for the working class to avoid work. It’s a very middle-class, puritanical concept to see evils in working-class habits like gambling. For them it’s a means of not working and the avoidance of the work experience is very basic to the working class. It annoys me when socialists glorify work, when all the work available is of a soul-destroying nature, and always likely to be. (quoted in Itzin 1980, 251)

In *One Afternoon on the 63rd Level of the North Face of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great*, slavery becomes an opportunity to reflect on factory life, with interesting implications regarding capitalist work organization. *Cheek* centres on a young proletarian's struggle to avoid work, mixing economic with sexual matters against the backdrop of an Oedipal relationship among mother, father and son. *A Passion in Six Days* anticipates some of the themes of the Theatre of Catastrophe, for instance contrasting the rationality of political discourse with the unstoppable force of sexual desire.

4.1 The Enemy is Marching at your Head.

One Afternoon on the 63rd Level of the North Face of the Pyramid of Cheops the Great (from here on *One Afternoon*) was broadcast by BBC Radio 4 on 24 April 1970. The play starts with an introduction in which some general facts about Cheops' pyramid are presented by a Narrator, followed by building-site noises:

The astonishing thing about the pyramid of Cheops is that, apart from the passages, and the tombs to which they lead, it is absolutely solid. [...] Over 100,000 slaves were engaged on this single structure, which took over twenty years to build. (*Fade in sound of vast building site, sounds of picks and shovels, heaves, groans, etc. Then, a long note on a whistle*). (Barker 1970, 1)

Three slaves are heard speaking, Myopes, Halitoses and Caries: they complain about the hardness of work and the shortness of pauses. Their conversation sounds like any other that could be heard in a factory's canteen in contemporary Britain, if not for the mentioning of galleys and temples:

Halitoses: This is the worse [sic] job I've ever been on. You was on a temple before, weren't you? Up the Valley of Kings?

Myopes: Who, me? Yeah, I've been on temples up there.

Halitoses: Tell us about it on the temples.

Myopes: Same. Same as an effing pyramid. All bloody work.

Halitoses: Same, is it.

Myopes: Slavery

(*Pause*)

Halitoses: I was on the gallies before I came here. [...] Luxury it was. Luxury compared to this. [...] I had no complaints. I mean – we got a good beating, twice a day, and the food was muck – but we did travel. That's what I liked, the travelling. (Ibid, 2)

The Foreman adds to the general industrial atmosphere and, if not for the frequent use of the whip, could pass for an overseer in a factory:

This ain't good enough. There's been complaints about you slackers! You should be twenty feet further up than this! His highness ain't very pleased – I can tell you that, quite confidentially like, I can tell you he's not at all happy.

(Sound of cracking whip)

You're beyond my comprehension. It's as though you don't care²⁰⁹ about this pyramid. I'm a good sort, I'm a considerate man, I don't bear grudges, but I don't feel I'm getting my reward in life. I don't feel you're making any effort for me. I feel – I feel neglected. (Ibid., 3)

As a way of improving the productivity, a new slave, Cerebes, is added to the group. He is far too slim and delicate to make a real difference; furthermore, he starts to prod his fellows for their passive acceptance of their condition, while also questioning the whole system:

But surely you must – don't you feel like saying – I've had enough? [...] You could all lay down your tools – you could just stop working. [...] Why don't you do something instead of just complaining to yourselves! [...] You must enjoy being slaves! (Ibid., 6)

Cerebes does not limit himself to provoking his fellows, but he also challenges the authority of the foreman and an army officer:

This man in charge behaves worse than an animal himself. I for one am not prepared to take part in the construction of this absurd geometrical farce. I demand you let me free. *(During this speech silence has covered the whole site. Now there is an astonished pause)*. (Ibid., 7)

As a consequence of this act of defiance Cerebes is taken away by the army officer, and his fellow slaves assume that they are not going to see him again. To their surprise he reappears, beaten and bleeding, but alive. The foreman cannot believe his eyes and the slaves cheer the survivor, but they soon notice that the experience has completely changed him: he has come to the conclusion that open rebellion is pointless and will only bring violent retribution on them. Cerebes looks and sounds, to all appearances, repentant: "I made a mistake. I was wrong. I could have been dead. They only spared me because I was so... innocent". (Ibid., 10) His fellow slaves try to convince him that his action has been an inspiration for all the work force and that it could take to rebellion, but Cerebes discourages them as he has seen that brute force would prevail anyway:

You don't understand – I was stupid – that kind of resistance – it was a mistake. I was imploring them for mercy. They broke me, I was completely broken down. [...] The pyramid is ugly, pointless, an insult to the men who build it. Right? Thousands of men have died here, all for the vanity of one idle man – the Pharaoh [sic]. Am I right? [...] If we revolt – we are all killed – then more slaves are brought here. (Ibid., 11)

Given the hopelessness of the situation, Cerebes suggests an action intended as a message to posterity, making of the pyramid a monument to the ferocity of humankind:

One way or another, the pyramid's going to be built. There's nothing you can do about it. So we turn the table on the Pharaoh. Instead of it being his wonderful achievement,

²⁰⁹ Underlined in the original.

we make it into a symbol of our own. [...] We make it say to the world – look at this ugly thing we built, this ridicule triangle, this great lump of useless masonry that took us slaves scores of years to build – we say, look at this wretched thing and think of all the suffering that went into it, heed the useless labour of men – and the stupid vanity of power. [...] When people look at it in years to come, you know what they’ll say? They’ll say, look at this ugly thing there – it must have taken years! And it’s so gawky, so stupid, the product of a diseased imagination, the phantasy of a megalomaniac! And they’ll think of us, the hopeless ones, the poor devils who spent their lives putting it up. (*pause*) And then they’ll pause, and realise how man can misuse his fellows. (Ibid., 12)

Effective as it may be, Cerebes’ rhetoric does not fully convince his mates, since they long for some immediate action, not for a message to posterity. Consequently, he changes his strategy and invites them to consider how this form of protest could, at least, unbalance “them”, that is the foreman, the officer, and also the superior power, the Pharaoh:

[I]t’s the only kind of protest we can make. Don’t you see, if we work like fiends, it’ll throw out all their calculations, they won’t know what’s happening. It’ll be a sock in the eye for all of them. [...] It’ll do tremendous harm. They won’t know what’s come over them. (Ibid., 12- 13)

This time they slaves are persuaded and they start working at great rhythm, punctuating their activity with hoorays when a block of stone is put into position. Faced with this outburst of activity, the foreman is at first pleased, then worried and finally bewildered, and so he calls the army officer for help and advice. The officer assumes that this is some kind of protest and that the newcomer must be responsible for it, and decides to arrest him. The slaves try to oppose his arrest, but Cerebes stops them:

No, you mustn’t lift a finger to save me! Don’t you see, that would be playing into their hands? This is the one thing we have! This is the supreme protest, the ultimate resistance! Keep it up! Keep working furiously – build the greatest farce in the world! Make it the most famous joke in the world! (Ibid., 15)

Cerebes is lead off and slaves start working even more enthusiastically than before, to the foreman’s growing bewilderment. There is a change of scene, and then a final coup de théâtre:

(A vast shout goes up. Then, furious sounds of work. After a few moments, fade out)

(Sound of a massive door closing, followed by footsteps along a marble floor. After what seems an interminable time, the footsteps come to a halt)

Servile official: Your majesty, your most royal highness, most blessed of the gods, our royal Pharaoh, I bring you the latest reports from the building site on the Nile. [...] The slaves have, as usual, worked at an unprecedented rate. The pyramid has risen over fifteen feet in a week. They talk of nothing but their dear friend Cerebes.

Cerebes (alias Cheops): I’ve always believed that you only achieve real satisfaction through exerting oneself to the full. [...] I can’t help feeling I’ll be blessed in the

Underworld. I've done so much good. I've been a very good person. [...] I feel I've made a lot of miserable people happy, and I deserve my little successes. (Ibid., 16)

The play ends with a commentary from the Narrator, a final insult to the slaves, as the “farce”, instead of a memorial to men’s exploitation of men, has become a monument to human enterprising spirit:

No visitor to Egypt can fail to be moved by the sheer majesty of the great pyramid of Cheops. Imposing, massive, steeped in history, an imperishable monument to the greatness of Egyptian culture, the pyramid recalls a glorious era in the gradually unfolding story of man and his never ending quest for grandeur and glory. (Ibid.)

Referring to *One Afternoon* and two other radio plays that would be broadcast soon after – *Henry V in Two Parts* (1971) and *Herman with Millie and Mick* (1972), Barker remarked: “They are original, clever, young man’s plays”. (quoted in Brown, 19) An exposition of the gullibility of the lower classes is the common feature of these three plays. In *Henry V in Two Parts* a soldier who fought at Agincourt and had taken seriously the king’s speech, goes to him after the war for fraternal help, only to be sent away by the king with the words: “I do wish people wouldn’t take things literally. It’s a sign of immaturity”. (Quoted in Rabey 1989, 12) In *Herman with Millie and Mick*, Herman, a working-class boy, is tricked by his friend Mick into working for him virtually for free, notwithstanding his girlfriend Millie’s advice to the contrary. (Ibid. 14-15) David Rabey commented on Barker’s general attitude in these early plays: “In each case Barker demonstrates that there is no virtue in meekness or innocence, as these prove weaknesses by which the characters are ensnared into submissive roles in power structure whose overall structures they fall short of perceiving”. (Ibid., 15) For all its underlying pessimism, *One Afternoon*’s tone is generally humorous, the humour mostly originating from time dislocation. For instance, the foreman, even though he uses his whip quite liberally, respects scrupulously the slaves’ breaks from work, prompting the officer’s comment: “Tea breaks will be the downfall of the Egyptian Empire”. (Barker 1970, 10) In this satiric context, contemporary industrial terms are used or adapted to befit the situation of an enslaved workforce: slavery is called “labour relations”, (Barker 1970, 7) slaves are beaten up to make them “productivity conscious” (Ibid., 9) and whipping becomes “corporal incentive”. (Ibid., 10) Egyptian slaves are a transparent portrayal of the male British working-class, as relations among them are marked by solidarity, but also by violence and machoism, as in Caries’ hostile reception of the newcomer, charged with sexual innuendos: “Watch out – he looks a wild one. He’ll spring! ‘ere, where did you get your pretty nose? [...] Oi. Does he miss his mummy, then? Come to think of it, he’s rather pretty, I think I rather like our new boy”. (Barker 1970, 4)

Yet, the main problem of the slaves – and of the British working-class – according to Barker, seems to be a sum of credulity and bad leadership. It is intriguing how much *One Afternoon* echoes one of Brecht’s poems *Deutsche Kriegsfibel* [*From a German War Primer*]:

When it comes to marching many do not know
 That their enemy is marching at their head.
 The voice which gives them their orders
 Is their enemy's voice and
 The man who speaks of the enemy
 Is the enemy himself. (Brecht 1976, 289)

Brecht's poem was written before WW2 and was primarily intended as a warning to the German people against their Nazi rulers. Yet more recently it has been increasingly read as a warning to humankind in general and the working-class in particular against blindly trusting their leaders, especially self-appointed ones. In this sense, it was quoted by Susan Sontag in her answer to a survey on the political role of intellectuals:

On the subject of the presumption (it's worse than naivety) with which intellectuals subscribe to collective action when they know virtually nothing about what they are so pleased to have an opinion on, nobody said it better than one of the most compromised intellectuals of the 20th century, Bertolt Brecht (who surely knew whereof he spoke):

When it comes to marching many do not know [...]. (Quoted in Levi Bernard 2000, 255)

That the Pharaoh in disguise may pass for a workers' leader is a powerful warning, in a socialist perspective, against trusting the leadership of the Trade unions and of the Labour Party. Without charging this juvenile work with too much significance, it is undeniable that the betrayal of the working class by their leaders will be one central theme of Barker's production in his pre-1986 phase. I have already mentioned *That Good Between Us* and *The Hang of the Gaol* as examples of Baker's stressing the inadequacies of the Labour Party; *A Passion in Six Days* will be the subject of analysis below. But the play in which the theme of leadership in the working class is exposed most corrosively is *Stripwell* (1975). The main plot is simple: Stripwell is a judge who, in the first scene, sends a petty criminal to jail; the latter swears revenge and, in the last scene, will shoot Stripwell down. Between these two scenes many things happen: Stripwell has a wife, Dodie, a drug-smuggling son, Tim, a very young lover, Babs, and a very old father-in-law, Haughton Jarrow. The latter is a former Labour MP – his surname needs no comment – who was a member of a Ramsay MacDonald²¹⁰ cabinet and a trusted advisor to Harold Wilson. When he first appears on stage, he is looking meditatively at his estate and musing: "Two thousand acres under socialist rule... when there are more Labour millionaires than Tory ones, will we have won?". (Barker 1977, 16) Jarrow does not see any contradiction in this statement, and a witty and joyous amorality is his main feature, apparently shared by the leadership of his party. A grotesquely comic effect is achieved when he recalls that a visit by Harold Wilson – the name is never mentioned but the references are clear – in order to discuss

²¹⁰ James Ramsey MacDonald was a Labour Politician; he presided over three governments between 1924 and 1935, the last one mainly supported by Conservative votes.

relationship with the racist state of Rhodesia, ended with the Prime Minister eagerly going through Jarrow's collection of porn magazines, that its owner defined as: "Best in the Labour Party. Mediocre for the Tories". (Ibid., 36) Jarrow's lack of morals is a constant source of discomfort, and even hatred, for Stripwell, who is full of moral scruples, even if he does not always act accordingly. Talking with his wife, Stripwell stresses Jarrow's many changes of political positions:

This bloody man. [...] This former pacifist, this former anarchist, this former East End Lenin with his girls locked in his orbit ... this former docker's son among his Jersey herds. (Ibid., 19)

In an attempt to stop Stripwell berating her father, Dodie tells of an encounter she had a few years back with some steel workers in Jarrow's constituency in Wales, underlining his popularity: "They loved Jarrow. They thrived on him. If it hadn't been for Jarrow I think they might have... risen up". (Ibid., 20) Preventing a possible uprising by the workers may be considered a merit from the perspective of a liberal democracy, but is not what is expected of a socialist leader who boasted to have advised Attlee to be more determined in his work: "We were going to do away with private enterprise. We were going to exterminate it. I said to Attlee, Clem, we have a mandate to change the world...". (Ibid., 37)

As the disguised Pharaoh, Jarrow, willingly or unwillingly, is objectively more intent at controlling the workers than at leading them to new conquests. Barker never showed particular affinity with Brecht's dramaturgy, and in a 1987 interview with Charles Lamb he even made fun of Bond's attempt at *Verfremdungseffekt* in his *Narrow Road to the Deep North*: "Not knowing Brecht I suppose I also found it rather exciting to see exotic places with Englishmen speaking colloquial English. Cockney monks provided a dislocation". (quoted in Brown 2011, 41) Therefore, it would be strained to suggest that Barker got some inspiration from Brecht, at that time at least; yet in addition to the above-mentioned consonances, the concept of *One Afternoon* in general, and Cerebes' rhetoric in particular, resonates with Brecht's *Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters* [*Questions of a Worker who Reads*]:

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?

In the books you will find the name of kings

Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?

And Babylon, many times demolished.

Who raised it up so many times? (Brecht 1976, 252)

Even if the treatment of the subject in *One Afternoon* is mostly comic, nonetheless it is stressed that behind every monument there are the blood, sweat and tears of those who built it, as in Brecht's poem. Barker's vicarious experience, through his father, of factory work, may have played a role in Barker's getting to know that exploitation may assume different forms. Barker insists on paternalism as a feature of his father's experience: "My father works in a very paternalistic family company where the men call the bosses Mr Jack or Mr Leslie, and they call the workers by

their surname, so I was very much aware of the basic relationship between the working class and the employer class". (Quoted in Itzin 1980, 250) All in all, thanks to the pseudo-historic pattern of *One Afternoon* Barker succeeds in providing a veritable, albeit satiric, portrait of class struggle beneath the thin travesty of ancient slavery.

4.2 Oedipus at South London

Cheek was Barker's first staged play. It was premiered at the Theatre Upstairs on 11 September 1970²¹¹ under the direction of William Gaskill. According to Barker, he got the idea of writing *Cheek* from seeing Edward Bond's *Saved*:

Saved was one of the first plays I ever saw in the theatre – and I myself was not a writer then. So I suppose that seeing that the life of my own class and background could be represented on the stage made me want to write a play – and, perhaps, write it better. I do remember feeling that Bond's presentation of South London working class was abominable and contemptuous. The inarticulacy, the grunting and the monosyllabics, being accepted as a portrayal of the working-class people, did offend me and may have inspired me to write *Cheek*, which did lend articulacy to the characters. Laurie is quite adept verbally. So it could be seen as a reaction to the sterility of Bond's language. (quoted in Brown 2011, 41)

One short example of dialogue in *Saved* is enough to understand what Barker meant by "grunting and monosyllabics". The characters speaking are a working-class boy, Len, and a girl, Pam, who have just met and know perfectly well that they are soon going to have sex, but put on this awkward courting scene to make the situation seem less cheap:

Len: Lucky.

Pam: What?

Len: Bumpin' in t'you.

Pam: Yeh.

Len: Yer don't mind me?

Pam: No.

Len: Sure?

Pam: Yer wan'a get on with it.

Len: Give us a shout if I do somethin' yer don't reckon.

Pam: Bligh! Yer ain' better 'ave. (Bond 1991, 23)

By contrast Laurie, the protagonist of *Cheek*, is a very articulate representantative of the young working-class. He is willingly and gladly unemployed, and he spends

²¹¹ The published edition reports the date of the first performance as "September 11, 1971" (Barker 1972, 6) but it is certainly a mistake, since in all the other sources, including reviews in newspapers, the year is 1970.

his time devising schemes for getting girls and earning money without working. Even when talking to his friend Bill of a very mundane subject such as picking-up schoolgirls, his speech is neatly conceived, if a bit overworked:

You wait till we're hanging about outside them school gates, our eye glazed, rivetted on those tight little bums in their flimsy little knickers [...] You know, I could have a lasting, deep, meaningful affair with one of them little whores... get my hands round them firm little buttocks... I'm going to, you know... I'm not passing my twenty-third birthday before I've had one. (Barker 1972, 7)

Laurie has an attractive mother in her mid-forties and a terminally ill father, whose death Laurie eagerly awaits – quoting Shakespeare: “As soon as he throws off the mortal coils, we'll be in for a bit”. (Barker 1972: 12) – in order to have some money to start one of his schemes. In fact, Laurie's plans are not completely unfounded, as he shows quite a thorough comprehension of the bases of capitalist economics, not to mention a certain prophetic gift in anticipating one pillar of the conservative revolution of the 1980s, that is deregulation:

So there are a couple of ways open to you. One is crime. [...] But that's not for me. Not that there's any risk, it's just that criminals haven't got any class. Take the Krays.²¹² The only other thing is property. Property gives us all the time in the world to get after those little scrubbers. [...] You see, the thing to do is to get hold of some bleeding great Victorian house and let it out to students and immigrants. They live anywhere, don't they? Don't bother to tell me it's not allowed under the mortgage. I know that, but who's going to know? You have to use your imagination. If everyone stuck to the rules there wouldn't be half the number of millionaires there are today. Rules are made to be broken. (Ibid., 13)

Laurie also has clear ideas about women, and he expresses them in elegant, if crude, terms:

On these new estates, there are only two kinds of women. Neurotics and nymphos. Well, some are both of course. Three kinds, if you like. They're probably the most pissed-off women on earth. Bored, neglected, frustrated, over-sexed and under-shagged. There are hundreds of them within a few acres, and they are literally dying for a ring on the two-tone doorbell. (Ibid., 9)

In the course of the play he is proved partially right, as he has an affair with a married woman living next door; unfortunately for him, the romance ends as soon as she discovers that all his talk of properties is just plain lies. This amorous skirmish is only a side show of the main relationship, that is the oedipal triangle among Laurie, his father and his mother. According to Laurie, his father hates him because of his superior intelligence: “He knew I was intelligent, and he hated that. He couldn't forgive me for that. When he looked at me there were ‘O’ levels engraved on my forehead”. (Ibid., 15) Laurie reciprocates his father's hate for having succeeded in living as he is planning to do, that is working as little as possible: the big difference with his father is that the latter did not deal in real estate,

²¹² The Kray twins, Ronald and Reginald, were famous gangster who dominated East End's underworld in the 1950s and 1960s. They inspired another Barker's play, *Alpha Alpha* (1972)

but, more traditionally, tried his luck in betting shops. But more than anything, Laurie blames his father for having prevented his mother from having the life she deserved:

Laurie: Tell me something. Ever since I was a tiny tot I've wondered how a nice girl like you got lumbered with the living death up there. How did it happen? I mean, you were good looking –

Mum: I still am, aren't I?

Laurie: You, are, you are! You're a kind of healthy Marlen Dietrich. (Ibid., 16)

For most of the play Mum is the perfect wife of a dying man: as soon as she comes home she goes upstairs to check on the condition of her husband, and she frequently scolds Laurie for not showing the least affection for his father. Sometimes she indulges in daydreaming about what could have been her life if she had made a different choice when, during the war, she was courted by an American officer. (Ibid., 17) As the play progresses, she is increasingly coquettish – for instance, she often looks at herself in the mirror – and flirts innocently enough both with her son, as in the above conversation, and with his friend Bill. In the last scene, Mum comes home half-drunk from an office party and the flirting becomes more and more risky, until Bill kisses her while Laurie goes out to buy some drinks. When he comes back he does not notice anything and so the conversation goes on as before. When his father bangs on the floor upstairs, which he usually does when he needs help, at first he suggests to ignore him, and then starts a sort of cruel game, imagining that he and his mother are the parents, and the father upstairs is their baby:

It's not good for him to have his own way all the time, is it? He won't grow up properly. [...] We don't want to spoil him or he'll be a delinquent when he grows up. [...] Typical mother! Always sees the best in her baby. No, we'll sit this one out. We don't want the baby to rule our lives, do we? Babies have their place. (Ibid., 52)

In the grip of this strange euphoria, Laurie changes his mind and brings downstairs his unconscious father, treating him like a baby: “Where's the baby powder? [...] We'll dust his horny little feet and then we'll put his toggy woggy slippers on”. (Ibid., 53) While Laurie looks for the slippers, Mum and Bill kiss again, but this time Laurie, re-entering the room, surprises them. After a moment of shock, he goes on with the father-baby joke, turning it into a savage rant at his mother:

He didn't see it. He was looking the other way. [...] (*He jerks Dad's head round*) Carry on, now he can see, go on, get on with it. [...] You set a very bad example, don't you? I was hardly out of the door. My back was hardly turned. Baba might have seen it. He might have seen his mumsa being dirty with his dad's best friend. [...] Go on, get up some bloody alleyway! Hey! Did you know she had varicose veins? (Ibid., 53-54)

The two lovers leave together and Laurie is left in a state of shock with his comatose father drooping on an armchair. When he regains control, he stuffs all his mother's clothes into a suitcase and, noticing that a pair of knickers are hanging out of the suitcase, takes them out and places them on his father head. His monologue becomes delirious with sexual and incestuous undertones:

You saw all that, did you? Out the corner of your eye? Of course, you wouldn't know what it meant. I mean, you're just a baba. If you saw his hand up her skirt, you wouldn't know what he was doing, would you? You wouldn't think he had his fingers up her fanny, would you? It's funny, but I came out of there. [...] I expect those officers put their finger up her fanny. What a history her fanny's got. Not that you care, eh? I can see you don't care. I'm the only one who's actually lived in there, actually been in all the way, head and shoulder. I expect you wish you could. But you are too big. (*Pause*) She messed us about, didn't she baba? [...] Now it's just me and you, eh? Just baba and Dada? Eh? [...] You haven't died, have you? Have you? You wouldn't admit it if you had, you poor bugger. (Barker 1972, 54-55)

At the end Laurie picks Dad up and carries him out of the stage, into the garden. The last words are heard from offstage: "Is that all right? See the sunsa shining? And all the little birdies? Say boo to the birdies, go on, say boo. Say boo! Say boo!". (Ibid.) After figuring out for himself a future as a successful businessman and philanderer, Laurie ends up as a hapless Oedipus, betrayed by his mother and incapable of killing his father, but reduced to awaiting his death from natural causes instead. Laurie is the victim of a whole series of tragic ironies: his mother acts according to his advice of looking for someone better than her husband, Bill puts into practice his teaching about women in council estates, and his father finishes being a burden instead of source of money, and too helpless to be hated. In fact, putting his mother's knickers on his father's head could be read as a final insult, in a sense referring again to *Saved*, in which, in one of the most shocking images, the young thugs rub the baby's face in his own excrements before stoning him to death (Bond 1991, 78); yet, it could also be seen as an attempt to defend the old man turned baby by isolating him from the outer world. According to Rabey: "[L]aurie ends up with the responsibilities of adulthood without its compensations, rather than vice versa as he wished". (Rabey 1989, 19) It could be argued that, even in this juvenile play, Barker anticipated some of the features of the theatre of Catastrophe expounded above, such as the oppressive quality of laughter and the abolition of generally accepted boundaries between good and evil.

The overall grotesque atmosphere prevents Laurie from becoming a full-fledged tragic hero: yet *Cheek* could be seen as a step towards Barker's definition of his own tragic formula through the mediation of another play, *Claw* (1975). *Claw* was staged a few months after *Stripwell*; yet, while in the latter Barker displayed "the verbal wit of a Tom Stoppard (Itzin 1980, 253), *Claw* – though at moments very funny – showed a sharp turn towards tragedy. Intriguingly, the inspiration behind *Claw*, as synthesised by Barker in a later interview, could apply to *Cheek*, too: "I regarded this play at the time as a didactic play of politics demonstrating false consciousness, the futility of individualism and the myth of social mobility". (Barker 1993, 55) The plot is best summarized by Barker himself:

The protagonist, an illegitimate war baby, defying his stepfather's gnawing insistence on class solidarity, succeeds brilliantly in his chosen career as a pimp. His activities place him in conflict with a government minister whom he numbers among his clients. He threatens to expose the man's private scandal, and, misjudging his own power,

finds himself incarcerated in the wing of a mental hospital, which is effectively a death chamber. (Ibid.)

As was the case with *Cheek*, *Claw* is based upon an Oedipal triangle among the protagonist, Noel Biledew, his unfaithful and amoral mother, who light-heartedly enjoys the earning of her son's career as a pimp, and his hapless and sexually impotent stepfather, ironically named Victor. The latter does not hide his anger for not being Noel's biological father and, as in *Cheek*, he resents the superior intelligence of his stepson: but more than anything he blames Noel for not putting his intelligence at the service of the struggle for socialism of his own class. Noel opposes his father, reasoning that this would mean helping exactly those who have been constantly bullying him for his short-sightedness, but Victor becomes both lyrical and comic in explaining that Noel should put his resentment towards a good cause:

All the more reason to assist in their improvement, Noel. In an unjust society, the weak will always be persecuted. Just as they brutalized you, so they are brutalized by the system. But when the system falls, so will all forms of cruelty, and boys with bad eyesight will be loved, even by their cuckolded stepfathers. (Barker 1977, 137-138)

As indicated in the above summary, Noel clashes with too powerful an enemy, and he ends up imprisoned in a secret institution. In the final scene Noel is served breakfast by two warders who converse with each other, ignoring him. During their conversation, it becomes evident that the two are professional killers doing government's dirty work. When Noel understands that he is going to be killed, he appeals to his absent stepfather for help, and he appears to him, dressed in a dressing-gown, and looking very old and tired. All Victor can do is remind his stepson that this is the consequence of his choices and suggests that he would appeal to the warders' humanity, using that eloquence he is so versed in:

I tried to tell you, keep your anger for your class. They could not have murdered your whole class. [...] Win them, Noel. Win them with your common suffering. Find the eloquence of Lenin, lick their cruelty away. [...] Don't despise them, win them, Noel! (Barker 1977, 226-27)

This is what Noel tries to do, but to no avail, and in the end he is drowned in a bath tube by the two warders. Writing about this finale, Edgar stated that it was "not easy to think of a series of images that say so much in so little time as those of the last half hour of Howard Barker's *Claw*". (Quoted in Itzin 1980, 249) Edgar also included this scene among "[t]he most potent, rich, and in many ways politically acute statements of the past ten years". (Edgar 1988, 41) In his *Arguments for a Theatre* Barker underlined the tragic quality of this scene, explaining the mechanism that it meant to put into motion in the audience:

The pimp completes his prayer and, in a state of exhaustion, awaits their verdict. This silence is, I suggest, the supremely beautiful moment of a play which is a journey through the stagnant pool of un-lived life, soiled feeling and the moral destruction of both poverty and privilege. It is also the political climax, since it proposes to the audience the possibility of celebration, redemption and revival. As in all my plays, the

antipathy felt by the audience towards an unattractive protagonist has been eroded by an intimacy of feeling accumulated over a long evening – the audience wills survival on the victim. It also wills the endorsement of the political posture of the despised parent. And it finally wills the dramatic optimism usually associated with survival. But the speech fails. The warders reach for the concealed bathtub which is to be the instrument of the hero's death. He is drowned, without resistance, on the stage. Thus the optimistic possibility is exploded – and didacticism is scattered in a surge of terror. (Barker 1993, 56)

Much of what will be characteristic of the 'catastrophist' Barker is already present in this 'socialist' play, and in particular the author's will to attack, disturb, and ultimately disappoint the audience and its expectations. The character of Noel is in many ways a development of Laurie, and both are an expression of Barker's idea of crime as an almost inevitable occupation for the young working class:

If you're working class and you have a real resentment, crime is one of the ways in which you operate it. Political knowledge is another, but because political knowledge is not widespread in the working class, crime is a very natural and legitimate outlet. That's why my characters more often drifts into crime than politics. After all there are more juvenile delinquents than there are Young Socialists. (quoted in Itzin 1980, 252)

Barker's views, even in his 'socialist' period, were too unorthodox to fit easily inside the frame of the political left, and his turn towards the elitism of the theatre of Catastrophe is in a way a logical consequence. Nonetheless, his early works remain an interesting testimony to an attitude to work and political struggle that had some currency among the young proletarians. The weakness and contradictions of the party that should have defended the interests of the working-class, the Labour Party, will be the subject of closer scrutiny on Barker's part, both in the 1974-79 period, in which Labour will govern the country, and after Thatcher's victory in 1979.

4.3 We'll Keep the Red Flag Flying Here

Some of Barker's plays deal overtly with the Labour Party. As seen above, in *Stripwell*, the former MP Jarrow embodies the loss of idealistic drive in the theory and praxis of the Labour Party. *That Good Between Us* takes a dystopian turn in staging a governing Labour Party which, as a reaction to popular discontent for its politics, actively promotes repression by security forces. In a paradoxical reversal of what was actually going on in the mid-1970s in the British army,²¹³ the opposition to Labour is organized by left-of-Labour officers and privates, who got politicized by their stay in Northern Ireland. In Act 2 Scene 2, Orbison, the Labour Home Secretary, offers scant resistance to a secret police representative, Knatchbull, who asks her to sign a law allowing arrests without trial:

Orbison: It will be exceptional law. Temporary and exceptional.

²¹³ See Megson 2012, 27.

Knatchbull: Naturally. Nobody likes extraordinary powers. Except when the situation is extraordinary. And it is. It is getting more extraordinary every minute. This power of arrest without the nuisance of a trial is an extraordinary law. But for an extraordinary situation. It is a law against mayhem. [...]

Orbison: It is being described as fascist.

Knatchbull: That word! [...] I think it is a sadly misused word. It has started creeping into Hansard, I believe. With reference to yourself. And to all of us. (Barker 1982, 40)

Orbison is not aware, or pretends not to be, of the implications of such a legislative measure; her hypocrisy reaches its peak when she tells the story of a friend who was shot down by secret police in a street in Santiago de Chile, without traffic policemen even taking notice of it, concluding that the new legislation will never go as far as that: this self-absolutory stance goes a long way in exposing the crisis of a party that has lost its sense of responsibility as well as its political points of reference.

The Hang of the Gaol is even more scathing in underlining the corruption of the Labour Party, as it stages an entirely realistic situation: an enquiry commission investigating the causes of a fire which has burnt down a prison. The commission positively concludes that the fire has been started by Cooper, the governor of the institution, out of hate for the inmates. Stagg, the Home Secretary, in order to avoid electoral damage, organizes the cover-up of the real causes of the fire. Stagg is another figure of a Labour politician who acts out of expediency, unmindful of any socialist principle. Despite boasting about his working-class roots, he clearly thinks that the Labour Party's mission is to exercise power and not to promote social equality. As Stagg explains to Cooper's decidedly right-wing wife, his quick rise from plumber to cabinet member – and by implication the rise of the Labour Party – avoided a revolution: "It was that or bishops on the lamp-posts". (Barker 1982, 18) His speech to convince the head of the commission, Jardine, to bend the final results of the enquiry, is a good sample of left-wing Machiavellian politics:

Governors setting light to prisons isn't very good for confidence. It so happens I appointed him myself. [...] George, we happen to be lumbered here with what they call the party-system, the Westminster model, call it what you like. And the bulk population of this long-suffering island of ours are under the impression it is freedom. The thought of this freedom no doubt gives comfort to old ladies dying of neglect in tower blocks. [...] Nothing is perfect, least of all corruption, but the smelly old women and the schizophrenic kids don't give a bugger for your morals. [...] There comes a time you 'ave to stop polishing yer conscience. Yer end up hypnotized by it". (Barker 1982, 75-77)

Stagg's final remark is both threatening and mocking to Jardine's attitude: in the end, Stagg has it his way, and the blame is put on one of the inmates. Whip, a prison warden, synthesizes the work of the commission: "They came, they saw, they whitewashed". (Ibid., 82) Interestingly, this phrase could also work as a comment

on the action of Labour governments, that is promoting cosmetic more than substantial changes in the capitalistic system.

These three plays were presented on stage between 1975 and 1978, when the Labour Party was in power, albeit precariously, with Wilson and Callaghan as Prime Ministers. In 1979 all this ended, and Labour would be ousted from government until Blair's victory in 1997. After Thatcher's triumph in May 1979, the issues of national government turned into feuds to control the Party, and political survival – individual more than collective – became the ultimate goal: this is the atmosphere that inspired and was reported in *A Passion in Six Days*. Appropriately, the *Guardian* reviewer Irene McManus defined *A Passion in Six Days* as an “astounding requiem for the Labour Party”. (McManus 1983, 866) If not for the whole body of the party, it was a requiem for its socialist heart.

A Passion in Six Days opened at the Sheffield Crucible Theatre on 7 October 1983 and ran until the 29th of the same month. The play stages the clashes, intrigues and petty rivalries of an annual Conference of the Labour Party in a seaside resort. This early run of performances at the Crucible is best remembered for two reasons: because on the second night a sizeable group of Labour Party representatives, led by David Blunkett,²¹⁴ walked out of the theatre in protest; and because the play ran contemporarily with the ‘real thing’, that is the annual Labour conference in Brighton. The 1983 conference had long lasting effects, since it started Neil Kinnock's twelve-year stewardship of the Party, marking the beginning of “its controversial and irrevocable long march rightwards [and] the inception of the ‘modernising’ project that paved the way, for what would become, with Blair and Blunkett in the vanguard, ‘New Labour’”. (Megson in Gritzer, Rabey 2006, 124-125) In the previous general elections on 8 June 1983 the Labour Party had suffered another disastrous defeat and Thatcher had won her second consecutive election, despite increasing unemployment, and social and racial tensions: the Brighton Conference represented the post-defeat showdown between the different factions of the party. It is tempting to establish a connection between the walkout and the New Labour political strategy, seeing both as symptoms of the decadence of a party who could not take criticism while also losing its soul. The protagonists of the walkout, perhaps in order to avoid further questions, presented it not as a protest at the political content of the play, but against the language and some nude scenes. Columnist Alan Rusbridger had an easy job in making fun of the whole business in his *Diary* in the *Guardian* of 11 October 1983:

Howard Barker's *Passion in Six Days* ran into disapproval from the comrades on its second night at Sheffield's Crucible Theatre on Saturday. Mr David Blunkett, council leader, and Mr Richard Caborn lead a walk-out by Labour members, unimpressed by the frank language and the plot, which included the wife of a Militant²¹⁵ supporter

²¹⁴ David Blunkett (b.1947) is a Labour politician. He was Secretary for education in the first Blair cabinet, and Home Secretary in the second.

²¹⁵ Militant was a left-wing faction of Trotskyist tendency in the Labour Party. It was expelled from the Labour Party during Kinnock's leadership.

cavorting naked with the Welsh frontrunner in a leadership contest. [...] Mr Caborn, who was accompanied by his 14-year-daughter, protested at the “gutter” language. Ms Clare Venables, theatre director, voiced surprise: “I never thought people would bring their children to a play about the Labour Party”. Indeed. Well, now they have been warned. (Rusbridger 1983)

Rusbridger did not mention – out of delicacy, no doubt – that Blunkett was, and is, blind, and therefore could hardly be offended by on-stage nakedness. Yet the article not too covertly suggested that taking exception to explicit language and images was just an excuse to avoid admitting that the Labour representatives had been affronted by the political content of the play, thus indirectly recognizing that there was some truth in it. Comparing *A Passion in Six Days* with Edgar’s *Maydays* in the *Guardian* of 28 October 1983, Billington maintained that Barker’s play “leaves behind a more generalised picture of a Brighton Labour Conference and its strange combination of festivity, drunkenness, sex, power-seeking, debate-rigging and fits of moral concern. A Labour MP assured me that it was not a wholly inaccurate picture of Conference”. (Billington, 1983)

A Passion in Six Days was the last of Barker’s ‘political’ or ‘state of England’ plays – *Dowchild* was performed in 1985 but written in 1977. In a 1996 interview with Chris Megson, Barker recounted how he started and then gave up on political satire, presenting it as a transitional phase, on the way to writing tragedies:

The exercise of power – presumed or real – had a natural appeal to me before I had uncovered an urge to write tragedy, for which no social democratic political figure could be an appropriate protagonist. [E]nglish political types figured extensively in my work because the failure to be heroic [...] brought these individuals into the scope of satire. I was a satirist because I was trying to evade social realism. I had not found an aesthetic that would edge me beyond satire, and when I found it, the objects of satire disappeared with it. (Quoted in Megson 2001, 471)

It is interesting to note that, while for other authors satire was a temporary diversion, almost a vacation, from their social-realist production – Edgar’s *Dick Deterred* or Brenton’s *Scott of the Antarctic* (1980) – Barker saw it as a formative step in reaching artistic maturity. According to Barker, thematically the focus remained on the issue of power even in his subsequent productions, but with a shift of perspective: “When I moved towards plays like *Victory* or *The Power of the Dog* I had discerned that what I required was a narrative about the evasion²¹⁶ of authority and not the exercise of authority”. (Ibid.) As for the language, even in his satirical works, Barker’s research went beyond the strictly satirical purpose: “I was also inventing a specific dramatic language for emotions and subjects beyond the ‘issue’”. (Ibid.) Some of the samples of text from *A Passions in Six Days* will show how much Barker was pursuing the poetic language he would use in his theatre of Catastrophe. As argued by McManus in her review: “No other modern writer quite matches Barker’s capacity to use language as a poetic knelling of death and destruction”. (McManus 1983, 866) According to the “Fortynine Asides for a

²¹⁶ Underlined in the original.

Tragic Theatre”, Barker definitely achieved the desired language when he finally turned to tragedy: “Tragedy liberates language from banality. It returns poetry to speech”. (Barker 1993, 18) Politically, *A Passion in Six Days* foresaw also the first of the “Fortynine Asides for a Tragic Theatre”: “We are living the extinction of official socialism. When the opposition loses its politics, it must root in art”. (Barker 1993, 17) Barker showed considerable prescience since, in point of fact, the Labour Party survived the years of Thatcherism, but, arguably, with no socialism in it. The passion of the title is the main moving forces behind the actions of the characters, more than any social or economic force, opening an obvious chasm with Marxist thinking. As Barker wrote in his *Arguments for a Theatre*: “The individual must be denied the sanctuary of class”. (Ibid, 23) Accordingly, *A Passion in Six Days* is a clash of individuals in which social origin or ideological standing play but a very limited part.

The action of the play consists in nineteen scenes, interspersed by twenty songs, mostly sang a-cappella by a vocal group, Mr Sprat’s Twenty First Century Popular Motets. One of these songs, titled *The Curse of Debate* – initially Barker thought that this would be the title of the play²¹⁷ – opens the on-stage action and sets the tone of the play by exposing how much the Conference consisted of empty rituals:

Now you must concentrate

The level of debate

Will test your e – du – cation

Can you be ethical,

Follow the technical

Without an ex – plan – ation?

[...]

They want to save the state

But this entire debate

Will only last three ho-urs

THIS IS THE DREAMING CITY

OF HOPE AND PAIN AND PITY

FORGIVE THEM THEIR ILL – USIONS

ARE THEY FIT TO GOVERN

ARE THEY LOOKING SLOVEN

ARE THEY GUILTY OF COLL – USIONS? (Barker 1985, 3-4)

²¹⁷ In the above-mentioned interview with Megson, Barker stated: “They wouldn’t accept that as a title”. (Megson 2001, 472) Presumably, “They” refers to the *Crucible*’s management.

The design of the first scene is described in the stage directions as “*A beach at night*”. (Ibid., 3) While the chorus sings, passing gradually from a whisper to full voice, an “old fat man” enters the stage, undressed and ready to jump into the sea for a swim. He introduces himself as Harry Gaukroger, a long-standing MP and member of the party for forty years, who is preparing himself for the conference with a purifying bath in the sea. Contemporarily, a married couple of conference delegates, Annie and John Axt, walks along the seashore, discussing their married life: the main issue at stake is the freedom of having sex outside marriage. The discussion is clearly for Annie’s benefit, since she has already enjoyed this freedom, while John has no intention to do so. Underneath the calm of a rational discussion, his tension is perceivable, expressed both by angry outbursts and bouts of lyrical self-commiseration: “Sea, constant sea. Up the beach. Frothing at the feet of miserable couples arguing their life. Must find it funny. Laugh its maritime laugh. The little crisis in the little life. Mollusc debates with mollusc”. (Ibid.) The two are so immersed in their conversation that they do not notice that Gaukroger is drowning, and do not hear his cries for help. Finally, Brian Glint, the unofficial candidate to the leadership of the party, jumps in the water and rescues him. Glint’s nakedness has a visible arousing effect on Annie, and her husband tries to talk her out of her physical attraction to Glint using political arguments. This results in a sang duet between the two in which reasons of politics and sex are opposed to each other:

Axt: He is an opportunist bastard

[...]

How do you think I feel to see him

Prancing like a pigeon

Under the fascinated gloating of my wife.

Annie: A woman can appreciate a man

As a physical creation,

Where exactly is the sin in that?

[...]

Axt: I can’t make sense of my feelings

But I would die if you had dealings

With a traitor to the left like Brian Glint

The body’s a contraption

For finding satisfaction

But anyone who touches him’s a bint. (Ibid., 8-9))

Political considerations have no effect on her, and, later in the play, she will throw herself at Glint, originating the scenes of nakedness that caused the walk-out, at least according to its protagonists. The pursuit of sexual satisfaction and power go hand in hand in the play, but while political struggle is very much a mind game, in which alliances are formed and dissolved for rational reasons, sexual attraction is often unpredictable and unstoppable. As Barker would state in later years: “The sexual is the ungovernable”. (quoted in Ritzner, Rabey 2006, 126)

The main political issue is the struggle for the succession to the leader Raymond Toynbee, who, besides being kept responsible for the decadence of the party, shows the early signs of a degenerative brain condition. Glint is Toynbee’s closest and most trusted collaborator, and a member of the Shadow Cabinet; this does not prevent him from plotting with other members of the Cabinet for Toynbee’s downfall. Among the conspirators, Monika Boakes seems the only one not to be moved by burning ambition, and to have in mind an idea of general good for the whole country. Unfortunately, she also shows a degree of cynicism in devising that a privileged and unmoral elite will be an unavoidable consequence of the new political course:

The party is rebuilt, with one of us as leader. We win the elections and rebuild this scarred and scalded land, we water this desert which stinks with rotting decencies and murdered hope. And in the end, Raymond gets understood, understood where he would most want to be understood, in the brains of historians, in dusty seminars he gets his laurels, and we, who are dirtier than Raymond, we take stick. But England’s saved. I don’t care with what muck attached, no matter how many little twisted businessmen there are and masons whooping it up in clubs, or tarts dancing on tables with their skirts above their arses. We save the place. (Ibid.,18)

I note in passing that considering moral scruples an unaffordable, and ultimately undesirable, luxury was a wide-spread malaise among European social democrats of the time, as can be seen in the Italian socialist leader Bettino Craxi’s saying “E la nave va”. [and the ship sails on] ²¹⁸ It would probably be too far-fetched to say that a mistrust for moral questioning was, more or less, official policy; yet it is hard to deny that Labour Party’s internal life was a cloak-and-dagger affair with little regard for social issues, in Barker’s play as in real life, especially in the highest ranks. In *A Passion in Six Days* the only open and morally-motivated opposition is carried out by a group of left-wing delegates, whom Barker labels half-mockingly as the Absolutes. They stand for the so-called Militant tendency, that is the extreme left of the Labour Party, whose representatives would be expelled in the early 1990s. The Absolutes introduce themselves on stage with a song that celebrates ranks-and-file political work:

Shoving things through letter box flaps

Climbin’ vandalized blocks of flats,

²¹⁸ Craxi’s saying quoted the title of a 1983 film by Federico Fellini: *E la nave va*. The meaning was that, one way or another, and regardless of moral scruples, the country kept going.

Talkin' to old geezers through the door

Anyone who wants to transform

Shouldn't look up to the platform,

Democracy is somethin' you find on the floor. (Ibid., 11)

As soon as they are in sight of Toynbee, both in and outside the conference room, they target him with cries of “Get back to the hospital” and “C-I-A”. In his review in the *Financial Times*, Michael Coveney defined them as “a bunch of sneering skinheads”. (Coveney 1983) Their continuous barracking and interrupting of Toynbee and other speakers seem to originate more from generational antagonism than from an alternative proposal, but, at least, the Absolutes are shown to believe in what they do. Apart from them, very little sympathy is shed on the characters, especially on the upper echelons of the Party, but also the middle ranks are not saved. Gaukroger is exemplary in this respect. A Member of Parliament for thirty-seven years, he has never taken the floor, neither in the House of Commons nor in the annual conferences. In short, he is a typical backbencher who follows the stream, reducing personal risk and engagement to the bare minimum. Not that he lacks intelligence and wit: when confronted by Nigel Proud, a member of the Shadow Cabinet, for never having made a speech in the House of Commons, his answer is self-mocking but fulminating: “I hate to interrupt the greater talents, but I boo a lot”. (Barker 1985, 34) It is apparent that what he lacks is a moral direction, as can be seen in both his political action and private life – he has a years-long affair with the married owner of the hotel where he lodges during the annual conferences, and makes a pass at every woman he meets. According to Coveney: “Gaukroger [is] a fat, gleaming and old rogue who [...] derides the militants for their impracticable power base and, rolling around the stage like a beached whale, celebrates the corrupt fervour of the Wilson era”. (Coveney 1983, 866) In defending Wilson politics, Gaukroger even ventures into a paradoxical eulogy of lies which says much about Barker’s idea on the prevailing morality in the Labour Party: “What’s wrong with lies? I don’t mind lies. You don’t mind lies. Lies are very comforting. Yer can sleep with a lie. You can dine on one. ’HO WANTS THE TRUTH IF THIS IS IT”. (Ibid., 40) Yet Gaukroger’s fierce support for Wilson’s politics does not prevent him from trying to jump on the prospective winner’s bandwagon, in order to preserve his seat in the House of Commons. Intriguingly, MacManus, in her review, singles out Gaukroger as one of the two characters with whom Barker means the audience to sympathise “as far as that’s possible in his complex writing” (MacManus 1983), arguing that Gaukroger is “flawed in all kinds of ways, but with the heart in its right place”. (Ibid.) This is highly questionable, since it is hard to find in him much more than self-interest. The sympathy felt by MacManus for Gaukroger could be down to the performance in the Crucible season of Harold Innocent, a character actor who specialized in sympathetically playing

villains.²¹⁹ Or it could depend on Gaukroger being perceived as a harmless relic of the past, even though not a glorious one, and a symbol of old age – even if he is just sixty-three – since he keeps coming back to that, becoming nearly pathetic, albeit humorously, when he connects an occasional sexual failure with the Labour Party’s fall from power, and with the rise of left-wing opposition inside the Party: “Never before ’as politics come between me and the bedroom, not even in the darkest hour. Under Wilson, what couldn’t I do, I don’t boast, you know that, but I could satisfy two women from midnight to six”. (Barker 1985, 40). Again, power and sex are indissolubly linked, and it would be hard to state for sure which is the leading force.

The other character that, according to Mc Manus, is meant to raise the sympathy of the audience is John Axt, and his case is worth of closer examination. As we have seen, in the first scene he painfully discusses with his wife how to re-arrange their marriage on rational bases – rational according to her. As she puts it: “We are taking the absurdity out of marriage”. (Barker 1985, 6) When he is on stage again, he is presenting to the Conference a resolution that makes a political issue of his personal dilemma, and one cannot but appreciate how much he struggles to harmonize politics and personal life:

I want to see a Labour Party which is [...] not only associated with nationalisation, wages or services, but with people, I want to see a party committed to the freedom of people. [...] The Labour Party forgets it is the party of personal liberty, and that means sexual liberty, and we must free ourselves from our own capitalism, the capitalism in our hearts. (Ibid., 31)

This statement is unlikely to receive much support, as it goes against common sense and generally accepted ideas: indeed, it is met with scorn by most of the conference. Another delegate, Ketch, demolishes it with gusto:

There’s nothing wrong with my marriage and I’m not a Tory. [...] I ask you, are you going to the country with a manifesto which includes – think about it for two seconds – a commitment to introduce legislation encouraging the development of alternative sexual and marital relations, come on, wake up, it’s a gift to the Daily Fartbag. (Ibid., 32)

There is probably an allusion to the Labour manifesto for the 1983 elections, which did not touch on private matters, but was quite adventurous, as it proposed, among other socialist reforms, the re-nationalization of industries, such as British Telecom, privatized during Thatcher’s first term. Gerald Kaufman, a Labour MP, labelled it as “the longest suicide note in history”,²²⁰ advocating, as Ketch does, a more pragmatic approach. Immediate parallels apart, it is interesting to note that in a 1987 interview with Charles Lamb, Barker offered a viewpoint similar to that of Axt:

A Passion in Six Days [...] is probably the play in which I articulate more clearly what I think is wrong in the Labour Party as a party. It must debate the forms of social

²¹⁹ His most famous performance was in Kevin Reynold’s movie *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves* (1990), in which he played the Bishop of Hereford.

²²⁰ See <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/feb/27/sir-gerald-kaufman-obituary>

progress. Now, in projecting itself as a pillar of family life and domesticity, the Labour Party has joined hands with the Tories [...] I expected a parliamentary party to embark upon a revolutionary programme, which shows a poor grasp of reality. I think I was groping towards not an economist criticism of English Labourism, but attempting to expose its intense petit-bourgeoise morality. (quoted in Brown 2011, 41)

Barker's longing for a non-economist criticism of Labour Party's politics strongly resonates in Axt's speech at the conference. It would be far-fetched to assume that Axt is the author's mouthpiece; yet the character's central role in the play is undeniable, despite his relatively few appearances on stage. Indeed, the whole contrast between Annie and John Axt is fraught with compelling issues and reflects two diverging visions of life: Annie advocates a rational acceptance of sexual desire as just another need to be satisfied, while John demands also his jealousy to be taken into account, irrational as it may be. Of the two, Annie seems the one in total control of the situation, as she always acts self-assuredly, while John seems to be desperately dependant on her. There is a reversal of their respective positions when Annie comes back to her husband after spending three nights with Glint, sporting her usual self-confidence:

You see. I've come back and nothing's – [...] Not stained, not altered, just the same old – [...] I've driven you a little bit mad. I've gone out and spent three nights with someone. And you've gone a bit mad. (Barker 1985, 51)

It is apparent that she expects things to be soon back to normal, and one has to wonder whether Barker meant her condescending attitude to be annoying to the audience. Contrary to her expectations, John does not want to go on as if nothing had happened, since he has been deeply touched by a brief conversation with another delegate, Emily Drum, to whom he has confided his wife's infidelity with Glint of all people. By stressing that sexual contact is not the only means of communication, John reverts the terms of his wife's statement:

I CAN'T GO ON WITH IT. [...] I met a woman. And she's stained me. And altered me. And I haven't touched her. And may not. (Ibid.)

Annie is caught off balance by her husband's sudden change. At first her reaction is both bureaucratic and patronizing, appealing to the cold language of logic to demonstrate that John is talking nonsense:

WHAT ARE YOU ABOUT YOU SILLY – Look. I 'ave a saying. If it can't go into a resolution, it's not worth saying. Take it to the branch, John. (Ibid.)

But John is resolute in claiming that their marriage is over: "I shan't lie with you again". (Ibid.) The hapless Annie has no resource other than appealing to traditional family values: "WE'VE GOT A KIDDIE PLAYIN' AT ITS GRANDMA'S". (Ibid.) It is indeed an inglorious exit for a standard-bearer of sexual revolution, as she shows the "intense petit-bourgeoise morality" (Brown 2011, 41) she was supposed to oppose.

Talking about his very early satirical productions,²²¹ Barker stated: “In that period I was further from any feeling of involvement with my characters that at any time before or since. I began to feel that being involved with my characters at all was a weakness”. (quoted in Brown 2011, 23) It seems that in *A Passion in Six Days* Barker overcame this intention to avoid identification with characters. It is not without significance that, talking with Megson about *A Passion in Six Days*, Axt is the only character who Barker mentions by name, even though he denies having created him for a specific purpose: “What does Axt stand for in *A Passion in Six Days*, after all? It’s hard to say. Certainly what he is looking for isn’t available from a political programme”. (Megson 2001, 173) It is perhaps arbitrary to state that Barker is taking sides; yet there is an evident contrast between Annie’s brain-controlled – one could say mechanical – sexuality and John’s surge of passion: in my opinion this inevitably invites a choice in the spectator. The contrast between the two characters is summarized by John’s outcry against Annie’s attempts at belittling his feelings towards the other woman: “Don’t smash it, please. This feeling I ‘ave. Don’t bash it up with sarcasm. [...] DON’T HURT MY FEELINGS WITH YOUR BRAIN”. (Barker 1985, 51) In his final conversation with his wife, John defines socialism in openly sensual and emotive terms: “It must be moist. It must be passionate. [...] Socialism. [...] A wet thing. Hot and naked”. (Barker 1985, 51) With all possible provisos, this definition could have been perhaps underwritten by Barker himself.

In the desolate political landscape of the Labour Party as portrayed in *A Passion in Six Days*, one character stands out as a giant: Lord Isted, born Tom Surrey-Bell, a nonagenarian pacifist who started his political struggle as a conscience objector during WW1 – and was roughly treated in a British jail because of that – and is still campaigning for pacifism and nuclear disarmament in the 1980s. His unflinching faith in the ultimate victory of his mission is a refreshing memento of the possibility of good politics, as can be seen in his conversation with Emily Drum:

I expect to see disarmament in my time. And if it cannot be by argument, it will be done by magic. [...] You see, if it doesn’t happen here, it cannot happen anywhere. [...] The arguments have all become redundant. The arguments and the counter arguments. Now the life force has begun to assert itself, the dark, wet thing that wriggles in the puddle and the blood. It will bear down the chorus of the manufacturers and wash away the biscuit brains of strategists. Moisture, you see. Women and moisture. Magic. (Ibid., 20)

It is not surprising that Isted would focus on women since it was women who started the movement against the placement of Cruise missiles in the UK, establishing the peace camps in Greenham Common in Berkshire in 1981. (Bull 2017,13) In a 1987 interview with Charles Lamb, Barker stated that Greenham Common was one of the last public events he felt interested in, because his wife was involved in it. (Brown 2011, 39) Perhaps there is a hint of Barker’s personal feelings in the speech

²²¹ Barker specifically refers to *Edward – the Final Days*, *Skipper* (staged 1973) and *Reach for the Sky* (unstaged).

that Isted makes in the conference, after Toynbee's refusal to turn nuclear disarmament into an official policy of the Party:

You've got no right to be alive. [...] By any application of the most unstrict logic, you should be dead, and not just dead, but fine dust. You are here by the most fantastic, circumstantial, coincidental tricks of fate in the history of the world. How long do you think it can last? [...] You have only the blank and hideous certainty that when this happens, AND IT MUST, your family, and your race, and your culture, and your genes, your entire impression on this spinning rock WILL BE ERASED. (Ibid.,49)

As Paul Allen wrote in the *New Statesman* “[Isted] makes as fine an anti-bomb speech as I have heard in the theatre”. (Allen 1983, 867) The conference at first receives this speech in bewildered silence, and then erupts in a rapturous applause. It seems that Isted is going to score a partial victory by awakening the pacifist soul of the Labour Party. And yet the accusation of being a fraud or, to say better, a double agent, hangs on him. Another Labour MP, Malcolm Ardstock, soon after the end of Isted's speech, reveals to Toynbee what he thinks to be an astonishing secret:

Lord Isted is a communist queer. I have the evidence. [...] A Major in the KGB. I have the evidence. [...] Unbelievable. A red aristocrat. A poof in the KGB. I've never 'eard of it before, either”. (Ibid., 50)

This happens near the end of the play, and the accusation remains unproved, one way or another. Of course, defining as unbelievable the presence of an aristocratic homosexual in the Soviet web of spies threw serious doubts on the credibility of the accuser – unless the statement was meant to be uttered ironically, but there is no such indication in the stage directions – since the history of the so-called ‘Cambridge five’²²² was well-known. Moreover, Ardstock has already shown he is annoyed by the nearly saintly status accorded to Isted in the party. When Elaine, Toynbee's wife, asks him if his hostility to Isted comes from fear, he is quite open about it:

Yes. If you must know yes. (*pause*) In ancient Greece they had this thing called ostracism. The populace wrote the name of people they didn't like on oyster shells. They counted them up and the one with the highest number got expelled. All the best people got expelled, and all the bastards got left behind. I would write Tom Isted on my shell. (Barker 1985, 29)

Isted had previously presented the annual Conference in the following terms: “This is the convocation of the good. And the less good. And the hardly good”. (Barker,

²²² The Cambridge Five was the label attributed by the press to a group of upper-class students who were recruited as Soviet spies during their stay at Cambridge in the 1930s; at least two of them were homosexual. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35360172> last accessed 22/04/2019. Their story is the subject of a play, *Another Country*, by Julian Mitchell, successfully premiered in 1981, and a movie of the same title, directed by Marek Kaniévka and released in 1984. Barker loosely based his still unproduced play *Heaven* (1978) on one of the Cambridge Five, Kim Philby. (Brown 2011, 30)

20) Ardstock is one of the hardly good, since his actions seem to be mostly motivated by envy, and his servile attitude to the powerful ones is disturbing: all in all, the adjective ‘slimy’ could apply to him. And yet, when Ardstock defends his own case, singing a song titled “But I can’t” – and there is no need to stress that this is a declaration of human and political impotence – he sheds a different light on his meanness:

How can I stick this party

Which is soft on homosexuals

Weekend courses down in Sussex

Skinny women, intellectuals

It’s so lovely for the heroes

Of the Liberation Fronts

They can get their dusty fingers

Up ar-isto-cratic cunts.

BUT I CAN’T

I come out of different deserts

The unwatered English city

Who cares about his struggle

An English boy will get no pity. (Barker 1985, 30)

The rhetorical juxtaposition of the actual deserts of former colonies – hinted at by the “dusty fingers” – with the metaphorical deserts of English cities is very effective. As was the case in Boakes’s speech, (Barker 1985, 18) England is characterized by its dryness; and the “dusty seminars” (Ibid.) of historians find an ironical echo in the “dusty fingers” of African and Asians militants. By contrast, as seen above, John’s concept of socialism relied on images of humidity, and Isted presented women and moisture as the ingredients of a magic formula that could stop the nuclear madness. Moist, moisture, wet: sexually-charged terms which sharply contrast with dryness as a symbol of sterility. Is Barker suggesting that joyless sex is at the roots of the Labour Party’s failures? Elaine, Toynbee’s wife, in recounting the beginning of her love story with the Labour leader, gives a vivid image of sexual mores in the Labour Party:

He sat beside me and said, listen I am ruthless in love. I said, are you asking to make love to me? No, he said, I am an Anglo-Saxon socialist. We fuck, we do not make love. This was most intoxicating at the time. I remember his smelling of mothballs, overlaid on low tide seaweed. He ferreted inside me for a while, there was a volley of abuse, and he bit my shoulder. He ended up saying he wished he was dead. [...] And I left my husband the same afternoon. (Ibid., 23)

The archaic idea of sexuality that results from these lines can be beguiling in its weirdness, yet it shows that the, according to Barker, the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s had hardly touched the Labour Party. Given the general backwardness of the Party, it is unsurprising that Ardstock, after berating homosexuals, may finally offer his loyalty to the future leader Glint in the form of sexual servitude, in a bizarre fantasy of homoeroticism and trans-sexuality, fuelled also by alcohol:

I wanna dance with you. My thigh – to your great ambitious crutch... I wish I was a woman. I would lie with all the ruthless men, and swallow them, and draw them breathless to my tits. (UP, 94)

The sentence quoted above does not appear in the published version of *A Passion in Six Days*, but in a typed script which is supposed to be the text the Crucible's production was based upon. The typed manuscript carries the caption: "Judy Daish Associates Limited" with address and phone number. The published version is significantly shorter than the typed one. Four songs are eliminated – *The Party Needs More Spaniels*, (Up, 11) *The Rebuke*, (Ibid., 44) *They See the Point* (Ibid., 74) plus an untitled one (Ibid., 92) – and some are shortened. I have no hard evidence that the typed text is the one performed in the Crucible. Nonetheless, the published version, in its brevity, seems hardly able to sustain a three-and-a half-hour performance. (Coveney, 1983)

The cuts in the published text do not detract from the clarity of the narrative; yet some of them are politically significant. For instance, Nigel Proud, one of the members of the shadow cabinet, explains with these lines his political career: "I was too refined a man to succeed with the ranks/I chose to serve my people through the chairmanship of banks". (UP, 59) Even more explicit is Parry, a former MP who has lost his seat in the latest election and is looking for a way back to Parliament by flirting with the left of the party:

Give me this seat, give me this seat
 God give me one more go, give me this seat
 When you have tasted the great strawberry mousse of power
 You cannot go back to the wife
 And the shitty little street
 [...]
 For a seat I will be mandated, delegated
 Or a parakeet! (UP, 76)

There could not be a better exposition of what Barker considered the target of his political satire: "[T]he corruptibility of ideals, [...] the erosion of meaning, the haemorrhage of meaning from grand and eloquent strategies". (quoted in Megson 2001, 471) Other cuts regard potentially embarrassing words but, since as many are

left, it is hard to see a censorious will behind the cuts. For example, when Elaine describes, in the typed text, how Toynbee's way of expression is the same in his public and private life:

You know, what is funny about you is that you speak to me – who is your bed companion and smells your farts and wipe your mouth when you are ill – exactly in the way you speak out there – the same language – the same innocence. (UP, 43)

The same phrase appears in the published version, only the expression “and smells your farts” is deleted. (Barker 1985, 43-44) In the absence of a better explanation, it can be assumed that the cuts were dictated by editorial reasons, i.e. the need not to exceed a certain number of pages. Where the two version significantly differ is in scene nineteen, the last one. In the published edition it is very short; Emily appears alone in the empty conference hall, and recounts a political success she gained in the Conference:

I got my resolution through. By a two third majority, which, according to the constitution of the party, ensures it becomes official policy, is written into the manifesto and will become legislation under the next socialist government. I attended forty-seven branch meetings, fifty meetings of the executive committee and eleven meetings of the General Management Committee. (*pause*) One hundred-and-sixty hours of my life.

Pause. The Chorus takes up 'The Curse of Debate'. Fade to black. (Ibid., 53)

In the typed version the last scene is much longer as it also includes episodes that are placed earlier in the published version, such as the final conversation between John and Annie. On the backdrop a dance goes on in a grotesquely chaotic atmosphere: “*The ballroom of the Imperial. A distinct absence of joy, but horseplay and alcoholism abound. Observing, Annie and Axt, couples revolve, in a tango*” (UP., 96)

The chorus sings a song celebrating the conference as a vacation from family duties more than a political event:

It is the last night of the par-ty conference

If you have not done what you would do it now,

There won't be another chance,

When you see her down the branch,

So never mind – about your conscience (Ibid.)

The song is followed by the conversation between John and Annie Axt, Ardstock's above mentioned drunken advances to Glint, and a conversation between Deasy and Toynbee in which the latter shows he has seen through Glint's behaviour: “I will not speak to Glint. Do not let Glint near me. [...] I shall send him reeling out of the office”. (Ibid., 95) After all this, the mayhem of the dance floor subsides, and Emily Drum enters the stage:

The figure of Drum is seen, walking through the dancers. They gradually disperse, leaving her isolated in the conference hall. She stares up at the deserted platform. Pause. (Ibid.,)

Drum's speech is the same as in the published version. When it ends, she is joined on stage by John:

Axt, who has watched from a distance comes to her, and lays his head on her shoulder. The chorus takes up again as the lights go down on them. (UP, 96)

Barker has often shocked his audiences with unexpected turns in the finales. I have mentioned a few: Stripwell's killing by Cargill (Barker 1977, 122), Noel Biledew's drowning by security agents in *Claw* (Ibid., 230), the shooting of Rhoda – Orbison's daughter – and her lover by terrorists in *That Good Between Us*. (Barker 1980, 59) Of course, the end of *A Passion in Six Days* is not shocking in a strict sense. Yet, one has to wonder if this sort of happy ending could possibly be intended as a means to surprise the audience with a vindication of romantic love after a play in which cynicism and opportunism reign. I note in passing that this preference for surprising endings possibly reinforces the hypothesis that the performance was based upon the unpublished text. Talking of *Claw*, Barker claimed that he considered a certain degree of unpredictability an important dramatic ingredient, especially in the finale:

[T]he father always holds the holy grail of political truth, and is proved right by the conclusion of the play. I was worried that that would look clumsy. There's nothing worse for an audience than knowing you can more or less predict how the relationships in a play will operate. (Brown 2011, 27)

In his early writing career, Barker was not shy of basing some of his characters on living persons, or openly alluding to them: in *No One Was Saved* (staged 1970) – apart from the clear allusion to Barker's *Saved* – the protagonist is a young single mother called Eleanor Rigby, and one of the characters is John Lennon (Rabey 1989, 22); in *Alpha Alpha* (staged 1973) the twin brothers Morrie and Mickey Kersh are transparent travesties of the Kray brothers, and one of their victims is a young Irish MP called Bernadette, a reference to Bernadette Devlin. (Ibid., 25) The protagonist of *Edward – The Last Days* (staged 1972) is a thinly disguised Edward Heath, who in the end commits suicide. The riskiest staging of a public figure is in *My Sister and I* (staged 1973), in which a queen called Liz has a lot of troubles with a reckless younger sister: the latter being called Marjory, instead of Margaret, provides the only barrier against complete identification. (Ibid., 37) Surprisingly, this staging of public figures has never resulted in an accusation of libel for Barker:

I've never been prosecuted. But it is one of the reasons why Methuen stopped publishing me. There's always the danger of libel because I've so often exploited the public's contempt for its heroes and governors. Attacking images, proposing alternatives, forcing revelations, is something the theatre does very well. (quoted in Brown 2011, 24)

It is therefore justified that some reviewers of *A Passion in Six Days* underlined how much some of the characters were reminiscent of actual members of the Labour

Party, as a result treating *A Passion in Six Days* as a chronicle play. According to Megson, Coveney's review in the *Financial Times* "takes this preoccupation to outlandish proportion" (Megson in Gritzner, Rabey 2006, 130), as it goes as far as drawing parallels based upon physical appearances:

The evocatively named party leader, Raymond Toynbee, is [...] a cunning amalgam of Michael Foot and Peter Shore.²²³ Another actor looks like Eric Heffer but says surprisingly little. Another looks like Gerald Kaufman but is, in fact, a pale carbon of Sir Robin Day. So it goes with Glint's sex appeal. (Coveney 1983, 867)

As stated above, the pairing Kinnock-Glint is overtly suggested by Barker by making the fictional character Welsh;²²⁴ besides, as was the case in the real political contest, the challenger to the leadership of the Party is much younger and fitter than his rival – Foot was seventy by the time of the 1983 Brighton conference, while Kinnock was forty-one. The similarity stops here, as the outcome of the on-stage struggle is not the same as the real one: at the end of the play, Toynbee retains his leadership by a narrow margin, thanks to his established network of alliances, while, quite predictably, Kinnock took Foot's place in the 1983 Conference. Barker always denied that this one-to-one pairing between characters in the play and public figures might be his main objective. In a 1996 interview with Chris Megson, Barker explained how much his concept of theatre differed from the plain staging of persons and events:

Critics are journalists. The entire contemporary theatre was generated by journalistic instincts, far from my own. Billington loved to see the "dramatization" of an issue, a political event. This is a miserable function for a great art form. To "dramatize" something is to confess the inability of theatre to be its own first cause. So if I had been inspired by a piece of news, I improvised wildly on the news, the news was never enough for me. I detest research. Research is for academics, not artists. This research destroys the autonomy of the drama, which cannot and should not be controlled by a political intention. (Quoted in Megson 2002, 472)

The distinction between dramatizing an issue and improvising on a piece of news is better understood by Barker's explanation of the genesis of *Downchild*: "The interesting thing about *Downchild* and its investigation is that it hangs from a pastiche – it is a conflation of two unrelated events of the 1960s: the Lucan murder and the peculiar resignation of Wilson, in the form of an English country house thriller. (Lamb, 40) This statement is inaccurate, since both events referred to belong to the 1970s: John Bingham, Earl of Lucan, disappeared in 1974 after killing the baby-sitter of his children, and Harold Wilson resigned in 1976. These events translate on stage into a thriller in which a former Labour Prime Minister holds

²²³ Michael Foot was the leader of the Labour Party, ousted by Kinnock at the 1983 conference; Peter Shore, Eric Heffer and Gerald Kaufman were Labour MPs and members of the Shadow Cabinet; Robin Day was a political commentator.

²²⁴ In a funny example of life imitating art, also Kinnock's leadership was baptized with seawater, as he actually fell into the sea during the 1983 conference in Brighton, albeit by accident and not to save someone from drowning. See <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/uk-politics-31993510/new-labour-leader-neil-kinnock-takes-a-tumble> last accessed 10/05/2019.

prisoner an aristocrat suspected of murder in a country house, and is confronted by a muckraking journalist, the eponymous Downchild, who, in a mock trial, accuses him of having betrayed socialism. Billington's review of *Downchild* clearly shows that his idea of theatre was irreconcilable with that of Barker:

Barker wisely calls his play 'fantasy' but for me its whole tone of high-camp excess invalidates its political arraignment. [...] This is the conspiracy theory of politics: colourful but one that never acknowledges nor explains genuine post-war Labour reforms. But what also undermined the play for me is Barker's high-minded sexual puritanism. He seems to see the promiscuity of politicians as part of the "dirty tapestry of public life" and there is more than a hint that Downchild's gayness is part of endemic English corruption". (Billington 1985, 1020)

Billington's assumption that not to acknowledge Labour Party's post-war reforms was a major fault in a drama can be understood as part of his general idea of theatre as a means of social and political advancement. Of course, this was not acceptable to Barker, even in the years in which he considered himself a socialist:

It's quite true I had no fixed scale against which to measure the characters of these plays. I did not wish to make a play into a demonstration, a QED, even if I was certain of my own Marxist qualifications. I already dimly sensed that drama is about oscillation, it is tender, it is not solid, a hard weapon of struggle. I could never bring myself to gratify my own ideological prejudices, something always usurped it – the autonomy of the characters always asserted itself, pushing down the satire. (Quoted in Megson 2001, 473)

As regards the accusation of anti-gay bias, Barker himself had some doubts about his treatment of Heath's homosexuality in *Edward – The Last Days*; he had also irritated a critic with a character in *That Good Between Us* and had dismissed the accusation after careful consideration:

At times I've felt I was wrong to relate so much of it to [Heath's] homosexuality, but that's only the unease of a liberal conscience. There should be no forbidden territory in theatre. I remember Jim Hiley²²⁵ expressing extreme anger with the homosexual in *That Good Between Us*. I examined the text and was certain there are no grounds for special pleading. (Quoted in Brown 2011, 23)

As regards *That Good Between Us* one has to agree with Barker: the character referred to, McPhee, is a state spy and a rapist – he took part in the gang rape of a woman, and even boasts about it (Barker 1983, 26-28) – and homosexuality does not play a central role in his actions; incidentally, the most evil character in the play, Knatchbull, is heterosexual and the loving father of a handicapped child. On the other hand, the accusation of promoting puritanism is decidedly surprising, as it was as far as possible from Barker's intentions. As Megson argued, referring to *A Passion in six Days*: "Barker's strategy in this play, as in others of this period, is to orchestrate the elements of theatrical performance so as to bestow on the audience an experience directly counter to puritanism – that of compelling *excess*".²²⁶

²²⁵ Jim Hiley is a critic writing for the *Observer*, the *Guardian* and the *Listener*.

²²⁶ Emphasis in the original.

(Megson in Gritzner, Rabey 2006, 126) It seems that Barker' and Billington's ideas of theatre are so irreconcilable as to cause an actual incommunicability between them. As Billington lamented in his review of *The Loud Boy's Life* (1980): "The problem is that Mr Barker offers us superior melodrama [...] when we hunger for tangible facts". (Quoted in Gritzner, Rabey 2006, 129) Given this premises, it is not surprising that Billington would appreciate Edgar, and other similarly-minded playwrights with their "almost unhealthy obsession with explaining things" (quoted in Swain 1986: 45-46): the title Billington gave to his 2007 study on post-war British drama, *State of the Nation*, says it all.²²⁷ Billington was not alone in being ill at ease with Barker's works. In his review of *The Loud Boy's Life*, Robert Cushman in the *Observer*, while conceding that "the play contains some of Mr Barker's best writing", nonetheless pointed out that "it lasts nearly three hours, and that is a long time not to be told things". (quoted in Megson 2006, 129-130) This critical attitude resulted in Barker being increasingly marginalized in the theatrical milieu. As Mark Brown put it: "Barker is a divisive figure. The response to his work by the English or, at least, the London theatre and critical establishment, has made him an internal exile in England". (Brown 2011, 13) As a result, Barker formed his own company, The Wrestling School, in collaboration with Kenny Ireland, director and actor, and actor Hugh Fraser. The story of the Wrestling School falls outside the scope of this study: it is sufficient to say that it was the recipient of an Arts Council grant until 2007 (Ibid.) and that its website <http://www.thewrestlingschool.co.uk/tws.html> records as its last production *Screaming in Advance* as a co-production with The Print Room in 2013. As for Barker's political stance, it is obviously difficult to point at an exact moment in which Barker decided that he was not a socialist anymore. In the mentioned 1996 interview with Megson, when asked what he thought was the politician's function in contemporary society, Barker answered: "To protect the autonomy of the individual". (Megson 2001, 471). I think there is no need to stress that this is as far as possible from a concept of socialist politics.

Most of the published essays about Barker deal with his Theatre of Catastrophe, while very little space is accorded to his productions up to 1986. The main source of information about Barker's early plays, including the unpublished ones, is Rabey's *Howard Barker Politics and Desire* (1989). Itzin's *Stages in the Revolution* focuses on Barker's productions, published and unpublished, up to *The Hang of the Gaol*. Megson's chapter on Barker's 'state of England' plays in the volume *Theatre of Catastrophe* edited by Gritzner and Rabey titled "England Brings you Down at Last" provides some analysis on the plays up to *A Passion in Six Days*; Megson's doctoral thesis *Martyr Misfit Monster: the Staging of the Politician in British Theatre Since 1968* includes a 1996 interview with Howard Barker I have extensively quoted; this same interview has also been published in

²²⁷ Barker is mentioned but once in Billington's book, in passing, in the paragraph devoted to the Almeida theatre: "[a] brilliant opening season that kicked off with Glenda Jackson in Howard Barker's *Scenes from an Execution*, written for radio and easily Barker's best play". (Billington 2007, 343)

edited form in *Modern British Playwriting: the 1970s* edited by Megson. My thesis represents an original contribution to the critical literature on Barker's works, also for being based largely on the unpublished manuscripts of *One Afternoon* and *A Passion in Six Days*.

Conclusion

In the postscript to her *Stages in the Revolution* Itzin made an appraisal of the achievements of political theatre from 1968 onwards:

At the end of the decade, there remained some pressing questions about the political theatre movement and its many diverse workers. What had been achieved? What would the future hold? What was changed? Certainly not the world. So, assessed on its own terms – on its desire to achieve a socialist society – the political theatre movement could only have been judged a failure. (Itzin 1980, 338)

The postscript was written just a few months after Thatcher's 1979 victory and Itzin was right in pointing out that in strictly practical terms political theatre had to concede defeat, having failed to change the world or, at least, Great Britain. This said, Itzin argued that, even if the ultimate goal had been missed, some results had been achieved: "The political theatre movement had failed to reach and convert or mobilise the mass of population, even if it managed to raise the consciousness of many individuals in pubs, clubs and workplaces". (Ibid.) Itzin left open all future options:

Only time would tell whether foundations had been laid for future growths (politically and artistically), or whether political theatre in the seventies would simply become a chapter in a book. [...] A balanced perspective, however, was hopefully that of David Edgar when he concluded that 'the realisation that socialist playwrights cannot themselves change the world might yet help them to discover ways of contributing, and in no small measure, to the work of those who can'. (Ibid., 339)

What Itzin defined at the time as a balanced perspective, in a few years' time would look as unbridled optimism not just in the United Kingdom but worldwide. The conservative revolution, brought about by the conjunct action of Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, put an end to the idea that socialism could be a feasible, or even attractive, option. In Great Britain this turn to the right was marked by the miners' defeat in 1985 and definitely ratified by Thatcher's third successive electoral win in 1987. It would therefore be justified to ask what, if anything, has survived of the political theatre movement. As John Bull argued in his *Stage Right*, during the 1980s the political playwrights would be increasingly pushed to the margin of the theatrical mainstream, as was the case with Trevor Griffiths, who was virtually silenced during that decade. (Bull 1994, 32) And even if some authors, such as Brenton, Edgar and Hare, would still succeed in having their plays performed in the main London theatres, they were aware that all they could do was plan a resistance in the long term, as Edgar clearly articulated in the Introduction to his *The Second Time as Farce* (1988). Sometimes the new political climate could lead to paradoxical outcomes: the case of Churchill's *Serious Money* (1987) is exemplary, if outright bizarre. *Serious Money* is a ferocious satire in verse of the greed and malingering of the Stock Exchange traders. Due to its success at the Royal Court, it was then transferred to the Wyndham's Theatre in the West End.

Billington singled out this play as an explanatory case of the changes in British society in the second half of the 1980:

Churchill's play, which opened at the Royal Court two months before the May 1987 election and transferred to Wyndham's two months after it, certainly caught the spirit of the money-making times. [...] But what was unnerving was the rapturous way in which this socialist play about capitalist pleasure was received by its targets. During the run at the Royal Court, the minimal parking space around the theatre was thronged by City traders' Porsches and BMWs. And at Wyndham's, [a]s Thomas Sutcliffe wrote in the *Independent*, "It is now a bit like going to see *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* with a coach party of SS men". (Billington 2007, 314-315)

In the light of such a despairing account, it would be tempting to conclude that all the political theatre movement was for nothing. And this view would be probably embraced by Howard Barker, who is nearly apologetic in explaining how he came to be for a while a socialist playwright:

I came to theatre ignorant of almost every classic text and with half a dozen matinees behind me. I came to it because I could write speech and was impatient with novels, but also because it existed and clamoured for big and little texts, lunchtimes, studios, events. [...] So self in motion seemed sufficient cause. But there seemed something shameful in using so public a medium for a private end, so I invoked my socialism, and talked of 'opposition', thinking I helped a class, or at best, was testament. (Barker 1993, 24)

Even taking into account Barker's love of paradoxes, this is a very categorical assertion, coherent with the development of his playwriting from the 1986 onwards. Anyway, it is safe to assume that the other individuals scrutinized in this study would probably hold a different view, as all their career has been a coherent consequence of those early years. Probably the most interesting case is that of Ronald Muldoon and Claire Burnley who, as already mentioned in the chapter devoted to CAST, after the withdrawal of CAST's subsidy, took control and renovated a run-down theatre in the East End of London, the Hackney Empire, making of it the centre of the New Variety project they had started in the last phase of their company's life. Their twenty-year stewardship of the Hackney Empire, from 1985 to 2005 was anything but uneventful, as it included several financial crises, a *Hamlet* performed by Ralph Fiennes and even a royal visit by Prince Charles who, according to Muldoon, delivered a speech "revealing a knowledge of our struggle for which – it must be said – I, though a republican, felt grateful. (Muldoon 2013, 311) Even if in 2005 they had to relinquish control of the theatre to a more managerial board of directors, the Hackney Empire – still active today, even if the programming is not as radical as under Muldoon-Burnley's control²²⁸ – is a lasting legacy of their vision of a truly popular theatre with a tight connection with the community around it.

Caryl Churchill has not given interviews from the mid-1990s, and so it is not possible to know her current opinion on politics; yet her work bears witness that

²²⁸ See <https://hackneyempire.co.uk/> last accessed 22/11/2018.

she has not given up on her political commitment. In the third chapter of this study I have already mentioned her use of dystopia in order to make strong political statements in *Far Away* and *Escaped Alone*: the latter in particular is an effective attack on the triumphant free-market ethics. General questions apart, contemporary events have been a continuous source of inspiration for Churchill, as in *Mad Forest*, on the 1989 Rumanian revolution, and *Seven Jewish Children*, about the conflict between Israel and Palestine and the current situation in Gaza. The latter play has been at the centre of controversies and has drawn charges of antisemitism against her: Churchill has challenged this accusation with a letter, published in *The Independent* on 21 February 2009²²⁹, her latest public statement on political matters. Her latest performed play has been *Pigs and Dogs*, a fifteen-minute piece on homophobic legislation in Uganda, staged at the Royal Court in July 2016.

David Edgar has remained faithful through the years to the idea of politically committed playwrighting, facing in his plays all the major British and international political issues such as the fall of communism, in the already mentioned *The Shape of the Table*, the tragedy of migration in *Pentecost* (1994), the dissolution of the Soviet Union in *The Prisoner's Dilemma* (2001) and racial tensions in contemporary Britain in *Playing with Fire*. (2005) In addition to his playwrighting, Edgar has published a volume *How Plays Work* (2009) on the craft of playwrighting, plus articles on the state of British theatre, such as "Enter the New Wave of Political Playwrights", published in *The Guardian* on 28 February 2010.²³⁰ In November 2018 Edgar has staged two of his plays at the Royal Court. One of them, *Maydays* is a rewriting of the play premiered by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1983 on left-wing intellectuals defecting to the right. The other, *Trying It On*, is an original script, performed by Edgar himself, in which he goes through the political history of his generation imagining a dialogue with his thirty-year old self. It is by and large a chronicle of defeats and disappointments, yet the underlying message is that those years have left durable traces in social and political life. I have attended a performance on 16 November 2018. Of course, my attention was fixed on the text, and on Edgar's performance, apparently the first since his appearance as God Almighty in Brenton's *Scott of Antarctic* in 1971. Yet, for me, the highlight of the evening was the presence of Howard Brenton in the audience, and a true emotion to see him chatting as an old friend with Edgar before the performance. Apart from the sheer significance of seeing together two of the most important contemporary playwrights, their encounter gave me the feeling that much of what I had written in this thesis about the collaborative relationship among the authors of the 1968 generation was proved to make sense.

While leaving the hall after the performance, I was given a brown envelope with a two-page programme of the play in it, designed in imitation of a mimeographed leaflet. The envelope also contained some brochures of no-profit

²²⁹ See <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/letters-jacobson-on-gaza-1628191.html> last accessed 22/10/2018.

²³⁰ See <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/feb/28/david-edgar-new-political-theatre> last accessed 15/10/2018

organizations, as declared in the programme: “Alongside this programme, we have included a selection of flyers from campaigns that members of the creative team are passionate about”. I wondered if supporting such campaigns was the sign of a defeatist attitude or a more realistic approach to the problems of the world, keeping in mind also that Caryl Churchill, whose view on charities I have examined at length, has donated the profits of her *Seven Jewish Children* to a charity, Medical Aid for Palestinians. I have not an answer to this question, and anyway it goes beyond the scope of this study.

In starting this thesis, I had two possible models in mind: Itzin’s *Stages in the Revolution* for its comprehensiveness and Bull’s *New British Political Dramatists* as regards the attention to the texts. I was aware that it was impossible to match the encyclopaedic quality of Itzin’s study, also for it having been written while the history of alternative theatre was actually going on, with the benefit of Itzin’s personal contacts with the authors; as for Bull’s study, without in any way trying to diminish its importance, in focusing on four authors – Howard Brenton, David Edgar, Trevor Griffiths and David Hare – whose common features were evident – male, middle class, university-educated, left-of-Labour – it did not cover, or just touched upon, subjects who did not conform to this restrictive pattern; for instance the phenomenon of alternative companies was acknowledged very briefly; even more significantly, Caryl Churchill was accorded just two pages, and only two other women playwrights – Marcella Evaristi and Clare Luckham – were just about mentioned. As a consequence, my aim was to combine a close scrutiny of some chosen texts with a widening of the horizon. I pursued this goal by choosing four authors that I considered representative of different, and yet somehow complementary, tendencies that accounted, as comprehensively as possible, for what was going on in the 1968-85 time-span, in British theatres as well as in public life, as I have stated in the introduction. In other words, I aimed more at enlarging the view than at narrowing it inside a frame. Whether my attempt has been successful, is not up to me to say.

APPENDIX

Destino

di David Edgar

Il Partito Conservatore è il Partito dell'Impero per lunga tradizione e per opinione condivisa. Noi siamo fieri del suo passato. Lo consideriamo la speranza più fondata del presente. Proclamiamo la nostra fede incrollabile nel suo destino.

Manifesto programmatico del Partito Conservatore per le elezioni politiche del 1950.

La Destra ha piena coscienza che il modello di società che desidera conservare dipende essenzialmente dal fatto che la Gran Bretagna rimanga una grande potenza. L'intero sistema di classe britannico comincia ad apparire insensato e ridicolo se collegato a una potenza secondaria in declino.

Peregrine Worsthorne, commentatore politico Conservatore, Aprile 1959.

Atto Primo

Scena Prima

Buio. Sentiamo una Voce potente.

Voce: Molti anni fa, abbiamo fissato un appuntamento col destino, e ora è giunto il momento di onorare questo impegno, forse non integralmente e pienamente, ma in maniera sostanziale. Ci sono momenti, che nella storia accadono raramente, in cui si esce dal vecchio e si entra nel nuovo, finisce un'era e l'anima di una nazione a lungo oppressa trova la sua voce. Allo scoccare della mezzanotte, mentre il mondo dorme, l'India si sveglierà alla vita e alla libertà.

Breve pausa.

Jawaharlal Pandit Nehru, 14 agosto 1947.

*Le luci si accendono all'improvviso, e contemporaneamente si sentono in lontananza rumori di festeggiamenti. Siamo nel magazzino di una caserma dell'esercito britannico presso Jullundur nel Punjab. Sul fondo è appeso un enorme quadro scuro, raffigurante la repressione della Rivolta Indiana del 1857, che domina l'intera scena. A un lato della scena c'è una porta. Ci sono poi due sedie, diverse casse da imballaggio, una tigre impagliata e un baule, tutti coperti da teli per la polvere. Un sergente dell'esercito britannico in divisa coloniale è in piedi vicino alla porta. Ha appena acceso la luce. Si chiama **Turner**, viene dalle West Midlands, ha una ventina d'anni ed è irritato.*

Turner: Oh cazzo! (*Esce. Lo si sente gridare*) Khera! Khera! (*pausa*) Cristo santo, Khera, dove cazzo ti sei nascosto?

Si sente correre. La voce di un giovane indiano.

Khera: Signore?

Turner: Dove accidenti sei stato? (*pausa*) Dai, vieni avanti. Guarda cos'ho trovato.

Turner rientra nella stanza con Gurjeet Singh Khera, un servitore Sikh di 18 anni che indossa un turbante, porta un braccialetto di metallo al polso e un coltello alla cintura. Quando si rivolge a Khera, Turner parla lentamente e a voce alta.

Turner: Bene. Vedi questa roba? Deve andare. Via. Tu, io, portiamo via questa roba, va bene? (**Khera annuisce e non si muove**). Allora, forza, muoviamoci. Leviamo questi teli, vediamo cosa c'è sotto. (**Khera e Turner cominciano a togliere i teli dai mobili e dalle casse. Khera si limita a buttarli. Turner se ne accorge**) Ehi, tu! Non buttarli come capita: piegali! (**Khera non fa niente; Turner sventola il suo telo piegato a mo' di esempio**). Vedi, piegare. Capito? (**Khera annuisce con aria giudiziosa**) Bene: datti una mossa, allora. (**Khera, sempre annuendo, comincia a piegare un telo con estrema lentezza e attenzione**) Gesù Cristo!

Turner ritorna al suo lavoro. Rumore di festeggiamenti, un po' più forti.

I tuoi si stanno divertendo, eh?

Pausa

Ho detto, i tuoi si stanno divertendo?

Khera: (*smette di lavorare*) Eh, sì. Si divertono come i matti. (*come se si rivolgesse a un bambino*). L'indipendenza.

Turner: Oh, mi stavo chiedendo cos'era.

Pausa.

Va bene, vai avanti. (**Turner toglie il telo alla tigre**). E qui cosa c'è?

Khera: (*servizievole*) Tigre. Impagliata.

Turner: Sai una cosa, ci ero appena arrivato per conto mio.

Khera: Gli sparano, poi le impagliano.

Turner alza gli occhi al cielo e riprende a piegare. Entra un Colonnello, 43 anni, classe alta. Turner scatta sull'attenti e saluta.

Turner: Signore!

Colonnello: Va bene, sergente.

Turner guarda **Khera**, che non ha reagito. **Khera** si rende conto della sua negligenza e si mette sull'attenti, lento e svogliato. Pausa. Poi:

Oh Signore! C'è dell'altra roba?

Turner: Sì signore!

Colonnello: (*guardando la tigre*) Ah! Cos'abbiamo qui?

Khera: E' tigre, signore.

Sguardo inferocito di Turner.

Impagliata.

Colonnello: (*sorridendo*) Sì.

Turner: (*Per cambiare discorso*) Ho trovato questo baule, signore. Non so cosa...

Colonnello: Sappiamo di chi è?

Turner: No, signore. Credo sia qui da un bel po'. Penso che qui non entri nessuno da anni.

Colonnello: Be', diamo un'occhiata. È aperto?

Turner: Adesso guardo, signore. (**Turner** apre il baule. Il **Colonnello** si inginocchia e guarda)

Turner: (*a Khera*) Puoi cominciare a portare questa roba giù ai camion.

Khera porta fuori la roba mentre:

Colonnello: Bene, bene. (*Tira fuori dal baule una giacca rossa da caccia*) Non si possono buttare via i vestiti di carnevale, non è vero?

Turner: Chiedo scusa per lui, signore, è...

Colonnello: Non importa, sergente. Dopo tutto, è il loro giorno. Senza dubbio i suoi compari si stanno dando alla pazza gioia a Jullundur.

Turner: Sì, signore.

Colonnello: Vediamo, cos'altro... ah. (*Tira fuori una baionetta e la sfodera*) Scommetto che è da un anno o due che non vede un po' d'azione. (*guarda il fodero*) Certamente non è nostra... Esercito Indiano, direi. (*alza le spalle e infila di nuovo la baionetta nel fodero, poi la rimette nel baule. Trova una bottiglia di whisky*) Dio mio, è scotch. Questo è un vero colpo di scena. Mi chiedo da quanto tempo sia lì.

Turner: Non lo so, signore.

Colonnello: Beh, non va a male, no? Dov'è il ragazzo?

Turner: (*va alla porta e grida*) Khera!

Khera (*fuori scena, in lontananza*): Signore?

Turner: Vieni qui. Subito!

Entra Khera che si rivolge deliberatamente al Colonnello piuttosto che a Turner.

Khera: Chiedo scusa, signore, stavo prendendo...

Colonnello: Guarda, puoi andare di corsa giù alla mensa a prendere tre bicchieri da whisky? Capito? Di' che ti ho mandato io.

Khera: Subito signore! Tre bicchieri, di corsa.

Turner: Tre, signore?

Colonnello: (*si alza*) Sì. Perché no? (*chiude il baule*). Temo che sia meglio portare via tutto.

Turner: Sì signore.

Colonnello: Dio solo sa dove metteremo questa roba.

Breve pausa.

Turner: C'è stato qualche problema oggi, signore?

Colonnello: Non che io sappia. Tutti si divertono. Qui il vero casino comincerà quando decideranno i confini. Ecco il motivo di tutta questa fretta.

Turner: Se vuole il mio parere, signore... (*ci ripensa*)

Colonnello: No, vai pure avanti.

Turner: Non c'erano tutti questi problemi, ai vecchi tempi. Ero a Calcutta l'anno scorso, durante i disordini, e mi sembra che non siano altro che selvaggi, qualsiasi cosa si dica.

Colonnello: Beh, non sono pensieri che spettano a noi.

Pausa. Entra Khera con un vassoio e tre bicchieri. Appoggia tutto sul baule.

Ah, splendido. Avresti voglia di un goccio, ehm ...

Turner: Khera, signore.

Colonnello: Khera? (*Khera non capisce. Il Colonnello agita la bottiglia*) Bere?

Khera: Oh, grazie, sì.

Colonnello: Splendido. (*versa il whisky e passa i bicchieri a Khera e Turner*) Khera, sai cosa farai quando ce ne saremo andati tutti a casa?

Khera: Oh, non so, signore.

Colonnello: Forse un giorno verrai in Inghilterra. Per vedere i nativi nel loro ambiente, eh?

Khera: Sì, signore, mi piacerebbe venire in Inghilterra moltissimo.

Colonnello: Alla salute di... certo, perché no? Alla salute del Re. Al quale credo che non dovremmo accostare il nome di mister Attlee.

Turner: Winston, signore?

Colonnello: Sì, splendido. Alla salute del Re e di mister Churchill.

*Stanno alzando i bicchieri quando irrompe nella stanza il Maggiore **Rolfe**. Ha quasi trent'anni, brusco di modi, e in questo momento è di pessimo umore.*

Rolfe Eccoti qua, sergente. Ti ho cercato per tutto... (*vede il colonnello*). Oh, mi scusi, signore.

Colonnello: Va bene, maggiore. Il sergente e io ci siamo lasciati prendere dalla generale atmosfera di giubilo. Si unisca a noi.

Il **Colonnello** fa un cenno a **Khera**, che passa il suo whisky a **Rolfe**. **Rolfe**, prendendolo:

Rolfe: Qualche accidente di moretto ha portato via la batteria del Land Rover.

Colonnello: Oh, cribbio, un'altra volta.

Rolfe: In pieno giorno. Tutto quello che non è inchiodato a terra. Hanno svuotato la cantina.

Colonnello: Bisognerà fare qualcosa per la batteria.

Rolfe: Sì, certo, se vogliamo toglierci di qui. Alla salute, colonnello. (*Beve un sorso. Breve pausa*)

Colonnello: Alla vostra! (*Lui e Turner bevono*)

Rolfe: (*rivolto a Khera*) Bene, non stare lì a bocca aperta. Immagino che tutta questa roba vada portata via?

Turner: Sì, signore.

Rolfe: (*rivolto a Khera*) Allora muoviti.

Khera: (*con una parodia di saluto militare*) Sissignore. (*raccoglie una cassa e va via*)

Colonnello: Piuttosto sveglio quel ragazzino. Probabilmente mezzo diavolo, ma di certo non mezzo bambino.

Rolfe: Chiedo scusa, signore?

Colonnello: Kipling. Non la conosce? Al liceo ce la facevano imparare a memoria.

Raccogli il fardello dell'Uomo Bianco -
Disperdi il meglio della tua stirpe

Forza i tuoi figli all'esilio
 Per servire i bisogni dei tuoi prigionieri;
 Per vegliare in assetto di guerra
 Su gente inquieta e selvaggia -
 Popoli appena sottomessi, insofferenti,
 Metà demoni e metà bambini.

Al liceo ce la facevano imparare a memoria.

Rolfe: Non ho fatto il liceo, colonnello.

Colonnello: Lo so, maggiore.

Rolfe: Comunque mi sembra una descrizione estremamente appropriata.

Pausa.

Turner: È vero, signore, che ora potranno venire a vivere in Inghilterra?

Colonnello: Penso che il signor Attlee stia preparando una legge, ora che l'India è nel Commonwealth.

Rolfe: Lei approva, Colonnello?

Colonnello: (*alquanto seccamente*) Naturalmente. È un dovere. Siamo la madrepatria, dopo tutto.

Rolfe: Io ho delle riserve.

Colonnello: E ne ha pienamente diritto.

Pausa. Il Colonnello vuota il suo bicchiere.

Penso che sia meglio che io vada a risolvere questa faccenda della batteria. Vedi di far caricare tutta questa roba, sergente.

Turner: Signore!

Colonnello: (*incontra Khera che sta entrando*) Continua così, Khera.

Khera sorride. Il Colonnello esce.

Rolfe: Bene, signor Khera, sembra che lei sia appena diventato un cittadino britannico. (*si versa un altro bicchiere*)

Khera: Signore?

Rolfe: Avanti col lavoro.

Khera: Volete tigre, signore?

Rolfe: Certo che vogliamo questo cazzo di tigre. L'abbiamo uccisa noi.

Khera porta via la tigre. Rolfe tira fuori il portasigarette e ne offre una a Turner.

Sigaretta, sergente?

Turner: (*incerto su come comportarsi*) Ehm...

Rolfe: Perdio, se Mountbatten può consegnare l'India a un branco di dervisci mezzi matti, tu potrai bene fumare in servizio.

Turner: (*prende una sigaretta*) Grazie, signore. (*accende la sua sigaretta e quella di Rolfe*) Crede che il signor Churchill potrà farci qualcosa, signore? Quando i conservatori torneranno al governo?

Rolfe: Quando sei stato l'ultima volta in Inghilterra, sergente?

Turner: Nel 1945, signore. Subito dopo la fine della guerra.

Rolfe: Sono cambiate molte cose.

Breve pausa.

Turner: Torna subito a casa, signore?

Rolfe: No, non proprio subito. Voglio andare a sud, a Tiruppur. La mia vecchia guarnigione. Giusto una volta, prima di andarmene.

Entra Khera

Bene, meglio muoversi.

Turner: Certo, signore. Khera, voglio che il resto di questa roba sia giù in dieci minuti.

Pausa.

Rolfe: Devi dire "sì, signore", o non lo sai?

Khera: Sì, signore.

Rolfe: Mettiamo in moto questo dannato carrozzone. (**Rolfe e Turner escono**)

Khera *si avvicina al baule e sta per togliere il vassoio coi bicchieri. Poi ci ripensa e si versa un bicchiere di whisky. Poi nota il quadro della Rivolta Indiana. Lo guarda. Tocca la tela. Poi si gira verso il pubblico e alza il bicchiere in una parodia di brindisi.*

Khera: Civis... Britannicus...Sum.

Buio e musica. La Musica per i Reali Fuochi d'Artificio di Händel copre il cambio di scena.

Scena seconda.

*Luce tenue su un ritratto del **Colonnello** in divisa, in India. La musica si spegne. Un riflettore illumina gradualmente il **Colonnello** su un lato del palcoscenico. È molto vecchio.*

Colonnello: Tornato a casa nel Quarantotto

Colonnello Chandler monocoloro

Un'altra Inghilterra

Ruvida e cruda

Non più gentile e sentimentale

Non certamente per comandare

Entrò in politica, ma per servire

Per controllare attentamente

La base Tory ed il suo umore

Come ogni nato di famiglia ricca

Per essere utile e non per profitto.

Alquanto liberale,

Sempre conservatore

Ma marginale diventa il suo seggio,

il suo potere sempre meno saldo

Le sue risposte alle interrogazioni

Sempre più senili e traballanti

Colonnello Chandler ormai invecchiato.

Degno. Ammirevole e superato.

Colonnello Chandler, con l'occhio smorto,

Un bel mattino d'estate è morto.

*Esce. Si accendono le luci, ora vediamo che il ritratto è appeso sulla parete di fondo di un salotto. Una porta. Una tavola, col caffè pronto per essere servito, e un telefono. Entra **Peter Crosby**, più vicino ai trenta che ai vent'anni. Come tutti gli uomini in questa scena è vestito sobriamente e indossa una cravatta nera. Va al telefono, solleva la cornetta, compone un numero.*

Crosby: Interno 237, per favore. Ciao Maggie, sei tu? Guarda, sono al (*controlla sul telefono*) 3721 di Taddley. **T-A-D-D-L-E-Y**. È da qualche parte vicino a West

Bromwich. Comunque, sarò ancora qui per una ventina di minuti, poi via per un'ora. (*Sorride*) No, è davvero un funerale. Mio zio.

Entra Platt, di mezza età, accento delle West Midlands, non del tutto a proprio agio. Sta per parlare a Crosby, quando si accorge che sta telefonando, e allora guarda il ritratto.

Direi di no. Era molto anziano. Allora, guarda, puoi farmi avere, per prima cosa, i rendimenti correnti delle obbligazioni Inter-Americans? Sì, quelli. E poi puoi dire a Bill che dia un'occhiata prima di pranzo ai miei futures agricoli su Chicago? No, tutto qua. (*Sorride*) Anche a te, tesoro. (*Mette giù il telefono e si accorge di Platt*)

Platt: Gli affari non si fermano, eh Peter?

Crosby: Temo che il mercato non rispetti molto il lutto. Caffè?

Platt: Sì, molte grazie. (**Crosby versa il caffè**) Ci è molto dispiaciuto che se ne sia andato.

Crosby: Sì. Credo che voi del suo collegio elettorale lo conosceste meglio di me.

Platt: Può darsi.

Crosby: Latte e zucchero?

Platt: Solo... latte.

Crosby: (*Mentre dà a Platt il caffè*) Immagino che una volta fosse un seggio molto più sicuro.

Platt: Eh, sì, proprio un seggio di campagna. Certo adesso, con le nuove case popolari, è molto incerto.

Crosby: Non ha mai pensato di ritirarsi?

Platt: Ne parlava da dieci anni. Ma sono cose che non si fanno, non è vero?

Crosby: I vecchi conservatori non muoiono mai, vengono solo ridistribuiti.

Platt sorride. Crosby guarda l'orologio.

Platt: Ehm, Peter, forse non è il momento adatto, ma l'elezione suppletiva è questione di giorni, e ho l'impressione che ai piani alti vogliano tenere tutto in famiglia. Forse dovremmo fare due chiacchiere.

Crosby: Sì, certo. Tanto non ho fretta di tornare. Perché dopo non beviamo qualcosa?

Platt: Ottimo. Potremmo andare al club. Far vedere la tua faccia in giro.

Breve pausa.

Naturalmente ci sono altri candidati. Non possiamo esagerare col nepotismo.

Crosby: Naturalmente. C'è qualcosa su cui dovrei insistere, e qualcosa invece da evitare?

Platt: Beh, per cominciare non nominerei i titoli agricoli su Chicago. Mi concentrerei su quelli industriali di Lonbridge.²³¹ (**Crosby sorride**) Per il resto, ricordati che sei nella terra di Enoch²³² e non avrai problemi.

Crosby: La terra di Enoch?

Platt: La zona è piena di nostri cugini del Commonwealth.

Crosby: Sì, certo, metterei subito in chiaro...

Platt: Io non lo farei.

Crosby: Non faresti cosa?

Platt: Mettere in chiaro, perché ti diranno solo che non si può essere obbligati a viverci insieme.

Crosby: Beh, sì, ma...

Kershaw apre la porta, lascia passare la Signora Chandler e poi entra anche lui. Hanno entrambi fra i cinquanta e i sessant'anni.

Signora Chandler: Ciao, Peter.

Crosby: (*la bacia*) Zietta.

Signora Chandler: Sono così felice che tu sia potuto venire.

Kershaw: Sarah, un caffè?

Signora Chandler: Con piacere, grazie. (**Kershaw versa il caffè.**) Scusa, Peter, conosci Frank Kershaw?

Crosby: Naturalmente conosco Frank.

Signora Chandler: La segreteria è stata tanto gentile da mandarlo in rappresentanza del partito.

Kershaw: Non è proprio così, Peter. Ce n'erano a dozzine che volevano venire, ma tua zia ha insistito per una cerimonia privata. (**Kershaw porge il caffè alla Signora Chandler**)

²³¹ Distretto industriale nei pressi di Birmingham, sede dell'industria automobilistica MG.

²³² Il riferimento è a Enoch Powell (1912-1998), uomo politico inglese. Un suo famoso discorso, pronunciato il 20 aprile 1968, mentre Powell ricopriva la carica di Ministro della Difesa nel governo ombra di Edward Heath, è ricordato per aver messo in primo piano il problema della convivenza fra popolazione britannica autoctona e immigrati dal Commonwealth. I toni forti, non privi di implicazioni razziste, hanno messo Powell in rotta di collisione con lo stesso Partito conservatore, rendendolo tuttavia una figura di riferimento per gli strati del popolo inglese più ostili all'immigrazione.

Signora Chandler: Grazie, Frank.

Pausa

Sai se sono arrivati?

Platt *tossisce.*

Crosby: Oh, scusate. Frank, questo è Jim Platt, caporeparto, o sbaglio?

Platt: Dirigente tecnico.

Crosby: Scusa, dirigente tecnico alle Fonderie Baron, un'industria locale. E inoltre, il che è più importante, presidente del partito in questo collegio elettorale. Jim, ti presento Frank Kershaw, i cui interessi economici sono troppi per essere nominati tutti.

Platt: Oh, certo, conosciamo tutti il signor Kershaw.

Kershaw: Non sapevo che la mia fama fosse arrivata fino qui.

Signora Chandler: Ecco, vedi Frank...

Platt: Il fatto è che noi siamo uno dei suoi numerosi interessi.

Crosby: Piccolo il mondo.

Kershaw: Come ha detto che si chiama...

Platt: Fonderie Baron.

Kershaw: Oh, sì, certo.

Breve pausa.

Ve la passate piuttosto bene, non è vero?

Platt: Beh, non è esattamente così, signor Kershaw. Per essere più precisi dovremmo dire che ce la passiamo piuttosto male.

Pausa.

Crosby: In realtà è un brutto momento per tutti.

Breve pausa.

Kershaw: Peter, hai dato un'occhiata ai conti?

Crosby: Sì. La voce più importante resta il petrolio.

Kershaw: Il che non significa che possiamo non pagarlo.

Crosby: Avanti col Mare del Nord, dico io.

Kershaw: Appena il signor Weedgwood Benn²³³ si leva di turno.

Platt: (*interviene con fare scherzoso*) I bei tempi dell'impero, eh Peter? Si mandano le cannoniere e gli arabi sono sistemati.

Crosby: (*sorride*) Il sole non tramonterà mai, eh Jim. Almeno per mille anni.

Signora Chandler: Mai abbastanza rimpianti, quei tempi.

Crosby sorpreso dal tono guarda Kershaw, che con la testa fa un cenno al ritratto.

Crosby: Sono spiacente, non intendevo...

Signora Chandler: Va bene, Peter. Naturalmente lo so che tutto è cambiato. La nazione e, certo, anche il partito. Una volta rappresentavamo il patriottismo, l'impero. Ora sono tutti giovani brillanti con camicie colorate e accento londinese, che leggono l'*Economist*. Si riesce o si fallisce per le proprie capacità. Forse, però, il messaggio non è altrettanto efficace, proprio no.

Pausa

Kershaw: Mi sembra di aver sentito la macchina.

Signora Chandler: Frank, dovesti sentir parlare Peter. È veramente molto spiritoso. Specialmente se si parla dello spirito di Dunkirk.²³⁴ Dice che probabilmente siamo l'unica nazione al mondo che trae ispirazione dalle battaglie perse.

Crosby: Sono spiacente.

Signora Chandler: Intendi presentarti?

Crosby: Presentarmi?

Signora Chandler: Come candidato.

Crosby: (*con cautela*) Ci ho pensato. Ma dipende interamente da te.

Signora Chandler: Ne sarei felice.

Si sente bussare. Kershaw va a parlare con qualcuno fuori.

Crosby: Davvero?

Signora Chandler: Davvero.

²³³ Anthony Neil Weedgwood Benn (1925-2014), uomo politico della sinistra laburista e Segretario di Stato per l'Energia dal 1974 al 1979, negli anni in cui si svolge l'azione principale di *Destiny*.

²³⁴ Dunkirk è il nome inglese della cittadina portuale di Dunkerque, nel nord della Francia, dalla quale venne tratto in salvo quello che restava dell'esercito britannico nel maggio-giugno del 1940, sottraendolo all'accerchiamento tedesco. L'espressione "Dunkirk spirit" è entrata nella lingua inglese per designare una reazione stoica e determinata in una situazione di estremo pericolo, specialmente da parte di una comunità di persone. "The Dunkirk spirit" è anche il titolo di testo agit-prop di David Edgar portato in scena dalla compagnia General Will nel 1974.

Kershaw: Sarah, sono pronti.

Signora Chandler: Andiamo allora.

*Escono **Kershaw** e la **Signora Chandler**.*

Platt: Guarda, Peter, se preferisci che lasciamo perdere, dopo il funerale, e che...

Crosby: No, va bene.

Platt: Se preferisci un altro giorno...

Crosby: No, va bene.

Platt *se ne va.* **Crosby** *guarda il ritratto.*

Vecchio bastardo. Stai ridendo di me.

Buio.

Scena terza

*Nel buio, si sente la voce di un giovane con accento di Birmingham, **Paul**.*

Paul: Bob! Ehi Bob!

*Luci. Il bar di un club del Labour Party. Un tavolo, con tre pinte e un portacenere. Degli sgabelli. **Clifton** e **Sandy** stanno giocando a freccette. Lui ha superato di poco la trentina, e indossa un vestito vecchiotto di velluto a coste con la cravatta. Lei è forse un po' più giovane, viene dal nord e porta un elegante completo di jeans.*

Clifton: *(lancia una freccetta, poi)* Paul!

Paul *appare. È sui venticinque anni, porta pantaloni e giacca di jeans, una camicia aperta sul collo e tiene in mano un foglio arrotolato.*

Paul: Bob, credo che ce l'abbiamo fatta.

Bob: *(mentre segna il suo punteggio)* Come fai a saperlo?

Paul: Beh, dai un'occhiata a questa roba.

Sandy *tira una freccetta mentre **Paul** fa spazio sul tavolo e stende il suo foglio. Vediamo che è una piantina con delle sezioni colorate. **Paul** la tiene aperta con un portacenere e un bicchiere. **Sandy** segna il punteggio e si avvicina.*

Clifton: Quella pinta è tua. Ehi, conosci Sandy?

Paul: No. Piacere.

Sandy: Ciao.

Clifton: *(va verso il bersaglio e tira una freccetta)* Paul ha l'incarico di farmi avere la candidatura. Pensa che io non sia abbastanza deciso sulla Clausola Quattro,²³⁵ ma mi sostiene considerando l'alternativa. Il Daily Express lo definirebbe una minoranza militante non rappresentativa. Ha cominciato a leggere il Tribune²³⁶ a due anni, odia Roy Jenkins²³⁷ un po' più di Adolf Hitler, e a Reg Prentice²³⁸ vengono le convulsioni solo a sentirlo nominare. *(torna al tavolo)* Ma sa tutto quello che c'è da sapere sul regolamento del Labour Party. Giusto?

Paul: Giusto.

Clifton: Allora?

Sandy *va a lanciare una freccetta.*

Paul: Allora. Questi sono i conti. Ci sono 40 delegati eletti dai sindacati. Secondo la mia stima, si divideranno cinquanta-cinquanta. E i cani sciolti come le donne, i giovani socialisti e le Coop sono tutti per te. Ok?

Clifton: Sì.

Sandy: *(riavvicinandosi)* Tocca a te, Bob.

Clifton: Scusa.

Clifton *va a tirare. Sandy guarda la piantina.*

Sandy: Veramente un gran lavoro...

Bob: Si tratta solo di sapere le regole.

Sandy: Per poi sfruttarle.

Bob: Usarle.

Clifton: *(ritorna)* Ok.

Si siede per far capire che la partita è sospesa. Sandy si siede.

Paul: *(indicando la cartina)* Bene. Allora, la chiave sono le sezioni. Sono più di metà dei delegati. Dunque, le sezioni di destra, quelle che hai già perso, sono segnate in rosa. Greenside e Fenly Heath. Quelle rosse sono tue, nessun problema: Grimley e Broughton Park. Quelle in bilico, Stourford e West Thawston, vedi?

Clifton: Vedo.

Sandy: Credi che l'altro tipo, come si chiama...

²³⁵ Clausola della costituzione del Partito Laburista che prevedeva la socializzazione dei mezzi di produzione. Abolita da Tony Blair nel 1995.

²³⁶ Rivista tradizionalmente legata alla sinistra laburista.

²³⁷ Roy Harris Jenkins (1920-2003), uomo politico della destra laburista. Fu uno dei promotori della formazione del partito socialdemocratico nel 1981.

²³⁸ Reginald Ernest Prentice (1923-2001), uomo politico della destra laburista, passato al Partito conservatore nel 1977.

Paul: John Smalley? Nessuna possibilità.

Sandy: Neanche... come ex parlamentare?

Paul: Specialmente come ex parlamentare. (*Tira fuori di tasca una fotocopia: rivolto a Clifton*) Le cose stanno così. Nessuna delle due sezioni in bilico ha il massimo dei delegati per il congresso. A Thawston non ci vanno neanche vicini. E se ne possono nominare da ora fino a quando è fissato il giorno delle elezioni. Quindi la strategia è: reclutare nuovi membri a più non posso, riempire il congresso di gente che vota per te, lavoro fatto. OK?

Clifton: Non può farlo anche Smalley?

Paul: Ci proverà. Ma qui sta il punto. Perché, ovviamente, in quelle due sezioni parliamo dei nostri amici d'oltremare. E, sia come sia, il signor Smalley si è un po' messo nei casini con loro.

Sventola la fotocopia. Sandy si avvicina.

Resoconto parlamentare, seconda seduta sugli asiatici cacciati dal Kenya, febbraio 1968. Onorevole John Smalley, allora parlamentare per Sheffield Est. Cito testualmente: (*legge*) "Per quanta simpatia si possa sentire, come sento io stesso, per questa gente sventurata, si deve accettare che la popolazione locale non resterà zitta per sempre, di fronte a quello che appare sempre più lo spigolo sottile di un pesante cuneo nero".

Clifton: Ha detto questo?

Paul: Tutto qui, nero su... insomma, hai capito.

Clifton: Fantastico.

Paul: Ne facciamo dei volantini. Li buttiamo un po' in giro. Lo teniamo in pugno, Bob. Come un topo in trappola.

Clifton *va a tirare una freccetta.*

Sandy: E quello Conservatore?

Paul: Eh?

Sandy: Fai avere la candidatura a Bob, o qualcosa. E il candidato Conservatore?

Paul: Allora... (*Confidenzialmente, a entrambi*) I conservatori. Ce ne sono due, mi dicono, come da noi. Da una parte il nipote di Chandler, di nome Peter Crosby. Per capirci, brillante, di successo, vestiti di sartoria e alta finanza. L'altro è tutto un altro tipo.

Clifton: Allora?

Paul: Un certo Maggiore Rolfe. Un duro, con uno sguardo di ghiaccio. Pensa che il Carlton Club²³⁹ sia al soldo di Mosca, e si considera un po' più a destra di Gengis Khan.

Clifton: Possibilità?

Paul: Chi può dirlo, con quella gente. Comunque, cosa ci interessa? Alla resa dei conti, sarà "Salutiamo l'Onorevole Robert Clifton".

Clifton alza il bicchiere. **Sandy** lo segue.

A voi compagni, e al crollo del capitalismo.

Paul e **Clifton** fanno cin-cin e bevono. **Sandy** sorseggia la sua birra. *Buio.*

Scena quarta

Luci. Scena vuota. Rolfe, ora sulla cinquantina, in piedi al centro della scena. Indossa un soprabito nero, con medaglie e un papavero all'occhiello.

Tornato a casa nel Quarantasette

Maggiore Rolfe, la faccia di pietra

Un'altra Inghilterra, squallida e sciatta,

Chiusa nei sogni di glorie passate.

Sull'Inghilterra fissa lo sguardo

E lo rattrista il suo tragico fato

Condanna l'insensatezza degli agi

Di uno stato flaccido di parassiti

È angosciato per le idiozie in voga

Dette a memoria come filastrocche

Mentre il nodo di vecchie scuole esauste

Stringe ancora l'Inghilterra al collo

Vede dei leader gonfi di menzogna

Bersi qualsiasi bugia gli venga detta.

Mentre il popolo ha il sangue malato

Per la sfrenata voglia di morire

²³⁹ Importante circolo conservatore di Londra.

Vede la luce il maggiore Rolfe
 Chiede alla destra uno scatto d'orgoglio
 Maggiore Rolfe a prua di vedetta
 Perde, perché non lo stanno a sentire.

Entra Kershaw, vestito in modo simile.

Kershaw: Lewis.

Rolfe: Frank.

Kershaw: Come stai?

Rolfe: Bene, e tu?

Kershaw: Bene.

Pausa

Come sta il ragazzo?

Rolfe: Bene anche lui. Appena promosso. Capitano.

Kershaw: Splendido.

Rolfe: Parte in nave per Belfast a mezzanotte.

Kershaw: Contento?

Rolfe: Arriva in tempo per vedere l'alba sopra Ballymurphy.

Kershaw: Mozzafiato.

Rolfe: Davvero.

Pausa

Kershaw: E gli affari?

Rolfe: A posto. E tu?

Kershaw *alza le spalle, sorridendo.*

Non ho avuto la candidatura, Frank.

Kershaw: Scusa?

Rolfe: Ricordi? Mi ero proposto per la candidatura Tory a Taddley.

Kershaw: Ah, sì...

Rolfe: Naturalmente non avevo nessuna speranza.

Kershaw: Oh, certo pensavo che ormai ti fosse dovuto...

Rolfe: Contro l'avversario perfetto.

Breve pausa

Kershaw: (*sorridendo*) Dai, continua.

Rolfe: Frank, aveva proprio l'aspetto giusto. Sapeva anche tutte le parole giuste. Interessato, umano, costruttivo, moderato... Proprio con la giusta nota di scusa nella voce quando doveva ammettere di essere anche un conservatore.

Kershaw: (*lievemente in imbarazzo*) Te la sei presa.

Rolfe: Forse. Il suo odio per il privilegio, capisci, non gli impedisce di mettere in mostra la cravatta a strisce dell'Università.

Kershaw: In effetti lo conosco. Peter Crosby. Il nipote di un mio amico.

Rolfe: Allora dovresti capire.

Pausa.

Comunque, cosa sta succedendo? Come si è ridotto il partito.

Kershaw: Come si sarebbe ridotto?

Rolfe: Senza autostima. Smidollato. Genuflesso davanti ai miti di moda.

Kershaw: (*con un pizzico d'ironia*) Che miti sarebbero, Lewis?

Rolfe: Il mito della piena occupazione, il mito dei salari in continuo aumento, il mito della spesa pubblica in crescita, l'intera demonologia socialdemocratica dei lavoratori buoni e i padroni cattivi, tutti quei miti...

Kershaw: Certo, sì, Lewis. Tutto questo è cambiato. Leggo sempre il Daily Telegr(aph)

Rolfe: (*lo interrompe*) Oh, sì, diremo che il Partito è cambiato, che alla fine abbiamo capito, che ora abbiamo il Giusto Atteggiamento, e alle conferenze di Partito sosteniamo come un sol uomo i nostri leader nuovi e leali, battiamo il tamburo e sventoliamo la bandiera. È solo che, vedi, lo impariamo dalla storia, in pratica, quando viene il momento, loro sventolano una bandiera senza rosso e blu, solo bianca.

Pausa

Kershaw: Qual è l'alternativa?

Rolfe: Questo è il problema.

Breve pausa.

Kershaw: Ok, Lewis. Messaggio ricevuto. Fuoco e zolfo. Qual è la salvezza?

Rolfe: Ogni tanto mi trovo a pranzo con un gruppo di persone.

Kershaw: È una bella cosa.

Rolfe: Per parlare di quello che succede dopo.

Kershaw: Di quello che succede dopo pranzo?

Rolfe: Quello che succede quando il fiume rompe gli argini.

Kershaw, *forse di proposito, non capisce.*

La guerra fredda di classe diventa bollente.

Kershaw: Oh, Lewis, per favore non quello.

Rolfe: Quello cosa?

Kershaw: Militari decrepiti del Suffolk che addestrano eserciti privati sui loro prati da croquet.

Rolfe: Certo che no. Non c'è nessun bisogno di eserciti privati.

Kershaw: Allora, cosa esattamente...

Rolfe: Quando ne abbiamo già uno pubblico.

Breve pausa

Uno del nostro gruppo è il Generale di Brigata di Alan.

Pausa

Kershaw: Stai proponendo seriamente un governo militare?

Rolfe *alza le spalle.*

In Inghilterra?

Rolfe: Va bene. Cosa succede? Il controllo sui salari crolla, i disoccupati occupano le fabbriche, gli inquilini delle case popolari rifiutano in gran numero di pagare l'affitto, per un motivo purché sia, un altro sciopero generale, la sterlina crolla sottoterra, il fiume inglese fa saltare gli argini... E tu cosa fai? O lasci che il diluvio diluvi, o costruisci una diga. Eh?

Breve pausa.

Bisogna che ci pensiamo, Frank.

Kershaw: Non è stato R.A. Butler²⁴⁰ a dire che la politica è l'Arte di ciò che è possibile?

Rolfe: No, non è stato lui.

Kershaw: Oh, sono sicuro che...

²⁴⁰ Richard Austen Butler (1902-1982), uomo politico conservatore.

Rolfe: Butler l'ha presa in prestito. Da Bismarck.

Pausa.

Kershaw: Perché ne parli a me?

Rolfe: Sto sondando il terreno.

Kershaw: Solo con me?

Rolfe: No, con ogni amministratore delegato di qualsiasi importante compagnia britannica le cui azioni valevano due sterline e cinquanta diciotto mesi fa e alla chiusura di venerdì hanno raggiunto appena i 64 penny.

Pausa. Kershaw, bruscamente.

Kershaw: No, Lewis.

Rolfe: No? Perché no?

Kershaw: Non riesco a vederla in questi termini

Rolfe: Non vuoi.

Kershaw: Perché ho ancora fiducia nella ragionevolezza della gente.

Rolfe: Ragione? I tuoi delegati sindacali sono uomini ragionevoli?

Kershaw: Nella lealtà della gente.

Rolfe: A cosa?

Kershaw: All'interesse nazionale.

Rolfe: Di chi? La lealtà di chi? I minatori? Gli studenti? Gli irlandesi? I neri?

Kershaw: Lewis, non c'è bisogno...

Rolfe: E l'interesse di chi? Tu parli di interesse nazionale, e loro ti stanno ad ascoltare? Dai, Frank. Loro sanno da che parte stanno. E dovremmo saperlo anche noi.

Kershaw: I dogmi della lotta di classe...

Rolfe: Sì, sì. E perché?

Kershaw: Dimmelo.

Rolfe: Perché se ci mostriamo vigliacchi, se collaboriamo, finiamo per tradire delle persone che, se non stanno dalla nostra parte, sono lasciati nella terra di nessuno, pronti a passare dall'altra parte. I sottufficiali. I piccoli borghesi.

Kershaw: Sì, e allora?

Rolfe: E comunque sono già stati traditi. Le loro proprietà non sono più sicure. Il loro status sociale, ora, infimo. E al posto di quello che è importante per loro, il

destino nazionale e la speranza, gli abbiamo dato... Vedi Frank, non è vero che, perso l'Impero, non abbiamo trovato un ruolo. Un ruolo ce l'abbiamo. Siamo gli zimbelli d'Europa. Quelli che stanno molto peggio degli altri. Una specie di... spiacevole sistema d'allarme dell'Europa. E per sostenere questo ruolo, dobbiamo diventare ancora più sciatti, squallidi, mediocri. Neanche simpatici, anzi piuttosto sgradevoli. E per quelli là, la gente da cui vengo, questa rassegnazione è un tradimento.

*Entra **Dennis Turner** e si mette in piedi sul fondo della scena. Ha quasi cinquant'anni, è vestito sobriamente, ha un papavero all'occhiello e tiene in mano una corona d'alloro. **Kershaw** e **Rolfe** capiscono che la cerimonia sta per cominciare e si mettono sull'attenti nello stesso momento. **Rolfe**, a bassa voce, a **Kershaw**.*

E se vanno via, abbiamo perso. E se ne andranno, se non si sentono difesi. Insomma, dobbiamo armare l'interesse nazionale per loro. Fortificarlo. Costruire la diga, per loro.

Pausa. Una Voce.

Voce: Commemoriamo e affidiamo all'amorevole cura del nostro Padre Celeste, il pastore di anime, la sorgente di vita eterna, coloro che sono morti in guerra per il nostro paese e la sua causa.

“Non invecchieranno, come noi siamo destinati ad invecchiare. L'età non li indebolirà, né gli anni li condanneranno. Al tramonto del sole, e al mattino, noi li ricorderemo.”

Risposta (Turner, Rolfe e Kershaw): Li ricorderemo!

*Un lungo silenzio. **Turner** posa la corona. Una tromba suona “the Last Post” [il Silenzio]. Alla fine.*

Voce: La Legione dei vivi saluta la Legione dei morti.

Risposta: Non vi tradiremo!

Kershaw a bassa voce a Rolfe.

Kershaw: Forse.

*Buio. **Rolfe** e **Kershaw** escono.*

Scena quinta

*Immediatamente un riflettore inquadra **Turner**.*

Turner: Tornato a casa nel Quarantasette

Sergente Turner, città delle Midlands

Un'altra Inghilterra, cupa e arrogante
 Un mondo nuovo, brillante e freddo
 Guarda la sua Inghilterra il sergente
 Sotto i suoi occhi la vede cambiata
 Virtù di un tempo, risparmio e prudenza
 Vede che son sempre più disprezzate
 I vecchi valori sono svalutati
 Mentre il denaro è inflazionato
 Sono derise le vecchie certezze
 Da arrivisti e sofisticati
 Gran capitale e proletariato
 Hanno un potere ormai smisurato
 Ed è lui che è preso in mezzo
 Ed è lui che sta perdendo
 Sergente Turner, un sottufficiale
 Dove sta andando non sa neanche lui.

*Luci. Il negozio di antichità di **Turner**, alle pareti manifesti elettorali del partito Conservatore per le elezioni del 1970: Vota Conservatore per un domani migliore. Entra **Tony**, quasi vent'anni, e **Paul**, un po' più giovane dell'ultima volta che lo abbiamo visto. Portano un tavolo antico.*

Tony: Antichità da Turner. Dipendente: Tony Perrin. Mi piace questo lavoro. Imparo un mestiere. Un investimento per il futuro.

Paul: Antichità da Turner. Dipendente: Paul McShane. Non mi piace questo lavoro ma, uscito da scuola, mercato del lavoro depresso, prendi quello che trovi.

Sistemano la tavola ed escono.

Turner: Vendiamo cose vecchie. Vendiamo cose belle. Tesori artigianali.

Tony: Qualche anno fa. Giugno 1970. Risultati elettorali. Labour sconfitto. Sondaggisti confusi. Il capo era contento.

Paul: Qualche anno fa. Giugno 1970. Risultati elettorali. I conservatori hanno vinto. Anatre zoppe e disoccupazione in crescita. Svolta liberista.²⁴¹ Un giorno nero.

²⁴¹ Nel testo "Selsdon Men". Selsdon è una località sita nel distretto Londinese di Croydon nel quale, fino dai primi anni '70, si riuniva un gruppo di pressione e di elaborazione politica collegato

Sistemano le sedie ai lati del tavolo. Tony prende il soprabito da Turner, esce e rientra, mentre:

Turner: La fine di sei anni di malgoverno socialista. Alla fine, l'uomo della strada avrà qualche possibilità contro i poteri forti.

Entra Monty, sui trent'anni, ebreo, accento londinese, capelli lunghi, giacca di denim in ordine, camicia col collo aperto. Ha una borsa da spesa con la Union Jack e fuma un sigaro sottile. Rivolto a Tony:

Monty: 'giorno, bello. C'è il capo?

Tony: C'è uno che vuole vederla, signor Turner.

Turner guarda Monty. Antipatia immediata.

Monty: Buon giorno, signor Turner. Montague Goodman. Nuovo vicino di casa. Ho pensato fosse il momento di fare quattro chiacchiere.

Breve pausa.

Mi chiami pure Monty.

Turner: Vicino di casa?

Monty: Esatto. Stiamo costruendo qui accanto.

Tony: Sguardo di sorpresa sulla faccia del capo.

Paul: Più di terrore, direi.

Tony e Paul escono.

Turner: *(si siede)* Costruendo cosa, precisamente?

Monty: *(si siede)* Un negozio.

Turner: Non lo sapevo.

Monty: Ecco il motivo della nostra chiacchierata.

Turner: Che tipo di negozio? Potrebbe danneggiare il mio.

Monty: Puoi scommetterci, vecchio mio. Antiquariato.

Pausa

Turner: Cosa intende con antiquariato?

Monty: Vendiamo cose vecchie. Vendiamo cose belle. Gonfie di nostalgia.

Turner: *(si alza)* Chi è lei?

col Partito conservatore. I cosiddetti "Selsdon Men" hanno avuto una decisiva influenza sulla svolta liberista dei governi di Margaret Thatcher.

Monty: Non le ho dato il mio biglietto? (*Si alza, dà a Turner il suo biglietto da visita. Rivolto al pubblico*) Gli ho detto di ignorare il nome della compagnia. Dato che è, per così dire, defunta.

Turner: Voi cosa?

Monty: (*al pubblico*) Piuttosto elegante, il sistema, bisogna dire. Si compra un nome, nel nostro caso più di uno, ditte non più operative ma ancora registrate e così via. Col loro nome si va da un agente immobiliare, nel nostro caso più di uno, e si comprano, separatamente, ovvio, una serie di proprietà adiacenti, si conclude l'acquisto e poi si chiude la ditta.

Turner: (*si siede*) Non capisco cosa intende.

Monty: (*al pubblico*) Allora gli ho spiegato. L'idea è di nascondere che un'intera fila di edifici è comprata da un solo costruttore. E, naturalmente, anche l'identità del costruttore. Ma siccome non poteva farci niente e mi era anche simpatico, gliel'ho spiegato. (*si siede. A Turner*) Adesso lei, Dennis Turner, è un inquilino del Metropolitan Investment Trust.

Turner: Io cosa?

Monty: Tesoro, hanno venduto l'edificio.

Turner: Chi?

Monty: Il tuo padrone di casa.

Turner: Ma...

Monty: (*al pubblico*) Anche se, per dire la verità, si è battuto parecchio. (*Si alza e cammina intorno*) In effetti, alla fine, abbiamo dovuto chiamare il Comune e proporre un piccolo baratto. Fortuna ha voluto che quelli morissero dalla voglia di costruire un centro commerciale in fondo alla strada, e avevano bisogno di demolire un paio di edifici in mano nostra. Allora abbiamo detto, sentite amici, se non volete la rottura di comprare da noi, perché non schiaffate un ordine di esproprio sul numero 27, un vecchio rudere, e l'affare è fatto. Dunque, appena abbiamo detto al proprietario che l'esproprio stava arrivando, ha firmato in un lampo. Si sarebbe perfino accontentato di una offerta più bassa...

Turner: E al mio negozio cosa succede?

Monty: (*al pubblico*) Gli ho detto che c'era il progetto di un'area dedicata ai giovani. Boutique, parrucchieri, bar, consultori legali drive-in, magazzini di antiquariato, centri massaggio self-service, quel genere di cose. (*a Turner*) E questo spazio particolare diventerà un ristorante macrobiotico zen da asporto, vecchio mio.

Turner: Vuole scherzare? Ho un contratto di dodici anni.

Monty *Si siede, raccoglie la sua sacca con la Union Jack, la lascia cadere su tavolo e parlando tira fuori un documento.*

Monty: Ecco, su questo ha ragione. Sfortunatamente la legge, nel suo modo maestoso, offre una via d'uscita. Cito: "L'affitto è soggetto a periodici adeguamenti". Tesoro, sei appena stato adeguato. In su.

Turner: Non potete farlo!

Monty: Ecco, qui ti sbagli.

Turner: Allora pagherò. Rifiuterò di andarmene.

Monty: Dai, tesoro, per favore.

Turner: Perché non dovrei?

Monty: *(al pubblico)* Odio questa parte. *(si alza in piedi, distogliendo lo sguardo da Turner)* Tesoro, non so se te ne sei accorto, ma fra gli allegri manovali che lavorano qui accanto ci sono molti dei nostri cugini dei Caraibi. Gente semplice e allegra, tutti molto simpatici, ma tendenti allo sbadato. Spontanea esuberanza, capisci? Il tipo di spontanea esuberanza che fa buttare pezzi di scaffalatura nelle finestre, colpendo qualche porcellana del Settecento.

Pausa. Spegne deliberatamente il sigaro sul piano del tavolo.

Turner: Bastardo!

Monty: *(torna alla tavola e rimette l'incartamento nella sacca)* No, non bastardo. Liberista.²⁴²

Turner: Ma perché distruggere la mia fonte di sostentamento?

Monty: *(brusco, rapido, quasi arrabbiato)* Perché, amore mio, distruggerti farà guadagnare dei soldi a qualcuno da qualche parte. Tutto qui. Cupidigia. Quella che hai anche tu, ma non abbastanza. Perché noi creiamo denaro dal denaro. La nostra ingordigia è su scala globale. Abbiamo spinto la cupidigia al di là dei tuoi più pazzi sogni di avarizia. E sai tu, piccolo onesto commerciante, qual è il tuo problema? Soffri di un'enorme deficienza di avidità. *(in tono spiccio, andandosene)* Hai tre settimane, vecchio mio.

Monty se ne va. Entrano **Tony e Paul**, uno per lato.

Tony: Siamo entrati. Abbiamo visto il capo. A pezzi.

Turner: Voi due, pausa pranzo.

Paul: Ma non erano ancora le dodici e mezza.

Tony: Glielo abbiamo detto.

Turner: Pausa pranzo e basta.

Paul: Siamo andati.

²⁴² Nel testo "Selsdon man". Vedi nota 241.

Paul se ne va. *Pausa.* **Turner** fa segno a **Tony** di andare. **Tony** se ne va. **Turner** guarda il tavolo e il sigaro schiacciato.

Turner: E adesso dove vado?

Buio

Scena sesta.

Luci in una sala sopra un pub. La data è il 20 aprile 1968. Tavoli, sedie. Su un tavolo un vecchio registratore Grundig. Un cavalletto, con sopra un quadro, è coperto da un panno rosso. Maxwell, un uomo magro ed elegante di poco più di vent'anni sta finendo di distribuire delle sedie.

Poi entrano Cleaver, sui 55 anni, distinto, e Drumont, un Franco-canadese di mezza età con un bicchiere di scotch in mano e un impermeabile sul braccio.

Cleaver: Molte grazie, David.

Maxwell annuisce e va via

Allora?

Drumont (*buttando l'impermeabile su una sedia*): Sembra che vada tutto bene, Richard.

Cleaver: Pensiamo anche noi.

Drumont: In tutto il mondo. Da Detroit a Grosvenor Square. Particolarmente qui. La svendita ormai evidente. Il marcio sempre più diffuso. Idee inconcepibili incominciano a circolare. Che occasione.

Cleaver: Davvero.

Drumont: Vorrei essere altrettanto fiducioso, Richard, ma c'è un problema.

Cleaver: Quale?

Drumont: Voi. Il movimento rivoluzionario. L'indispensabile avanguardia. Dove siete, Richard?

Cleaver: Edward, vedi...

Drumont: No, Richard, no. Te lo dico io dove siete. Siete rimasti bloccati al 1930. State ancora combattendo vecchie battaglie, facendovi a pezzi fra voi per piccole liti settarie che avreste dovuto risolvere anni fa.

Cleaver: Richard, il motivo è... (*bussano alla porta. In tono impaziente*) Sì?

Entra Maxwell.

Maxwell: Credo che siano arrivati tutti. Sono al bar e si chiedono...

Cleaver: (*Guarda l'orologio*) Certo, naturalmente, digli di salire. (**Maxwell se ne va.** **A Drumont**) La volontà c'è. Mancano i soldi.

Drumont: Quando il movimento britannico dimostrerà di essere seriamente intenzionato all'unità, i soldi arriveranno. Semplice.

Cleaver: Stiamo facendo degli incontri...

Drumont: Sull'unità?

Cleaver: Esatto.

Drumont: Fa in modo che si concluda qualcosa.

Cleaver: Sì. Naturalmente.

Drumont: Richard, è il 1968. Rivolte studentesche. Scioperi degli operai. Caos e decadenza. Nel giro di dieci anni, dove potreste essere? Te lo dico io. Fuori dalle cantine, Richard. Fuori dai sotterranei e alla luce del sole.

Bussano

Cleaver: Avanti.

A porta si apre ed entrano un certo numero di persone. In maggioranza giovani. La maggior parte con un bicchiere in mano. Alcuni salutano Cleaver. Maxwell è con loro. Drumont prende su il soprabito e fa per andarsene. Cleaver, rivolto a lui.

Cleaver: Te ne vai?

Drumont: Se voglio una vuota cerimonia, vado in chiesa. Per cui, au revoir.

Cleaver: Arrivederci.

Maxwell: Chi era quello?

Cleaver: Edward Drumont. Canadese. Pieno di soldi.

Maxwell: E...

Breve pausa. Cleaver alza le spalle.

Cleaver: Sbrighiamo le formalità.

Maxwell e Cleaver si spostano al centro. Maxwell fa tintinnare un bicchiere per ottenere silenzio. Durante il suo discorso, gli altri presenti gli si riuniscono intorno, alcuni seduti.

Maxwell: Camerati. Posso avere la vostra attenzione? Camerati. In questo giorno speciale, il 20 aprile 1968, ho il piacere di chiedere a Dick Cleaver, in rappresentanza del movimento, di proporre il brindisi della fedeltà.

Applausi. Durante il discorso di Cleaver, Maxwell prende un vassoio di candele da sotto un tavolo e le accende.

Cleaver: Grazie, camerati. Il mio non sarà un discorso lungo ...

Voce fra i presenti: Speriamo!

Risate. Cleaver sorride.

Cleaver: Anche se credo che un buon discorso dovrebbe essere come una gonna, abbastanza corta da suscitare interesse, ma anche abbastanza lunga da non lasciare fuori niente. *(risate)* Comunque, quello che voglio dire è quanto sia bello vedere un gruppo di persone come questo, e specialmente i giovani, con i tempi che corrono. *(risate)* Come probabilmente sapete, come probabilmente avete visto il mese scorso a Grosvenor Square, molti degli studenti del giorno d'oggi sono attirati dal comunismo come alternativa ai mali del sistema capitalistico. E hanno ragione. È un'alternativa. Il capitalismo è basato sullo sfruttamento dell'uomo sull'uomo. Il comunismo è esattamente il contrario. *(risate)* Ma questa lo sappiamo già, non è vero? Comunque...

Voce fra i presenti: Perché ce l'hai raccontato l'anno scorso.

Cleaver: *(sorridente, ancora bonario)* E ne ho in serbo altre. Va bene, una sola. Prometto. Ci sono due uomini d'affari ebrei su un treno. Stanno discutendo di etica. Uno dice: "Ti racconto una storia che illustra perfettamente il problema etico. Sono nella sartoria che gestisco col mio socio Hymie. Un tipo viene a prendere il suo vestito. Io glielo consegno e gli chiedo 10 sterline; lui me le dà. Ma quando se n'è andato mi accorgo che mi ha dato per sbaglio 20 sterline. E qui, come ti dicevo, sta la questione etica definitiva: lo dico o non lo dico al mio socio?"

Risate. Improvvisamente diventa serio.

Ma non c'è bisogno che spieghi a nessuno dei presenti questo genere di etica. O la degenerazione della gioventù di oggi. O la deliberata distruzione del nostro paese. Non è necessario. La puzza la sentite.

Breve pausa. Nuovamente gioviale.

Bene, questo è tutto. E allora, senza ulteriori fastidi, posso chiedervi di alzare i bicchieri e di unirvi a me in un brindisi all'uomo il cui compleanno oggi festeggiamo insieme. David...

I presenti prendono le candele dal vassoio. Qualcuno spegne la luce, lasciando la scena illuminata dalle candele. Maxwell toglie la copertura del quadro. È Adolf Hitler.

Il Führer.

Tutti *(alzando i bicchieri):* Il Führer!

Maxwell accende il registratore. Una registrazione dell'inno delle SS, Il canto di Horst Wessel. I presenti si tolgono la giacca. Alcuni hanno già una fascia al braccio con la croce uncinata. Altri si mettono fasce al braccio, distintivi, gradi dell'esercito. Con delle piccole aggiunte a delle semplici tenute nere, marrone e blu, i loro vestiti comuni diventano uniformi. Via via che ognuno dei presenti finisce di cambiarsi, saluta il ritratto, si mette in piedi vicino al registratore e si unisce al coro. **Cleaver** è l'ultimo a salutare l'immagine del Führer.

Canto: Marciamo e combattiamo, fino alla morte o alla vittoria

La nostra forza è giusta, i traditori non prevarranno

I nostri cuori sono corazzati contro gli ardenti portoni infernali

Né proiettili né bombe possono fermare la nostra possente canzone

La nostra spada è la verità, il nostro scudo è la fede e l'onore

In gioventù o vecchiezza consacriamo i nostri cuori,

Anche se potremmo morire per salvare il nostro popolo e la nostra gente

Questo percorso continuerà, milioni di noi in marcia.

Si sente bussare alla porta. La canzone si spegne.

Serriamo i ranghi con lealtà e coraggio.

Ringraziamo Dio per i nostri amici fedeli e fidati.²⁴³

Maxwell: *(spegnendo il registratore)* Chi è?

Drumont: *(da fuori)* Drumont.

Cleaver: Fatelo entrare.

Qualcuno accende la luce. Il senso di panico del gruppo si acquieta. Maxwell lascia entrare Drumont, che ha in mano un giornale piegato. Sta in piedi, senza dire niente.

Cleaver: Sì, Edward?

Drumont consegna il giornale piegato a **Cleaver**.

Drumont: Leggi questo.

Cleaver: Cos'è?

Drumont: Giornale della sera. Leggilo. Da qui.

²⁴³ Questo non è il testo dell'*Horst Wessel Lied* ma della *Battle Song* composta da George Lincoln Rockwell, fondatore dell'American Nazi Party. Vedi <http://www.americannaziparty.com/rockwell/materials/articles/battlesong.php> ultima visita 25/05/2018.

Cleaver: Cos'è?

Drumont: Leggi.

Cleaver: *(contrariato dal fatto di ricevere un ordine, tuttavia comincia a leggere)* “Una o due settimane fa ho parlato casualmente con un elettore, un uomo normale di mezza età, un operaio impiegato in una delle industrie nazionalizzate. Dopo un paio di considerazioni sul tempo, mi ha detto ‘Se avessi i soldi per andarmene, non resterei in questo paese’. Io ho protestato un po’, dicendogli che anche questo governo non sarebbe durato in eterno... *(Guarda verso Drumont)*

Drumont: Bene, vai avanti.

Cleaver:... ma lui ha fatto finta di niente e ha continuato: ‘Ho tre figli, tutti e tre hanno fatto il liceo, e due sono sposati con figli. Non sarò contento finché non li vedrò sistemati oltreoceano. In questo paese, nel giro di quindici o venti anni, l'uomo nero comanderà l'uomo bianco. *(alza lo sguardo)* Edward, chi...

Drumont *(prende il giornale, gira la pagina, indica un punto):* Adesso leggi qui. Vai avanti.

Cleaver: “La nuvola grande come una mano, che può crescere fino a coprire il cielo, è diventata visibile a Wolverhampton e ha dato segno di diffondersi rapidamente. Se guardo davanti a me, sento oscuri presagi. Come il Romano mi sembra di vedere... *(breve pausa)* ‘Il fiume Tevere schiumare di molto sangue’”.

Pausa

Va bene, chi è?

Drumont: L'Onorevole Enoch Powell, ministro della difesa del governo ombra. Dice quello che nessuno, tranne voi, ha mai osato dire. *(Pausa. Aspetta che le sue parole abbiano effetto. Poi si rivolge a Maxwell)* Sei un duro, soldato?

Maxwell: Mi piace pensare di sì, signore.

Drumont: Questo fa male? *(colpisce improvvisamente Maxwell allo stomaco. Maxwell vacilla appena e scuote la testa)* Ok, adesso levati questa roba.

Maxwell: Scusi, signore?

Drumont: Camicia, fascia. Tutta questa mascherata.

Maxwell *guarda verso Cleaver che fa un cenno di assenso col capo. Maxwell si toglie camicia e fascia. Drumont lo colpisce di nuovo all'improvviso.*

Ha fatto più male? La seconda volta?

Maxwell: No, signore.

Drumont: Bene. *(si gira verso il resto dei presenti)* Allora, camerati. Per anni avete sbattuto contro una porta sprangata. *(sventola il giornale)* E ora si è aperta. Potete unirvi, e costruire, e muovervi. Per farlo dovete ripudiare i simboli. Ripudiare gli

orpelli. Ma non la fede. No, assolutamente non la fede. (*cammina in tondo, tutti lo guardano*) Perché, se crescete, dovrete naturalmente affrontare delle eresie. Due eresie. Piuttosto facili da definire. State attenti a chi – il conservatore di destra, il militare disilluso – vorrebbe eliminare il socialismo dal Nazionalsocialismo. Ma anche, e ancora di più, state attenti a chi – il giovane appassionato, il Sigfrido della situazione – vorrebbe eliminare il nazionalismo dal Nazionalsocialismo. Vigilare su entrambi. Mantenetevi forti. Mantenetevi fedeli. E mantenete affilati i vostri lunghi coltelli. (*copre il ritratto di Hitler*) Così. Non per sempre. Per un po'. (*Andandosene, tira il giornale a Maxwell*)

Cleaver: Dove parlava?

Maxwell: (*guarda il giornale*) Birmingham.

Cleaver: Fiumi di sangue.

*La scena si arresta, e le luci si spostano su **Khera** in un punto laterale del palcoscenico. Ora ha una quarantina d'anni, è a capo scoperto, coi capelli corti e ben sbarbato. Indossa la tenuta da lavoro da operaio di fonderia, e ha in mano la maschera e gli occhiali protettivi.*

Khera: Tornato a casa nel '58

Gurjeet Singh Khera in una città delle Midlands

Altra Inghilterra, un'altra nazione

Non l'Inghilterra che immaginava

Le forze del mercato del lavoro

Hanno una volontà internazionale

I contadini venuti dal Punjab

Vengono a popolare le officine

I sacri kess e kanga, kachka, kara e kirpan²⁴⁴

Il sikh li rinnega per diventare

Quel che si dice un autentico inglese

Si fida ancora della virtù umana,

Mentre si sforza di perdonare

La repulsione della madre patria

Verso i figli tornati da lei.

²⁴⁴ Le 'cinque K' designano quattro oggetti che il fedele Sikh deve avere sempre con sé (coltello, fascia, braccialetto, pantaloncini), oltre all'obbligo di lasciar crescere i capelli.

Gurjeet Singh Khera un tempo schiavo,
 E' ritornato come un fantasma
 Ad infestare la tomba dell'impero.

Platt: *(fuori scena)* Khera! Khera! Cristo, Khera, dove cazzo ti sei nascosto?

Platt *entra con poca luce dall'altra parte del palcoscenico. Indossa un camice bianco e sporco, e ha in mano un blocco di appunti. Pausa.*

Khera: Signore?

Buio. Musica di Händel.

Atto secondo

La crescita del movimento Nazista esprime la protesta della nazione contro uno stato che rifiuta il diritto al lavoro ... la protesta contro un ordine economico che ragiona solo in termini di profitti e dividendi.

Gregor Strasser, parlamentare Nazionalsocialista al Reichstag, 10 Maggio 1932.

È perché vogliamo il socialismo che siamo antisemiti.

Joseph Goebbels, 1931.

Il termine socialismo è in sé inadeguato, ma bisogna assolutamente capire che non significa che le imprese devono essere socializzate ... La partecipazione dei lavoratori al possesso e al controllo è semplicemente Marxismo.

Adolf Hitler, 22 maggio 1930.

Solo un antisemita è un vero anticomunista.

Adolf Hitler, 1931.

Scena prima

Luci. Platt e Khera nella stessa posizione. Rumore di macchinari. I Personaggi devono gridare per farsi sentire, Platt un po' più del necessario.

Platt: OK. Allora, cos'è questa cosa che ho sentito?

Entra Patel. Vestito come Khera, si mette in piedi vicino a lui. Sui venticinque anni.

Khera: Cosa?

Platt: Che i tuoi rifiutano lo straordinario.

Khera: Non è ancora deciso. Vi faremo sapere. *(Si gira per andarsene)*

Platt: Niente da fare, amico. C'è nel vostro contratto. 28 ogni mese.

Patel: C'è anche nel contratto che accelerate la catena?

Platt: Niente che lo proibisca, vecchio mio.

Patel: E per gli addetti al carico e scarico e alla fusione, niente aumento di paga per l'aumento di lavoro?

Platt: Non siete a cottimo, amico.

Patel: Non come gli addetti agli stampi.

Platt: *(arrabbiato)* Oh Cristo!

Khera: *(calmo)* Che, guarda caso, sono tutti bianchi.

Platt: Amico, non è colpa mia se tutti gli asiatici sono a salario fisso. Non è colpa mia se tutti gli stampisti sono bianchi. Dovreste parlarne col vostro sindacato.

Khera: Siamo noi il nostro sindacato. **(Patel e Khera si girano per andarsene)**

Platt: Perché non me ne frega niente se siete neri, bianchi, marrone o rosa con strisce viola. L'importante è che lavoriate, non...

Patel: Precisamente, signor Platt.

Platt: *(grida dietro a Khera)* Allora, signor Khera.

Khera: Come delegato sindacale ho convocato un'assemblea. Vi faremo sapere.

Platt, *arrabbiato, se ne va.* **Patel** scuote la testa con un mezzo sorriso a **Khera** ed esce.

Khera: *(al pubblico)* L'industria metallurgica. Orari interminabili. Lavoro pericoloso in un ambiente surriscaldato. Gli asiatici hanno paghe più basse, meno possibilità di promozione, e sono i primi ad essere cacciati.

Attwod, *bianco, operaio della fonderia ma vestito normalmente, attraversa il palco, ignorando completamente Khera, ed esce dall'altra parte.*

Khera: *(in tono sardonico)* E portano via il lavoro agli operai britannici.

Se ne va, mentre si spengono le luci.

Scena seconda.

Luci. Una sala da assemblea. Un tavolo sul fondo su una pedana rialzata. Microfono. Fra i presenti c'è Tony coi capelli più lunghi che nel Primo Atto e una chitarra sotto la sedia; la Signora Howard, una signora anziana, e Liz, vicina ai trent'anni, piccola borghesia. Varie altre persone. Turner sta cercando maldestramente di appendere uno striscione: Taddley Patriotic League (Lega

patriottica di Taddley). Da qualche parte sullo striscione c'è una Union Jack. Entra **Maxwell**. Ora ha quasi trent'anni, indossa un abito di sartoria, di buon gusto e alla moda. Tocca **Turner** sulla spalla: tutto il dialogo, fino all'inizio dell'assemblea vera e propria, non è isolato dal contesto, fa parte del mormorio generale della conversazione. Nel frattempo, entra **Attwod** e si siede.

Turner: Ah, ciao David. Siamo quasi pronti per il via.

Maxwell: Bene. Ho appena chiamato Cleaver. Credo che ci siamo.

Turner: Ottimo.

Maxwell si siede. **Turner** finisce il suo lavoro. **Tony** gli si avvicina rapidamente, come se stesse aspettando di parlargli.

Tony: Ehm, signor Turner.

Turner: (*guardando l'orologio*) Sì, Tony...

Tony: Non si dimentichi la poesia, mi raccomando.

Turner: La poesia? Ah, sì, naturalmente.

Tony sorride e si siede.

Turner: (*fra sé e sé, andando dietro al tavolo*) Bene.

Maxwell si alza all'improvviso e gli si avvicina.

Maxwell: Ehi, Dennis.

Turner: Sì?

Maxwell: Solo una cosa. Ho notato. Sullo striscione.

Turner: Sì?

Maxwell: Hai attaccato la bandiera al contrario.

Turner: (*girandosi per guardare lo striscione*) Accidenti, davvero?

Maxwell: (*sorridendo*) Non importa. Purtroppo non ci fa caso nessuno. Però, magari, la prossima volta...

Turner: Certo.

Turner sorride a **Maxwell**, che contraccambia e si siede. **Turner** si rimette dietro al tavolo. Parla nel microfono, che rimanda il suono.

Buona sera signore e... Oh Gesù! (*Muove il microfono. Continua a rimandare il suono*) Buona sera, signore... (*grida, lontano dal microfono*) Si potrebbe, non c'è nessuno al sistema voci? (*Pausa. Sorride*) Miracoli della tecnologia. (*Pausa. Stavolta il microfono è morto*) Prova, prova. Ora l'abbiamo perso del tutto. Prova. Pro... (*L'amplificazione si riattiva*)... va, prova. Ah, uno, due, tre, quattro. Così va

meglio. Signore e signori, come stavo dicendo prima di essere interrotto così bruscamente, buona sera a tutti voi. Allora, ho convocato quest'assemblea, come molti di voi sanno, per discutere due faccende collegate fra di loro. Una è la prossima elezione suppletiva a Taddley, e l'altra è la possibilità che la Lega Patriottica confluisca in un'organizzazione nazionale. E a questo proposito, è nostro ospite stasera il signor Maxwell, che è il leader, non è giusto, David?

Maxwell: Segretario Generale.

Turner: Scusa, Segretario Generale del partito Nation Forward, un'organizzazione veramente patriottica: sono sicuro che tutti voi sarete d'accordo quando avrete sentito quello che ha da dirci. Prima di tutto, però, c'è il problema di pagare la sala, e mi chiedevo se qualcuno...

Liz: Ci penso io, signor presidente.

Turner: Grazie, tesoro.

Liz comincia a fare una colletta in giro.

Sempre meglio raccogliere i soldi prima di sentir parlare l'oratore, eh? Allora, prima di tutto, spero che tutti abbiate visto l'ultimo giornalino. Se qualcuno di voi non l'avesse ricevuto, abbiamo un grandioso nuovo sistema che potrebbe non funzionare ancora bene. Comunque, me ne sono rimaste una copia o due. (*Prende in mano un giornalino*) Allora, in questo ci siamo spinti quanto più in là si poteva. Io non mi preoccupo di quelli delle Relazioni fra le Razze²⁴⁵ ma gli stampatori stanno diventando nervosi. Comunque, una faccenda su cui vorrei richiamare la vostra attenzione è a pagina 4, l'articolo sui vermi intestinali alle elementari di Thawston, perché a tale proposito ho scritto all'Ufficiale Sanitario. Credo che stia veramente cominciando a stufarsi di me. Forse alla fine si stuferà tanto da fare qualcosa per i problemi portati dagli immigrati nelle nostre scuole. Comunque, mi ha risposto col consueto tono accomodante, spero che si renda presto conto che i patriottici abitanti di Taddley non si lasciano accomodare così facilmente. Una delle cose che gli ho detto su questo problema dei parassiti è che si passano con le posate e usando gli stessi water. Naturalmente nel caso che questa gente si sieda sul water. A volte fanno altre cose, come sapete. Comunque, non ha detto granché di questo nella sua risposta. Comunque, questo era l'unico punto che volevo sottolineare prima di passare la parola al signor Maxwell, che ci spiegherà tutto di Nation Forward. Grazie.

Si siede, applausi educati. Maxwell va dietro al tavolo. Turner gli sistema il microfono.

Maxwell: In realtà, credo che farò a meno dell'aiuto dell'elettronica. (*parla fuori del microfono*) Effettivamente, ho pensato che, malgrado la splendida introduzione

²⁴⁵ Nell'originale "Race Relations people". Il riferimento è al Race Relations Board, un organismo istituito nel 1966 per controllare l'applicazione dei provvedimenti legislativi tesi a contrastare la discriminazione etnica in vari campi. (Race Relations Act del 1965, 1968 e 1976).

del signor Turner, non mi lancerò in un grande discorso, credo che tutti voi sappiate qualcosa di Nation Forward, e credo che sarebbe molto più utile se noi aprissimo ora la discussione, in modo che possiate fare le domande per le quali volete delle risposte e, più importante ancora, io possa sentire quello che *voi* avete da dire.

Si siede. Pausa.

Turner: Beh, credo che la sorpresa li abbia lasciati senza parole, signor Maxwell.

Maxwell *sorride. Pausa.*

Forza. Sono sicuro che qualcuno ...

Pausa. Per rompere il ghiaccio.

Bene, credo che una cosa che molti potrebbero chiedere ...

La **Signora Howard** *si alza in piedi e interrompe. Durante tutti gli interventi, Maxwell prende appunti.*

Signora Howard: Signor Presidente.

Turner: Ah, signora Howard, ero sicuro che prima o poi avrebbe trovato la voce.

Signora Howard: Signor Presidente, sono stata un membro del Partito Conservatore per quarant'anni. Ecco quello che vorrei dire.

Pausa. Turner accenna a chiederle se ha finito.

Turner: Questo è...

Signora Howard: *(lo interrompe)* Per me sarebbe una bestemmia sostenere o votare un altro partito.

Pausa. Ancora.

Turner: Sta dicendo...

Signora Howard: *(lo interrompe)* Comunque, temo che il partito non sia più quello di una volta. È diventato pavido. Una volta rappresentava i valori più alti della classe media. Ora, è in cancrena.

Pausa. Ancora.

Turner: Sì, dunque, sono...

Signora Howard: *(lo interrompe)* I valori sono derisi. Dileggiati. Nel Partito. I Giovani Conservatori, che spesso sembrano più socialisti dei socialisti stessi. Hanno l'aria imbarazzata se si parla dell'Impero, o di responsabilità personale, o di disciplina. Ridacchiano, e parlano del Mercato Comune. Sogghignano, e parlano di un vento di cambiamento.

Una pausa più lunga.

Turner: Signora Howar...

Signora Howard: (*lo interrompe*) Sono sicura che il Partito è infiltrato. Da sinistra. Cripto comunisti. Rossi pallidi. Sono sicura.

Pausa. Turner non interrompe.

Io me lo ricordo, capirete, com'era un tempo. Non ho altro da dire. (*Si siede*)

Maxwell: Signora Howard, posso dire che la sua opinione è esattamente la nostra?

Liz: (*si alza*) Signor Presidente, vorrei dire una cosa. Sono sicura che quello che dice la signora è vero, ma non è solo questione di politica. Mio marito, non è potuto venire stasera, insegna al Politecnico, e si è convinto di alcune cose. Una è che i cosiddetti studenti stranieri non studino per niente. Vengono una volta a lezione e poi spariscono. E in più è abbastanza sicuro che almeno il 75% degli insegnanti, e alcuni di loro sono immigrati, siano comunisti. E per questo, potrebbe perdere il lavoro. Perché è un patriota, e non ne fa mistero, e quando ci saranno dei tagli, e ci saranno, lui sarà il primo a essere mandato via. Il sindacato non alzerà un dito. E poi un'altra cosa. Sono quelli come noi, che lavoriamo per la Gran Bretagna, a soffrire di più. Come quando parlano di case di proprietà, particolarmente i Tory. Cosa succede? Il mutuo va su così tanto che non riusciamo a pagare le rate. Allora diciamo, OK, vendiamo. Ma anche quello è impossibile. La nostra casa è a West Thawston e, come sapete, appena uno dice che è di Thawston cominciano a parlargli coi verbi all'infinito. Così non possiamo vendere. Né comprare. Così la gente diventa disperata. Veramente disperata. Sembra non ci sia via d'uscita, capite? (*Si siede. Pausa*)

Turner: Qualcun altro?

Signora Howard: (*si alza*) Secondo me...

Turner: Signora Howard, se qualcun altro vuole...

Signora Howard: Solo una cosa. A proposito di quello che ha detto la giovane signora.

Turner (*alza le spalle*): A lei la parola.

Durante questo discorso, Attwood dà sempre maggiori segni di irritazione.

Signora Howard: Secondo me la signora ha proprio ragione. È la maggioranza silenziosa a soffrire. In silenzio. Mentre vedono la loro terra verde e amena diventare sempre più simile a una colonia asiatica. E poi i buonisti. Non è ora, signor Presidente, che, tanto per cambiare, pensiamo alle vittime? E l'ondata di permissivismo, l'erosione dei buoni valori, non è andata troppo in là? Ecco quello che dicono. La gente a reddito fisso. Con l'inflazione. Senza nessun grande sindacato che li protegga. Chi pensa a quelli senza sindacato? A noi?

Attwood *si alza in piedi e interrompe. Turner sussurra il suo nome a Maxwell. Dopo qualche istante, la signora Howard si siede.*

Attwod: Allora, signora, lasci che le dica una cosa. Credo di essere un patriota quanto lei, ma sono iscritto a un sindacato, e ho votato Laburista tutta la vita, e le dirò cosa mi dà fastidio. Sono un metalmeccanico, delegato in una fonderia, e quello che mi preoccupa, stando così l'economia, è che se una ditta è britannica, fallisce, e se è americana, c'è qualche magnate di Detroit che alza il telefono e dice, più profitti se scarichiamo le perdite su Dusseldorf. E poi c'è dell'altro. Perché i posti di lavoro che ci sono non vanno a noi. Dubito che conosciate le Fonderie Baron dove lavoro, ma quando è ora di mangiare ci sono così tanti turbanti che la mensa sembra un campo di maledetti lillà, e in più puzza come il Buco Nero di Calcutta.²⁴⁶ E se uno di loro viene licenziato, insorgono tutti, strillando alla discriminazione. Sta succedendo adesso. Sarò franco a proposito dei neri, li odio. E nessuno fa un cazzo di niente. Ecco cosa mi disturba. Non l'erosione dei suoi dannati valori della classe media. (*si siede*) Prima o poi bisognerà fare qualcosa. (*arrabbiato, alla signora Howard*). Per cui, non mi rivolga la parola.

Pausa carica di tensione. Tony si alza.

Tony: Ehm, signor presidente.

Turner: Tony?

Tony: Penso, quello che diceva l'ultimo che è intervenuto. Lei sa, voglio dire, lei è di classe media e ha perso il suo negozio, non è vero? Spero non le dispiaccia che io nomini questa cosa, ma, intendo, è stata la stessa grande società che ha comprato... E prenda me. Sono disoccupato. Come diceva lei. Mi sembra solo che, qualsiasi sia la classe... è lo stesso, cioè...

Non sa più cosa dire. Maxwell si alza in piedi. Tony si siede, sollevato.

Maxwell: Forse qui potrei intervenire io. Allora, amici miei, avevo detto che avrei imparato un paio di cose da voi, e accidenti se avevo ragione. Abbiamo sentito parlare della sovversione nelle scuole. Del partito conservatore dalla signora Howard. E dal signor (*guarda un appunto*) Attwood, della fabbrica locale. Ma secondo me l'ultimo intervento ha veramente centrato il punto. Cioè, che abbiamo in comune molto più di quanto non ci divida. Sono sicuro, per esempio, che la signora Howard non è contraria ai sindacati in sé ma alla loro perversione a scopo politico. Sono convinto che il signor Attwood non sia contrario all'onesto profitto, ma alle manovre degli speculatori. Naturalmente, siamo in disaccordo su molte questioni. Ma ci unisce molto, molto di più di quanto non ci divida. È un vecchio proverbio, ma puoi cambiare la tua classe e la tua fede. Ma non puoi cambiare il sangue che ti scorre nelle vene.

²⁴⁶ Nel testo: "Black Hole of Calcutta". Il riferimento è a un episodio storico del 1756: a Calcutta, in seguito a uno scontro con l'esercito indiano, circa 150 soldati britannici vennero imprigionati in un luogo estremamente ristretto, e la maggior parte morì per soffocamento. L'espressione in seguito è entrata nella lingua inglese per designare un luogo sovraffollato e maleodorante. Il personaggio che la usa sembra non conoscere l'origine dell'espressione, dato che la usa per descrivere un luogo affollato di lavoratori provenienti dal sub-continente indiano.

Si sente qualche "Giusto, giusto". Maxwell sorride.

Ma temo che abbiamo qualcos'altro in comune. Per dirla in tono scherzoso, abbiamo tutti l'impressione che i bei tempi se ne siano andati. Seriamente, osserviamo tutti un declino graduale, una disintegrazione delle nostre fortune e delle fortune della nostra nazione. E forse c'è una ragione, cioè che abbiamo un nemico in comune.

Naturalmente sembrano tanti nemici diversi: per la giovane signora sono i rossi nelle scuole, per il signor Attwood sono le multinazionali, per la signora Howard sono le banche che promuovono spericolatamente l'inflazione e distruggono i suoi risparmi. E ci sono tanti nomi, nomi che rappresentano cose che ci insegnano a considerare opposte fra loro: socialismo, liberalismo, comunismo, capitale finanziario. Cose che in realtà non sono per niente opposte.

Sapete, c'è ancora chi ride quando parliamo di cospirazione. Anche quando vediamo quelli che favoriscono l'immigrazione. Anche quando vediamo presunti difensori della libera impresa che parlano di distensione e vendono il loro grano per favorire il bolscevismo. C'è ancora gente che ride all'idea di una cospirazione. Una cospirazione mondiale.

Ma c'è un solo piccolo gruppo di uomini e donne che non ridono. C'è un partito, piccolo ma in crescita, che sa quel che sta succedendo ed è deciso a impedirlo. È il Nation Forward. E spero in tutta sincerità che voi vorrete unirvi al partito, unirvi a noi, per rifare grande il nostro paese.

Pausa. Si siede.

Turner: Bene, andiamo avanti. Penso che sia meglio passare direttamente al voto. Ehm, che la Taddley Patriotic League da qui in poi si fonda e diventi una sezione del Nation Forward Party. Credo che vada bene così. Tutti favorevoli?

Tutti tranne Attwood votano. Pausa. Attwood vota.

All'unanimità.

Maxwell: Penso di poter dire, a nome dell'intero movimento, quanto io sia felice di questa decisione.

Turner: Grazie, signor Maxwell, sono sicuro che...

Maxwell: *(lo interrompe, sorridendo)* Non posso ancora dire niente di specifico, a nome del movimento, sulle prossime elezioni suppletive, ma speriamo di presentarci, e la mia opinione personale è che non ci sia un candidato migliore del vostro presidente, Dennis Turner.

Applausi

Turner: *(compiaciuto ma colto di sorpresa)* Bene, David, non so cosa dire... penso che comunque sia meglio chiudere la serata.

Tony alza la mano.

Se non c'è nient'altro...

Tony: Signor Turner...

Turner: Oh, scusate. Un'altra cosa. Il qui presente Tony Perrin, dando una bella dimostrazione di spirito di iniziativa, ha scritto una canzone patriottica, e credo che sia un epilogo estremamente appropriato per una così bella assemblea. Dai, ragazzo, facci sentire.

Tony, nervoso, si alza in piedi, raccoglie la chitarra e va sulla pedana.

(a **Maxwell**) Cosa dici, David, andiamo in platea? (**Turner** e **Maxwell** si spostano e si siedono al centro della sala.)

Tony: (si siede sull'orlo del tavolo e tira fuori la chitarra dalla custodia.) È... non ho scritto io le parole, è una poesia, l'ho solo messa in musica... (fa una nota, per controllare l'accordatura, e rompe una corda) corda rotta. Mi ci vuole un attimo. (Ci mette un po' di più. Qualche segno di impazienza) Ci siamo. "L'inizio" di Rudyard Kipling, 1914. Messo in musica da Anthony Perrins. (Un piccolo colpo di tosse, poi canta. Dapprima non molto bene, incerto, ma diventa sempre più sicuro, sempre più duro, avvicinandosi al climax.)

Non l'avevano dentro nel sangue

E c'è voluto moltissimo tempo

Ripensamenti ed esitazioni

Quando gli inglesi hanno preso ad odiare

Non erano facili da trascinare

Erano decisi a restare in attesa

Che ogni fatto venisse provato

Ma poi gli inglesi hanno preso ad odiare

Le loro voci erano piane e tranquille

I loro sguardi diritti e decisi

Non l'hanno dato neanche a vedere

Quando gli inglesi hanno preso ad odiare

Non era predicato alla folla

Non era insegnato dallo stato
 Nessuno ne parlava ad alta voce
 Quando gli inglesi hanno preso ad odiare

Non venne fuori improvvisamente
 E non si placcherà rapidamente
 Negli anni freddi davanti a noi
 Sarà contato il tempo a partire
 Da quando gli inglesi hanno preso ad odiare

Sorride

È tutto.

Buio. Nel buio, per coprire il cambio di scena, si sente un messaggio dall'altoparlante di una macchina.

Voce di Maxwell: Gente di Taddley. Noi siamo Nation Forward, il partito che mette la gran Bretagna al primo posto. La nostra nazione è minacciata. Il flagello della disoccupazione colpisce ancora. I lavoratori sono costretti a soffrire per gli errori di politici corrotti, mentre gli speculatori immobiliari e gli affaristi si mangiano il paese. E, più di tutto, politici traditori hanno cospirato per inondare il nostro paese con i rifiuti dei ghetti dell'Asia e dell'Africa. Votate per il cambiamento. Votate Nation Forward. Votate Dennis Turner.

Il nastro va spegnendosi.

Scena terza

Luci. Il club del Labour Party. Clifton e Sandy coi bicchieri in mano. Paul con Khera, entrambi in giacca, e Patel, vestito casual.

Paul: Gurjeet Khera, Prakash Patel; Bob Clifton, Sandy Clifton.

Khera: Piacere.

Sandy: Ciao.

Clifton: *(sbrigativo, ma non aggressivo)* Bene. Allora, cosa desiderate?

Khera: Ci chiedevamo, signor Clifton, se conosceva la situazione alle Fonderie Baron.

Clifton: Sì. In parte.

Khera: E, dunque, se potrebbe...

Patel: Ci serve sostegno.

Clifton: Andate avanti.

Khera: Noi le abbiamo dato il nostro. Noi delegati di Thawston abbiamo votato per lei e le abbiamo dato il nostro sostegno, e ora ci serve il suo.

Clifton: Capisco. Potreste informarmi dei dettagli?

Paul: Allora, Bob, come ti dicevo...

Clifton: Non tu, Paul.

Khera: *(aiutandosi con degli appunti)* Allora. La vertenza alle fonderie Barons è cominciata come uno scontro sull'aumento dei ritmi, più lavoro per la stessa paga. E visto che solo gli operai generici non ricevono premi di produzione, e che sono quasi tutti asiatici, questa ridefinizione dei tempi è discriminatoria in sé. E questo ha anche evidenziato una discriminazione nelle promozioni, dato che i lavori meglio pagati di stampatura sono andati esclusivamente a bianchi. Perciò gli operai generici, dopo i necessari negoziati, hanno bloccato lo straordinario.

Pausa.

Clifton: Va bene. Avanti.

Khera: *(non guarda più gli appunti a mano a mano che acquista sicurezza)* Esiste un sindacato. L'Associazione Metallurgici e Fonditori. In effetti siamo stati noi a mettere in piedi il sindacato nella fonderia. Ora, per cinque settimane ci siamo battuti, abbiamo rifiutato lo straordinario, senza assistenza. Abbiamo passato mozioni, inviato lettere, ci siamo mossi per i canali corretti. Anche quando ci sono arrivati i preavvisi di licenziamento, non hanno fatto niente.

Clifton: E così...

Khera: Abbiamo occupato i loro uffici.

Clifton: Del sindacato?

Khera: Esatto.

Clifton: E poi?

Khera: Hanno ufficializzato il blocco dello straordinario

Clifton: Bene. Allora dov'è il problema?

Patel: Allora, il rifiuto dello straordinario è ufficiale. Su un foglio di carta. Registrato in Sede Centrale, dovunque sia. Il che non vuol dire che sia ufficiale per gli stampisti.

Clifton: No, certo.

Patel: E con un partito razzista alle elezioni suppletive. Che fa propaganda. Volantinaggi. E così via.

Clifton: Sì.

Pausa.

Va bene. È un chiaro caso di discriminazione. Il blocco è ufficiale. Legale. Allora farò una dichiarazione ufficiale. Di sostegno alla vostra vertenza. Va bene?

Khera sta per rispondere quando Patel lo ferma con un gesto. Clifton se ne accorge.

Problemi?

Patel: Una domanda.

Clifton: Spara.

Patel: Cosa ti viene in tasca?

Clifton: Perché chiedi?

Patel: Non abbiamo grandi motivi per fidarci del Partito Laburista... di nessun politico britannico.

Clifton: No, certo che no. La risposta alla tua domanda è: niente. Non ci guadagno niente a nuotare contro corrente. E allora? Non so. Dimmelo tu.

Breve pausa.

Khera: Grazie.

Clifton: Di niente.

Khera, Patel e Paul se ne vanno, quest'ultimo alzando il pollice in segno di approvazione.

Clifton: (A Sandy) Iscritti al partito.

Sandy: Scusa?

Clifton: È quello che intendeva. Ricordi il giro di reclutamento di Paul a Thawston? In un certo senso mi hanno fatto nominare.

Sandy: Ah, capisco.

Clifton: Non che... voglio dire, li avrei appoggiati lo stesso.

Sandy: Sicuro, Bob?

Bob: Sì...

Sandy: Allora perché ti stai giustificando?

Breve pausa.

Bob: Non so.

Buio. Nel buio si sente un altro messaggio dall'altoparlante di una macchina.

Voce di Turner: Gente di Taddley. Noi siamo Nation Forward, il partito che mette la gran Bretagna al primo posto. La nostra nazione è minacciata. Il flagello della disoccupazione colpisce ancora. I piccoli imprenditori sono schiacciati da una tassazione punitiva mentre i parassiti dell'assistenza sociale si mangiano il paese. E, più di tutto, politici traditori hanno cospirato per inondare il nostro paese con i rifiuti dei ghetti dell'Asia e dell'Africa. Votate per il cambiamento. Votate Nation Forward. Votate Dennis Turner.

Il nastro va spegnendosi.

Scena quarta

Quartiere generale elettorale di Nation Forward. Tavoli, sedie, macchine da scrivere. Troppe carte e troppo poco posto. Liz è seduta a un tavolo e scrive indirizzi su delle buste.

Due porte: una, con uno spioncino, dà sulla strada, l'altra conduce a una stanza interna.

Campanello. Liz si alza, guarda attraverso lo spioncino e fa entrare Tony e Turner. Hanno entrambi una coccarda con la Union Jack.

Turner: Ciao, Liz. C'è il signor Maxwell?

Liz: È nel retro. Ha detto che questo probabilmente ti interessava. È l'Evening Post. (Gli dà un giornale.)

Turner (si siede): Grazie.

Liz: Caffè?

Turner: Ottima idea.

Liz: Tony, potresti...

Tony: Certo. (Tony si siede e comincia a scrivere indirizzi. Liz va nell'altra stanza. Turner ride) Che c'è, signor Turner?

Turner: Il candidato laburista. È andato a infilarsi nella vertenza dei negri alla Barons. Finirà per lasciarci le palle, se non sta attento. (Tony sorride. Entra Maxwell dall'altra stanza.)

Maxwell: Ciao Dennis. Hai visto la storia?

Turner: Sì. E il Tory non è molto meglio.

Maxwell: Cosa? Ah, no, intendevo la nostra dichiarazione sul voto degli immigrati. Pagina tre, in alto.

Turner (*gira la pagina*): Ah.

Liz *entra con un vassoio coi caffè.*

Liz: David?

Maxwell: Liz, sei un tesoro.

Turner: (*prende una tazza, leggendo*) Grazie. (**Liz dà una tazza a Tony e poi si siede con la sua tazza e riprende a scrivere indirizzi**) Bel lavoro, David.

Maxwell: Credo che catturerà l'attenzione.

Turner: Di sicuro.

Maxwell: A proposito, sei riuscito a dare un'occhiata alla bozza del discorso elettorale?

Turner: (*mette giù il giornale, tira fuori un dattiloscritto dalla tasca*) Ah, sì.

Maxwell: Qualcosa che non va?

Turner: Beh, sì, in effetti. Uno o due cose.

Maxwell: (*si siede*) Spara.

Turner: Allora, forse ti verrà da ridere, ma qualche punto mi è sembrato un po' di sinistra.

Maxwell: (*sorride*) In che senso?

Turner: Dunque, in gran parte è ottimo, hai presente, tutta la roba sui negri, legge e ordine, fantastico. Ma questa faccenda di controllare le importazioni e nazionalizzare le banche, voglio dire... capisci cosa voglio dire?

Maxwell: Non proprio.

Turner: Non so come la prenderanno.

Maxwell: Gli elettori Tory.

Turner: Esatto.

Maxwell: Ma noi non cerchiamo solo gli elettori Tory.

Turner: Beh, no. Ma qui si parla di opporsi al controllo dei salari...

Maxwell: (*lievemente spazientito*) Naturalmente ci opponiamo al controllo dei salari. (*nuovamente cordiale*) Solo nella misura in cui siamo convinti che la crisi sia creata da speculatori internazionali senza scrupoli, e perciò non dovrebbe essere pagata dalla classe lavoratrice britannica. Capisci?

Turner: Sì, ma...

Maxwell: *(si alza)* Bene.

Turner: Poi ci sono i vermi intestinali.

Maxwell: Scusa?

Turner: Il rapporto dell'ufficiale sanitario sui vermi intestinali fra gli scolari figli di immigrati.

Maxwell: Beh, sì, ho pensato, meglio tenerla su un piano generico.

Turner: Ma dimostra quello che ho sempre detto.

Maxwell: Sì, certo, ma credo che ci siano delle statistiche più generali...

Turner: *(si alza)* Ma questa è vera dinamite.

Maxwell: *(in tono paziente)* Guarda, Dennis, noi non siamo, non possiamo essere solo un gruppo di pressione, su qualsiasi questione, anche su una centrale come quella del colore. Siamo un partito e, in quanto tale, affrontiamo altri partiti le cui ideologie sono totali, onnicomprensive. Perciò anche noi dobbiamo mostrare di avere un punto di vista globale. Non siamo solo dei patrioti inflessibili. Certamente non siamo Conservatori di complemento con una particolare avversione per l'immigrazione. Noi siamo Nazionalisti Britannici con una nostra chiara e distinta visione del mondo. Capisci?

Turner: Non credo che tu conosca la gente di qui.

Pausa. Campanello. Liz va a rispondere alla porta mentre:

Maxwell: Va bene. Va bene. Mi arrendo alla tua superiore conoscenza locale. Inseriremo un riferimento specifico.

Liz *controlla e fa entrare Cleaver. È un po' più vecchio dell'ultima volta che l'abbiamo visto.*

Cleaver: Ah, splendido, una vera fucina di attività.

Maxwell *fa un cenno di saluto con la testa*

Turner: Buon pomeriggio, Richard.

Cleaver: Sempre in prima linea, eh, Tony? Come va?

Tony: Bene, grazie, signore.

Cleaver: Splendido. Avanti così. **(A Turner e Maxwell)** Meditando sul discorso?

Maxwell: Esatto

Cleaver: *(prende in mano il dattiloscritto)* Qualche problema?

Maxwell: Dennis era preoccupato di alcune delle faccende economiche. Qualità della vita. Le banche.

Cleaver: (*sfogliando*) È così?

Maxwell: Ho sottolineato la necessità di proporre una alternativa forte alla politica fallimentare degli altri partiti.

Cleaver: (*sempre sfogliando*) Giusto.

Maxwell: E in particolare che dovremmo dissociarci completamente dall' elitismo retrogrado dei Conservatori.

Cleaver: Naturalmente. Vedi, Dennis, al contrario dei Tory, noi non sosteniamo senza riserve lo status quo economico. Specificamente, ci contrapponiamo ai faccendieri e ai parassiti del credito e del capitale finanziario. Allo stesso tempo, naturalmente, intendiamo eliminare i sabotatori marxisti dalle fabbriche. In realtà, nella nostra visione capitale finanziario e sovversione comunista sono, essenzialmente, due bracci della stessa cospirazione per minare lo spirito d'iniziativa della nazione.

Turner: Non è quello che viene detto qui.

Cleaver: Così sembra.

Pausa.

Dennis, perché tu ed Elizabeth non andate a organizzare il porta a porta?

Turner: Bene.

Liz e Turner vanno nell'altra stanza. Cleaver continua a leggere. Tony ascolta mentre lavora.

Maxwell: Gesù Cristo.

Cleaver: Qual è il problema?

Maxwell: L'ossessione di Turner per le malattie.

Cleaver: Non sapevo di questa cosa.

Maxwell: Per cominciare, ha una vera paranoia per i vermi intestinali.

Cleaver: Intestinali che?

Maxwell: Vermi.

Cleaver: David, questa cosa non mi piace del tutto.

Maxwell: Beh, deve essere in tipografia per domani.

Cleaver: C'è solo qualche omissione. Tony, vai a vedere se Mr Turner ha bisogno di una mano.

Tony: Sì, signore.

Tony esce e va nella stanza interna.

Maxwell: Allora?

Cleaver: Allora. (*legge*) “Nation Forward ritiene che la causa della nostra crisi attuale non siano le legittime richieste salariali dei lavoratori britannici, ma il controllo sulla nostra economia da parte di una piccola cricca di capitalisti internazionali, esattamente la stessa gente che importa deliberatamente mano d’opera straniera a buon mercato, e beni prodotti all’estero a buon mercato, con lo scopo di tagliare i nostri salari e farci perdere il lavoro”.

Maxwell: Allora?

Cleaver: Togli il dagli-ai-negri e potrebbe essere il Tribune,²⁴⁷ David.

Maxwell: Allora cosa vuoi? I malvagi sindacati che tengono il paese in ostaggio? Eastbourne²⁴⁸ über alles. Perché è quello che Turner...

Cleaver: (*arrabbiato, sbattendo un dito sul dattiloscritto*) Dov’è, fra tutte queste belle storie sul covo di ladri che è la Borsa, il sostegno alla libera industria produttiva? Dov’è, all’interno di tutta questa amabile retorica sul triste destino dei comuni lavoratori, la necessità di isolare i sabotatori comunisti? Dov’è, in mezzo a tutti questi bei discorsi sulle strutture democratiche e la partecipazione attiva, un accenno, niente più che un accenno, al fatto che non tutti gli uomini sono uguali e che alcuni sono nati per condurre e altri sono capaci solo di seguire?

Maxwell: Richard, possiamo ristampare il *Mein Kampf* se questo ti rende...

Cleaver: David, sto perdendo la pazienza...

Maxwell: Richard, ho avuto Turner fra i piedi tutto il pomeriggio. Sto cercando di dirigere una campagna elettorale in una scatola di scarpe ingombra e con l’assistenza di giovani minorati mentali, e francamente della tua pazienza non me ne potrebbe fregare di meno.

Pausa

Cleaver: (*con calma glaciale, facendo a pezzi il dattiloscritto mentre parla*) David, se non fosse per la sconfinata carità di alcuni di noi che, contro ogni evidenza, hanno visto, dietro la tua facciata goscista, alcuni tenui barlumi di potenziale, staresti ancora marciando a passo d’oca su e giù per la foresta di Epping, con le braghe militari dismesse e il berretto da boy-scout. Oppure staresti organizzando Nordic Kulturfest al parco di Clapham, o ti faresti arrestare per accuse ridicole come cercare di arrestare il Primo Ministro per alto tradimento, o forse... (**Maxwell, furioso, tira un gancio rabbioso a Cleaver, che gli blocca il polso.**) Ben fatto,

²⁴⁷ Vedi nota 236.

²⁴⁸ Cittadina balneare della costa meridionale dell’Inghilterra, qui nominata come esempio di conservatorismo piccolo borghese.

David. Per un momento non sembravi più un uomo di Neanderthal, ma quasi un esemplare progredito. Solo per una volta.

Suona il campanello. Cleaver sta ancora tenendo Maxwell. Il campanello suona ancora. Cleaver lascia andare Maxwell che si siede, furioso, e si immerge in una intensa attività quando entra Liz che va alla porta e guarda dallo spioncino.

Liz: Non so chi sia.

Cleaver *va a guardare dallo spioncino.*

Cleaver: Oh, questa è davvero una sorpresa. Elizabeth, vai a chiamare il signor Turner. Digli che ha visite.

Liz esce. Cleaver fa entrare Crosby che ha in mano un giornale.

Buon pomeriggio, signor Crosby. Il mio nome è Cleaver. E lui è David Maxwell.

Crosby: C'è Dennis Turner?

Cleaver: Arriva subito. Si sieda.

Crosby *si siede.*

Oggi ho letto la sua dichiarazione al Post.

Crosby: Ah sì?

Cleaver: Mi dica, è di origine sessuale?

Crosby: Cosa?

Cleaver: Il piacere che ricava stando dall'altra parte.

Pausa.

Comunque, un bel colpo. Lo zio tira le cuoia e subito arriva lei.

Crosby *sta per replicare quando entra Turner.*

Turner: Oh, signor Crosby, a cosa dobbiamo...

Crosby: *(si alza, agita il giornale)* Signor Turner, ho studiato il vostro piano di sabotaggio di queste elezioni suppletive.

Turner: Sabotaggio?

Crosby: Sono venuto a chiederle di riconsiderare il vostro progetto di prendervela con gli elettori immigrati. Cito: "Intendiamo monitorare al seggio elettorale tutti gli immigrati che a nostro avviso non hanno diritto di votare a queste elezioni". Allora?

Turner: Ah, le interessa il voto dei negri, o no?

Crosby: Sono... venuto del tutto controvoiglia.

Turner: Guardi, lei sa bene come me, che metà di loro non ha diritto di votare, e l'altra metà vota due volte.

Crosby: Può ripensarci?

Turner: Neanche per idea.

Crosby: Farò rapporto all'Ufficiale elettorale

Turner: Si accomodi pure.

Pausa

Crosby: (*arrabbiato*) Non c'è nessun bisogno, capite, di rendere schifosa l'intera vicenda, di trascinarci tutti ... Non c'è bisogno, ma immagino che faccia tutto parte del vostro piano di rinascita nazionale, usare queste tattiche da Gestapo... Oh, mi dispiace. Probabilmente per voi è un complimento... Queste tattiche da bulletti bolscevichi, allora. (*Si gira per andarsene*)

Maxwell: Per noi sono sempre meglio i rossi, signor Crosby. Hanno del sangue nelle vene. I nostri militanti più impegnati sono operai, ex rossi.

Crosby: Sono sicuro che reclutate in varie categorie di pazzi, non solo in una.

Maxwell: Meglio estremisti di destra che estremamente sinistri.

Crosby: (*andando alla porta*) Che commento sciocco, non riesce a fare di meglio?

Maxwell: Signor Crosby, io ho uno zio...

Crosby: Che bello. Il mio è morto. Arrivederci, signor Turner...

Maxwell:... che vive a Southall. Mai interessato di politica. Probabilmente vota laburista. E questo vecchio innocuo è genuinamente terrorizzato che, dopo la sua morte, in un futuro più o meno prossimo, sulla sua tomba venga costruito un tempio indiano. E questo potrebbe anche sembrarle assurdo, o per usare un termine tecnico, paranoico. E potrebbe sembrare molto passé, molto antiquato, molto fuori moda, dire che questo ragazzo di una volta non ha combattuto in due guerre mondiali per poi morire, quale che sia la causa, come un vecchio infelice, solo e impaurito.

Pausa. Crosby è completamente spiazzato.

Crosby: Penso ... penso ... non penso che ci sia più niente di utile da dire.

Se ne va.

Cleaver: (*in tono allegro, mentre va nella stanza interna*) Vedi cosa intendo, Dennis? Fiacco. Bolso. Come tutti i conservatori, schiavo del sentimento.

Se n'è andato. Turner guarda Maxwell. Sorriso sforzato di Maxwell. Buio e cono di luce su Crosby, a un lato del palcoscenico, e Platt, dall'altro.

Crosby: È stato veramente strano, mentre parlavo con questa gente. Pensavo, non è possibile, la loro orribile xenofobia, non è possibile, oppure sono una nostra creazione. Demoni. Alterego. In qualche modo. (*Platt sorride*) E mi sono ricordato, da piccolo, l'Incoronazione, la conquista del monte Everest, una specie di semplice patriottismo, una sorta di innocua fierezza, appena venata di orgoglio. Un grazioso mondo ad acquarello, capisci? (**Platt** *ha l'aria imbarazzata*) E poi il loro mostruoso sciovinismo. Un oscuro desiderio di qualcosa... come qualcosa di oscuro e terribile nell'anima.

Pausa. Platt tossicchia.

Mi sono sentito fuori del tempo.

Platt: Scusi? Fuori di cosa?

Crosby: Ho paura.

Buio

Scena quinta

Durante la scena seguente, le luci si accendono gradualmente. Platt è ancora nello stesso punto. Kershaw, con un soprabito e una valigia 24 ore, entra in scena e gli si avvicina.

Voce: Taddley, stazione di Taddley. Al binario due è appena arrivato il treno delle 15,57 da Birmingham New Street, che proseguirà alle 16,18 per West Bromwich, Dudley, Bilston e Wolverhampton. Al binario due il treno delle 16,18 per Wolverhampton. Ferma in tutte le stazioni.

Platt consegna a **Kershaw** un grosso incartamento. **Kershaw** lo apre, poi guarda **Platt**.

Kershaw: Allora, Jim, in poche parole: che cosa vogliono?

Platt: Un'estensione dei premi. E la fine della cosiddetta discriminazione nelle promozioni.

Kershaw: Possiamo concedere la seconda e affossare la prima?

Platt: In nessun modo. I bianchi non lo manderanno giù.

Kershaw: Perché?

Platt: Perché non ci guadagnano niente.

Kershaw: E se concediamo tutto?

Platt: A questo punto resterebbero comunque dei problemi.

Kershaw: Capisco. Allora dobbiamo spezzarlo.

Platt: O lasciare che spezzi noi.

Kershaw: (*Guarda Platt*) Jim, capisci perché sono qui?

Platt: Non proprio. È una vertenza insignificante.

Kershaw: Lo era. Finché bloccavano gli straordinari.

Platt: Allora, guardi, non è colpa mia. Quell'accidente di sindacato. Hanno detto che avrebbero sostenuto il blocco. Hanno lasciato lavorare normalmente i bianchi, non è vero? Non c'è da stupirsi che i nostri abbronzati fratelli abbiano perso la pazienza.

Kershaw: Non è colpa mia, triste ma vero, che senza collettori o tamburi dei freni non si possono fare le auto.

Breve pausa.

Platt: Credo che si chiami elevata interdipendenza dei sistemi capitalisti tecnologicamente avanzati.

Breve pausa.

A sentire il *Financial Times* di mio figlio.

Kershaw: Allora. La polizia non può fare niente?

Platt: Dicono di no.

Kershaw: Perché no?

Platt: Possono ma non vogliono.

Kershaw: Ma possibile, Jim, uno sciopero auto proclamato...

Platt: Lo dica al buon ispettore. (**Kershaw guarda Platt**) Si può capire il loro punto di vista. Stampa, telecamere e tutto. È dura per loro, dal punto di vista politico.

Kershaw: Lo vedi il mio punto di vista? Tre fabbriche ferme. Dura, per noi, dal punto di vista economico.

Platt: Capisco. Credo che si possa definire una contraddizione.

Kershaw: Jim, per l'amor del cielo...

Pausa.

Platt: Conosco un giovanotto. Che sta passando una specie di crisi. Ha deciso, più o meno una settimana fa, che non ce la faceva più a essere un conservatore. Il che non importerebbe molto se non fosse il candidato Tory alle elezioni fra 4 giorni. Tutti abbiamo dei problemi.

Kershaw: Sì.

Pausa.

Ricordami le percentuali. Neri e bianchi.

Platt: Circa sei a uno.

Kershaw: Brutta quota.

Platt: Per cosa?

Kershaw: Il picchetto.

Pausa.

Sai se Nation Forward è al corrente dello sciopero?

Platt: Perché lo chiede?

Breve pausa.

Kershaw: *(improvvisamente, in tono allegro, mentre esce di scena)* Un fiume inglese che straripa dagli argini inglesi.

Platt: Non capisco cosa intende.

Buio.

Scena sesta

*Nell'oscurità, un registratore a cassette trasmette **Turner** che prova un discorso elettorale. Non gli sta venendo bene. Mentre va questo discorso registrato, le luci si accendono gradualmente sul quartier generale di Nation Forward. È sera. **Cleaver** e **Maxwell** sono seduti. **Liz** e **Tony**, che ha il registratore vicino a lui, stanno lavorando su uno striscione in fondo alla scena. **Turner** è in piedi dietro una sedia che userà come leggio.*

Turner: *(registrato)* Cittadini di Taddley, tutti voi avete sentito le calunnie. Le bugie. Le... cos'è questo?

Maxwell: *(registrato, da una certa distanza)* Denigrazioni.

Turner: *(registrato, dopo aver preso fiato)* Denigrazioni. Avete sentito i... cos'è questo: "piagnistei"?

Maxwell: *(registrato, da una certa distanza)* Sì.

Turner: *(registrato)* Va bene. I piagnistei del personale... dei commentatori con un personale... mi spiace, posso cominciare da capo?

Maxwell fa un cenno a **Tony**, che spegne il registratore. **Turner** sorride e alza le spalle.

Maxwell: Ok, lasciamo stare questo. Proviamo con qualche domanda.

*Breve pausa. **Cleaver** fa la prima domanda.*

Cleaver: Signor Turner, ammetterebbe di avere dei pregiudizi razziali?

Turner: Abbiamo tutti una sana e naturale preferenza per quelli della nostra stessa specie.

Maxwell: Colore?

Turner: È quello che voglio dire. Certamente, concedere il passaporto britannico a un asiatico non lo rende britannico.

Cleaver: *(come suggerimento)* Gatto.

Turner *(un po' troppo in fretta, come se fosse una frase imparata a memoria):* In fondo, se un gatto è nato in una scatola di aringhe, non per questo diventa un'aringa.

Liz e Tony *alzano lo sguardo e mostrano di apprezzare la battuta.* **Cleaver** *guarda Maxwell.*

E sapete quella del...

Cleaver: *(interrompe)* Turner, I Pakistani spingono per una scuola separata per le ragazze, per motivi religiosi. Lei è d'accordo?

Turner: Assolutamente sì. Purché sia in Pakistan.

Cleaver: No!

Turner: Perché no? È divertente.

Cleaver: Lascia perdere. Devi dire che ciò dimostra che gli stessi immigrati non sono in grado di integrarsi.

Turner: *(alza le spalle)* Fammene un'altra.

Cleaver: Rimpatri.

Cleaver *alza tre dita.*

Turner: Ordinati... compassionevoli... umani. *(Si ferma. Cleaver gli fa segno di andare avanti)* Ma noi siamo abbastanza onesti da dire che non possono essere volontari. E questo include anche gli immigrati nati qui.

Cleaver: No!

Turner: Cosa c'è che non va?

Cleaver: Come cavolo è possibile che un immigrato sia nato qui? Telecomando?

Turner: Beh, lo sai cosa...

Cleaver: È proprio quello che vogliono i contestatori.

Maxwell: E, a proposito, non dire che si riproducono come conigli.

Turner: Perché?

Maxwell: Perché c'è sempre qualche spiritoso che grida che, se è per quello, anche la regina Vittoria.

Pausa. Cleaver guarda Maxwell.

Cleaver: Va bene. Questo sciopero alla Barons?

Turner: La maggiore priorità deve essere... resistere agli attuali tentativi di raggiungere un accordo sottobanco fra gli immigrati e la compagnia che passi... in cima alle teste...

Maxwell: Sopra le teste...

Turner:... sopra le teste dei lavoratori britannici.

Maxwell: Un accordo che dimostrerebbe ancora una volta...

Turner: Dimostrerebbe...

Maxwell: Gli interessi in comune...

Turner: Fra le multinazionali e gli elementi multirazziali in mezzo a noi.

Maxwell: Quindi?

Turner: Quindi, naturalmente, se la direzione andasse contro gli interessi dei comuni lavoratori bianchi, dobbiamo mostrare il nostro appoggio.

Maxwell: No, Dennis, no. Se la direzione *svendesse* gli interessi degli operai bianchi *alla catena di montaggio* dovremmo *dimostrare* la nostra *solidarietà*.

Turner: Ah, sì. È giusto. Mi dispiace.

Cleaver *guarda Maxwell. Maxwell piuttosto contento di sè, si alza e va a controllare il lavoro di Liz da dietro le spalle. Cleaver si appoggia allo schienale della sedia.*

Cleaver: Signor Turner, mi chiedevo, potrebbe dirci qualcosa di più su questi interessi in comune fra le multinazionali e i neri?

Turner: Beh, sono loro che li attirano. Che fanno annunci sui giornali di là. E sono loro, le multinazionali, che quando sono qui li incoraggiano a, per così dire, integrarsi.

Cleaver: Capisco. E perché lo farebbero?

Maxwell: *(mentre continua a guardare il lavoro di Liz e Tony)* Paghe.

Turner: Sì, per ridurre le paghe degli operai bianchi.

Cleaver: Solo per le paghe?

Maxwell: *(sempre guardando gli altri due lavorare)* Posti.

Turner: Giusto. Per prendere posti di lavoro che normalmente sarebbero andati a lavoratori bianchi.

Cleaver: Nient'altro?

Maxwell *guarda Cleaver.*

Niente a che vedere con... un piano? Riprodursi? E lo scopo, forse, di imbastardire...

Turner: Cosa?

Cleaver: Di trasformare la nostra nazione in una razza bastarda di mezzo sangue marrone...

Turner: Ah, sì, anche quello.

Maxwell: *(torna da Turner e Cleaver, con aria decisa)* Dai Turner, siete solo fascisti con la pelle di pecora. Basta guardare le credenziali naziste di Cleaver.

Cleaver: *(grattandosi un orecchio)* E quelle di Maxwell.

Maxwell: Siete solo dei Führer in sedicesimo, venuti a rovesciare la democrazia.

Turner: Non è...

Maxwell: Forza! Domanda! Rispondi!

Turner: Se mi dai il tempo. C'è una risposta semplice. Vogliamo più democrazia. Pensiamo che in questo momento siamo controllati da una élite internazionale non democratica di... burattinai... di Wall Street, che sono dietro al complotto per minare alla base le nazioni, le nazioni libere, e imporre uno stato Mondialista sotto il loro controllo. I loro metodi includono strangolare le economie nazionali caricandole di debiti... e *(guarda Cleaver)* e l'imbastardimento, e la sovversione comunista, e... *(guarda Maxwell)* la creazione di monopoli multinazionali.

Maxwell: Ben fatto.

Turner: *(durante il suo discorso, Cleaver comincia a ridere, forte e a lungo)* Noi invece vogliamo costruire... una società veramente democratica... e nazionalista... in cui le opinioni di ciascuno siano... per così dire... Cosa c'è da ridere?

Cleaver: *(ridendo)* Oh mamma mia!

Turner: *(piuttosto arrabbiato)* Cosa c'è da ridere?

Cleaver: Wall Street? Alleati coi comunisti? Mamma mia!

Turner: Beh, hanno finanziato la rivoluzione russa...

Cleaver: *(ridendo ancora più forte)* Finanziato la rivoluzione russa. I banchieri di New York. Oh, questa è buona, questa!

Turner: Beh, è stato detto...

Cleaver: (*ancora gioviale*) Voglio dire, santo cielo. Fai dei nomi.

Turner: Beh, Jacob... Schiff e Otto...

Maxwell: Warburg.

Turner: Warburg, hanno dato soldi per pagare i bolscevichi...

Cleaver: (*ridendo ancora più forte*) Schiff e Warburg. Questa è bella davvero. Questa è proprio bella. Voglio dire, cosa avranno mai in comune con i comunisti? Dimmelo. Cosa cavolo?

Pausa. Ancora sorridendo.

Dai, dimmelo. Cosa cavolo. In comune.

Pausa.

Turner: Richard, non capisco...

Cleaver: (*non sorride più*) Oppure, messa in un'altra maniera: cos'hanno in comune i padroni di casa britannici, gli inquilini britannici, gli operai britannici, gli imprenditori britannici? In comune.

Turner: (*a bassa voce*) Razza.

Cleaver: Non sento.

Turner: La razza.

Cleaver: E allora... gli altri?

Pausa.

Warburg. Marx. Schiff. Rosa Luxemburg. Rotschild. Lev Davidovitch Trotsky. Cosa hanno in comune?

Turner: Richard, non sono un antisem... (*si ferma. Pausa*)

Cleaver: Dennis. L'uomo che ti ha portato via il negozio. Come si chiamava?

Pausa

Turner: Goodman. Monty Goodman.

Cleaver: Sì.

Suona il telefono. Cleaver va a rispondere.

Pronto. Oh, sì, certo. Stia in linea.

Copre la cornetta.

E allora, l'osservazione dell'intervistatore sulla democrazia. Cos'è la democrazia?

Turner: Quello che serve. Che è nell'interesse. Della razza.

Cleaver: *(Si alza e va verso l'uscita, svolgendo il filo del telefono)* Va bene. *(rivolto a Maxwell)* Buona notte, David. *(Quando è all'uscita, si gira e fa un gesto col ricevitore a Turner)* È per te.

Cleaver esce con il telefono. **Turner** lo segue e alza le spalle rivolto a **Maxwell**. **Tony** ha finito il suo lavoro, si alza e va a sedersi su una sedia. **Liz** guarda **Maxwell**:

Maxwell: Allora?

Liz: Allora cosa?

Maxwell: Non vedete cosa sta facendo?

Liz: Chi?

Maxwell: Herr Oberstgruppenführer.²⁴⁹

Liz torna al suo lavoro.

Liz: Dimmelo tu.

Maxwell: Capisci, lui ha questa visione di sé stesso, si vede davvero in alta uniforme che marcia lungo Earls Court, scortato da manipoli dei più biondi e brillanti...

Breve pausa.

Capisci, Liz, quello che non capirà mai, che non si può, al giorno d'oggi, sbandierare le rune nordiche e Wagner, c'è gente qui fuori che ha bisogno di essere convinta, e noi dobbiamo apparire...

Breve pausa.

Voglio dire, va bene il Trionfo della Volontà, ma non solo la sua...

Tony: Non importa quello che diciamo, è importante che prendiamo i voti, è questo che intendi?

Maxwell: *(si lascia cadere in una sedia)* Oh cribbio. A che serve?

Liz, *finito il suo lavoro, si alza in piedi. Tira fuori una sigaretta.*

Liz: Mi piacciono le cose fatte bene.

Si accende la sigaretta.

Facevo un sacco di lavori di cucito. Non solo vestiti, ma cose per la casa. Tende, copri sedie. Ho anche fatto degli arazzi, avevo imparato a scuola. La casa stava

²⁴⁹ Storpiatura (forse voluta) del titolo Oberstgruppenführer oppure Obergruppenführer, alti gradi nella gerarchia delle SS.

diventando proprio carina. Ma poi, coi vari problemi, sembrava non ci fosse più molto senso.

C'era questa associazione di inquilini, parecchi di loro, in effetti, erano della Patriotic League, sai, questa cosa gestita da Dennis. Il bello non era che dicevano le cose che io pensavo, ma che con loro potevo esprimermi, senza scusarmi.

Perché non dovrei? Perché non dovrei sentirmi fiera di quello che sono? Il nostro paese sta marcendo. Il tessuto rovinato, strappato sulle cuciture. Perché la gente non vuole essere orgogliosa di quello che è. Non mi interessa il modo. Voglio una ragione per fare dei figli.

Tony: Sì. È giusto.

Entra Cleaver

Maxwell: Allora, chi era al ...

Liz: *(lo interrompe)* Lo striscione è finito, Richard.

Cleaver: Fatemi vedere.

Tony e Liz sollevano lo striscione. Una Union Jack, con dietro una famiglia bianca. Lo slogan: "Il futuro ci appartiene".

Sì, ottimo.

Maxwell: *(improvvisamente, quasi in tono disperato)* Oh, Cristo di Dio, Tony, te l'ho detto centinaia di volte, la striscia bianca più spessa va a sinistra in alto, guarda, l'hai attaccata rovescia, cazzo ...

Tony: Non sono l'unico.

Pausa. Cleaver, come se si accorgesse per la prima volta di Maxwell dopo essere tornato.

Cleaver: Ah, David, sei ancora qui?

Pausa.

Tony, prendi il soprabito del signor Maxwell.

Maxwell: Non ho un soprabito.

Cleaver: Tony, accompagna fuori il signor Maxwell.

Tony va verso Maxwell. Turner è rientrato e guarda la scena.

Maxwell: Guarda, io... Tony, guarda, tu...

Tony: Sentito cos'ha detto il signor Cleaver?

Maxwell: Oh Signore Iddio.

Si gira ed esce in fretta. Tony fa un cenno verso lo striscione.

Cleaver: Non importa, Tony, è stata una lunga notte. (*si siede*)

Turner: Cosa succede? Perché David se n'è andato?

Cleaver: (*in tono paziente*) Dennis. C'è una eresia nella politica nazionalista, più o meno perenne, che sostiene che i veri patrioti dovrebbero opporsi non solo alla finanza internazionale ma all'iniziativa privata in toto. Cosa ne deriva? Un'ossessione per la "democrazia". Masse contrapposte all'individuo. Sfiducia nella leadership. Marx agghindato di erbacce patriottiche.

Pausa.

Abbiamo fatto una piccola purga.

Breve pausa. In tono allegro.

Va bene. Un'altra volta. Il discorso.

Buio.

Scena settima

Immediatamente, un riflettore su Turner, davanti allo striscione. Ha un microfono. Il suo discorso è calmo, sicuro, professionale.

Turner: Cittadini di Taddley, tutti voi avete sentito le calunnie. Le bugie, le denigrazioni. Avete sentito piagnistei dei commentatori con un interesse personale nel sostenere che il nostro nazionalismo britannico sia una moda passeggera. Bene, lasciate che dica a loro, e dica a voi.

Che a partire da stanotte, da Taddley, da queste elezioni suppletive, qui siamo e qui resteremo. Qualsiasi barriera si possa incontrare, qualsiasi ostacolo si debba superare; per quanto lungo sia il viaggio e per quanto difficile la strada... noi siamo il futuro.

Chi ci può fermare adesso?

Applausi, ma anche schiamazzi. Un coro dei contestatori "Nation Forward Partito Nazi" è sommerso da "Land of Hope and Glory".²⁵⁰ Rumori di violenza, sedie rovesciate. I contestatori tentano di intonare "L'Internazionale". Sono sommersi da un coro molto più forte mentre i rumori di violenza aumentano: "Teppa rossa scavati la fossa". La luce su Turner si affievolisce, mentre la sua espressione passa dal trionfo all'allarme. Buio mentre i cori e i rumori di violenza vanno crescendo finché si interrompono improvvisamente e si sentono due colpi di arma da fuoco.

²⁵⁰ Canzone patriottica inglese.

Scena ottava

Luci. Rolfe in piedi. Indossa un cappotto scuro sopra un abito che mostra i segni di un viaggio improvviso. Il palco è vuoto, anche se in effetti siamo nel Quartier Generale dell'esercito a Lisburn, Irlanda del nord. Rolfe tiene in mano una Union Jack spiegazzata. Sembra quasi che la culli come un bambino. Alza lo sguardo verso il pubblico.

Rolfe: C'è un momento nella vita, più terribile e traumatico anche della fine del primo amore, o del rendersi conto di avere fallito le proprie ambizioni, o della consapevolezza di invecchiare. È il momento in cui ti accorgi di avere più tempo, attenzione e rispetto per i tuoi nemici che per quelli che consideri amici. Questo momento per me è venuto di notte, mentre ero seduto su un aereo, diretto verso nord, a ovest, attraverso il mare d'Irlanda, per andare a prendere il corpo di mio figlio.

Era, mi hanno detto, nella parte bassa di Falls Road. Durante un'irruzione dell'esercito, ha girato la testa, un secondo. E il ragazzino, lo scolaretto alla finestra del decimo piano, col suo fucile di precisione. Probabilmente era lì da ore. Che aspettava quell'attimo. Pazientemente.

E sull'aereo mi sono accorto che avevo più tempo per lui, l'assassino di 12 anni del casermone di Divis Street, il bambino oscuro col suo fucile russo, molto più tempo per lui che per loro. I generali. I ministri. Ci avevano assicurato che il sole non sarebbe mai tramontato. I generali non hanno saputo impedire che per mio figlio, nella sua ora più luminosa, calasse il suo sole.

Eppure ancora non vedete.

Ci riuscirete mai? Voi generali, ministri, capi della polizia, non volete vedere che siamo in guerra. A Belfast, Bradford, Bristol, Birmingham, la stessa guerra che abbiamo perso a Bombay trent'anni fa., Quella che stiamo perdendo in Gran Bretagna adesso. A meno che voi non vediate in tempo.

Non sono teppisti né pazzi, né burattini di Mosca. Sono uomini e donne ordinari, ragionevoli e normali, a migliaia. E non c'è tempo. Sono ovunque. Nel profondo, nel più profondo del cuore. Non c'è più tempo.

Sta piangendo.

Il sole è tramontato. E non dovremmo ricordare. Non dovremmo guardarci indietro, ma pensare invece solo al mattino.

Guarda la bandiera spiegazzata.

Colpa sua. Ha girato la schiena.

Smette di piangere. Rolfe alza la bandiera come in un saluto ufficiale.

Abbiamo bisogno di un'alba di ferro.

Resta lì in piedi, tenendo in alto la bandiera. Le luci si affievoliscono fino a spegnersi.

Atto terzo

“La carcassa deforme del moderno stato democratico costituisce una minaccia estremamente seria per gli ideali al servizio dei quali era stato originariamente concepito. I tentacoli della burocrazia e del socialismo egualitario stanno strangolando l’iniziativa privata.

Robert Moss, *The Collapse of Democracy [Il crollo della democrazia]*, 1975.

“L’iniziativa privata non può essere salvaguardata in tempo di democrazia: è concepibile solo se il popolo ha una salda idea di autorità ... Tutti i beni terreni che possediamo, li dobbiamo alla lotta degli eletti”.

Adolf Hitler, 20 febbraio 1933.

Scena prima.

Casa con luci basse. Un bambino piange. Il campanello della porta suona due volte. Luci. Il salotto di Clifton. Un divano, una sedia, un tavolino con sopra tazze sporche, bicchieri, una bottiglia di whisky, un telefono. Lettere, documenti, giornali e giocattoli sul pavimento. Clifton ha acceso la luce. È in vestaglia. Va a rispondere alla porta. Il pianto del bambino va spegnendosi. Fuori dalla porta c'è Crosby, intirizzito per il freddo.

Crosby: Buona sera.

Clifton: *(sorpreso)* Buona sera.

Crosby: Mi chiedevo se potevamo parlare un attimo.

Clifton: È piuttosto tardi.

Crosby: È piuttosto urgente.

Beve pausa.

Clifton: Entri.

Clifton *fa entrare Crosby e chiude la porta.*

Crosby: Mi dispiace per l'ora.

Clifton: Eravamo in piedi comunque. La bambina.

Pausa.

Qualcosa da bere? Temo ci sia solo whisky.

Crosby: Ottimo.

Clifton: Ottimo. (*Versa due whisky e ne dà uno a Crosby. Pausa.*) Che giornata schifosa è stata.

Crosby: Sono spiacente. Questa è una situazione sociale sulla quale Emily Post²⁵¹ purtroppo non dice niente. Il corretto comportamento da tenere per un cocktail col nemico di classe all'una di notte.

Clifton: (*sorride, si siede*) Cosa vuole?

Crosby: Voglio collaborare.

Entra Sandy in camicia da notte.

Sandy: Buona sera

Crosby: Buona sera.

Clifton: Ruth sta bene?

Sandy: Tutto a posto. Aveva fame. Scusate, se non è sconveniente chiedere...

Clifton: (*si alza*) Scusate. Peter Crosby, candidato conservatore. Mia moglie.

Sandy: Ho un nome, Bob. Ed essere tua moglie non è la sintesi totale della mia esistenza.

Clifton: Scusa. Sandy. Che lavora per il Progetto della Comunità di Thawston; mia moglie nel tempo libero.

Sandy: (*si siede*) Grazie. Buonasera.

Crosby: Sono lieto di conoscerla.

Pausa. Sandy fa segno a Crosby di sedersi, e lui si siede. Pausa.

Sandy: Bene, che privilegio. Essere testimone di un incontro trasversale. Quelli che, in termini parlamentari vengono definiti "i consueti canali". Giusto?

Crosby: (*sorride*) Giusto.

Clifton: (*si siede*) Ok, allora. Che cosa vuole?

Crosby: Dunque.

Breve pausa.

Lo sa che domani gli asiatici resteranno fuori dalla Baron?

Clifton: Sì. Lo so.

²⁵¹ Emily Post (1872-1960) scrittrice americana, autrice di libri sul comportamento da tenere nelle più diverse occasioni sociali.

Crosby: E che i bianchi cercheranno di sfondare i picchetti?

Clifton: So anche quello...

Pausa.

Crosby: Guarda, Bob. Sarò chiaro. Come sai, entrambi i partiti hanno cercato tradizionalmente, come dire, di tenere la razza fuori dalla politica. Formare una specie di... fronte comune contro il tipo di demagogia che Nation Forward sta usando alla Baron. Allora, ho solo pensato che, potrebbe essere interesse di entrambi. Per cercare di salvare... Beh. Lo sai.

Breve pausa.

È tutto.

Clifton: Vuoi che sia sconfessato.

Crosby: Esatto.

Clifton: Uhm.

Crosby: Allora?

Clifton: Allora. Il fronte comune. Sulla razza. Il vostro atto del '62. Poi il nostro, un po' più estremo, l'ordine del giorno sugli asiatici del Kenya, che restringeva gli ingressi puramente sulla base del colore. Così, per non farsi superare, l'asticella si è ancora alzata, ed è toccato a voi nel '71, fuori la Razza dalla politica, fuori i neri dalla Gran Bretagna.

Crosby: Beh, sì, ma...

Clifton: Ma c'è gente che non ci sta a questa partita a poker, che vuole tenere la schiena dritta. Io sono uno di quelli. E infatti ho ricevuto un sacco di posta sull'argomento. (*raccoglie un po' di lettere e le agita.*) E non solo comuni cittadini. Anche militanti che dicono che non collaboreranno più. Per cui, quando parla di reciproci benefici, non posso che citare il fatto che io ho già preso posizione. Tirarmi indietro adesso non mi aiuterebbe una virgola. Mentre, d'altra parte, per lei...

Crosby: Beh, mi dispiace, credevo che avrebbe assunto un atteggiamento più moderato...

Clifton: Oh, per...

Clifton: (*si alza*) Va bene.

Breve pausa

Ha sentito del comizio di Nation Forward? Quello che hanno detto?

Clifton: Ho sentito.

Crosby: E quello che hanno fatto? Ai contestatori?

Clifton: So anche quello.

Pausa.

Crosby: Allora va bene. Buona notte.

Clifton: Ci vediamo giovedì.

Crosby: Sì. (*Mette giù il bicchiere vuoto*) Grazie per lo scotch.

Clifton: Di niente.

Crosby esce.

Sandy: Poveretto.

Clifton: Perché?

Sandy: Carità cristiana. Sta per perdere il seggio di suo zio.

Clifton: (*si alza*) Non ci scommetterei. Al momento, la gara è per vedere a chi Nation Forward toglie più voti.

Sandy: Naturalmente hai ragione.

Clifton: A volte mi chiedo a che scopo...

Sandy: Quando?

Clifton: (*versandosi un altro whisky*) Quando vado porta a porta, confrontandomi con la massa degli Uomini Qualunque²⁵² delle West Midland. (*parodiando l'accento*) "Eh, signor Clifton, siamo con lei per il controllo delle importazioni, mi sembra giusto, ma il problema sono i moretti, non è vero? Voglio dire, sappiamo che vivono in venti una stanza e si moltiplicano come mosche e non usano carta igienica..."

Sandy: Chiudi il becco, Bob.

Clifton: Perché?

Sandy: Perché mi stai facendo arrabbiare.

Clifton: Perché?

Sandy: Perché non hai nessun diritto di trattare con superiorità persone di cui non sai niente.

Pausa.

²⁵² Nel testo "Alf Garnetts". Alf Garnett è stato il personaggio principale di una commedia televisiva a puntate intitolata *Till Death Us Do Part*, andata in onda dal 1965 al 1975. Mediocre, meschino e xenofobo, è diventato la personificazione dei difetti dell'inglese medio di quegli anni.

Clifton: Dai, amore, è solo che ho appena visto Peter Crosby...

Sandy: È solo che un po' mi stufo dei tuoi pregiudizi su persone che incontri per due minuti sulla porta di casa, una volta ogni morte di papa. Perché, al contrario di te, io lavoro davvero sul campo e incontro gente comune tutto il tempo.

Clifton: Meglio per te.

Sandy: Lavoratori.

Clifton: Meglio ancora.

Sandy: E se credi che non ci siano problemi veri a integrare un gran numero di persone di cultura completamente diversa, hai bisogno di farti vedere da uno psichiatra.

Breve pausa.

Clifton: Oh, certo, giusto. E allora... Questa settimana controllo, la prossima chiediamo il blocco, e quella dopo mandiamoli a casa...

Sandy: Mi irriti sul serio a volte, Bob.

Clifton: Amore, siamo stanchi tutti e due...

Sandy: Io non sono stanca.

Pausa

Clifton: A cosa devo...

Sandy: (*arrabbiata adesso*) Guarda Bob. Tu fai le tue grandi dichiarazioni del cazzo su immigrazione senza limiti e razzismo istituzionale. Tu puoi permettertelo.

Clifton: No, ed è proprio quello...

Sandy: Tu puoi permettertelo. Ma basta che fai due passi, lasci la macchina per una volta e fai due passi in giro per West Thawston. Ogni tanto potresti perfino fermarti e ascoltare quello che dice la gente. Capisci cosa intendo, ascoltare? Allora potresti capire.

Clifton: Lo so...

Sandy: Tu non sai niente, per questo te lo dico. Una vedova che visito. L'unica faccia bianca della via. Niente più negozi inglesi. Non può comprare un giornale inglese. Il macellaio se n'è andato. I ragazzini le rompono le finestre. Certo, naturalmente, dirai che lo fanno tutti i ragazzini, ma quando la via era tutta bianca non succedeva, Bob. Allora le dico che è razzista?

Clifton: No...

Sandy: Un vecchio. Sui sessanta. Un delegato sindacale che ha rifiutato di accettare il taglio dei premi. Cos'è successo? Licenziato, il suo lavoro è andato a un pakistano. È un fascista?

Clifton: Sai già la risposta. Danno la colpa alla gente sbagliata.

Sandy: A chi dovrebbero dare la colpa? A loro stessi?

Clifton: *(spiegando tanto a sé stesso quanto a lei)* Lo sai benissimo. Che c'erano case malsane ben prima che arrivassero loro. Che le case peggiori sono a Glasgow, e lì praticamente non ci sono neri. Che gli anni dell'immigrazione sono stati gli anni della piena occupazione. Che i responsabili della disoccupazione e delle case malsane sono i padroni e gli squali immobiliari, e molto pochi di loro sono neri. Lo sai. E allora perché...

Sandy: Oh, grande. Reazione pavloviana. È il sistema. E io allora cosa faccio? Li porto su un cazzo di barricate?

Clifton: Dunque...

Rumore di vetri infranti fuori scena.

Sandy: Cos'è stato?

Suona il telefono.

Clifton: Rispondi tu.

Clifton esce. Sandy tira su il telefono.

Sandy: Pronto? Paul. Cosa? No, sta... Va bene, glielo dico io.

Mette giù il telefono, sta per uscire, incontra Clifton che rientra con in mano un pezzo di carta. Lui la ferma.

Clifton: Ho controllato. Ruth è a posto. È stato un mattone tirato nella finestra. E c'è dell'altra roba... sul tappeto.

Sandy: Roba?

Clifton: Escrementi. Merda. Umana.

Sandy: Oh Cristo.

Clifton: *(le da il biglietto)* E questo.

Sandy: *(legge)* "Bada ala tua squaldrinella figlia di troia Clifton le notti scure stanno arrivando".

Clifton: "Alla" con una l sola.

Sandy: Ma su "squaldrinella" se la sono cavata bene.

Clifton: Chi era al telefono?

Sandy: Paul. Ha sentito che Nation Forward sarà alla Baron la mattina presto. Per sfondare i picchetti.

Pausa

Clifton: Proprio quello che ci serviva adesso. *(Si siede)* Un'altra presa di posizione intransigente. E buongiorno Peter Crosby, Membro del Parlamento.

Sandy: *(Si inginocchia vicino a Clifton e gli prende la mano, con molta gentilezza)* Bob. Una volta... forse te lo ricordi, hai detto, a proposito del Partito, perché sei lì dentro.

Clifton: Ehm?

Sandy: Hai detto che, malgrado... tutti quelli di destra, tutte le svendite, hai detto che almeno, almeno c'era una possibilità di cambiare le cose. Di cambiare veramente le cose. Avresti potuto aderire a qualche piccola, marginale rivoluzione da quattro gatti, mantenere pure le tue idee, hai detto, ma al prezzo di non essere mai di nessuna utilità per nessuno. Volevi renderti utile, hai detto, con tutti i compromessi, le ritirate, lo scherno che implicava.

Clifton guarda Sandy.

E sono rimasta colpita, perché mi è sembrato molto coraggioso.

Clifton sorride a Sandy.

Andiamo a letto.

Clifton: Ok.

Clifton si alza e va. Sandy fa per andare, si gira, guarda intorno alla stanza, e spegne la luce.

Scena seconda

Luci fioche. Esterno della fonderia. Vicino ai cancelli Khera, Patel, Paul, forse altri ancora, che formano il picchetto. Cartelli: NON SUPERATE I PICCHETTI, LA NOSTRA LOTTA È LA VOSTRA LOTTA, NO AI CRUMIRI

Qualche momento, poi:

Khera: *(verso il pubblico)* Sono le sette. Mattina d'inverno, picchetto. Per molti di noi, il primo. Anche solo essere riusciti a farlo è una sorpresa.

Entrano Platt e un Ispettore di Polizia, se possibile anche con altri poliziotti su un lato della scena. Khera li guarda.

E adesso ci siamo.

Si unisce al picchetto.

Patel: *(a Paul)* Polizia, con Platt.

Paul: Puoi scommetterci.

Patel *si avvicina a Khera e gli parla.*

Platt: Saranno subito qui.

Ispettore: Sì.

Platt: La vostra tattica?

Ispettore: Tenerci fuori. Finché si limitano a un pacifico dare o chiedere informazioni, a un pacifico convincimento se lavorare o no.

Platt: La legge è così?

Ispettore: È così. Conosco i loro diritti.

Khera: *(a Paul)* Cosa dicono?

Paul: Non riesco a sentire.

Platt: *(indicando Patel)* Vede quello? Quello giovane? È il tipo che ho segnalato.

Ispettore: Sì?

Platt: Con un passato interessante.

Entrano Cleaver e Liz dal lato opposto della scena.

Khera: Nation Forward?

Patel: Credo di sì.

Patel *dice qualcosa a Paul che annuisce.*

Ispettore: E questi chi sono?

Platt: Non so. Saranno passanti.

Ispettore: Alle sette e mezza della mattina?

Platt: È possibile.

Entrano Turner e Tony con bandiere britanniche.

Ispettore: Con le bandiere?

Platt: Mi sbagliavo. Quello è Turner. Nation Forward.

Ispettore: Ah è così.

Paul: *(a Patel)* Quello è Turner.

Patel: Sì.

Khera: E adesso?

Patel: Aspetta.

Entra Attwood al centro della scena.

Platt: Non fate niente?

Ispettore: Come ho detto, aspettiamo un reato.

Pausa. Poi Attwood guarda l'orologio.

Attwood: Bene. Sette e mezza. Ora di andare al lavoro. (*Va verso il picchetto*)
Oh, guarda cosa c'è qui. (*Quelli di Nation Forward si avvicinano ai picchetti*)

Un picchetto illegale.

Il picchetto serra le fila.

Che mi sbarra la strada al lavoro.

Pausa.

Per favore lasciatemi passare. (*All'improvviso, afferrando Khera*) Dai, Harry Krishna. Levati dai piedi.

L'azione si blocca.

Khera: E l'ho quasi fatto. Quando ha detto spostati l'ho quasi fatto, come un riflesso condizionato, di spostarmi per farlo passare. Ma poi...

Patel: (*a Attwood*) Bastardo crumiro.

Khera: E poi ancora...

Patel: (*spingendo Attwood*) Bastardo crumiro venduto.

Attwood: Tieni giù le tue luride mani, sporco negro di merda.

Patel: (*afferra Attwood per la gola*) Il nome. Il nome è Prakash Patel. E noi non ci muoviamo, fratello.

L'azione si sblocca.

Platt: (*in fretta, avvicinandosi a grandi passi ai picchetti*) Dai, ragazzi, perché non lo lasciate entrare...

Patel (*a Attwood, riferendosi a Platt*): Guarda adesso, guarda. Guarda come sorride.

Si sente un fischiotto. Nation Forward carica i picchetti. Buio. All'improvviso, un riflettore su Kershaw su un lato della scena.

Kershaw: Spiacevole. Ma ne abbiamo fatti entrare dieci. Impensabile usare questa gente, ma impossibile non farlo. Esclusa ogni altra opzione. Imbarazzante, ma

anche necessario. Meglio farsela col macellaio, sporcare le lenzuola, piuttosto che morire con le mani pulite.

Buio.

Scena terza

*Una stazione di polizia. La maggior parte della scena è un corridoio, illuminato. **Paul** è seduto su una panca e legge un giornale spiegazzato. A un lato, un'area che rappresenta una stanza da interrogatorio. Un sospetto è seduto a un tavolo in quest'area, guardando verso il fondo della scena. L'**Ispettore** entra con **Tony**.*

Ispettore: Là.

Tony alza le spalle e si siede sulla panca. Esce l'**Ispettore**. **Paul** mette giù il giornale e riconosce **Tony**.

Paul: Tony.

Tony: (si gira e riconosce **Paul**) Paul.

Pausa. Si rendono conto della situazione. Ridono entrambi.

Entrambi: Ma guarda chi si vede.

Tony: Nei posti più strani.

Pausa. Ridono di nuovo.

Paul: Allora. Come stai?

Tony: Bene. E tu?

Paul: Benissimo, anch'io.

Tony: Bene.

Paul: Cioè, a parte l'essere bloccato qui.

Tony: Sì. Chiaro.

Pausa

Paul: (in tono scherzosamente confidenziale) Guarda, amico, non voglio sembrare indiscreto ma, ehm... che cosa ci fai qui?

Tony: Mi hanno arrestato.

Paul: Idem.

Tony: E aspetto di conoscere l'accusa.

Paul: Idem con patate.

Breve pausa

Eh...

Tony: Un po' di casino, giù alle Fonderie Castings.

Breve pausa.

Paul: Sì?

Tony: Lo sai, c'è questa vertenza...

Paul: Sì, certo, ma... eri nei picchetti?

Tony: Naturalmente non ero in quel cazzo di picchetto.

Breve pausa.

Noi eravamo lì per sfondare quel cazzo di picchetto.

Paul: Noi?

Tony: Sì, noi. Nation Forward.

Pausa.

Paul: Io ero nei picchetti.

Pausa. Tony ride.

Tony: Perdio.

Paul: Cosa c'è di divertente?

Tony: Perdio. Paul McShane. Il grande combattente per la classe lavoratrice. Fianco a fianco con una banda di negri per tagliare le paghe al fratello...

Paul: Tony, questo è un sacco...

Tony: (*arrabbiato*) Perché la gente non capisce. Non l'abbiamo chiesto noi.

Paul: Cosa?

Tony: Che i pakistani ci prendessero le case e il lavoro. Trasformando questa terra verde e amena in un ghetto asiatico. Non abbiamo...

Paul: Verde e amena? Sì. Proprio come qui intorno. Con tutti questi begli alberi dal fogliame lussureggiante. Sai, avevano un poster durante la guerra: "Questa è la vostra Inghilterra. Combattetevi per lei". L'immagine di un villaggio di campagna. Cottage coi tetti di paglia. Quanti soldati inglesi sono morti senza avere mai visto un cottage di campagna? Con o senza tetto di paglia?

Tony: Sono morti, se vuoi saperlo, Paul, perché alcuni stanno dalla parte della propria gente.

Paul ride.

Paul: Per l'amor di dio, Tony, ma con chi hai parlato?

Tony: Non c'è bisogno di parlare. Lo so. Ogni uomo bianco lo sa. Nel sangue.

Paul: Il sangue?

Tony: Lo spirito della razza.

Pausa.

Paul: Dio mio! (*si alza e grida*) Ehi, sergente! Lo sapeva che qui ha un rappresentante della maledetta Razza Superiore? Non può trattenerlo per aver provocato una rissa!

Pausa. Paul si gira verso Tony per vedere le sue reazioni.

Tony: (*Calmo e tranquillo*) Proprio non lo conosci, davvero?

Paul: Cosa?

Tony: Il tuo vero nemico

Paul: In realtà, sono dell'opinione sorpassata che il nemico dei lavoratori siano ...

Tony: Oh, certo, i padroni. Quali?

Paul: Allora? Dimmelo tu?

Tony: Usa il naso, Paul. Ce l'hai. La senti questa puzza di straniero, o no?

Paul: Oh, sì, certo che lo sento. Il puzzo schifoso di tutti quegli speculatori neri. Di quegli agenti di Borsa pakistani. Di quei direttori generali giamaicani.

Tony: Non loro, Paul.

Paul: No, non loro. La Classe Dominante.

Tony: No, Paul. La Razza Dominante.

Pausa.

Paul: Tutta la storia è lotta di classi.

Tony: Tutta la storia è lotta di razze.

Pausa.

Paul: I lavoratori di tutte le razze devono unirsi.

Tony: I lavoratori di tutte le classi devono unirsi.

Pausa.

Paul: A conti fatti, la scelta è fra socialismo e barbarie.

Tony: A conti fatti, è Sionismo, dittatura mondiale, oppure noi.

Breve pausa. Tony si alza.

E quando avremo vinto, ci saremo liberati di loro, non ci sarà più necessità di scontro. Guerra di classe. Scioperi e tutto. Allora capitale e lavoro agiranno insieme, nell'interesse della nazione. Con la Gran Bretagna al primo posto. La nazione sopra tutto.

Pausa.

Certo, puoi ridere. Della razza e del sangue. Ma tutto quello che hai, Paul, viene da quello. Tutto ciò che è sano, degno, tutto ciò che ha un senso, un valore, viene dal sangue. Perché il seme non muore, quello che siamo non muore. Si trasmette. Trasmesso di generazione in generazione, dalle legioni dei morti alle legioni dei vivi, le legioni del futuro.

Paul: Tony, l'ultima volta che hanno detto questo, è andata a finire che mettevano la gente dentro...

Tony: (*con semplicità*) No, no, Paul. Non è mai accaduto. Auschwitz e tutto. Solo fabbriche. L'olocausto, solo foto truccate. Un'invenzione degli ebrei.

Paul guarda **Tony**.

Paul: Sei un Nazi.

Tony: Sì. È vero.

All'improvviso Paul, rivolto al pubblico.

Paul: E, capite, era come guardare in uno specchio, guardare lui, il mio vecchio compare, Tony. Tutto giusto, uguale, identico. Solo una cosa sbagliata. Destra e sinistra. Classe e razza. Diversi quanto più possibile. Opposti. Maledettamente rovesciati...

Le luci si spostano su l'Ispettore e il Sospetto. Ora vediamo che il Sospetto è Patel. L'Ispettore ha in mano un passaporto indiano.

Ispettore: Bene, signor Patel. Ripassiamo per l'ultima volta. Quando afferma di essere entrato?

Buio.

Scena quarta

Luci in un ristorante pakistano. Un paio di tavoli. Clifton e Sandy sono seduti e mangiano. Paul e Khera sono appena entrati e sono in piedi.

Paul: Hanno arrestato Prakash Patel.

Clifton: Cosa?

Paul: E stanno pensando di mettermi dentro per aggressione.

Breve pausa.

Clifton: Sedetevi.

Paul e Khera si siedono.

Paul: Guarda, Bob, se chiami adesso i giornali, potresti far pubblicare una dichiarazione domani, chiedendo il suo rilascio...

Clifton: Patel è dentro per aggressione?

Paul (*Spazientito*): No, è...

Clifton: Mi sembrava che avessi detto...

Khera: Immigrazione clandestina. Per la legge del '72. Più facile che mettere in prigione gli scioperanti. Basta rimandarli in India in aereo.

Sandy: Ma c'è stata un'amnistia.

Khera: Non lo riguarda. È rimasto oltre la durata del permesso di soggiorno, è venuto come studente e semplicemente non è andato di ritorno.

Clifton: Povero diavolo.

Paul: Per cui, vedi, Bob, sarebbe grande se, il giorno prima delle elezioni...

Clifton: Dov'è?

Paul: Alla stazione di polizia.

Clifton: E hanno scoperto...

Paul: Platt. Deve essere stato per forza lui. Il bastardo sapeva, e lo ha venduto.

Clifton: (*evasivo*) Sì.

Breve pausa.

Paul: Allora?

Clifton: (*pragmatico*) Giusto. Allora, ha il permesso scaduto, no?

Paul: Beh, così dicono.

Clifton: Ma è vero o no?

Paul: Beh, credo di sì.

Clifton: Per cui, in effetti, ha infranto la legge.

Pausa.

Paul: Beh, sì.

Clifton: E questo rende il tutto alquanto complicato.

Paul: Perché?

Sandy: Perché, se ha infranto la legge, è ovvio che Bob non può chiedere il suo rilascio.

Paul: Perché?

Sandy: È ovvio.

Pausa.

Paul: (*a Clifton*) Ma è quello che hai continuato a dire. Opporsi alla Legge sull'Immigrazione.

Sandy: Non è quello che gli stai chiedendo di fare.

Paul: Sì, è quello. C'è qui un esempio, un tipo...

Sandy: Bob chiede che la legge sia cambiata, non infranta.

Pausa

Paul: (*a Clifton*) Beh, di' qualcosa.

Clifton: Cosa vuoi che dica?

Paul: Beh, per dirla tutta, che la tua dolce metà sta dicendo delle sciocchezze.

Clifton: Non è vero.

Paul: Ah, capisco.

Clifton: No, non capisci. E allora ti spiego.

Paul: Sono tutto orecchie.

Breve pausa. La voce di Clifton si incrina.

Clifton: Allora, mi presento alle elezioni come legislatore, giusto? Quella è la definizione del lavoro. E sto per fare quello, posso fare solo quello se credo che sia giusto fare le leggi, OK? E che è possibile cambiare la società facendole.

Paul: Ma...

Clifton: Allora, se questo significa qualcosa, posso dire che una volta fatte, le leggi, non dovremmo osservarle?

Paul: E allora io? Aggressione, a dei fascisti.

Sandy: Paul, la legge non può fare a meno di proteggere un tipo solo perché tu pensi che sia un fascista.

Pausa.

Clifton: È semplicemente una questione di rispetto della legge.

Sandy: Bisogna che tu riesca a vedere il problema, Paul.

Paul: Lo vedo. Gli sto parlando. È seduto lì e si sta ingozzando di byriani di pollo.

Pausa.

Clifton: La legge è un'auto. Va in qualsiasi direzione la si guidi.

Paul: E allora come mai, chiunque sia alla guida, va sempre in una sola direzione?

Pausa

Khera: Vi racconto una storia, sul rispetto della legge. In Amritsar, nel 1919. Un generale di brigata, Dyer, ordinò alla sua truppa di aprire il fuoco su una folla di dimostranti indiani disarmati. Quasi 400 morti. Ci volle un po' di tempo perché i fatti venissero fuori. Poi, naturalmente, Dyer fu messo sotto inchiesta. Stretta legalità. Censurato. Costretto alle dimissioni.

Sandy: (*piano*) 1919.

Khera: Quel massacro. Difesa del dominio britannico sull'India.

Sandy: (*piano*) Che è finito trent'anni fa.

Khera: Ah, certo, naturalmente. Scusate.

Breve pausa. Mentre parla, con calma, Khera non guarda nessuno in particolare, forse solo giocherella con il portacenere sul tavolo.

Vengo da Jullundur nel Punjab. Educazione Sikh. Bambini abituati a essere tranquilli, obbedienti, rispettosi. E così, in Inghilterra, il paese della tolleranza e del decoro, e ho fatto fatica a capire. Ma l'anno scorso sono andato a casa in vacanza, in India. Ho visto, con uno sguardo nuovo, quello che gli inglesi avevano fatto. E allora ho capito. C'è più capitale britannico in India adesso che trent'anni fa.

Scorre abbastanza in profondità. Perfino i britannici bianchi poveri pensano che anche loro, non solo i loro padroni, siano nati per comandare. E noi, i neri, gli irlandesi, tutti noi, una razza inferiore, senza il Governo della Legge.

Ma questo è un problema vostro.

Si alza. Rivolto a Sandy.

Mi perdonerete. Sono di servizio ai picchetti. Alle 7 della mattina. (*se ne va.*)

Lunga pausa.

Paul: Certo, questo ti mette ...

Clifton: Hai letto Crosby nell'Evening Post? Ha espresso il timore che alcuni dei suoi commenti potessero essere male interpretati. Ha chiarito di essere

assolutamente contrario all'arrivo di altri immigranti di colore. Ha notato segni di disagio sociale.

Paul: Beh, da domani ce ne sarà uno di meno, non è vero?

Breve pausa.

Sì, l'ho letto.

Clifton: *(passa un biglietto a Paul)* Questo certo non l'hai visto. È arrivato attraverso la finestra l'altra notte. Accompagnato da un mattone e da un bel mucchietto di escrementi.

Paul legge il biglietto.

Paul: E allora ti arrendi? Per questo qui? Vedi cosa sono capaci di fare questi bastardi, e ti arrendi?

Sandy: Ruth ha otto mesi, Paul.

Paul: Ah, sì. E la legge le darà certo ogni protezione.

Clifton: *(perde la calma)* Lo sai, Paul, a volte la tua arroganza raggiunge vette di furore messianico che trovo veramente agghiaccianti.

Paul: Ah, sì?

Clifton: Ed è sorprendente. Perché quello che fai non è molto difficile. È piuttosto facile, confortevole, la tua rabbia, piuttosto comoda nella sua ferrea intransigenza. Perché tu pensi in termini assoluti, di dogmi, non devi affrontare le vere battaglie, le vere lotte sporche, tu ti mantieni pulito. E se le tue... sterili costruzioni arrivano mai a toccare il mondo reale e le sue malattie, sono protette da bozzoli di plastica, strofinate mille volte perché si mantengano pure.

Pausa.

Paul: *(piano, con gentilezza, un vero bisogno di spiegarsi)* Sapete, c'è un buffo momento, in cui capisci, vedi chi sono i tuoi veri amici. A me è successo a una riunione degli scioperanti della Baron. Oh, sì, certo, tutto pugni chiusi e fervore maoista artificiale.

Ma, in mezzo a tutto quello, della gente che imparava. Che parlava per la prima volta, di come si poteva fare, cercando delle soluzioni, in modo lento, tortuoso, piuttosto frustrante stare lì seduti ad ascoltare, capisci, per noi vecchi professionisti.

Ma si ascoltava della gente che cresceva. Si imparava che era possibile per loro creare il proprio futuro. Un po' come succede la mattina. Il sole si alza così piano che non si vede che cambia. Ma diventa sempre più chiaro. Pensateci.

Colpa loro. Indietro non si torna. Il bisogno di essere padroni di noi stessi. Di cambiare il mondo reale.

Si alza.

Ciao.

Paul esce.

Sandy: Ben fatto.

Clifton: Uhm. In due giorni lo sapremo. Cosa guadagna un uomo a perdere l'anima del suo partito.

Sandy: Non l'hai persa.

Clifton: Beh, non avevo molta scelta.

Sandy: Ce l'avevi.

Clifton: Sì, comunque.

Breve pausa.

Sarà meglio che io vinca.

Buio.

Scena quinta

*Nel buio sentiamo da un altoparlante la voce della **Sindaca** di Taddley.*

Voce della Sindaca: Io sottoscritta, Ufficiale elettorale per il collegio elettorale di Taddley, comunico qui che il numero di voti ottenuto da ogni candidato è il seguente:

*Luci. Risultati elettorali. In piedi da sinistra a destra: **Cleaver, Tony, Turner, Platt, Emma, Crosby, Sindaca, Wilcox, Clifton, Sandy, Paul e Khera.** I primi tre e gli ultimi due un po' staccati. **Emma** è la moglie di **Crosby**, **Wilcox** è una Liberale. Mentre la **Sindaca** annuncia i risultati, **Platt** e **Sandy** annotano le cifre. Una **Voce** identifica i candidati.*

Sindaca: Clifton, Robert John...

Voce: Laburista.

Sindaca: Diecimila novantasei.

*Applausi sparsi. **Clifton** sembra preoccupato, i Tory compiaciuti.*

Crosby, Peter Sanderson.

Voce: Conservatore.

Sindaca: Undicimila ...

*Grande applauso. **Crosby** è incredulo. **Emma** lo bacia. **Clifton** gli stringe la mano. La **Sindaca** riprende da capo.*

Undicimila ottocento trentadue; Turner Dennis... Turner Dennis...

L'applauso si spegne.

Turner, Dennis Stephen...

Voce: Nation Forward.

Un coro improvviso "Nation Forward Partito Nazista". Si spegne.

Sindaca: Seimila novecento novantatre.

*Applauso. Fischi. Quelli di **Nation Forward** hanno l'aria molto soddisfatta.*

Wilcox, Diana ...

Voce: Liberale

Sindaca: Mille e cinquantadue.

*Un breve applauso. **Sandy** dà il biglietto a **Clifton** e lo bacia. **Crosby**, **Platt** e **Emma** parlano fra loro.*

E che la persona di seguito menzionata è stata eletta al Parlamento per questo collegio: Peter Sanderson Crosby.

*La **Sindaca** si gira verso **Crosby** e gli stringe la mano. **Crosby** prende il microfono mentre **Clifton** parla a **Platt**.*

Clifton: Bel lavoro, Jim. Credo che si possa concludere che vi hanno fatto vincere le elezioni.

Platt: Solo se hanno tolto più a voi che a noi. E quello come si fa a saperlo.

Crosby: (nel microfono) Ehm...

*Buio improvviso. Molto breve. Luci. Le persone al centro, e il microfono, non ci sono più. Quelli rimasti (**Tony**, **Cleaver** e **Turner** da una parte, **Paul** e **Khera** dall'altra) stanno ancora guardando il punto dove c'era **Crosby**. Poi, mentre le luci si abbassano fino a un debole effetto notte, entrambi i gruppi si accorgono della presenza degli altri. Guardano attraverso lo spazio vuoto. Tesi. Nervosi. Poi entra **Attwood** dalla parte di **Paul** e **Khera** chiudendo loro la via di fuga. **Paul** e **Khera** si spostano al centro. Pausa. Poi **Cleaver** tocca **Turner** sulla spalla e fa per andare via. **Turner** non si muove. **Cleaver** gli fa cenno di seguirlo. **Turner** segue **Cleaver** fuori dalla scena.*

Tony: Bene, eccoci qua.

Paul: (a **Khera**, fa per andare) Muoviti.

Tony: Ciao, Paul.

Paul: (a **Khera**) Dai, muoviti.

Tony: E saluti anche alla scimmietta di compagnia di Paul.

Breve pausa.

Khera: (a **Paul**) No.

Tony: Ok.

Tony attacca **Khera**, **Paul** cerca di proteggerlo, **Attwood** attacca **Paul**. Prima di arrivare a contatto con **Tony**, **Paul** si accorge della presenza di **Attwood**, si gira e lo colpisce con una ginocchiata, mentre **Tony** atterra **Khera** con un pugno. **Attwood** si piega in due, **Tony** sta per colpire **Khera** con un calcio quando sente due clic. **Tony** si gira, pensando che venissero da dietro di lui.

Tony: Che...

Rapidamente, **Khera** fa scivolare sul pavimento verso **Paul** uno dei due coltelli a scatto che ha in mano. **Tony** e **Attwood** capiscono. **Paul** raccoglie il coltello e cerca di colpire con un fendente **Attwood** che riesce a schivare il colpo e corre via. **Tony** cerca di pestare la mano a **Khera** ma fallisce. **Khera** si alza e ferisce in faccia **Tony** col coltello. **Tony** si gira per scappare e si trova davanti **Paul**. Si ferma. Il sangue comincia a colargli sulla faccia. Adesso **Tony** ha l'aria molto, molto spaventata.

Khera: Bene. Adesso dimmi. Per chi credi di fare tutto questo?

Buio.

Scena sesta

Luci in una sala di rappresentanza di una banca d'affari di Londra. Sedie in pelle. Sul muro un grande quadro scuro raffigurante la repressione della Rivolta Indiana del 1857. Cleaver è seduto. Turner è in piedi e guarda il quadro. Un momento o due. Poi Cleaver si guarda l'orologio. Turner tocca il quadro come per apprezzarne la superficie. Poi si gira verso Cleaver.

Cleaver: Aveva detto che avrebbe potuto essere in ritardo. Una riunione... le conseguenze del Marco tedesco, che sale o che scende.

Turner: Ah, sì?

Cleaver: Sì.

Turner si gira verso il quadro. **Cleaver** si alza e si avvicina a **Turner**.

Turner: Ero lì, lo sai?

Cleaver: (sorridente) Nel 1857?

Turner: No, dal 1945. A Calcutta i bastardi ci hanno preso a sassate. Molti ragazzi, soldati, si sono rifiutati di sparare. La vedevano come una sorta di... vendetta giustificata. (*Fa un cenno col capo verso il quadro*) Per questo, e tutto il resto.

Cleaver: Complesso di colpa. Masochismo liberale. Cosa dobbiamo fare per...

Turner: Eh, certo. Fa vomitare.

Breve pausa.

Pensi che...

Entrano Kershaw, Rolfe e Carol, la segretaria di Rolfe.

Kershaw: Richard, mi spiace...

Cleaver: Non importa.

Kershaw: Richard, questo è Lewis Rolfe.

Rolfe e Cleaver *si stringono la mano.*

Cleaver: Piacere.

Rolfe: Come va?

Kershaw: E Dennis Turner. Credo che vi siate già incontrati.

Rolfe: (*a Turner, stringendogli la mano*) Certo. È passato molto tempo. Congratulazioni Dennis.

Turner: Grazie, signore.

Rolfe: (*sorride*) Non c'è bisogno.

Kershaw: Bene. 23 per cento. Sarete contenti.

Turner: Beh, niente di speciale, ma è un inizio.

Cleaver: Una somma depositata è una somma guadagnata.

Tutti sorridono.

Rolfe: Carol, si potrebbe avere uno sherry?

Carol: Sì, certo. (*esce*)

Rolfe: Prego, sedetevi.

Si siedono tutti tranne Rolfe.

Kershaw: (*a Turner*) Immagino che Richard ti abbia messo al corrente.

Turner. Sì.

Breve pausa.

Kershaw: Beh, allora?

Cleaver: Dobbiamo conoscere i vostri motivi.

Kershaw: Sì, certo.

Entra Carol con un vassoio di bicchieri di sherry che passa in giro, e poi esce.

Rolfe: Bene, signori. In risposta alla vostra domanda.

Breve pausa.

Siamo minacciati. La Gran Bretagna e la sua industria. Che sono indivisibili. Un colpo all'una è un colpo all'altra. Affrontiamo una minaccia comune, un nemico comune. Abbiamo un'esigenza in comune.

Una colla. Per tenere unita la nazione. Per rendere, sì, le sue imprese sicure. Per unire il minatore di Durham con l'agente di borsa del Surrey. Il manovale dell'East End col possidente scozzese. Una ideologia.

Sappiamo cosa ci è stato offerto. Il liberalismo. Da tutte le fonti. Una comunità di tolleranza, compassione, moderazione. Tolleranza per il crimine, permissivismo. Compassione per gli spostati di tutti i colori e di tutto il mondo. E moderazione, freni ai militari, basso profilo, anche di fronte a una insurrezione. Al punto che, dato che la cancrena è penetrata così in profondità... dobbiamo pensare a soluzioni estreme.

Voi offrite una soluzione estrema. Una vecchia idea. Non solo la nazione. La razza. Un'idea profondamente radicata nel cuore collettivo. Legare in fretta il barile con cerchi di acciaio.

Non pallida. Non debole. Non atrofizzata. Rossa, bianca e blu, denti e artigli. (*Con un mezzo sorriso*) Allora?

Cleaver: Naturalmente c'è anche dell'altro.

Kershaw: Combattere i rossi, ovunque si mostrino. Le scuole, le fabbriche.

Cleaver: Perché non la polizia?

Kershaw: La polizia non sa niente. Sono isolati. Voi ... i Rossi sono nelle vostre strade. Voi sapete.

Cleaver: L'esercito.

Rolfe: Può contenere, forse. Non distruggere.

Cleaver: Noi combattiamo anche il capitale internazionale.

Kershaw: Noi abbiamo anche bisogno di protezione.

Cleaver: Se volesse dire controllo?

Rolfe: Una mano lava l'altra.

Cleaver: Sacrifichereste l'iniziativa privata?

Kershaw: Sì, per salvare la proprietà privata.

Pausa.

Uno non va volentieri dal dentista.

Breve pausa.

Se non per salvare il dente.

Rolfe: Medici. L'esercito, la polizia. Capaci solo di tenere a bada il dolore. Voi... chirurghi. Usate la passione. Canalizzate il sangue caldo e lo mandate a scorrere in un'altra arteria.

Cleaver: Condizioni.

Kershaw: (*bruscamente*) Non si parla neanche di condizioni. Non si parla di un accordo.

Breve pausa.

Ma, visto che chiedete...

Breve pausa.

Una certa tendenza, fra i vostri, per così dire, ad andare un po' troppo a sinistra?

Cleaver: Ah, sì. Il nostro piccolo gruppo di Trozkisti della razza. Allora, Maxwell e la sua banda di bolscevichi non sono più con noi.

Kershaw: Capisco.

Cleaver: È nostra convinzione che la classe operaia non debba essere conquistata con slogan mutuati dal marxismo. Anzi, è nostra convinzione che non *possa* essere conquistata in questo modo.

Rolfe: Giusto.

Cleaver: Allora. Denaro?

Kershaw: No, non adesso. Assolutamente non adesso.

Cleaver: Questa... iniziativa, è solo personale?

Kershaw: Ah, sì. Solo personale. Non certo della United Vehicles. Non ora.

Rolfe: Non certo del Metropolitan Investment Trust. Non ora. Non ancora.

Turner *improvvisamente alza lo sguardo.*

Cleaver: Capisco. Naturalmente...

Turner: Che cosa ha detto?

Rolfe: Scusa?

Turner: Come ha detto che si chiama la sua azienda?

Rolfe: Metropolitan Investment Trust.

Kershaw: Possiamo continuare il discorso a pranzo?

Cleaver: *(Si alza)* Perché no?

Rolfe: Andiamo.

Fa segno al gruppo di uscire. Cleaver, Kershaw e Rolfe escono, lasciando Turner che, nella confusione generale, viene dimenticato. Uscendo, Rolfe a Cleaver in tono leggero.

Rolfe: Pensavo di provare un posto nuovo a Cornhill. Naturalmente se non vi dispiace che sia italiano...

Sono andati. Turner si avvicina e guarda il quadro. Entra Carol con un vassoio per raccogliere i bicchieri dello sherry.

Carol: Oh, scusi, pensavo foste tutti...

Turner: Sì, sono andati.

Carol: Lei non va a pranzo?

Turner: No.

Breve pausa.

Carol: Va bene.

Turner sta ancora guardando il quadro. Carol raccoglie i bicchieri dello sherry. Quando ha finito, si rivolge a Turner in tono leggero, riferendosi al quadro.

Carol: Spaventoso, non è vero?

Turner: È lui.

Carol: Scusi?

Turner: Non me n'ero reso conto. Il suo capo.

Carol: Il mio capo?

Turner: È lui il Metropolitan Investment Trust.

Carol: Non capisco proprio...

Turner: Quelli che mi hanno portato via i mezzi di sostentamento...

Breve pausa

Forse non si nota. Soffro di una enorme deficienza di avidità.

Breve pausa.

Ha ragione.

Carol: Come sarebbe ho ragione?

Turner: È spaventoso.

Entra Cleaver.

Cleaver: Dennis? Cosa succede? Non vieni?

Turner: No.

Carol: Ha detto che... gli hanno portato via...

Cleaver la ferma con un gesto. Lei alza le spalle ed esce. **Cleaver** si rivolge a **Turner**.

Cleaver: Dennis, capisco. So esattamente come mi sento. Mi sento anch'io come te.

Turner lo guarda.

Naturalmente è una delusione. Ci contavamo. La pentola d'oro.

Turner capisce **Cleaver**.

Ma, Dennis. Sul lungo periodo. Quando le loro preziose legge e ordine andranno in pezzi, le città bruceranno, il centro non ce la farà.

Breve pausa.

“Qualsiasi barriera incontreremo. Per quanto sia lungo il viaggio, difficile la strada”. Che cosa al mondo ci può fermare?

Una lunga pausa. Poi Turner a Cleaver.

Turner: Allora dimmelo. Dimmelo. Dimmelo.

All'improvviso le luci cambiano. Cleaver e Turner illuminati da dietro in controluce. Si sente una voce: gentile, tranquilla, insistente. È la voce di Adolf Hitler.

Adolf Hitler: Solo una cosa avrebbe potuto fermare il nostro movimento: se i nostri avversari avessero capito la sua natura, e avessero schiacciato il nucleo del nostro movimento con la massima brutalità.

Breve pausa.

Hitler, Norimberga, 3 settembre 1933.

Buio.

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Report by Robert Aldous on *What Happens Next* dated 19 September 1978; two handwritten pages on a printed form.

ACGB 1978 34/34/2/LAMEDE1

Note by Lamede with Drama Department letterhead, dated 20 October 1978; one handwritten page.

ACGB 34/34/2/LAMEDE2

Internal memo from Lamede to Faulkner; two typed pages on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/2/MEMO

Internal memo from Lamede to Faulkner, dated 19 October 1978; one typed page with handwritten annotations.

ACGB 34/34/2/JOB

Letter from Dalzel Job to Faulkner dated 8 July 1978; one typed page.

ACGB 1978 34/34/2/FAULKNER

Letter of reply by Faulkner to Dalzel Job dated 1 August 1978; one typed page.

ACGB 34/34/2/DEC1978

Letter from Roland Muldoon to the Drama Panel dated 28 December 1978; two typed pages with CAST's letterhead.

ACGB 34/34/2/NAPS

Minutes of a meeting of the New Applications and Projects Committee at the end of the 1978/79 financial year; two typed pages, undated.

ACGB 34/34/2/ROBINSON

Letter from Robinson to St John Stevas dated 12 October 1979; one typed page.

ACGB 34/34/2/BRYCE

Letter from Bryce to St John-Stevas dated 26 May 1980; one typed page with Grand Orange Lodge of Scotland letterhead.

ACGB 34/34/2/SHAW

Letter from Shaw to Bryce dated 5 August 1980; two typed pages with Arts Council letterhead.

ACGB34/34/3/ FAULKNER

Report on *From One Strike to Another* by John Faulkner dated 29 September 1980; two typed pages on a printed form.

ACGB 1977/34/34/3/LANCASTER

Report on *Goodbye Union Jack* by Roger Lancaster, dated 1 October 1977; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/3/LAMEDE1

One handwritten page by Lamede dated 20 October 1978.

ACGB 34/34/3/LAMEDE2

Letter from Lamede to Claire Burnley dated 24 July 1978; one typed page.

ACGB 34/34/3/ RYMER

Report by David Rymer on *From One Strike to Another*, dated 21 October 1980; two handwritten pages on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/3/STONE

Newspaper cutting from the *S. Francisco Chronicle* of 10 December 1980, signed by Judy Stone.

ACGB 34/34/4/LAMEDE

Report by Lamede on *Full Confessions of a Socialist*, dated 23 July 1980; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/4/MB

Newspaper cutting signed MB from the *Express and Echo* of 18 September 1980.

ACGB 34/34/4/OBIE

Letter from Lakin to Faulkner dated 4 June 1980; one typed page on CAST paper.

ACGB 34/34/4/SILK

Newspaper cutting signed Brian Silk from the *Daily Telegraph* Of 4 September 1980.

ACGB 34/34/4/STRIKE1

Programme of *From One Strike to Another*; one printed page with photos of the five actors.

ACGB 34/34/4/STRIKE2

Leaflet presenting *From One Strike to the Other*, undated; one printed page.

ACGB 34/34/5/AGENT

CAST's presentation of *Hotel Sunshine*; one printed page.

ACGB 34/34/5/BRADNACK

Report on *Hotel Sunshine* by Ben Bradnack dated 25 November 1981; one typed paged on a printed form.

ACGB 1981 34/34/5/FAULKNER

Report by Faulkner on *Sedition 81* dated 9 June 1981; two typed pages.

ACGB 34/34/5/HAYNES

Letter from Haynes to Shaw dated 28 May 1981; one typed page.

ACGB 34/34/5/HOTEL

Press release on *Hotel Sunshine*; one printed page.

ACGB 34/34/5/JEHU

Newspaper cutting from *The Stage* of 1981, signed by Jeremy Jehu.

ACGB 34/34/5/LAKIN

Press release dated 22 July 1981, unsigned; one typed page on CAST paper.

ACGB 34/34/5/LAMEDE

Report by Lamede on *Sedition 81* dated 3 July 1981; two typed pages.

ACGB 34/34/5/LANE

Report by Jeremy Lane on *Hotel Sunshine*, dated 12 January 1982; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/5/SCHEDULE

Schedule of New Variety's performances from 12 to 26 February 1981 with a map, prices and instructions to reach the Old White Horse pub; two printed pages with illustrations.

ACGB 34/34/5/SE

Report on *Sedition 81* signed SE dated 6 July 1981; two typed pages on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/5/SHAW

Internal memo signed R.S. (Roy Shaw). One typed page.

ACGB 34/34/6/BREWSTER1

Report by Yvonne Brewster on a CAST board meeting, dated 11 January 1983; two printed pages with pen annotations.

ACGB 34/34/6/NURSE

Newspaper cutting from *The Daily Telegraph* of 9 February 1983, signed by Keith Nurse.

ACGB 34/34/6/1/STEWART

Newspaper cutting from the *Tribune* of 28 January 1983 signed by Michael Stewart.

ACGB 34/34/7/BRIEFING

Summary of CAST's financial situation, unsigned and undated; one typed page.

ACGB 34/34/7/BREWSTER1

Report on *Reds Under the Bed* by Yvonne Brewster, dated 12 January 1984; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/7/BREWSTER2

Report on *What's Funny* and *Personal Conversation with Mrs T* by Yvonne Brewster dated 4 July 1984; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/7/CHUBB

Report on *The Return of Sam the Man* by Kenneth Chubb, dated 19 October 1982; one handwritten page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/7/DALGLISH

Letter from Andy DalGLISH to Luke Rittner dated 7 September 1984; one typed page on CAST's letterhead.

ACGB 34/34/7/HMJ

Newspaper cutting from the *South Western Star* of 28 September 1984.

ACGB 34/34/7/RITTNER1

Letter from Luke Rittner to Tom Jones dated 29 March 1984; one typed page.

ACGB 34/34/7/RITTNER2

Letter from Luke Rittner to Ronald Muldoon dated 26 July 1984; one typed page.

ACGB 34/34/7/RP

Arts Council Internal Memo signed RP; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/7/SCOTNEY

Report on *The Return of Sam the Man* by John Scotney, dated 23 July 1982; one handwritten page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/7/TOREED

Letter from Ronald Muldoon to Dickon Reed, dated 21 December 1983; two typed pages with CAST's letterhead.

ACGB 34/34/8/BOTTOM

Minutes from CAST's Extraordinary General Meeting, dated 15 June 1983; three typed pages with CAST's letterhead.

ACGB 34/34/8/BREWSTER

Report on *Sam the Man* by Yvonne Brewster, dated 8 March 1983; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/8/HEDLEY1

Report on *The Bottom Line* by Philip Hedley, dated 11 August 1983; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/8/HEDLEY2

Report on *Reds Under the Bed* by Philip Hedley; the date is not readable; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/8/JAMES

Report on *Reds Under the Bed* by Ronald James, dated 16 January 1984; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/8/PB

Report on *Sedition UK*, signed PB and dated 9 June 1983; one typed page with a handwritten annotation at the bottom.

ACGB 34/34/8/PULFORD

Letter from Richard Pulford to Hillary Bauer, dated 13 July 1983; one typed page.

ACGB 34/34/8/WALLBANK

Report by John Wallbank on *Reds Under the Bed*, dated 6 February 1984; two typed pages on a printed form.

ACGB 34/34/8/WYMARK

Report by Olwen Wymark on *Reds Under the Bed*, dated 16 January 1984; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/125/2/COHEN

Newspaper cutting from the *Morning Star* of 2 December 1977 signed by Philip Cohen.

ACGB 34/125/2/COVENAY

Newspaper cutting from the *Financial Times* of 9 January 1978 signed by Michael Covenay.

ACGB 34/125/2/DFB

Newspaper cutting from *The Telegraph* 30 December 1977 signed by DFB.

ACGB 34/125/2/FAULKNER

Letter from John Faulkner to Jenny Rees dated 15 March 1978; one typed page.

ACGB 34/125/2/GILL

Arts Council Internal Memo with report on *Our Own People* by Anton Gill dated 13 January 1978; one typed page on a printed form with handwritten annotations.

ACGB 34/125/2/HEDLEY

Report on *Our Own People* by Philip Hedley dated 30 November 1977; two handwritten pages on a printed form.

ACGB 34/125/2/LAMEDE

Arts Council Internal Memo with report on *Our Own People* by Jonathan [Lamede] dated 6 December 1977; one typed page on a printed form.

ACGB 34/125/2/MORE

Pirate Jenny program of future activities with the title "Pirate Jenny asks for more". Three undated typed pages.

ACGB 34/125/2/REES

Letter by Jenny [Rees] to Anton [Gill] dated 10 March 1978; one typed page.

ACGB 34/125/3/ADAMS

Letter by Jad Adams to Clive Tempest dated 16 June 1977; one typed page.

ACGB 34/125/3/GLOVERSMITH

Letter by Frank Gloversmith to the Drama Department dated 25 June 1977; one typed page with University of Sussex letterhead.

ACGB 34/125/3/HEESON

Letter from Rosemary Heeson to John Faulkner dated 6 September 1978; one typed page with Circuit letterhead.

ACGB 34/125/3/TEMPEST

Letter by Clive Tempest to Jad Adams dated 16 June 1977; one typed page.

ACGB 34/125/4/EMIGRANTS

Programme and press release of Pirate Jenny's *Emigrants*, dated 3 August 1978; one printed page with a picture and three typed pages.

ACGB 34/125/4/SHAW

Letter from Roy Shaw to Jenny Rees dated 12 November 1979; one typed page with Arts Council letterhead.

ACGB 34/125/4/SIR

Press release of Pirate Jenny's *Sir is Winning* dated 21 April 1978; three typed pages.

ACGB 96/23/2/APPLICATION

Application for an ACGB subsidy, dated January 1976; three typed pages on Monstrous Regiment paper.

ACGB 96/23/2/PROGRAMME

Programme of *Vinegar Tom*; printed brochure consisting of two foldable pages.

Cataloguing criteria

As already stated, a part of the work of research – especially on CAST, but also on Pirate Jenny and Monstrous Regiment – has been carried out in the archive of the Arts Council of Great Britain – ACGB – at the Blythe House, in the complex of the Victorian and Albert Museum; as regards CAST, other important documents come from the East London Theatre Archive – ELTA – kept in the University of East London. In referencing to the various documents, I have tried to follow the original classification, reflecting the order in which the documents are kept in those archives.

In the ACGB archive documents are divided into files, which, in their turn, contain various numbered folders. Therefore, I have classified the various documents with the number of the file (e.g. 34/34) and the number of the folder, (e.g. 1) plus a short denomination characterizing the single document. So, for instance, the document classified as ACGB 34/34/1/BULLWINKLE refers to a document kept in folder 1 of the file 34/34, containing a report by Jean Bullwinkle. The various folders are in chronological order, but this order is not strictly observed. For example, Lancaster's report on *Goodbye Union Jack* of 19 October 1977

(ACGB 34/34/3/LANCASTER) is in the folder marked 3 of the file 34/34, while Sandy Craig's report of the premiere of *Confessions of a Socialist* of 3 February 1978 is in the folder 2 of the same file, hence the classification ACGB 34/34/2/CRAIG.

In the ELTA, the documents are divided into files according to the various projects, shows or events in which the company and its founders, Ronald Muldoon and Claire Burnley, were involved. Many of these projects ran concurrently and therefore some chronological overlapping is inevitable. As in the ACGB, I have kept to the original classification of the file, adding a denomination pointing at the specific document. For instance, the classification HE/CAST/SHO/1/4/ HUDSON means that the document is to be found in the file HE/CAST/SHO/4²⁵³ containing "press cuttings and flyers mostly relating to the CAST productions 'Harold Muggins is a Martyr' written by John Arden";²⁵⁴ the added specification "HUDSON" means that the document is an interview to John Arden by Roger Hudson.

I have kept this kind of classification as a reference in the text, even to the risk of making the reading less flowing, with the aim to facilitate a possible work of further research by students and scholars. Every classification is followed by a concise description in bibliography, which is meant to make every document easily recognizable, for instance by stating if a document is printed, typed or handwritten. I followed the same criterion for both archives; the result is more precise for the ELTA because the original cataloguing it is based upon is more distinctive.

Accessed Web-Sites

<http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/>

<https://monologues.co.uk/musichall/Songs-B/Billy-Muggins.html>

<http://www.rogerhudson.me.uk/about.html>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqZoszQYfHw&t=25s:](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqZoszQYfHw&t=25s)

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/mar/15/comment.labour1>

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/dec/10/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries>

<http://www.attilastockbroker.com/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqZoszQYfHw>

See <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/jun/23/olwen-wymark>

²⁵³ The suffix HE refers to the Hakney Empire, in which the CAST archive was kept before being donated to the ELTA.

²⁵⁴ This description comes from an unpublished printed catalogue I received on my first visit to the ELTA. The catalogue is available to anyone visiting the archive.

<http://www.unfinishedhistories.com/history/companies/monstrous-regiment/scum-death-destruction-and-dirty-washing/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/sep/01/ann-jellicoe-obituary>

<https://www.forcedentertainment.com/how-we-work/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2007/nov/14/theatre1>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2009/sep/23/noel-greig-obituary>

<http://www.richardiii.net/>

<http://www.famous-trials.com/chicago8/1324-ginsberg>

<https://edition.cnn.com/videos/us/2013/08/22/tsr-intv-ben-stein-richard-nixon-racist-remarks.cnn>

<http://watergate.info/1973/04/30/nixons-first-watergate-speech.html>

<http://watergate.info/chronology/1973-chronology>

<http://watergate.info/chronology/1974-chronology>

<https://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485>

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-433497/Widow-Enoch-Powells-Rivers-Blood-speech-really-did-exist.html>

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html>

http://tenstakonsthall.se/uploads/139Brecht_A_Short_Organum_for_the_Theatre.pdf

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/politics/jayaben-desai-striker-sari/>

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jan/11/salman-rushdie-satanic-verses>

<https://www.theguardian.com/news/2001/may/17/guardianobituaries1>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jun/29/caryl-churchill-the-playwrights-finest-hours>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2002/oct/03/theatre.artsfeatures>

<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/architecture-the-rise-fall-and-rise-of-the-tower-block-peter-dormer-explains-why-multi-storey-homes-1395911.html>

<https://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/genesis/getemoutbyfriday.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/feb/19/top-five-theatrical-dystopias-1984>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/nov/20/caryl-churchill-conquered-british-theatre-here-we-go>

<https://d19lfjg8hluhf.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/25191802/Escaped-Alone-Resource-Pack.pdf>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yp_15ntikaU

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QYgqdaI-NRg>

<http://monstrousregiment.co.uk/productions/vinegar-tom/>

<http://www.thewrestlingschool.co.uk/tws.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2002/oct/03/theatre.artsfeatures>

<https://hackneyempire.co.uk/>

<https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/letters-jacobson-on-gaza-1628191.html>

<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/feb/28/david-edgar-new-political-theatre>