Experiments with Realism in Contemporary Feminist Theatre in Britain



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Abstract

This thesis re-encounters classic texts of feminist theatre theory by Elin Diamond, Jill Dolan, Sue-Ellen Case and Elaine Aston in the light of formally experimental theatre by women in the 2010s. In particular, it revisits the feminist critique of realism, which characterised realism as an inherently conservative form. Although the critique has been challenged and nuanced since the 1980s, including by its original proponents, I suggest that a political suspicion of realism continues to underlie many critical approaches to theatrical form in contemporary theatre studies, particularly feminist ones.

While Dolan, Aston and Janelle Reinelt have characterised the 1990s and 2000s as something of a crisis for both feminism and feminist theatre, I argue that the 2010s has seen a new wave of feminist playwrights and theatremakers in Britain, who are deeply concerned with the politics of theatrical form. I contend that this new wave of feminist playwrights engages in critical and creative dialogue with realisms within experimental forms in order to question gender norms and imagine alternative political realities.

My case studies each focus on a different aspect of theatrical form: the representation of gender and gendered performance in physical theatre company RashDash's *Two Man Show* (2016) and *Three Sisters* (2018); experiments with naturalist character in the collaborations between director Katie Mitchell and playwright Alice Birch on *Ophelias Zimmer* (2015) and *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017); and Ella Hickson's dramatising of a search for a theatrical form that can express female desire in *The Writer* (2018). Close reading of these plays in performance, combined with interviews with the practitioners and attention to the productions' reception, reveal insights that build on and complicate the

feminist theories of the 1980s and 90s, especially regarding the performance of gender, character and acting, and play structure.

As a whole, the thesis reconsiders how experiments with realisms in theatre can be politically progressive, modelling a method of analysis that brings together feminist theory and criticism with close attention to theatrical form. It also contributes to emerging critical conversations about the place of formal analysis within theatre studies.

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All good art is subversive, either in form or content.
And the best art is subversive in form and content.
And often, the element that most outrages those who seek to impose censorship is form.

Sarah Kane

Introduction

This thesis emerges from the conviction that theatrical form is political. Rather than making a claim for the politics of form in the abstract, I follow critics such as Raymond Williams and Sheila Stowell in arguing that, within specific performance contexts, formal choices can convey specific political meanings.[1] I regard theatrical form as dynamic and responsive to shifting social circumstances. This is particularly true of realism because of its ontological claim to represent reality. As I shall demonstrate, theatrical form is an element that has historically been underexplored in theatre studies when analysing the aesthetic and political meanings of plays, a gap that is only just beginning to be addressed. This thesis revisits and reanimates critical debates around the feminist politics of theatrical form, particularly realism. Where the feminist critique of realism has typically argued that feminist theatre is a departure from and reaction against realism, I argue that the 2010s has seen a new wave of feminist playwrights in Britain who engage in critical and creative dialogue with realism within experimental forms in order to question gender norms and imagine alternative political realities.

Problems of definition

Paradoxically, the ubiquity of realism in modern British theatre means that it is curiously resistant to definition. Indeed, Stephen Lacey cautions that 'any attempt to arrive at a fixed and invariable definition [of realism] will be a wasted journey; it is much more useful to think of realism not as a fixed category, but as a series of debates, which are historically

[1] See Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969); Sheila Stowell, 'Rehabilitating Realism', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 6 (1992), 81-87.

variable, which operate differently across different cultural forms, but which have a set of common issues at their core'.[2] I group these issues into three categories: 'the realistic impulse', theatrical conventions, and the role of the audience.

Realistic impulse

J.L. Styan defines 'the realistic impulse' as 'the desire to reproduce on the stage a piece of life faithfully'.[3] On its own, this is slightly too loose a definition of realism because it can encompass theatre from Greek tragedy (as theorised through Aristotle's concept of mimesis as imitation), Shakespearean drama, and even absurdist plays like Samuel Beckett's *Endgame* (Royal Court Theatre, 1957), as well as plays that are more conventionally recognised as realist, because they all represent reality in some way.[4] (Represent is a better word than reproduce, as it implies mediation through artistic conventions.) Theatrical realism is commonly thought to have emerged as a discrete form in the second half of the nineteenth century, reaching particularly intense expression in the European naturalist movement at the end of the century in such plays as *Ghosts* (1882) by Henrik Ibsen and *Miss Julie* (1889) by August Strindberg.[5] Already we encounter one much debated definitional difficulty: the difference between realism and naturalism, terms that are often conflated in popular usage and, indeed, by some practitioners and critics. For the sake of clarity, I use

[2] Stephen Lacey, *British Realist Theatre: The New Wave in its Context: 1956-1965* (Routledge, 1995), p. 64.
[3] J.L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice*, Vol 1 Realism and Naturalism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 164.
[4] Throughout the thesis, I give the dates of first performance for dramatic works rather than their publication, unless specified otherwise.
[5] Styan, p. 1. Williams observes that 'realism' was used in French from the 1830s and in English from the 1850s. Raymond Williams, 'Realism', in *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Harper Collins, 1976), pp. 257-262 (p. 258). I am dealing with dramatic realism exclusively, rather than considering the realist novel, as, due to the technologies of theatrical production, they are fundamentally different forms even when works in both media display similar philosophies and aims.

naturalism to refer to the pan-European movement across art forms from the 1860s to the 1920s, influenced by positivist philosophy and scientific discoveries, which aimed at the scientific study through art of the influence of social forces and the environment on humans.[6] I use realism more broadly to refer to plays that combine reference to the real and a desire to represent reality with a set of techniques that have come to be associated with the form, authorised as an accurate representation by audience reception. I regard naturalism as a historical manifestation and intensification of realism; much of what can be said about realism also applies to naturalism and vice versa, so there is some necessary overlap. However, it can also be productive to separate naturalism from realism as a discrete dramatic tradition, as I do in Chapter 2.

Raymond Williams suggests that the 'structure of feeling' of naturalist drama is a 'passion for truth' which conflicts, particularly in Ibsen, with idealism.[7] Realism and naturalism, then, make some kind of truth claim for their representations of the world. Lacey comments, 'Perhaps the first thing that most people think of when they consider the term realism, is a play that "reflects", or re-creates across the entire panoply of elements of dramatic form and theatrical representation, in as direct a way as possible an identifiable social world and asks to be judged in relation to it; this relationship is captured in the colloquial adjective "realistic" in both its descriptive and evaluative senses'.[8] However, as Lacey goes on to admit, this is not a straightforward process, and does not always involve verisimilitude. A critical move of nineteenth-century naturalism was to position itself in opposition to the mainstream theatrical conventions of the time as part of its commitment

[6] For more on naturalism, see Christopher Innes ed., *A Sourcebook on Naturalist Theatre* (Routledge: London, 2000).
[7] Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, pp. 334, 335.
[8] Lacey, p. 66.

to accuracy of representation. In his manifesto for naturalism on the stage in 1881, Émile Zola famously declared,

> I am waiting for someone to put a man of flesh and bones on the stage, taken from reality, scientifically analysed, and described without one lie. […] I am waiting for environment to determine the characters and the characters to act according to the logic of facts combined with logic of their own disposition. […] I am waiting for everyone to throw out the tricks of the trade, the contrived formulas, the tears and superficial laughs.[9]

Theatrical techniques associated with naturalism include prose dialogue, set design that conveys the influence of the characters' environments upon their lives, and a style of acting that encourages the submersion of an actor in the character they play.[10] In reference to German naturalists, such as Gerhart Hauptmann, Kirk Williams writes, 'their explicit objective was to completely remove the barrier separating theatre from life, to create an illusion so powerful that it would render the theatrical medium absolutely transparent'.[11] Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that naturalist theatre, however much it might strive to be a 'transparent' medium, is still made up of theatrical conventions that mediate reality.[12] Indeed, Sheila Stowell points out that 'One of the paradoxes of stage realism at its most extreme is that its material exuberance encourages audiences to admire the

[9] Émile Zola, 'Naturalism on the Stage', trans. by Samuel Draper, in *Playwrights on Playwriting: from Ibsen to Ionesco*, ed. by Toby Cole (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), pp. 5-14 (p. 6).
[10] See Innes, pp. 1-27.
[11] Kirk Williams, 'Anti-Theatricality and the Limits of Naturalism', in *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, ed. by Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 95-111 (p. 96).
[12] As George Henry Lewes observes, 'Art is a Representation of Reality [which] must necessarily be limited by the nature of its medium. […] Art always aims at the representation of Reality, i.e. of Truth, and no departure from truth is permissible, except such as inevitably lies in the nature of the medium itself. Realism is thus the basis of all Art, and its antithesis is not Idealism, but Falsism'. While Lewes' conviction that the representation of truth should be the basis of all art is more of an exhortation than an accurate description, his recognition that the artistic medium mediates or even distorts reality but does not obviate the work's claim to realism is an important insight. George Henry Lewes (unsigned review), 'Realism in Art: Recent German Fiction', *Westminster Review*, 70 (1858), *ProQuest* <www.proquest.com/magazines/realism-art-recent-german-fiction/docview/2138584874/se-2?accountid=13042> [accessed 15 January 2021].

painstaking business of its illusion making', for example the staging of a protest in Trafalgar Square in *Votes for Women* (1907) by Elizabeth Robins.[13] This tension between desire for a 'transparent' medium and the intervention of the medium itself often emerges in criticism of realism, as shall be seen in the discussion of the feminist critique of realism.

An oppositional streak is inherent in early manifestations of realism and naturalism. Williams observes, '"To put ourselves and our situations on the stage": this ambition of naturalism, in its ordinary forms, is recurrent. The locally convincing speech and atmosphere, of one generation, becomes first dated, then theatrical; a new local style is then launched against it'.[14] Yet, he suggests, 'many of the supposed rejections of naturalism are in fact variations on it', as 'these new conventions, normally, have the same central purpose: a true representation of life'.[15] Thus he finds that John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956), which had traditionally been hailed by theatre historians as a radical break with previous drama, is in fact a continuation of the tradition of naturalism with a shift in subject matter.[16]

Williams's view that theatrical conventions shift in order to represent reality resonates with Bertolt Brecht's observation, *'Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must change'*.[17] In the same essay, Brecht argues that realism is a term that must be 'cleansed' of its previous (presumably naturalist) associations, declaring that 'Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society/ unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who rule it/ writing from the standpoint of the class

[13] Stowell, 'Rehabilitating Realism', p. 85.
[14] Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, p. 318.
[15] Ibid., p. 332.
[16] Ibid., p. 318.
[17] Bertolt Brecht, 'Against Georg Lukács', trans. by Stuart Hood, *New Left Review*, 1/84 (1974), 39-53 (p. 51). <newleftreview.org/I/84/bertolt-brecht-against-georg-lukacs> [accessed 1 December 2020].

which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught/ emphasising the element of development/ making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it'.[18] Whilst the naturalist manifestation of the 'realistic impulse' strives to represent life more accurately by closely reproducing surface appearances, Brecht's Marxist realism strives for truth by revealing what lies beneath the surface, sometimes by more symbolic or expressionist theatrical techniques. Williams and Lacey's decision to associate Brecht with a form of realism, which I follow, complicates the positioning of Brecht by feminist critics, such as Elin Diamond, in opposition to the realist tradition. As shall be discussed later, Brecht's critique of the techniques and politics of bourgeois, 'culinary theatre' has inspired feminist critics to consider how Brechtian alienation techniques might be used to defamiliarise prevailing ideas about gender.[19] Yet Brecht's essays on theatre can also offer a counterpoint to the feminist critique of realism. He claims a direct, Marxist political purpose for his strain of realism as disrupting the status quo because it is 'unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who rule it'.[20] Therefore, if Brecht considered himself to be working within realism, then we must complicate existing ideas of anti-realism so that it is not merely a synonym for Brechtian.

Due to the historical variation of formal conventions, Williams associates realism with a 'particular attitude towards what is called "reality"', which he defines as comprising 'the secular, the contemporary, and the socially extended'.[21] 'Social extension' encompasses

[18] Ibid., p. 50.
[19] See Elin Diamond, 'Brechtian Theory/ Feminist Theory: Toward a Gestic Feminist Criticism', *The Drama Review*, 32 (1988), 82-94; Bertolt Brecht, 'Notes on the Opera *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahoganny*', in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. by Marc Silberman, Tom Kuhn and Steve Giles, 3rd edn (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), pp. 70-80.
[20] Brecht, 'Against Georg Lukacs', p. 50.
[21] Raymond Williams, 'A Lecture on Realism', *Screen*, 18 (1977), 61-74 (pp. 61, 65).

the naturalist drama of the late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century's focus on the bourgeoisie in the work of writers such as Ibsen, Strindberg and Chekhov, and the shift in focus to a younger generation and working-class characters in 1950s social realist plays. Lacey notes the political potential of realist drama: 'To represent social experience that has hitherto been largely unrepresented within dominant forms of post-war drama is to validate that experience, to argue that it is worthy of interest in itself and to remedy a significant absence'.[22] Beyond Jimmy Porter, Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958) presented unconventional, female-led family dynamics and included a black character and a gay character, and Arnold Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1956) focused on a Jewish family. Michelene Wandor also notes that 'Historically, artistic movements which seek to represent the experiences of oppressed groups reach initially for a realistic and immediately recognisable clarity'.[23] This can be seen in realist drama by women in the early twentieth century, such as Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916).

The choice of what to represent and how to represent it is particularly fraught when it comes to cultural minorities. In the early 2000s, there was a flourishing of productions of social realist plays by Black British writers, such as *Elmina's Kitchen* (2003) by Kwame Kwei-Armah. Writing on Black British drama of the 2000s, Lynette Goddard acknowledges the risk that plays that represent gang violence might reinforce racial stereotypes, as 'the prevalence of these portrayals arguably suggests that successful black plays are filtered through white-managed institutions and therefore somehow fit white (male) cultural gatekeepers' ideas about black people's lives'.[24] This highlights the concern with accurate

[22] Lacey, p. 74.
[23] Michelene Wandor, 'Introduction', in *Strike while the iron is hot: Sexual Politics in Theatre*, ed. by Michelene Wandor (London: The Journeyman Press, 1980), pp. 5-15 (p. 11).
[24] Lynette Goddard, *Contemporary Black British Playwrights: Margins to Mainstream* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 12.

representation that drives the production and reception of many realist plays. Nonetheless, Goddard suggests that so-called 'ghetto plays', such as *Elmina's Kitchen*, which ends with a father witnessing his son being stabbed to death, can 'raise awareness and understanding of contemporary social issues' and serve as 'important social documents of the era'.[25] Social realist plays continue to be written and staged in the 2010s, often bringing attention to contemporary social issues. Lyn Nottage's Pulitzer-Prize-winning play, *Sweat* (Oregon Shakespeare Festival 2015; Donmar Warehouse, 2018; Gielgud Theatre, 2019), depicted a working-class community dealing with the loss of the factory that provided employment, which was interpreted by some critics as speaking to the rise of Trump and populism in America.[26] Alexander Zeldin's trio of plays, *Beyond Caring* (2014, Yard Theatre), *Love* (2016, National Theatre), and *Faith, Hope and Charity* (2019, NT), focused on cleaners on zero hours contracts, families in temporary accommodation and a community centre respectively. Nottage's play was based on extensive interviews with people living in Reading, Pennsylvania, and Zeldin's plays were devised in response to research and involvement with the communities they depict.[27]

Nottage and Zeldin's methods recall the development of another manifestation of realism from the 1990s: documentary and verbatim theatre (although their plays cannot strictly be considered to belong to this form). Such plays manifest the 'realistic impulse' and indeed may make an even more insistent truth claim in their reference to 'real' events and staging of the words of interviewees. Yet, like older forms of realism, the versions of reality

[25] Ibid., p. 14.
[26] Quentin Fottrell, 'Lyn Nottage on "Sweat", her Broadway play about factory workers in Trump's America', *MarketWatch*, 4 May 2017. <www.marketwatch.com/story/pulitzer-prize-winning-author-on-sweat-her-broadway-play-about-trumps-america-2017-03-20> [accessed 17 November 2020].
[27] Ibid. Catherine Love, 'Alexander Zeldin: "I want audiences to experience intensity and forget their phones"', *The Stage*, 8 December 2016. <www.thestage.co.uk/features/alexander-zeldin-i-want-audiences-to-experience-intensity-and-forget-their-phones> [accessed 17 November 2020].

presented are shaped through the dramatic medium and the role of the writers in composing the play. Indeed, Chris Megson and Alison Forsyth reflect that many of the contributors to their edited collection on documentary theatre 'note that, instead of reaching for a wholly objective representation of "truth", much documentary theatre has functioned to complicate notions of authenticity with a more nuanced and challenging evocation of the "real"'.[28] This questioning of the real that the documentary form often explores seems a necessary complication of realism in the wake of postmodernism, which puts ideas of reality or objective truth in scare quotes (though, as seen in the novels of George Eliot, testing the capacity of art to represent life is not new). The desire to represent reality is not invalidated by an acknowledgement within the work itself of the difficulty, or even impossibility, of that endeavour.

Realist conventions

Raymond Williams observes that realism has typically meant 'the injection of new content into an orthodox dramatic form', a view that Lacey echoes.[29] However, as well as it being difficult to disentangle form from content, this is also part of a wider tendency to underestimate the aesthetic qualities of realist plays and the skill involved in shaping the material. For instance, Winsome Pinnock, who is often labelled a realist playwright, considers 'every play I've written is experimental actually. […] I think with every single play, you try to find a form that fits your idea, and you search quite hard for that'.[30] Rather than

[28] Alison Forsyth and Christopher Megson ed., *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2.
[29] Raymond Williams, 'Recent English Drama', in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature,* vol. 7: The Modern Age, ed. by Boris Ford, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963), pp. 496-508 (p. 498). Lacey, p. 64.
[30] Winsome Pinnock and J.C. Niala, 'Winsome Pinnock in conversation with JC Niala', *St Hilda's Feminist Salon*, St Hilda's College, Oxford, 2 November 2018. <www.mixcloud.com/FeministSalon/feminist-salon-winsome-pinnock-and-jc-niala-2-november-2018/> [accessed 26 February 2019].

accepting the feminist critique of realism, she does not believe that 'there's a direct relationship between experiment and radicalism, necessarily […] because we're […] bound in by patriarchy, by the theatre system itself [the way plays are accepted, the relationship between writer and director], and […] what you need to do is dismantle that, actually, and that's a difficult ask'.[31] Pinnock's observation is an important reminder that the political impact of the form of plays cannot be analysed in isolation, or apart from the context of the theatrical system under which they are produced, ideas that are explored further in Chapter 3 in reference to *The Writer* by Ella Hickson. Pinnock's description of her writing process – 'you try to find a form that fits your idea' – resonates with Martin Esslin's argument that naturalism's commitment to 'the primacy of content over form, the conviction that any subject matter could be treated, and that each subject matter would call for the form most adequate and suitable to express it' led, paradoxically, to a concept of '*organic form,* which, of necessity, had to adapt itself to its subject matter'.[32] This legacy is visible in the formal innovations within new writing in the twenty-first century.

This concept of realism as an 'organic form' is more versatile than critical accounts that attempt to define realism by adherence to a formula, which often end up oversimplifying the aesthetics and politics of the form. Ruby Cohn's *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama* (1991) stems from a cheerfully confessed aesthetic bias against realism ('the most impressive playwrights tend to be non-realistic. About the others I say nothing').[33] This results in a partial (in both senses) definition of realism:

> Mimetic at both ends, the realistic play is embedded in the contemporary scene. The heir of the well-made play, it too is well made in linking cause and effect within a plot. The characters behave with sociological and psychological credibility; members

[31] Ibid.
[32] Martin Esslin, 'Naturalism in Context', *The Drama Review: TDR*, 13 (1968), 67-76 (p. 73).
[33] Ruby Cohn, *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 4.

> of the broadening middle class, they display the effects of its education and conventions. Often rooted in the stock types of melodrama […] the character can wind away from its roots, but will nevertheless remain psychologically coherent from first to last […] the coherence of realistic dialogue parallels that of plot and character. Ibsen's people speak grammatically in complete sentences. O'Casey's tenement dwellers connect one sentence logically to another; they answer pointed questions, and they swear meaningful oaths.[34]

Reference to the contemporary, structure that establishes a pattern of causation, psychologically realised characters and prose dialogue are recognisable elements of realism, although it could be argued that many of these elements are no longer just associated with realism but have been absorbed into mainstream Western dramatic conventions. However, realist drama is far more than the sum of its parts. Moreover, Cohn's perfunctory characterisation of Ibsen and O'Casey ignores their expressionist works, such as *When We Dead Awaken* (1889) and *The Silver Tassie* (1929), as well as the differences between their realisms. There is no such thing as a pure realism that embodies all the conventions in perfect proportions. Rather like Pointillist paintings, plays may create an impression of realism from afar but scatter into a series of features that detract from or complicate notions of realism when scrutinised at close quarters. For these reasons, and in the light of historical variations, it is more productive to talk of realisms or realist elements than a monolithic 'Realism' (unless referring to 'Realism' as a cultural construct to resist). Finally, in labelling all the plays she chooses to include in her survey, experimental and anti-realist, Cohn underestimates the resilience of realisms. As Katharine Worth notes, 'experiment can go a remarkably long way without wrecking the necessary impression of social credibility', such as the plays of Harold Pinter that offer the surface impression of realism without the psychological knowability of the characters, either by themselves or the audience.[35] Cohn

[34] Ibid., p. 3.
[35] Katharine J. Worth, *Revolutions in Modern English Drama* (London: G. Bell & Sons, 1972), p. viii.

declares, 'I do not believe theatre revolutions can be waged in an old structure, and realism seems to me the dominant old structure, cramping inchoate reality within its rigid walls'.[36] Yet, as I will show, resisting 'the dominant old structure' from within can be politically and aesthetically productive.

Reality effects: relationship with an audience

The theatre audience is a crucial collaborator in a play's production of a sense of reality. Although this dynamic is not limited to realist theatre, it is perhaps intensified when a production makes a claim to accurate or truthful representation. A particularly extreme example of this relationship breaking down can be seen in the riots that greeted early performances of J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907), with audience members shouting 'That's not the West'.[37] This could be interpreted both as a rejection of Synge's characterisation of the people of West of Ireland as murderous and lascivious (even through black comedy), and the style and means of representation.[38] As Susan Bennett notes, 'A crucial aspect of audience involvement […] is the degree to which a performance is accessible through the codes audiences are accustomed to utilizing, the conventions they are used to recognizing, at a theatrical event. Intelligibility and/ or success of a particular performance will undoubtedly be determined on that basis'.[39]

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[36] Cohn, p. 18.
[37] Christopher Morash, *A History of Irish Theatre: 1601-2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 135.
[38] As Christopher Murray notes, twentieth-century Irish drama is particularly charged in relation to questions of nation, so the aesthetic and political senses of representation cannot be separated. Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), Introduction.
[39] Susan Bennett, *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 174.

Although conventions associated with naturalism have been so naturalised within mainstream Western theatre (and, indeed, film and television) as to be almost imperceptible, August Strindberg's Preface to *Miss Julie* (1888) is a salient reminder of how disruptive these innovations were when they were first introduced. Having listed a series of grievances with established theatrical conventions, such as painted scenery and the actors delivering key speeches by the prompter's box, he concludes, 'no revolutions, simply some small modifications, for to turn the stage into a room with the fourth wall removed and some of the furniture consequently facing away from the audience, would probably have a distracting effect, at least for the present'.[40] In order to preserve the audience's suspension of disbelief, therefore, Strindberg suggests that some elements of convention must be preserved even while they are revised, such as using real furniture and not representing the whole room through the set. Strindberg's aspiration for the stage to become 'a room with the fourth wall removed' and actors performing with their backs to the audience also suggests that naturalism refigured theatre's relationship with an audience. In contrast with later criticism of naturalism for the supposed passivity of its audience, Bennett argues that in the contemporary reactions to naturalist theatre the audience is 'acknowledged as a creative aspect of the dramatic process, and the spectator generally confronted, often co-opted, into a more direct role in the theatrical event'.[41]

Raymond Williams's concept of 'convention', which he defines as meaning both '*tacit agreement*' and '*accepted standards*', is also relevant when considering the dynamic between stage and audience in theatrical innovation.[42] He suggests, 'Dramatist, actors and

[40] August Strindberg, 'Preface to Miss Julie', in *Strindberg on Drama and Theatre*, ed. and trans. by Birgitta Steene and Egil Törngvist (Amsterdam University Press, 2007), pp. 61-72 (p. 72).
[41] Bennett, *Theatre Audiences*, p. 21.
[42] Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, p. 13.

audience must be able to agree that the particular method to be employed is acceptable; and, in the nature of the case, an important part of this agreement must usually precede the performance, so that what is to be done may be accepted without damaging friction'.[43] Whilst he argues individual works by writers such as Aeschylus and Ibsen have extended conventions, he believes that it is impossible for a dramatist to stray too far from accepted conventions without alienating the audience. Lasting changes are made to dramatic conventions, Williams suggests, when they emerge from a 'structure of feeling' that chimes with the age, such as the 'passion for truth' that drives naturalism.[44] Williams's concept of 'structure of feeling' allows him to pay close attention to the forms of individual plays and to consider them within their historical and socio-political contexts, a method I also adopt.

Williams's approach is also insightful in suggesting how to talk about developments in form over time in a non-teleological way. Theatrical forms, particularly overdetermined forms like realism and naturalism, contain a historical residue of their previous uses, which can be activated in performance (see Chapter 2 on how Katie Mitchell and Alice Birch activate and problematise the history of the obsession with hysterical women in nineteenth-century naturalist drama). Moreover, due to the frequent revivals and reimagining of 'classic' plays in the theatrical repertoire, theatre history is never past; it is impossible to assert a linear development of theatrical conventions or their reception.[45] Contemporary plays' conversations and experiments with realisms can crystallise wider historical currents in the development of the form.

[43] Ibid., p. 15.
[44] Ibid., pp. 17, 334.
[45] The theatre repertoire and canonicity will be explored further in Chapter 1 on RashDash's *Three Sisters*.

Contemporary realisms

Although, as I have established, awareness of historical uses of a theatrical form is vital, the focus of this thesis is on contemporary engagements with realism in British theatre in the 2010s. It is important to note here that the plays I select for my case studies would not necessarily be called realist, even in a capacious understanding of the term. Rather, they put elements of realism in dialogue with other, more experimental forms.[46] In new writing of the twenty-first century, there is less of a pronounced distinction between mainstream theatre and alternative theatre than there was in the 1970s and 1980s.[47] Introducing a study of twenty-first-century playwrights including Caryl Churchill, Martin Crimp, Simon Stephens and debbie tucker green, Vicky Angelaki argues that their plays,

> do not operate on the binary of the aesthetic versus the political: rather, they exist in the space between the two to create a form of theatre responsive to the complexities of our time. As a consequence, social and political performance becomes redefined, moving further away from social realism and into a territory where formal experimentation and sensory richness are no longer seen as tropes of alternative stages but as methodologies that, in twenty-first-century British theatre, have infiltrated the mainstream.[48]

While Angelaki's expanded consideration of the forms that constitute political theatre should be welcomed, she sustains the critical narrative in which formal experimentation is cast as a complete break with realism, when, as I shall show, realism and experimentalism can be in conversation within the same plays.

Shifts in contemporary theatrical conventions can be linked with the emergence of the new writing industry in Britain in the 1990s and 2000s, driven, to a significant extent, by

[46] I use the comparative cautiously, not wanting to elide the moments in history when realism has been an experimental form. However, through the second half of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century it has been regarded by many as the 'dominant' form of British theatre, spurring productive resistance.
[47] Susan Bennett notes this in the Preface to the second edition of *Theatre Audiences*, written in 1997, suggesting that the expectations of theatre audiences had shifted. Bennett, p. 9.
[48] Vicky Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre in 21st-Century Britain: Staging Crisis* (Bloomsbury: London, 2017), p. 4.

the Royal Court.[49] A survey of the British theatrical repertoire in 2013 found that new work represented 58% of all productions (overtaking revivals for the first time), 64% of all performances, 63% of all seats sold and 66% of box office takings.[50] The success of transfers of experimental plays from the subsidised sector to the West End, such as Duncan Macmillan's *People, Places, & Things* (National Theatre, 2015; Wyndham's Theatre, 2016) and Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's *Emilia* (Shakespeare's Globe, 2018; Vaudeville Theatre, 2019), suggests a receptive, paying audience for such work. Furthermore, as Catherine Love and Duška Radosavljević argue, developments in collaborative theatre-making practice make traditional distinctions between text-based and non-text-based performances difficult to maintain.[51] Such hybrid forms are particularly visible in Rashdash's work (explored in Chapter 1), which combines text with movement, music and visual images.

The influence of Sarah Kane and Caryl Churchill on encouraging formal experimentation in a generation of playwrights, particularly women, also cannot be ignored. When Churchill was given the Award for Outstanding Contribution to Writing by the Writers' Guild of Great Britain in 2018, Lucy Kirkwood paid tribute to her 'protean gifts', praising a writer 'who says something new in both form and content every time she puts pen to paper' and who has, over the course of her sixty-year career, 'changed the dramatic landscape of

[49] For more on this, see Jacqueline Bolton, 'Capitalizing (on) New Writing: New Play Development in the 1990s', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 32 (2012), 209-225. All my case studies are connected with the Royal Court in some way. Alice Birch and Ella Hickson both participated in the Royal Court Young Writers' Group, and Birch has had plays produced there; RashDash directed *Hole* by Ellie Kendrick at the Court in 2018.
[50] British Theatre Consortium, UK Theatre, and the Society of London Theatre, 'British Theatre Repertoire 2013', May 2015, p. 3 <britishtheatreconference.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/British-Theatre-Repertoire-2013.pdf> [accessed 14 December 2020].
[51] See Catherine Love, *Are We on the Same Page? A Critical Analysis of the "Text-Based"/ "Non-Text Based" Divide in Contemporary English Theatre* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2018) <pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/are-we-on-the-same-page-a-critical-analysis-of-the-textbasednontextbased-divide-in-contemporary-english-theatre(a8c3d2ff-efdd-457d-981a-d3c60bfa5afc).html> [accessed 15 January 2021]; Duška Radosavljević, *Theatre-Making: Interplay between Text and Performance in the Twenty-first Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

two centuries, and evolved more than any other British playwright our conceptions of what a play even *is*'.[52] However, given the amount of scholarly attention Churchill and Kane's work has received, I feel justified in omitting their work from primary consideration in order to focus on women playwrights whose work has yet to receive such attention.[53]

The feminist critique of realism

The feminist critique of realism was developed, among others, by Sue Ellen Case, Jill Dolan, Janelle Reinelt and Elin Diamond during the 1980s and 90s. It articulates theoretically a commitment to anti-realism expressed by many feminist practitioners in their work from the 1970s. Gillian Hanna of Monstrous Regiment reflected in 1991, 'Our instinct was never to trust naturalism. […] Music was the clearest instrument for breaking it up'.[54] Such a mistrust of naturalism and realism persists today; similar sentiments were expressed by Sphinx Theatre's Artistic Director Sue Parrish at the Women Centre Stage Symposium in February 2019, organised by Sphinx at Hampstead Theatre.[55] Nonetheless, in contrast with Helen Small's view that the feminist critique of realism is 'now largely passé', as it 'has little to tell us politically in the early twenty-first century that we don't already know, and little to

[52] Lucy Kirkwood, '"A writer of protean gifts": Lucy Kirkwood on Caryl Churchill', *Nick Hern Blog*, 17 November 2018 < https://nickhernbooksblog.com/2018/01/17/a-writer-of-protean-gifts-lucy-kirkwood-on-caryl-churchill/> [accessed 19 November 2020].
[53] On Churchill, see, for example, Mary Luckhurst, *Caryl Churchill* (London: Routledge, 2014); Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), as well as number of book chapters and articles on Churchill's recent work. On Sarah Kane, see, for example, Graham Saunders, *Love Me or Kill Me: Sarah Kane and the Theatre of Extremes* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002); Elaine Aston, *Feminist Views on the English Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), Chapter 5; Cristina Delgado-Garcia, *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), Chapter 3.
[54] Gillian Hanna, 'Introduction', *Monstrous Regiment: Four Plays and a Collective Celebration*, ed. by Gillian Hanna (London: Nick Hern, 1991), pp. xiii – lxxxiii (lvi).
[55] Sphinx Theatre, 'Women Centre Stage Symposium: Are We at the Tipping Point?', Hampstead Theatre, London, 3 February 2019.

tell us about literary forms and methods that we shouldn't be moving, quickly, to complexify or debunk', I believe that, although it can be complicated and nuanced, Case, Dolan, Reinelt and Diamond's now canonical criticism asks fundamental questions about the gender politics of theatre that continue to resonate when applied to contemporary work.[56] Rather than rejecting the feminist critique of realism, I am building upon some of its insights and refining others, as theories forged in the 1980s and 90s cannot adequately account for the forms of the feminist theatre that are being made in the 2010s (nor should they be expected to, as forms, contexts and debates shift over time). Through close analysis of contemporary plays in performance, I will also consider how recent feminist theatre practice can complicate these theories.

Catherine Belsey's Marxist-poststructuralist critique of 'classic realism' in her essay 'Constructing the Subject, Deconstructing the Text' (1985) provided the theoretical foundation for Dolan, Case and Diamond's work. Belsey suggests that 'classic realism', which she associates with the Victorian novel and particularly the detective story, 'is characterised by "illusionism", narrative which leads to "closure", and a "hierarchy of discourses" that establish the "truth" of the story', the creation and solving of enigma and the re-establishment of order.[57] Drawing on Althusser's concept of interpellation, Belsey argues that

> the *form* of the classic realist text acts in conjunction with the expressive theory and with ideology by interpellating the reader as subject. The reader is invited to perceive and judge the 'truth' of the text, the coherent, non-contradictory

[56] Helen Small, 'Feminist Theory and the Return of the Real: "What we really want most out of realism…"', in *Adventures in Realism*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 230-240 (p. 230).
[57] Catherine Belsey, 'Constructing the Subject, Deconstructing the Text', in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature*, ed. by Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Newton (Taylor & Francis Group, 2012). ProQuest Ebook Central <ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=10926> pp. 45-64 (p. 53).

> interpretation of the world as it is perceived by an author whose autonomy is the source and evidence of the truth of the interpretation.[58]

Belsey suggests that through literature's role in subject formation (she follows Lacan in seeing the subject as formed through language and feminist psychoanalytic criticism of Lacan on the impossibility of the female subject) readers are compelled to see the world in accordance with the dominant ideology, without being conscious that they are doing so. The classic realist text's insistence on closure makes its resolution almost impossible to disagree with, resulting in a (supposedly) impregnable form. She therefore stresses the importance of deconstructing the text critically to 'examine the *process of its production*', revealing the inconsistencies and plurality beneath the supposedly coherent surface of its ideology.[59]

Dolan, Diamond and Case take Belsey's ideological characterisation of realism and apply it to theatre, incorporating Laura Mulvey and Teresa de Lauretis's work on the gaze in film theory and Brecht's critique of bourgeois theatre.[60] Summarising the feminist critique of realism in the first chapter of *Unmaking Mimesis* (1997), Elin Diamond writes,

> With Brechtian hindsight we know that realism, more than any other form of theater representation, mystifies the process of theatrical signification. Because it naturalizes the relationship between character and actor, setting and world, realism operates in concert with ideology. And because it depends on, insists on a stability of reference, an objective world that is the source and guarantor of knowledge, realism surreptitiously reinforces (even if it argues with) the arrangements of that world.[61]

Diamond's characterisation of realism as 'mystifying the process of theatrical signification' (and, by extension, the workings of ideology) resonates with Belsey's criticism of realism as 'illusionism'. Indeed, much of the ire directed towards realism seems to be rooted in the belief that realism poses as a mirror reflecting reality when it is, in fact, an ideological

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[58] Ibid., p. 52.
[59] Ibid., p. 54.
[60] It is worth noting that Diamond does not cite Belsey in *Unmaking Mimesis*. Yet her articulation of the feminist critique of realism overlaps with Belsey's, particularly in the idea of the closure of realism.
[61] Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (Routledge: London, 1997), pp. 4-5.

representation.[62] However, at times the feminist critique of realism appears to rely upon the very idea of the correspondence of realism to reality that they critique in the argument that, by representing a patriarchal society, realist writers necessarily reinforce the existing social order, precluding change; in Dolan's words, 'Realism is prescriptive in that it reifies the dominant culture's inscription of traditional power relations between genders and classes'.[63] This seems a rather pessimistic view of artistic representation, demonstrating, as Sheila Stowell argues, 'an inability to distinguish between reproduction and reinforcement; consequently we hear that to "show" something in realist terms is to confirm its inevitability to uncritical and politically resigned spectators'.[64] Stowell's distinction between 'reproduction' (or, more precisely, representation) and 'reinforcement' seems crucial. This is still a live debate, as shown by the criticism of Katie Mitchell and Alice Birch's collaborations for supposedly reinforcing the patriarchal oppression they represent, which shall be discussed in Chapter 2.

In its first articulations, the feminist critique of realism often becomes a wider critique of representation, understood artistically and politically. Bringing together feminist psychoanalytic criticism, ideas of *écriture féminine* and poststructuralism, Sue-Ellen Case asserts, 'With the deconstruction of the forms of representation, and dialogue and modes of perception characteristic of patriarchal culture, the stage can be prepared for the entrance of the female subject, whose voice, sexuality and image have yet to be dramatised within the dominant culture'.[65] Subject (as in subject position) is partially conflated with subject

[62] See Reinelt's summary of feminist objections to realism in Janelle Reinelt, 'A Feminist Reconsideration of the Brecht/ Lukács debates', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 7 (1994), 122-139 (p. 124).
[63] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 2nd edn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012; first published 1988), p. 84.
[64] Stowell, p. 86.
[65] Sue-Ellen Case, *Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2014; first published 1988), p. 132.

matter here, as throughout *Feminism and Theatre* (1988) Case considers the paucity of roles for female actors since the 'male creation of female parts' in classical tragedy.[66] As an alternative to both the closure of realist drama and the assumption of a stable subject, Case suggests a female form that would 'be elliptical rather than illustrative, fragmentary rather than whole, ambiguous rather than clear, and interrupted rather than complete'.[67] Nonetheless, for those who are not advocates of poststructuralism, Case's championing of 'interrupted' forms over realism as a means to express female subjectivity can seem more like aesthetic preference than convincing argument.

More persuasive is Jill Dolan's application of these theories of the subject to consider its implications for the audience in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (1988), suggesting that the female spectator of a play occupies an impossible position: 'If she identifies with the narrative's objectified, passive woman, she places herself in a masochistic position. If she identifies with the male hero, she becomes complicit in her own indirect objectification'.[68] This is because, she argues, 'theatre creates an ideal spectator carved in the likeness of the dominant culture whose ideology he represents': 'Historically, in North American culture this spectator has been assumed to be white, middle-class, heterosexual and male'.[69] In her idea of the 'feminist spectator as critic', Dolan turns this outsider position into a space for deconstructive critique of the dominant culture, arguing that 'Feminism begins with a keen awareness of exclusion from male cultural, social, sexual, political, and intellectual discourse'.[70] It is important to consider the role of the theatre audience and its production context. Yet Dolan herself admits in the Preface to the 2012 edition of *The Feminist*

[66] Ibid., p. 5.
[67] Ibid., p. 129.
[68] Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, p. 41.
[69] Ibid., p. 1.
[70] Ibid., p. 3.

Spectator as Critic, 'the dominant culture's most preeminent venues are no longer as dominated by conventional, fourth-wall, domestic realism as they were in the 1980s. Popular theatre has opened itself to much more flexible styles, forms, and genres, rather than championing realism as the only viable theatrical choice'.[71] Realism is no longer necessarily a form that dominates theatrical representation and, even if it were, it does not follow that it has to reproduce the dominant ideology.[72]

This is clarified by Sheila Stowell's influential refutation of the feminist critique of realism, targeted at Dolan and Belsey in particular, in her article, 'Rehabilitating Realism' (1992). She emphasises that the realism of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw emerged as a subversive challenge to 'the ideological assumptions imbedded in melodrama and the well-made play', stressing the political radicalism of such plays as *Widowers' Houses* (1892) at the time they were first produced.[73] Moreover, she disputes the assumption that realist theatre, in Dolan's words, 'naturalizes the social relations imposed by dominant ideology', as 'Theatricalizing workrooms, drapers' establishments, law offices and (yes) drawing-rooms can have the effect of making visible traditionally invisible processes of capitalist production, exposing the usually hidden workings of an oppressive system, such staged revelations calling into question existing ideology's "naturalized" view of the world, each one a call to action'.[74] She also challenges the idea of realism's 'closure' as a form, as such an argument 'negates the possibility of cumulative experience' and reduces a play's impact

[71] Ibid., p. xxxii.
[72] Indeed, in the context of modern British theatre, Mary Luckhurst argues that 'since Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* in 1956 a certain kind of social realism has been understood as quintessentially English and promoted as the national drama – a campaign so successful that practically everyone has come to believe it' but suggests that this version of theatre history does not reflect the diversity of theatre practice, including devised work and musicals. Mary Luckhurst, 'Contemporary English Theatre: Why Realism?', *Contemporary Drama in English*, 9 (2002), 73-84 (p. 76).
[73] Stowell, 'Rehabilitating Realism', p. 84.
[74] Ibid., p. 85.

to its conclusion.[75] Stowell concludes 'while dramatic and theatrical styles may be developed or adopted to naturalize or challenge particular positions, dramatic forms are not in themselves narrowly partisan', calling for plays to be interpreted in their historical and socio-political context.[76]

Stowell's essay is a welcome reminder that Case, Diamond and Dolan's accounts of realism are only partial, based upon readings of a few, male-authored canonical texts that are taken as synecdoche for realism as a whole. For instance, Sue-Ellen Case pronounces,

> Realism, in its focus on the domestic sphere and the family unit, reifies the male as sexual subject and the female as the sexual 'Other'. The portrayal of female characters within the family unit – with their confinement to the domestic setting, their dependence on the husband, their often defeatist, deterministic view of the opportunities for change – makes realism a 'prisonhouse of art' for women, both in their representation on stage and in the female actor's preparation and production of such roles.[77]

This critique is convincing when applied to, say, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) or John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* (1956). However, it is less applicable to realist plays that centre female characters, such as Marsha Norma's *'night Mother* (1982), even if it does depict a stifling domestic space. Moreover, many realist plays question the confinement of women's socially sanctioned roles to the domestic sphere, such as Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879). Case's limited view of realism suggests that, in the feminist critique of realism, issues with the under- or misrepresentation of female characters in the canonical theatrical repertoire are often conflated with issues with realism as a whole.

Diamond concocts a slightly more nuanced and historically informed view of 'new realism' or 'Ibsenite realism' in the first chapter of *Unmaking Mimesis*, reading Ibsen's plays alongside developments in Freudian psychology. Echoing Belsey, she argues that, in such

[75] Ibid., p. 86.
[76] Ibid., p. 87.
[77] Case, *Feminism and Theatre*, p. 124.

plays, 'The spectator takes on the role of seeker/ knower, is assured of completing the narrative, of discovering the secret, of judging its truth', encouraged to read the hysterical body of the central female character for clues.[78] In contrast, she favours performances and plays that activate what she calls 'realism's hysteria', disruptions that intervene in the production of truth and destabilise the relationship between sign and referent.[79] These ideas will be further explored in Chapter 2, in the context of the creation of character. While this critique of 'Ibsenite realism' might be a persuasive reading of Diamond's limited corpus of plays (*Rosmersholm* (1887), *Hedda Gabler* (1891), and *The Second Mrs Tanqueray* (1893) by Arthur Wing Pinero), it does not apply to all nineteenth-century realist plays or even all of Ibsen's works. Moreover, critics such as Kim Solga have taken this theory and applied it to realism as a whole. In her article on Sarah Kane's *Blasted* (1995), which she argues blasts open the 'blind-spot' of realism, Solga talks of 'the violence stage realism does to women's bodies as it medicalizes their suffering for audience edification, while eliding or downplaying that suffering's social and political dimensions'.[80] It seems strange to talk of a theatrical form doing violence to women's bodies, even in metaphorical terms, as it blames what is represented upon the means of representation. The feminist critique of realism creates a seductive myth of realism that offers a galvanising spur for resistance but is not an accurate description of the variety of dramatic realisms, in both aesthetic and political terms.

Nonetheless, Dolan and Diamond's pioneering feminist theatre criticism raises questions and debates that continue to resonate in contemporary theatre, for example, the

[78] Diamond, p. 20.
[79] Ibid., p. 25.
[80] Kim Solga, 'Blasted's Hysteria: Rape, Realism, and the Thresholds of the Visible', *Modern Drama* 50 (2007), 346-374 (p. 361). Solga makes clear that when she talks of theatrical realism she means 'a very specific kind of realism, the new social drama of the late nineteenth century, what Elin Diamond calls "Ibsenite" realism (4), and its twentieth-century progeny', p. 355.

problem of how to represent the female body onstage without it being objectified by the male gaze. Diamond offers a potential solution in her concept of gestic feminist criticism, which promises 'a female body in representation that resists fetishization and [offers] a viable position for the female spectator'.[81] She proposes both a mode of reading that 'would "alienate" or foreground those moments in a playtext when social attitudes about gender and sexuality conceal or disrupt patriarchal ideology' and a style of acting that combines insights from Brecht, male gaze theory and Butler.[82] She writes, 'In my hybrid construction – based in feminist and Brechtian theory – the female performer, unlike her filmic counterpart, connotes not "to-be-looked-at-ness" – the perfect fetish – but rather "looking-at-to-be-looked-at-ness" or even just "looking-ness" [...] this Brechtian-feminist body is paradoxically available for *both* analysis and identification, paradoxically within representation while refusing its fixity'.[83] This is in contrast with naturalistic acting, which Diamond argues 'laminates body to character' (laminate here meaning the manufacture of a material by placing layers on top of each other), therefore encouraging the spectator to identify with the character rather than seeing it as a historical and ideological construct.[84] (The politics of different performance styles will be discussed at greater length in Chapters 1 and 2).

Whether or not one agrees with Diamond's view of naturalist acting, her fusion of Brecht, Mulvey and Butler has been highly influential on feminist theatre criticism. Dolan's final chapter in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* makes the case for a materialist-feminist criticism and practice that aims 'to disrupt the narrative of gender ideology, to denaturalize

[81] Diamond, p. 44.
[82] Ibid., p. 54.
[83] Ibid., p. 52.
[84] Ibid.

gender as representation and to demystify the workings of the genderized representational apparatus itself'.[85] Janelle Reinelt notes the influence of Brecht upon feminist theatre practice, such as Caryl Churchill's *Vinegar Tom* (1976) and Red Ladder's *Strike While The Iron is Hot* (published 1980). Whereas in much feminist criticism, Brechtian alienation techniques are positioned as an alternative to realism, Reinelt suggests these plays adopt hybrid forms, as

> Such a feminist perspective, that the personal is political, demands the dramatisation of the personal, emotional life, drawing on, to some extent, the techniques of traditional bourgeois realism. Epic techniques, on the other hand, place the personal, individual experience of the characters within their socio-political context, widening the focus to include the community and its social, economic and sexual relations.[86]

Nonetheless, as Stowell reminds us, we should be wary of generalising that certain forms produce specific political effects in the abstract.

Indeed, many theatrical techniques which seemed disruptive when they were first used have now been absorbed into the repertoire of accepted theatrical conventions. Playwright Trevor Griffiths observes, in an interview with Reinelt, that 'there isn't a pure or uncontaminated form' of realism: 'It is actually impossible to go back to Ibsen, Chekhov, or Strindberg without coming through Brecht. Brecht mediates the first progressive wave of naturalism/realism in very significant ways and inflects it, even if you're not aware of Brecht as a system'.[87] This can be seen in Griffiths's own play, *Comedians* (1975), in which the racist and sexist comedy routines of the second act might seem to provide a *gestus* but also do not puncture the fictive reality of the play, as they are in character (or, for Gethin Price, out of character in an interesting way). More recently, Hans-Thies Lehmann has included Brecht

[85] Dolan, p. 102.
[86] Janelle Reinelt, 'Beyond Brecht: Britain's New Feminist Drama', *Theatre Journal*, 38 (1986), 154-163 (pp. 162-63).
[87] Janelle Reinelt, *After Brecht: British Epic Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 145.

in his critique of 'dramatic theatre', which he criticises for 'thinking [of] the aesthetic form of theatre as a variable dependent on another reality – life, human behaviour, reality, etc […that] always precedes the double of theatre as the original'.[88] In contrast, Lehmann argues that rather 'than wanting to be repetition and double – however differentiated, condensed and artistically formed – of another reality', postdramatic theatre intends a more direct relationship with reality, as 'it becomes more presence than representation, more shared than communicated experience, more process than product, more manifestation than signification, more energetic impulse than information'.[89] Ironically, Lehmann's manifesto for postdramatic theatre could be seen as yet another manifestation of the 'realistic impulse' to replace existing theatrical conventions with new ones that supposedly make a greater truth claim. Yet postdramatic theatre's disavowal of mimetic representation suggests a distinct break with realism. Several of the performances explored in this thesis engage with the real in performance but remain committed to mimesis, suggesting that it is productive to view them as in continued dialogue with realism rather than as postdramatic theatre.

Furthermore, Diamond's work on mimesis in the introduction of *Unmaking Mimesis* posits a dynamic relationship between theatrical representation and reality, which can be used to generate an expanded definition of realism (even if this is not what she intended). Diamond locates a doubleness and inherent instability in mimesis, setting Plato and Aristotle against Luce Irigaray's idea of mimicry as a subversive feminist practice: 'On the one hand, it speaks to our desire for universality, coherence, unity, tradition, and on the other, it unravels that unity through improvisations, embodied rhythm, powerful

[88] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 36-37.
[89] Ibid., pp. 36, 85.

instantiations of subjectivity, and what Plato most dreaded, impersonation, the latter involving outright mimicry'.[90] Nonetheless, despite the problems with mimesis, she admits that

> Theater, like feminism, finds it difficult to rid itself of the mimetic structure […] because the discourse of theater, like the discourse of feminism, cannot rid itself of the temptation to refer, to emplot, to remember, to show. The actor's body cannot forget its gender (in the most exciting feminist practice, performers remember with a vengeance), cannot shake off the referential frame imposed by text, mode of production, and spectators' narrativity (those trajectories of scopic desire that performer and performance text can only partially control).[91]

Rather than abandoning mimesis entirely, she proposes, 'A feminist mimesis, if there is such a thing, [which] would take the relation to the real as productive, not referential, geared to change, not to reproducing the same'.[92] This sense of a dynamic relationship between representation and the real resonates with Brecht's insight that 'Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must change'.[93] The idea of a 'productive […] relation to the real' is further explored in Chapter 1 on RashDash, which also engages in a retheorisation of 'the real' through Judith Butler's work on gender. Although Diamond associates realism with the most politically conservative aspects of mimesis, 'posit[ing] a *truthful* relation between world and word, model and copy, nature and image', I believe that 'feminist mimesis' is not irreconcilable with the expanded conception of realisms I defined in the first part of this introduction.[94] Indeed, rather like Griffiths' awareness that he is writing post-Brecht and that this mediates realism without artists necessarily being

[90] Diamond, p. v.
[91] Ibid., xv.
[92] Ibid., xvi.
[93] Brecht, 'Against Georg Lukacs', p. 51. Diamond's concept of 'feminist mimesis' has proved productive for a number of critics. See, for example, Lauren Bissell, 'There *Is* Such a Thing: Feminist Mimesis in Contemporary Performance in the UK', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 28:4 (2018), 522-536, which applies Diamond's theory to feminist political performance in the UK, including *Cock and Bull* (2015) by Nic Green and Laura Bradshaw.
[94] Elin Diamond, 'Mimesis, Mimicry, and the "True-Real"', *Modern Drama,* 32 (1989), 58-72 (p. 58).

consciously aware of it, we can see the work of theatre-makers such as RashDash, Alice Birch and Ella Hickson as being not just post-Brecht and post-Beckett, but also post- the feminist critique of realism. 'Post' here does not mean departing from, but rather informed and inflected by the critique's discoveries and politics, as they create hybrid and politically engaged forms. The ideas of the feminist critique of realism have permeated beyond academic circles and feminist fringe theatre into the mainstream (or, at least, politically engaged subsidised theatre on main stages), as shall be seen in the discussion of Hickson's *The Writer* in Chapter 3.

Feminist reconsiderations of realism

The feminist critique of realism has proved highly influential on feminist theatre criticism and, arguably, on political theatre criticism more broadly.[95] Elaine Aston and Kim Solga both devote substantial space to it in their introductions to theatre and feminism.[96] Lynette Goddard has countered the tendency in the work of critics such as Case, Dolan and Aston, who often include chapters on Black women's theatre, 'to assume a feminist sensibility in black women's performance without fully interrogating the feminist principles within the work itself and its effect on audiences'.[97] In contrast, Goddard argues that 'black feminist

[95] Helene Keyssar acknowledges the enduring importance of debates around realism and its alternatives in feminist theatre criticism since 1983, when she was finishing the research for her first book on feminist theatre, to the publication of her edited collection, *Feminist Theatre & Theory*, in 1996, which includes essays by Jean Forte, Janelle Reinelt and Loren Kruger that engage with these questions. Helene Keyssar, 'Introduction', *Feminist Theatre and Theory* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 1-18 (pp. 4-7). For the influence of the feminist critique of realism beyond feminist criticism, see, for example, Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier, 'Introduction', *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer*, ed. by Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 1-26, which opposes the 'straight theatre' of realism with 'queer dramaturgies', p. 13.

[96] See Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1995) and Kim Solga, *Theatre & Feminism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

[97] Lynette Goddard, *Staging Black Feminisms: Identity, Politics, Performances* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 3.

performance practice must ultimately be provocative in challenging the racist and (hetero)sexist assumptions of white, hetero-patriarchal, discourses', selecting case studies that demonstrate that 'innovations with form, whether through modified realism or more experimental practices, aid substantially in the production of new meanings'.[98] Nonetheless, in considering what a Black feminist theatre aesthetic would look like, Goddard reiterates the political assumptions of the feminist critique of realism, suggesting that Winsome Pinnock's 'use of realist form limits the possibility of feminist intervention in her plays' and that her representations of Black female characters reproduce stereotypes acceptable to the mainstream.[99] This seems a little unfair on Pinnock, whose plays do include elements that challenge conventional understandings of realism, such as the character of the obeah woman in *Leave Taking* (1987), which shifts the play into magical realism.

In the late 2000s and early 2010s, the original proponents of the feminist critique of realism began to revise their views on realism. In her re-evaluation of the work of Wendy Wasserstein in 2008, Dolan suggests, 'Just as the sharp distinctions among the feminisms have now usefully blurred, realism, too, is often bent and stylized in ways that poke holes in part of its ideological armour. […] While realism might never achieve the cutting critical edge of more Brechtian epic drama, playwrights more frequently fragment its once coherent characters with touches of expressionism and the absurd'.[100] However, this reconsideration of realism and the peace she makes with 'liberal feminism' are not entirely positive. Dolan starts her article with a bleak overview of the decline in the visibility of feminism in the public sphere:

[98] Ibid., p. 54.
[99] Ibid., pp. 11, 80.
[100] Jill Dolan, 'Feminist Criticism and the Popular: Reviewing Wendy Wasserstein.' *Theatre Journal,* 60 (2008), 433-457 (p. 455).

> In 2008, not enough feminist performance work is visible or taken seriously for scholars to make the fine distinctions that once seemed necessary. […] And after eight years of the Bush administration and the taste it has left of the most chilling sorts of ideological conservatism, I believe that progressive feminists can no longer afford to disparage one another's work or split critical hairs about which forms, contexts, and contents do more radically activist work.[101]

This relates to the rise of post-feminism, which Angela McRobbie defines as 'a new kind of anti-feminist sentiment', mobilised by the state and the media, which 'positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed'.[102] Janelle Reinelt reads the work of women playwrights in the 1990s and 2000s through the lens of postfeminism, identifying 'the lack of an energetic and robust political movement, the lack of an identity "woman" with which to align, and the perception of restrictive and detrimental positions associated with feminism' as contributing factors.[103] She identifies 'a decline in feminist dramas' since the 1980s, despite 'the significant success of individual women artists'.[104] Although she does not think that the plays of Sarah Kane, Suzan-Lori Parks and the later works of Caryl Churchill can be described as feminist because they 'seem to lack the overt marks of explicitly feminist commitment', she locates a 'feminist residue' of issues important in Second Wave feminism that have yet to be resolved.[105] In this context, Dolan's article therefore reads more as a call to show feminist

[101] Ibid., p. 435.
[102] Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (London: SAGE, 2009), pp. 1, 12.
[103] Janelle Reinelt, 'Navigating Postfeminism: Writing Out of the Box', in *Feminist Futures? Theatre, Performance, Theory*, ed. by Elaine Aston and Geraldine Harris (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 17-33 (p. 20).
[104] Ibid., p. 21
[105] Ibid., pp. 31, 20.

unity on all fronts, rather than a call to re-evaluate the aesthetic and political potentialities of realism.

The renewed attention Elaine Aston pays to realism in her 2016 article 'Room for Realism', too, seems an act of compromise (both the form and the critical gesture), in response to a hostile political climate. She argues, 'since the late 1990s there has been an increasingly reactionary, neoliberal climate that has meant a far less propitious time for feminism inside and outside the theatre. Consequently, a more inclusive approach is now needed to understand how socially progressive interests, feminist or otherwise, are being addressed in theatre and performance'.[106] She analyses the 'more fluid' applications of realism in Fiona Evans' *Scarborough* (2007), *Free Outgoing* (2007) by Anupama Chandrasekhar and Lucy Kirkwood's *NSFW* (2012) as 'reflect[ing] a shift away from those conservatively formed, phallocentric uses of the genre that were previously the object of feminist criticism'.[107] She therefore hopes, 'Just as the intensification of bourgeois society gave rise to the late nineteenth-century advent of naturalist drama, so the contemporary moment is one in which realism might be deployed to urge dissent from escalating neoliberalism'.[108] Aston's reappraisal is welcome and provides hope for resistance within established political and theatrical systems, yet it does not go far enough and fails to acknowledge that realism has always been a hybrid form.

[106] Elaine Aston, 'Room for Realism?', in *Twenty-First Century Drama: What Happens Now*, ed. by Siân Adiseshiah and Louise LePage (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) pp. 17-35 (p. 19).
[107] Ibid., p. 32.
[108] Ibid., pp. 24-25.

Feminist theatre in the 2010s

In contrast with the professed crisis of feminist theatre in the 1990s and 2000s, the 2010s have seen a resurgence of both feminism in the public discourse and feminist theatre in the UK. Aston declares, 'Over the course of the last decade, feminism as a social movement has become more high profile than it has been since its second wave of activism in the seventies', linked with rising inequalities due to neoliberalism and the 2008 financial crash.[109] This resurgence in feminist activism is partly due to a political context that could be seen as increasingly hostile to women, with the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America in 2016, and the cuts to women and children's services under the austerity policies of successive Conservative governments in the UK from 2010. In response, a fourth wave of feminism has emerged, with high profile advocates in popular culture such as Emma Watson and Beyoncé, an engagement with activism through social media and the internet for activism, an increased attention to intersectionality – particularly spurred by the #BlackLivesMatter movement from 2013 – and more fluid understandings of gender and sexuality, such as support for people to define their own gender legally. Within the entertainment industries, #TimesUp and #MeToo brought issues of sexism and sexual harassment to the fore, including allegations against Max Stafford-Clark, Kevin Spacey and Ramin Gray. Artistic Director of the Royal Court, Vicky Featherstone held a day of town hall meetings in response to the revelations in October 2017, entitled *No Grey Area*, and led efforts across the British theatre industry to formulate codes of behaviour to prevent sexual harassment and ensure adequate reporting mechanisms.[110] In the short term, #MeToo

[109] Elaine Aston, *Restaging Feminisms* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 2.
[110] 'No Grey Area', *Royal Court Theatre* [n.d.]. <royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/no-grey-area-your-stories-heard/> [accessed 3 December 2020]. 'Code of Behaviour', *Royal Court Theatre* [n.d.]. <royalcourttheatre.com/code-of-behaviour/> [accessed 3 December 2020].

generated a large amount of fringe theatre in 2018 exploring topics of sexual violence and female experience, as well as a renewed attention upon gender imbalances in theatre programming.[111] Although many theatres now have stronger harassment policies and reporting mechanisms, the wider impact of #MeToo at the level of institutional change remains to be seen.

Discussions about the continued dominance of a handful of powerful men within the entertainment industry also drew renewed attention to the underrepresentation of women within the theatre industry. Campaigning groups have sprung up, such as Tonic Theatre, which offers gender diversity training to theatre organisations, and ERA 50:50, which called for the equal representation of women and men on the UK stage and screen by 2020 (a goal that has not yet been achieved).[112] Joint Chief Executives of the National Theatre, Rufus Norris and Lisa Berger have committed that, by March 2021, 50% of living writers and 50% of directors on the National Theatre's stages will be female, with an average 50:50 gender balance in terms of casting; 20% of writers and directors will be people of colour and at least 25% of performers.[113] However, the National's commitment to achieving this goal was questioned in 2019 in an open letter signed by 200 playwrights, in response to a half-season

[111] Devised shows *dressed.* by ThisEgg theatre company (Edinburgh Fringe, 2018) and *It's True, It's True, It's True* by Breach Theatre (Edinburgh Fringe, 2018), explored the topic of sexual assault sensitively and with creative theatricality. However, a number of shows in the 2018 Edinburgh Fringe seemed to use #MeToo as a hook. I explore some of the ethical implications of this in Hannah Greenstreet, 'Edinburgh Review: Power Play: The Empty Chair at Pleasance Pop Up', *Exeunt Magazine,* 19 August 2018. <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/edinburgh-review-power-play-empty-chair-pleasance-pop/> [accessed 3 December 2020].

[112] 'About', *Tonic Theatre* [n.d.] <www.tonictheatre.co.uk/#about> [accessed 3 December 2020]. See Lucy Kerbel, *All Change Please: A Practical Guide to Achieving Gender Equality in Theatre*. London: Nick Hern, 2017. Equal Representation for Actresses, 'Our Campaign' <www.era5050.co.uk/our-campaign/> [accessed 3 December 2020].

[113] 'On Our Stages', *National Theatre* [n.d.]. <www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/about-the-national-theatre/diversity/on-our-stages> [accessed 3 December 2020].

programme announcement that did not include any female playwrights.[114] From 2016-2018, Victoria Sadler conducted gender audits of the playwrights programmed in major London subsidised theatres' seasons, including the National, the Royal Court, the Almeida, and the Donmar Warehouse. In 2017, she found that while 10 out of the 17 plays performed at the Royal Court were by women, the National Theatre had 7 out of 21, the Almeida 1 out of 6, and the Old Vic programmed no plays by women.[115] Sadler only considers the gender of playwrights, rather than directors, in her surveys and does not really consider race. Moreover, the snapshot of one year of productions does not necessarily reflect what was commissioned or developed. Yet it is clear that, while some female playwrights are being performed on the mainstages of subsidised theatres, as a whole they remain underrepresented in the theatre industry in the 2010s; the British Theatre Consortium's report on theatre repertoire found that, in 2013, 31% of the new plays that were produced were written by women.[116] Women are also underrepresented in positions of artistic leadership. Although the 2000s have seen several women appointed Artistic Directors of theatres, such as Vicky Featherstone at the Royal Court (2013-), Sarah Frankcom at the Manchester Royal Exchange (2008-19), Ellen McDougall at the Gate Theatre (2017-), and Orla McLoughlin at the Traverse (2012-2019), female leadership of a theatre remains the exception to the norm.[117] Aston is a little sceptical of liberal feminist calls for greater

[114] See Matt Hemley, 'National Theatre bosses recommit to gender equality in face of scathing criticism', *The Stage*. 1 April 2019. <www.thestage.co.uk/news/national-theatre-bosses-recommit-to-gender-equality-in-face-of-scathing-criticism> [accessed 4 December 2020].
[115] Victoria Sadler, '2017 in review: The lot for female playwrights worsens', *Victoria Sadler*, 4 September 2017 <www.victoriasadler.com/2017-in-review-the-lot-for-female-playwrights-worsens/> [accessed 4 October 2017]. Unfortunately, Sadler has now deleted her blog, so this content is no longer available online.
[116] British Theatre Consortium, p. 3.
[117] Sphinx Theatre found that in 2017-18 only 31% of Artistic Directors of theatre NPOs were female and only 21% of NPO funding was controlled by female Artistic Directors in theatre. Sphinx Theatre, 'What Share of the Cake? 2019' (2019), p. 5. <sphinxtheatre.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/What-Share-of-The-Cake...pdf> [accessed 25 January 2021].

representation of women in the industry for its own sake, observing that 'lobbying for more women to move centre stage fails as a feminist strategy if the glass ceiling cracks only to admit a few successful women who then participate in the self-same values that prop up the masculinist and capitalist imagination'; instead, a shift in 'the patriarchal culture of the profession' is required.[118]

In response to the resurgence of feminism in the 2010s in Britain and the USA, a new wave of academic work on feminist theatre and performance has emerged. The 2018 'Feminisms Now' special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review*, edited by Sarah Gorman, Geraldine Harris and Jen Harvie, gives a snapshot of the vitality of the creative and critical work in the field, including articles on Australian aboriginal cabaret troupe Hot Brown Honey; ageing in Peggy Shaw's *Ruff* (2012) and Caryl Churchill's *Escaped Alone* (2016); the #WakingTheFeminists campaign in Ireland; the plays of debbie tucker green; and British-Muslim, feminist theatre. In the introduction to the issue, Gorman, Harris and Harvie convincingly articulate the importance of this work:

> Feminism remains persistently necessary because what also endures are inequalities which feminism aims to redress, inequalities which are gendered, but also related to race, age, class, geopolitical situation, and so much more. Feminism needs sustained, sincere commitment to intersectionalism and to honouring differences. It needs revived commitment to the socialism dedicated to dismantling the socio-economic inequalities which sustain women's oppression, while it also needs to defend against the myopia risked by dominant socialism as much as dominant feminisms. It needs to pay more attention to the profound significations of bodies, not least to recognise and respect embodied differences as well as different traditions, conventions, and commitments of signification. It needs to attend scrupulously to important articulations of feelings, especially, as seen here, legitimate anger and rage, even as it seeks joy.[119]

[118] Aston, *Restaging Feminisms*, pp. 9, 18.
[119] Sarah Gorman, Geraldine Harris and Jen Harvie, 'Feminisms Now', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 28 (2018), 278-284 (p. 283).

As seen in this issue, much of the recently published feminist work is intersectional in terms of race and sexuality and, to a lesser extent, (dis)ability and class, and international in scope. Recent publications from the IFTR Feminist Research Working Group, such as their edited collection, *Performance, Affect and Feminism in Neoliberal Times* (2017), which contends 'the nexus of feminism, performance, and affect constitutes a powerful, activist engagement with contemporary life, and presents some of the most courageous acts of opposition to the depredations of existence in neoliberal times', also demonstrate an affective turn in feminist performance criticism.[120]

Elaine Aston continues this emphasis in her most recent book, *Restaging Feminisms* (2020), combining it with a re-animation of the tripartite model of feminisms (liberal, radical, materialist), through which she reads contemporary British plays. She is particularly drawn to Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's *Emilia* (2018), affected by its anger at patriarchal injustice. She concludes that, 'Irrespective of genre, style or venue, the potential political efficacy of all the theatre explored in *Restaging Feminisms* resides in its capacity to generate the "production of [feminist] ideas with the power to affect" (Mouffe 2018: 75)'.[121] Aston valuably documents recent plays by women that engage with feminist ideas, such as Laura Wade's *Home, I'm Darling* (2018) and Nina Raine's *Consent* (2017), but her approach focuses on content to a neglect of theatrical form. Although the importance of affect should not be underestimated, neither should the intellectual aspects of form for their capacity to unsettle preconceived ideas. Ironically, both *Home, I'm Darling* and *Consent* are closer to the 'classic' realism that Aston once criticised, leading to quite a straightforward

[120] Elin Diamond, Denise Varney and Candice Amich, 'Introduction', in *Performance, Feminism and Affect in Neoliberal Times*, ed. by Elin Diamond, Denise Varney and Candice Amich (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 1-12 (p. 5).
[121] Aston, *Restaging Feminisms*, p. 110.

presentation of ideas – for example the debate between the second-wave feminist mother, Sylvia and her daughter, Judy, living out her 1950s domestic-goddess fantasy in *Home, I'm Darling*.

In a slightly different emphasis from some recent feminist theatre criticism, this thesis will engage more with feminist theatre aesthetics and theories rather than considering how plays thematise the political ideas of feminism. As Lizbeth Goodman suggests, there are multiple feminist theatres and multiple feminisms.[122] It is therefore important to have a diversity of approaches within the field. I have chosen to focus on productions that seem to respond to issues suggested by the feminist critique of realism, whether or not their makers are familiar with the academic expression of these ideas.[123] Therefore these productions are not necessarily consciousness-raising or proposing change in straightforward ways but use theatrical techniques, in Dolan's words, 'to disrupt the narratives of gender ideology, to denaturalize gender as representation, and to demystify the workings of the genderized representation apparatus itself'.[124] Although it is important to avoid generalising about the political capacities of theatrical forms out of context, these plays have some aesthetic similarities in their self-awareness of the representational strategies they deploy (for example, the metatheatrical shifts in *The Writer*, and the deconstructive turn at the end of *Two Man Show*, in which Abbi and Helen question the premise of the show). This enables the plays to mount, again in Dolan's words, 'a critique of prevailing social conditions that formulate women's position as outside of dominant male

[122] Lizbeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatres: To Each Her Own* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 2.
[123] Until I interviewed them, both RashDash and Ella Hickson were unfamiliar with the feminist critique of realism. However, both articulated an instinctive feminist critique of established theatrical conventions. This is testament to the influence of the feminist theatre tradition that resists realism and also could suggest that key ideas from feminist theatre criticism have been absorbed beyond the academy. Another example of the popularization of an idea from feminist theory is the concept of the male gaze.
[124] Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, p. 101.

discourse'.[125] This accords with Goodman's broad definition of feminist theatre as 'political theatre oriented toward change, produced by women with feminist concerns'.[126] As shall be seen in the thesis, precisely how the status quo is critiqued and how the productions are oriented towards change (and whether that change is considered possible) varies between practitioners.

Selection of case studies

Instead of the breadth of a survey, which often does not leave space for considered formal analysis, I have chosen depth, focusing in detail on close analysis of five productions that I hope will be illustrative of the key issues. I have chosen to focus on the work of RashDash, Alice Birch and Ella Hickson because they have all expressed a commitment to feminism and a belief in the importance of theatrical form for shaping the politics of a play. Reflecting upon the increasing importance of form in her plays, Ella Hickson has stated that form 'is the point at which all subversion operates'.[127] Although Ella Hickson has expressed wariness about the lazy labelling of plays by women as 'feminist', observing 'if a woman happens to write a play with a woman in it, it gets called feminist', many of her recent plays explore gender politics in intersection with other issues, such as geopolitics and imperialism in *Oil* (Almeida, 2016), capitalism in *The Writer* (Almeida, 2018) and power and monarchy in *Swive: Elizabeth* (Globe, 2019).[128] RashDash have defined themselves as a feminist company from their beginnings, addressing issues ranging from pornography in *We Want You to*

[125] Ibid., p. 3.
[126] Goodman, p. 1.
[127] Ella Hickson, interview by Hannah Greenstreet (22 March 2019, Oxford) [unpublished].
[128] Gwendolyn Smith, 'Ella Hickson on her new play Anna: "If a woman happens to write a play with women in it, it gets called feminist"', *INews*, 21 May 2019. <inews.co.uk/culture/anna-national-theatre-ella-hickson-interview-29319> [8 December 2020].

Watch (National Theatre, 2015) to masculinity in *Two Man Show* (Edinburgh Fringe, 2016).[129] They reflected that, in working with Alice Birch on *We Want You to Watch* (2015), 'the idea of form being as political as content became really apparent' and has influenced their practice since; finding the right form 'became a real, fundamental part of how we make a show'.[130] Alice Birch's most explicitly feminist play, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2014) was inspired, in part, by Valerie Solanas's *SCUM Manifesto* (1967).[131] Feminist politics undergird Birch's work more generally, from her attention to a woman's life under patriarchy in *Ophelias Zimmer* to her play *[BLANK]* (National Theatre, 2018; Donmar Warehouse, 2019), which explores the impact of the criminal justice and care systems upon women and children through a fractured form.[132]

My choice of artists also allows me to explore a range of theatre practices and styles. Chapter 1 explores RashDash's collaborative devising process in *Two Man Show* and *Three Sisters* (Yard Theatre, 2018). Chapter 2 examines Alice Birch's close collaboration with director Katie Mitchell and set designers Chloe Lamford and Alex Eales on the productions of *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide*. Chapter 3 focuses on a more traditional new writing relationship between writer and director in Blanche McIntyre's production of Hickson's *The Writer* at the Almeida. As yet, little criticism beyond reviews has been

[129] See Maddy Costa, 'RashDash: Punking feminist theatre', *Guardian*, 22 January 2014 <www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jan/22/rashdash-ugly-sisters-feminist-theatre> [accessed 4 December 2020].
[130] Catherine Love, 'RashDash' [podcast], *Theatre Voice*, 31 May 2018. <www.theatrevoice.com/audio/rashdash/> [accessed 10 March 2020].
[131] Andrew Dickson, 'Alice Birch: "Being called an armchair feminist made me furious"', *Guardian*, 22 January 2015 <www.theguardian.com/stage/2015/jan/22/alice-birch-playwright-interview-we-want-you-to-watch> [accessed 4 December 2020].
[132] For more on *[BLANK]*, see Hannah Greenstreet, 'Review: [BLANK] at the Donmar Warehouse', *Exeunt Magazine*, 20 October 2019. <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-blank-donmar-warehouse/> [accessed 8 December 2020].

published on these artists, although there are signs that this is changing, suggesting the relevance of this thesis as a contribution to critical dialogue.[133]

The choice of productions is also driven, in part, by practical concerns. All, except *Ophelias Zimmer*, premiered in London or Edinburgh during the period 2016-2019. I am writing about work that I have seen, often more than once, either in person or in archival recordings, or both. In my work as a theatre reviewer and, since 2018, co-editor of *Exeunt Magazine*, I have encountered and written about many more feminist and queer performances, often on the Fringe, than can be included in the thesis; this immersion in the London contemporary theatre scene has informed and enriched my thinking throughout the process of research and writing. It has also allowed me to develop and reflect upon my own practice as a 'feminist spectator as critic'.[134] While I often review the work of emerging companies, I consciously chose more established artists, who have built up a body of work and worked with larger venues, for my case studies, firstly because of the greater availability of reviews, published scripts and archival material, and secondly as being more likely to result in a contribution to established critical conversations in contemporary theatre studies.

[133] The special issue of *Contemporary Theatre Review* on Katie Mitchell included an essay on *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide*. Tom Cornford and Caridad Svich eds, 'Katie Mitchell', *Contemporary Theatre Review* (2020), 30:2, 135-302. A conference on experimental forms in the work of contemporary British women playwrights included a panel on Ella Hickson and papers on Alice Birch. 'The New Wave of British Women Playwrights Experimenting with Forms', Sorbonne Université, Paris/ Online, 11-12 December 2020.

[134] Here, I have been influenced by Jill Dolan's spanning of academic criticism and blogging. It should be noted that the limited word counts and tight deadlines of theatre reviewing, even for an experimental publication like *Exeunt*, is rather different from the slow criticism enabled by a PhD thesis, which affords the space for thoughts about a production to marinate over several months or even years. I regard my reviews as a first draft of my thoughts on a production, though sometimes these can change over time, especially given the complexity of the productions explored here. For example, while I initially responded to *The Writer* with anger and disappointment, I now regard it as a challenging and complex play. See Hannah Greenstreet, 'Anger, Ambivalence and Ella Hickson's *The Writer* (2018), Backpages, *Contemporary Theatre Review* 29.3, 343-354. On slow criticism, see Hannah Greenstreet, 'Redux Review: Anatomy of a Suicide', *Exeunt Magazine*, 18 August 2020. <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/redux-review-anatomy-suicide/> [accessed 14 December 2020].

There are, of course, many other women playwrights making formally experimental work that I could have chosen. Aside from Caryl Churchill, Lucy Kirkwood has pushed formal conventions in her plays, *The Children* (Royal Court, 2016), which, like its tilted set, has realism slightly askew in its exploration of our responsibility to the environment; *Mosquitoes* (National Theatre, 2017), which constellates birth and the Big Bang in its exploration of a relationship between two sisters, one of whom is a scientist working on the Hadron Collider; and her large cast play, *The Welkin* (National Theatre, 2019), which subtly and disconcertingly inserts anachronisms into a play set in the eighteenth century.[135] Kirkwood's work is notable for its scope and scale (even smaller cast plays like *The Children* explore huge themes), an interest that Lucy Prebble shares. In recent years, Prebble has worked more in TV and games than theatre. Nonetheless, her most recent play, *A Very Expensive Poison* (Old Vic, 2019), recounts the poisoning of Alexander Litvinenko by the Russian state through a combination of techniques from documentary theatre and subversive cabaret, reimagining political theatre.[136] E.V. Crowe has used form to explore women's experiences under neoliberalism in *The Sewing Group* (Royal Court, 2016), which ultimately reveals that the pre-industrial village in which most of the play is set is an elaborate corporate training event, and *Shoe Lady* (Royal Court, 2020), a surreal not-quite monologue about losing one's grip that ends with a talking tree.[137] There are also, it should be noted, plenty of formally experimental male playwrights, including Tim Crouch and

[135] See Ava Wong Davies, 'Review: The Welkin at National Theatre', *Exeunt Magazine*, 24 January 2020. <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-welkin-national-theatre/> [accessed 8 December 2020].
[136] See Michael Billington, 'A Very Expensive Poison review – Lucy Prebble's Litvinenko drama fascinates'. *Guardian*. 6 September 2019. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/sep/06/a-very-expensive-poison-review-lucy-prebble-litvinenko> [accessed 8 December 2020].
[137] See Hannah Greenstreet, 'Review: Shoe Lady at the Royal Court', *Exeunt Magazine*, 12 March 2020 <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-shoe-lady-royal-court/> [accessed 8 December 2020].

Martin Crimp, whose work has attracted sustained critical attention.[138] Some of their plays explore gendered experience, such as Crimp's *When We Have Sufficiently Tortured Each Other* (National Theatre, 2019), which reimagines Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* as a sadomasochistic relationship, and Crouch's *Adler & Gibb* (Royal Court, 2014), which, to some extent, considers the interplay of gender and artistic creation in the myth of the reclusive, lesbian artists Adler and Gibb. Although they engage less centrally with ideas from the feminist critique of realism than my chosen case studies, all these plays suggest how widespread experiments with form are in contemporary British theatre. It is my hope that the method of feminist formalist analysis I develop across the thesis can be used to begin to understand and analyse other new writing.

Parallel to the feminist critique of realism, recent plays by debbie tucker green and Jackie Sibblies Drury pose politically challenging experiments with realism that focus on race, racialised representation, and racism. debbie tucker green has received considerable critical attention in contemporary theatre studies for her experiments with language in plays that have often been read as critiques of neoliberalism.[139] Her most recent play, *ear for eye* (Royal Court, 2018) comprises three parts. Part one is a series of short scenes between Black characters in the UK and USA, exploring, among other things, police brutality, protest and intergenerational tensions within activism. In part two, a Black woman, possibly a student, attempts to get an older white man to admit that the killings he

[138] See Vicky Angelaki, *The Plays of Martin Crimp: Making Theatre Strange* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Delgado-Garcia, *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre*, Chapter 4. My sense is that, as well as being underrepresented on UK stages, women playwrights are also somewhat underrepresented in contemporary theatre scholarship, hence my decision to centre plays by women.

[139] See Angelaki, *Social and Political Theatre*, Chapter 7; Siân Adiseshiah and Jaqueline Bolton ed., *debbie tucker green: Critical Perspectives* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Trish Reid, '"Killing Joy as a World Making Project": Anger in the Work of debbie tucker green', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 28:3 (2018), 390-400.

characterises as random acts of violence are part of a wider system of white supremacy. The third part is a film installation, in which white actors read out excerpts from Jim Crow laws and British and French slave codes. As a whole, the play communicates affectively the violence of institutionalised racism and white supremacy upon Black people, which accumulates over the course of the play through repetition, such as a repeated, elliptical scene in which a mother has 'the talk' with her son about what to do if he is stopped by the police. The shifts between representational modes and concomitant senses of reality are particularly powerful, the placement of the film asserting the direct connection between contemporary racism and the legacies of slavery and colonialism. Rather different in style, the first act of Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* (UK premiere: Young Vic, 2019) recalls *The Cosby Show* in its naturalistic depiction of an upper-class African American family preparing to celebrate their matriarch's birthday. However, through a voiceover, white characters begin to comment on and mock the action, eventually intruding onto the stage to make the Black characters conform to the racial stereotypes they hold (for example, that the husband must be unfaithful; that the teenage daughter is pregnant). In the final moments of the play, the white members of the audience are invited to come up onto the stage, while the Black actors leave the stage to join the people of colour in the audience. This coup de théâtre makes visible and challenges the operation of the white gaze within naturalistic drama and beyond the theatre and attempts to reverse this power dynamic, albeit fleetingly.

It is important to recognise that not only has realism been considered a patriarchal form but that it also has been associated with whiteness and the West, particularly as it is manifested through the classics. This is explored and countered in postcolonial adaptations of the classics, such as Inua Ellams's Nigerian *Three Sisters* (National Theatre, 2019), which I discuss further in Chapter 1. Tanika Gupta's decision to set her version of *A Doll's House*

(Lyric Theatre, 2019) in 1879 India, making Tom (Torvald) a British colonial bureaucrat with an Indian wife, Niru (Nora), sharpens the gender politics of Ibsen's play by exploring its intersections with race and class. Both adaptations are facilitated by the form and content of the source texts to pose their postcolonial critiques.

Notwithstanding the arguments that realism is a white Western form, there are a number of Black and Asian playwrights who work successfully within existing conventions of realism. For example, Natasha Gordon's *Nine Night* (National Theatre, 2018), which transferred to the West End, focused on the tensions within a Jamaican-British family during the nine-night wake for the family matriarch, Gloria. Imran Qureshi's Papatango prize-winning play, *The Funeral Director* (Southwark Playhouse, 2018), used a conventional realist form to represent a Muslim woman funeral director rediscovering her feelings towards a female school friend after refusing to bury a gay Muslim man.[140] These plays suggest that realism continues to fulfil the function of 'social extension', representing people and experiences that are not normally shown onstage, and that the form does retain the radical potential that Stowell identified in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century uses.

Feminist formalism?

Although the conjunction of feminism and formalism might seem an oxymoron, the feminist critique of realism has modelled a materialist feminist approach to theatrical production. In this thesis, I therefore bring together attention to theatrical form with attention to the politics of gender. From the chapters that follow it will become clear that I am defining

[140] See Hannah Greenstreet, 'Review: The Funeral Director at Southwark Playhouse', *Exeunt Magazine*, 8 November 2018 <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-funeral-director-southwark-playhouse/> [accessed 9 December 2020].

theatrical form as something broader than the merely literary or, indeed, something that resides in the play-text alone. John McGrath captures this in his conviction that 'the language of the theatrical event' is far more than text; theatre is, in his view, a fundamentally 'social event': 'For not only must the text, mise-en-scene, lighting, performances, casting, music, effects, placing on the stage all be taken into account in order to arrive at a description of a stage event, but also the nature of the audience, the nature, social, geographical and physical, of the value, the price of tickets, the availability of tickets, the nature and placing of the pre-publicity, where the nearest pub is, and the relationships between all these considerations themselves and of each with what is happening on stage'.[141] While I do not go quite as far as considering pub locations, I analyse the plays in production, considering the plays' realisation in performance as a crucial part of their forms, as well as audience response.

Recent work in literary and theatre studies has also turned towards a more social understanding of form. In the introduction to *Postdramatic Theatre and Form* (2019), Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish and Brandon Woolf identify a suspicion of formalism, or approaches that centre form, within theatre studies as apolitical and/ or removed from an understanding of the context in which the work was made.[142] They suggest that this can be traced back to the origins of Drama as a distinct discipline in the 1950s and 60s, breaking from literature departments in the grip of New Criticism.[143] Combining Marxist attention to the means of (theatrical and economic) production and work in literary studies by Caroline Levine, Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant, they define form as

[141] John McGrath, *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre, Audience, Class and Form* (London: Methuen, 1981), p. 5.
[142] Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish and Brandon Woolf, 'Introduction', in *Postdramatic Theatre and Form*, ed. by Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish and Brandon Woolf (London: Methuen, 2019), pp. 1-19 (p. 7).
[143] Ibid., p. 8.

> integral rather than incidental to theatre, originating theatre rather than ornamenting it. Instead of sealing theatre off from society, form is what theatre and society share. Form names more than just practices of representation and meaning making within the theatre; it also encompasses the modes of production, consumption and circulation that give shape to and are shaped by theatre. Paying attention to matters of form does not mean ignoring how theatre can be political; at the same time, however, formalism requires considering how theatre engages with the reproduction of social life beyond the specific sphere of politics.[144]

It is worth noting that Hans-Thies Lehmann proposes a very different formulation of politics and form for postdramatic theatre than that of traditional understandings of political theatre, declaring that 'the truly political dimension of theatre has its place not so much in the thematising of politically burning subject matters […] as in the situation, the relation, the social moment which theatre as such is able to constitute'.[145] However, this has been criticised by Janelle Reinelt, among others, for 'shifting attention away from any direct connection between theatre and political life outside the theatre, and turning attention inward to the processes of the theatrical apparatus itself and its internal politics', a point of view I am inclined to agree with.[146] Any claim for the politics of theatre must reside in the conjunction of form and content. Therefore, although Boyle, Woolf and Cornish's approach productively expands the ways in which theatre can be considered political, I cannot accept all its implications.

Whereas political theatre has traditionally been understood in Britain as theatre that, in Amelia Howe Kritzer's words, 'presents or constructs a political issue or comments on what is already perceived as a political issue', Sarah Grochala argues that contemporary plays can have a 'politics of form as opposed to a politics of content' (or even, she implies,

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[144] Ibid., p. 15.
[145] Hans-Thies Lehmann, 'Postdramatic Theatre: A Decade Later', in *Dramatic and Postdramatic Theater Ten Years After: Conference Proceedings*, ed. by Ivan Medenica (Belgrade: Faculty of Dramatic Arts, 2011), pp. 31-46 (p. 35).
[146] Janelle Reinelt, 'Performance at the Crossroads of Citizenship', in *The Grammar of Politics and Performance*, ed. by Shirin M. Rai and Janelle Reinelt (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 34–50 (p. 35).

regardless of their content).[147] She argues that the realist dramaturgy of 'serious drama' which is considered political theatre in Britain is out of touch with experiences under neoliberalism. Therefore, she champions experimental dramatic forms that capture the experience of 'liquid modernity', through simultaneous understandings of time, plot structures that resist linear causation and challenge traditional conventions of character.[148] She suggests,

> In order to create political change, the social subject needs to be able to imagine how their social reality could be structured differently. A play that articulates a politics of form, reimagining the structure of social reality through its structures, allows the social subject to access a vision of a world structured on fundamentally different principles.[149]

Although Grochala's readings of individual plays are often compelling, I find the theories she extrapolates from them unconvincing, particularly the idea that form can be analysed in isolation. This is partly because Grochala has incorporated, seemingly unconsciously and without challenge, the idea prevalent in the feminist critique of realism that merely by representing the world, theatre reinforces the dominant way of things and precludes change, albeit with a slightly different inflection: the dramatic structures we have inherited are no longer adequate to accurately represent contemporary reality. Moreover, I suggest that many of the experimental dramaturgical techniques she identifies in contemporary drama are still in conversation with realism and are not complete departures from it.

Cristina Delgado-Garcia's approach to accounting for formal developments in contemporary theatre is more persuasive. She rethinks the conventions of character

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[147] Sarah Grochala, *The Contemporary Political Play: Rethinking Dramaturgical Structure* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2017), p. 17. Amelia Howe Kritzer, *Political Theatre in Post-Thatcher Britain: New Writing, 1995-2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 10.
[148] Grochala, p. 17.
[149] Ibid., p. 22.

alongside theories of subjectivity that go beyond the assumptions of liberal humanism, including the work of Judith Butler, Jacques Rancière, and Alain Badiou. She writes,

> The ultimate aim is to offer a less prescriptive definition of character – namely, that character can be any figuration of subjectivity in theatre, regardless of how it looks on the page, of how it is materialised (or not) on the stage, and irrespective also of the idea of subjectivity it figures. The central thesis of this book is that, so long as a notion of subjectivity is evoked, presented or induced in a text or performance, character remains.[150]

She is not abandoning character as a term but arguing that we need to expand what it can mean in order to reflect contemporary theatre practice, such as the work of Tim Crouch and Sarah Kane. My project adopts a parallel approach with the term 'realism'. Crucially, in my case studies, realisms are placed in dialogue with contrasting forms such as dance and metatheatre, or otherwise drawn attention to as forms. Because these playwrights are deliberately deploying elements of realism for the form's specific aesthetic, political and historical associations it does not make sense to abandon realism as a term, even though the plays about which I write would not be regarded as conventionally realist. The very instability of the term and the difficulties around definition, in fact, make it a dynamic term to have in play.

Methodology

As has been demonstrated by this critical survey, my work draws heavily on feminist criticism and Marxist-inflected formalist approaches. The thesis as a whole offers a significant contribution to retheorising the politics of theatrical form. When I started researching this PhD, very little academic criticism had been published on RashDash, Alice

[150] Cristina Delgado-Garcia, *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), p. xii.

Birch and Ella Hickson. I have therefore relied heavily upon reviews, both for critical perspectives and for some indication of audience reception, as well as other online ephemera, such as blogs, newspaper, YouTube and podcast interviews with artists, theatre publicity materials and programmes, and sometimes social media.[151] This research has been made easier by the contributions of several feminist critics and editors within the journalism industry who have ensured that work by women is covered. These include Lyn Gardner at the *Guardian* till 2018 and *StageDoor*, Alice Saville of *TimeOut* and *Exeunt*, Natasha Tripney of *The Stage*, Holly Williams of the *Independent*, and Maddy Costa. Their reviews appear often in the thesis and provide crucial documentation of and first critical reflection on some of these productions.

I also conducted interviews with Helen Goalen and Abbi Greenland of RashDash, Hattie Morahan and Kate O'Flynn (actors in Katie Mitchell's Royal Court production of *Anatomy of a Suicide*), Blanche McIntyre and Ella Hickson, and Lyn Gardner (on her critical reception of RashDash's work).[152] These interviews provided original insights into practices and production processes that inform my analysis in the thesis.

Although this thesis contains no practice-as-research, my interest in and understanding of theatrical form emerges, in part, from my practice as a playwright, which

[151] Although the National Theatre Archive and the V&A Theatre & Performance archive both preserve clippings from productions, including printouts of online reviews, as do individual theatres, much of this material has not yet been archived and risks never being archived, partly due to the ephemerality of digital media, partly due to budgetary constraints. One of the contributions of this thesis is therefore capturing a rich cross-section of feminist theatre practice and its reception in the late 2010s.

[152] I also spoke to Alice Birch off the record, but she did not give me permission to quote from the conversation as she finds it very uncomfortable to think too much about critical interpretations of her work. In one of the few media interviews she has given, she mused, 'It's weird that my job becomes such a public thing because it's so intensely private. It doesn't work for me to imagine it meaning anything to anyone else ever'. Alice Jones, 'Alice Birch on her impossible new play, *Succession* and adapting Sally Rooney for TV: "I feel sick"'. *INews*. 16 October 2019 <inews.co.uk/culture/arts/alice-birch-blank-donmar-warehouse-succession-story-editor-normal-people-351442> [accessed 4 January 2021]. Katie Mitchell unfortunately did not respond to my requests for interview, but this was less of a challenge because she has given several published interviews.

has allowed me to test out some of my ideas on gender and form. Like several of the writers studied in this thesis, I see finding the right shape in which to explore the subject matter a crucial moment in the generation of a new play.

Chapter summaries

The first chapter explores gendered representation in the work of feminist, physical theatre company, RashDash. Through their combination of performance styles and forms, their emphasis on their (often naked) female bodies, and their use of autobiography, RashDash reveal a constantly shifting relationship between theatrical representation and the world by playing with the real. In *Two Man Show* (2016), a realist play-within-a-play about brothers Dan and John, performed in drag, is set against naked dance sequences, in order to experiment with alternative performances of gender identity. Drawing on Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (2011), I analyse Helen Goalen and Abbi Greenland's bodies in performance as bringing together discursive and embodied manifestations of sex and gender. *Three Sisters* (2018), an irreverent and playful response to Anton Chekhov's play, explores the 'weight' of the male-dominated theatrical canon on female creatives, from programming decisions to the value system upheld by reviewers. In dramatising their search for alternative dramaturgies, RashDash create a piece of creative, feminist criticism on Chekhov's play. RashDash's recycling and ironising of realist techniques in both *Two Man Show* and *Three Sisters* complicates Diamond's assumption that realism must be completely disavowed by feminist theatre-makers. Realism and the Classics become something to cannibalise, react against and improvise upon.

The second chapter examines the construction of character in Katie Mitchell and Alice Birch's theatrical collaborations, responding to Diamond's critique of nineteenth-century naturalist plays as pathologising their female characters. While *Ophelias Zimmer* (2015) might seem to promise a forensic dissection of the character Ophelia, I argue the affectless performance style cultivated by director Katie Mitchell deliberately frustrates such a pathologising impulse, denying the audience insight into Ophelia's mind. The simultaneous structure of *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017) challenges the structural inevitability often associated with naturalism; rather than suggesting that the propensity to commit suicide is inherited from mother to daughter, the theatrical device of staging three storylines at once asserts subtler, affective connections between the characters. I argue that both plays deploy and extend elements of naturalism – including its historical associations – in order to subvert the patriarchal gender politics often associated with the form.

Through the form of her recent plays, *Oil* (2016), *The Writer* (2018), and *ANNA* (2019), Ella Hickson has resisted 'a received idea of realism that is built on capitalism and therefore patriarchy'.[153] The third chapter examines how Ella Hickson uses theatrical form to activate female desire in her play *The Writer* (Almeida Theatre, 2018), juxtaposing it with the capitalist, patriarchal desire she suggests structures commercial theatre-making. Indeed, the first scene of *The Writer* seems to give dramatic expression to the feminist critique of realism. A young female writer confronts a male director, exposing and critiquing the gendered power dynamics that structure mainstream British theatre. The form of Hickson's play as a whole, which shifts disconcertingly between scenes, also departs from the conventions of character and structure associated with realism. The central monologue,

[153] Hickson and Greenstreet interview.

which centres on female desire and rejects the established world of the play, models a form through which the female writer can express her subjective experience of reality and reimagine society. Yet the return to a more traditional manifestation of realism in the final scene is used to register the gap between the world as it is and the world as it could be, acknowledging the material restrictions that impede societal change. In its testing of multiple realisms, *The Writer* complicates the assumption of the feminist critique of realism that only certain forms have feminist potential.

Chapter 1: Playing with the real: Representing gender and gendered representations in RashDash's *Two Man Show* and *Three Sisters*

This chapter is about the dynamic relation between the real and its representation, particularly in relation to gender. Whereas Diamond has characterised realism as a kind of representational short-circuit, which cannot help but reinforce the dominant world view in its representation of (an ideologically inflected version of) reality, I suggest that experiments with realism are not incompatible with her concept of feminist mimesis, which would 'take the relation to the real as productive, not referential, geared to change, not to reproducing the same'.[1] RashDash's work speaks to and reanimates two key areas of debate within feminist theatre criticism. The first half of the chapter, on *Two Man Show*, engages with representing gender, specifically how to represent female subjective experience within performance, how to stage the female body without playing into the male gaze, and how to represent gender without reifying it into binaries. The second half of the chapter, on *Three Sisters*, engages with gendered representation: feminist debates around canonicity and the (mis/under-)representation of women in canonical works in the theatrical repertoire. RashDash's work provides particularly fertile soil for exploring these ideas due to their dual commitments to feminism and formal experimentation. While it would be a challenge to characterise RashDash's shows as realist, *Two Man Show* and *Three Sisters* both deploy the real, and also put alternative forms, such as dance, in dialogue with realism.

[1] Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, *Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 4-5, xvi.

Introduction to RashDash

RashDash was formed in 2009 by Helen Goalen and Abbi Greenland, who met studying Drama at the University of Hull.[2] The company has become known for combining movement with music and text to create formally adventurous, playful, highly physical and increasingly politically engaged theatre.[3] In summer 2017, their long-time collaborator, musician Becky Wilkie, joined the company as a core member. RashDash's process for making work is grounded in collaborative devising, combining research, improvisation through movement, strong visual images, writing and musical improvisation. During their more than ten-year collaboration, Goalen and Greenland have developed a distinctive style of movement together, which falls somewhere between contemporary dance and physical theatre. In their creative process and their work, they stress 'the SENSUAL EXPERIENCE of being a body, as well as the CEREBRAL EXPERIENCE of being a brain. We know things in our toes, our knees, our ribs as well as in our heads'.[4] RashDash's emphasis on embodied knowledge and nonverbal communication contrasts with a perceived emphasis on the literary text to the exclusion of the physical in contemporary British new writing.[5] As Greenland explains, in an

[2] RashDash, 'What we do'. <www.rashdash.co.uk/what-we-do/> [accessed 10 March 2020].
[3] For more on RashDash's style, see Maddy Costa, 'RashDash: Punking feminist theatre', *Guardian*, 22 January 2014. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jan/22/rashdash-ugly-sisters-feminist-theatre> [accessed 7 September 2020].
[4] RashDash, 'What we do'. Goalen and Greenland describe the process of making *Two Man Show* in Jessie Thompson, 'RashDash: Meet the feminist theatre company thrashing thought against feeling to dismantle the patriarchy', *Evening Standard*, 9 September 2016. <www.standard.co.uk/go/london/theatre/rashdash-meet-the-feminist-theatre-company-using-thought-and-feeling-to-dismantle-the-patriarchy-a3341296.html> [8 March 2018].
[5] In *Devising Theatre*, Alison Oddey asserts that 'British post-war theatre has almost always been text-led, originating with the playwright and emphasising the written word', suggesting that 'Devised theatre is an alternative to the dominant literary theatre tradition, which is the conventionally accepted form of theatre dominated by the often patriarchal, hierarchical relationship of playwright and director'. Alison Oddey, *Devising Theatre: A Practical and Theoretical Handbook* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 4. Yet Heddon and Milling argue that Oddey exaggerates devising companies' hostility to text, as many use text as a stimulus for their work, and they also question her assumption that devised theatre is inherently more democratic than pre-scripted theatre, as many of these companies are held together by a director. Deirdre Heddon and Jane Milling, *Devising Performance: A Critical History*. Revised edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp.

interview with Catherine Love, 'We've always been quite suspicious of text, of verbal language'.[6] The hybrid forms of RashDash's shows are characterised by a juxtaposition of different modes of expression; text makes up only one part of their theatricality. Nonetheless, Goalen and Greenland observe that collaborating with playwright Alice Birch on *We Want You to Watch* (National Theatre Shed, 2015), which departed from the bold premise of attempting to end pornography and ended up revealing the complexities of that ambition, caused them to re-evaluate their attitude to text. Goalen recalls that, 'the idea of form being as political as content became really apparent and […] that became a real kind of fundamental part of how we make a show is going, what is the right form to express what we want to say'.[7] Like Birch and Ella Hickson, then, RashDash are interested in form as an integral part of a show's meaning and politics, despite the differences between the forms they deploy. As in Hickson's *The Writer*, RashDash's shows demonstrate self-awareness in their theatricality, often turning outwards to the audience and deconstructing the forms they deploy. Greenland calls this 'putting our dilemma into the form and having that conversation we were having as makers onstage'.[8]

From their inception, RashDash have described themselves as a feminist company; the 'Values' section of their website declares, 'We will DISMANTLE THE PATRIARCHY'.[9] Given the importance of the physical to their practice, RashDash also work with and from their

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7, 47. Dan Rebellato has convincingly challenged the characterisation of theatre as 'literary'. Dan Rebellato, 'What's Wrong with Playwriting?', TORCH Theatre and Performance Research Network, University of Oxford, 12 November 2019.

[6] Catherine Love, 'RashDash: 'We're still a huge risk for some buildings', *The Stage*, 20 April 2017. <www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2017/rashdash-were-still-a-huge-risk-for-some-buildings/> [accessed 8 March 2018].

[7] Ibid.

[8] Helen Goalen and Abbi Greenland, 'RashDash in conversation'. Cambridge Interdisciplinary Performance Network, Centre for Research in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Cambridge, 6 February 2018.

[9] Capitals RashDash's emphasis. RashDash, 'Values' [n.d. but written after Becky Wilkie joined the company] <www.rashdash.co.uk/values> [accessed 7 September 2020].

embodied identities, declaring on their website, 'We are women and we talk, move, write and make as women'.[10] Greenland reflects that their sense of what it means to be a feminist company has shifted over the last ten years:

> Our early work was about going, 'women's stories aren't told so much, we need to tell stories about being women, and being a woman is a really important central part of the stories that we're telling'. And as we go on it feels like we're in a really different place, which is a really good place to be, which is to go, 'I want the fact that I'm a woman to be irrelevant to this'. I just want to tell stories that I want to tell and we don't need to talk about the fact that I've got a vagina because that's where we're all trying to get to, right? […] That we can all assume this sense of being universal.[11]

The development in approach that Greenland describes hinges on different approaches to the political and artistic representation of women, a key issue in feminist criticism and theatre.[12] Greenland's description of RashDash's approach to making work 'tell[ing] stories about being women' and the importance they give to the body recalls Jill Dolan's description of cultural feminist theatre and live art, which 'posits the female body as a radical site of opposition to male models' and searches for an embodied *écriture féminine* or female form in opposition to dominant 'male' ones.[13] The second approach Greenland proposes, her idea of 'being universal' (and expanding the category of universal to accommodate everyone), recalls the 'liberal feminist' position, which Dolan characterises as 'accept[ing] the notion that theatre communicates universally and prefer[ing] not to be

[10] RashDash, 'What we do'.
[11] Abbi Greenland, interview with Hannah Greenstreet (London, 25 February 2020).
[12] For more on the vexed issue of representation in feminism, see Keya Ganguly, 'Accounting for Others: Feminism and Representation', in *Women Making Meaning: New Feminist Directions in Communication*, ed. by Lana Rakow (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 60-79.
[13] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 2nd edn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), p. 83. Dolan is suspicious of cultural feminism because of its tendency to essentialise the category of woman and conflate sex and gender, reversing the gender hierarchy rather than breaking down the binaries of male and female. Yet, as we shall see in my analysis of *Two Man Show*, the body in RashDash's work is far more dynamic than this might suggest; one can explore how certain theatrical and bodily forms come to be gendered or associated with a gender without conflating and essentialising.

particularized as women'.[14] The problem is, as RashDash explore in their feminist deconstruction of the canon in *Three Sisters*, that the concept of 'the universal' in theatre has for so long signified a metonymy in which a white, able-bodied, middle-class male performer can stand in for everyone; but a female performer, and/or a queer, working-class, disabled and/or BAME actor can only represent his/her/their particular identity. Expanding the category of the universal does not deconstruct it; some bodies are still considered more universally representative than others and to assume otherwise, even as a utopian aspiration, risks perpetuating exclusion and erasure.[15]

The two extended critical responses to RashDash's work, by Maddy Costa and Tom Cornford respectively, have both focused on issues of representation – who is represented (and who is excluded) by the company and the work – which can distract from how RashDash represent who they represent and their means of representation, leading to a neglect of the work's formal qualities.[16] This chapter is a corrective to that trend. I take as one of my starting points Costa's questioning of 'RashDash's development as a feminist theatre company, what it means for these bodies in particular to speak to, of and for female experience'.[17] Costa's conclusion recalls the questions that Diamond identifies as being fundamental to feminist theatre criticism in the introduction to *Unmaking Mimesis*:

> Who is speaking and who is listening? Whose body is in view and whose is not? What is being represented, how, and with what effects? Who or what is in control?[18]

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[14] Ibid., pp. 3-4.
[15] Ayanna Thompson writes about how constructions of Shakespeare as a 'universal' writer can elide racial differences and/or create a sense of a homogeneous culture that excludes racial division. Ayanna Thompson, *Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), Chapter 1.
[16] Maddy Costa, 'Criticism & Love #9: RashDash', *Criticism-and-love Tiny Letter*. 10 September 2018. <tinyletter.com/criticism-and-love/letters/criticism-love-9-rashdash> [accessed 12 March 2020]. Tom Cornford, 'The Racist Case for Diversity?', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, Backpages 28.4 (2018), 548-560.
[17] Costa, 'Criticism & Love'.
[18] Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. ii.

I am particularly concerned with the means of RashDash's representation: the company members' use of their female bodies as material and mechanism by which to explore the relationship between the real and its theatrical representation. In the first part of the chapter, I will trace RashDash's performances of gender in conversation with Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter* (1995) to explore the shifting relationships between theatricalised bodies and their discursive representation in *Two Man Show* (2017). In *Three Sisters: After Chekhov* (2018), RashDash continue their exploration of gendered representation but shift their focus from the relationship between gender and bodies to the artistic representation of women. In the second part of the chapter, therefore, I consider how RashDash use their bodies and autobiographical experiences to critique what they perceive as their source text's deficiencies in its representation of women. The intertextuality of RashDash's *Three Sisters* reveals that both it and *Two Man Show* are in dialogue with and borrow from theatrical realisms, constantly questioning the relationship of theatrical representation to the world by playing with the real. This constructive engagement with realisms contrasts with the assumption often expressed by proponents of the feminist critique of realism that realism must be completely disavowed by feminist theatre-makers. As something to cannibalise, react against and improvise upon, RashDash's deploy realist techniques tactically, in combination with techniques from other styles of theatre.

Performing gender, performing genre: *Two Man Show*

Two Man Show was first performed at Northern Stage, Summerhall at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe on 6 August 2016. It toured to a number of venues, including Soho Theatre, London, and returned to the Edinburgh Festival as part of the British Council showcase in

2017. RashDash set out to 'make a show about men', exploring the 'crisis in masculinity' from their perspective as 'a feminist, female company'.[19] RashDash acknowledge the irony of the disjunction between their professed subject matter (men) and their subject positions as a 'female company' in the prologue, as they introduce 'a story about the crisis of masculinity because as you know we know everything and are fully qualified and have the ideal life experience to dissect and discuss this issue'.[20] According to Goalen, the process of making *Two Man Show* began with a period of research into the origins of patriarchy and the development of language, particularly the idea that the pronoun '"he" is more comprehensive than "she"'.[21] The second stage of their process consisted of writing scenes to explore ideas around the theme of 'crisis in masculinity'. In the third stage, Goalen and Greenland improvised and moved together in different costumes to explore questions such as, 'what is masculinity and movement? What is femininity and movement?'[22] The show eventually took shape in three sections: a gig theatre prologue introducing an alternative myth of the origins of patriarchy that frames the show; a section that alternates movement sequences (that Goalen and Greenland mostly perform naked) and scenes from a play-within-a-play about two brothers, Dan and John, that makes up the main body of the piece; then a section that deconstructs what has gone before. Catherine Love astutely observes in her review that the show's tripartite structure is 'a warped mirroring of the well-made play'.[23]

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[19] RashDash, 'Two Man Show: our feminist quest to smash the patriarchy', *The Guardian*, 20 February 2017. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/feb/20/two-man-show-feminist-patriarchy-rashdash-soho-theatre> [accessed 8 July 2020].
[20] RashDash, *Two Man Show* (London: Oberon, 2017), p. 18. All references to the script that follow will be included in the body of the chapter.
[21] Helen Goalen, interview with Hannah Greenstreet (Skype, 26 February 2020).
[22] Ibid.
[23] Catherine Love, 'Two Man Show', *Exeunt Magazine*, 14 October 2016. <exeuntmagazine.com/features/two-man-show/> [accessed 9 September 2020].

In alternating scenes from the play-within-a-play with sections of dance, RashDash are pitting two modes of representation against each other – words and embodied expression – testing the affordances and restrictions of each. In an article written to publicise *Two Man Show*, RashDash declare, 'We want to explore a sensual, instinctive, emotional understanding and experiencing of the world. […] Logic and rationality have become masculine, reliable and important; emotion and intuition have become feminine, unpredictable and inappropriate'.[24] From this account of their process, it can seem like RashDash are constructing a reductive, binary opposition between these modes of expression, associating 'logic and rationality', even language, with the 'masculine', and 'emotion and intuition', expressed through the body and dance, with the feminine. This in turn might reinforce gender stereotypes, for example the insistent association of the feminine with the body.[25] However, in practice RashDash's *Two Man Show* breaks down such formal and gender binaries, resulting in far more complex performances of gender.[26]

Two Man Show in performance

The set of *Two Man Show* suggests a gig: a red carpet stretches across the floor, with instruments, including a keyboard, guitar and drum kit, set up on either side. Two banks of seating face each other in traverse. Three women come on in shiny, metallic costumes that

[24] RashDash, 'Two Man Show: Our feminist quest to smash the patriarchy', *Guardian*.
[25] As Janet Wolff observes, 'identifying women with their bodies is perilously close to those reactionary arguments in sociobiology and other disciplines, as well as in conservative common sense, which justify women's oppression in terms of their biology'. Janet Wolff, *Feminine Sentences: Essays on Women and Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p. 132.
[26] It is worth noting that some reviewers picked up on this binary in trying to interpret *Two Man Show*. Andrzej Lukowski ventured that the dance sections 'are, I think, supposed to be somewhat ironic attempts at "feminine" expression in contrast to Dan and John's unadorned words' but recognises that this interpretation is complicated by the final scene. Throughout his review, Lukowski wrestles to make sense of *Two Man Show*, which suggests the complexity and ambiguity of the show as a whole. Andrzej Lukowski, 'Two Man Show', *TimeOut*, 21 September 2017 (republished review from 2016 Edinburgh run). <www.timeout.com/london/theatre/two-man-show> [accessed 9 September 2020].

look like intergalactic robes, raided from a dressing up box. They stand in a circle facing inwards and sing wordlessly in harmony, which modulates into a throatier and harsher sound (Fig. 1). Abbi Greenland and Helen Goalen go to one side of the stage and pick up microphones.[27] The musician Becky Wilkie, dressed in a gold outfit and crown, goes to the bank of instruments on the other side (Fig. 2). Helen and Abbi narrate an alternative history of the original dominance of women in society and the origins of patriarchy. They speak into microphones that distort their voices to make them sound squeaky and silly. They repeatedly refer to man as 'the male human' (17), using the anthropological register to defamiliarise assumptions around masculinity and to denaturalise patriarchy. The Prologue ends with a catchy, riot grrrl style song 'about patriarchy': 'It springs from fear, do you hear? / Do you hear? Do you hear?' (19). Reviewer Holly Williams observes that *Two Man Show* 'begins with the sort of bonkers stridency that RashDash's high-energy shows are known for' but afterwards adopts a different style as 'we're plunged into a naturalistic drama about two awkward brothers, Dan and John, who fail to communicate while their father is dying'.[28] These rapid formal and stylistic shifts proved disorienting for many audience members.[29] *Two Man Show* is demanding to watch, encouraging the audience to grapple mentally with the ideas it explores by not providing all the answers. Indeed, the show's ambiguity, its refusal to present a clear message, was praised as one of its strengths by several critics. As Natasha Tripney observes, *Two Man Show* 'is not a show with a clear message but thank

[27] I refer to their performance personas in *Two Man Show* as Abbi and Helen throughout as that is how they refer to each other in the show. When I talk about Goalen and Greenland as creators or performers, I use their surnames.

[28] Holly Williams, 'Edinburgh Festival: Two Man Show, Summerhall review: "A terrifically generous piece of writing"', *Independent*, 17 August 2016. <www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/edinburgh-festival-two-man-show-summerhall-review-a-terrifically-generous-piece-of-writing-a7196146.html> [20 February 2018].

[29] See Lukowski.

God for that because none of this stuff is clear, not now. It's messy and unsteady, confusing and confounding, and this show is the perfect reflection of that'.[30]

Figure 1. The production photograph by Murdo Macleod, depicting Becky Wilkie, Abbi Greenland and Helen Goalen in metallic costumes, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/feb/20/two-man-show-feminist-patriarchy-rashdash-soho-theatre [accessed 22 January 2021].

Figure 2. The production photograph by The Other Richard, depicting Becky Wilkie as the Goddess, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at <www.rashdash.co.uk/look> [accessed 22 January 2021].

Realism in drag

The plot of the play within-a-play of *Two Man Show* aligns itself with social realist plays in its investigation of a social issue: 'the crisis in masculinity' (18). Dan visits his family home where his brother John is looking after their dad, who has an unnamed condition that is suggested to be dementia. As in many realist plays, such as Arthur Miller's *The Price* (1967), the brothers' temporary reunion allows them to excavate childhood rivalries and

[30] Natasha Tripney, 'Two Man Show review at Summerhall, Edinburgh – "exhilarating attack on patriarchy"', *The Stage*, 10 August 2016. <www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2016/two-man-show-review-summerhall-edinburgh-exhilarating-attack-patriarchy/> [accessed 9 September 2020].

resentments, particularly Dan's difficult relationship with his father after their mother's death. From the subtext, it seems that Dan fell short of his father's expectations of masculinity. For instance, he remembers being grounded for bringing home a pornographic magazine that actually belonged to his younger brother; the punishment was not for the possession of the magazine but for the fact that John 'got hold of it first' (45), implying that Dan should have gone through this rite of passage before his younger brother. Dan is angered by John's close relationship with his father, reflected by his adoption of his father's name although he was christened Terence. Throughout the play-within-a-play, Dan and John argue about what it means to be a man. Dan ignores calls from his pregnant girlfriend and expresses doubts about becoming a father because 'It's just gonna be changing nappies and staying in' (29). 'Yeah that would be shit, wouldn't it' (29), retorts John, who has been caring for his father for a number of years. Later Dan explicitly mocks John's assumption of the role of caregiver: 'Little John changes nappies and cuddles his daddy / and cooks Nigella recipes. Little John has become Little Jane' (56). Although John emerges as a more progressive version of masculinity, both consider being compared to a woman as the ultimate insult, as it compromises their sense of manhood. John calls Dan 'a little pussyboy' (50) and a 'cunt' (51) for not facing up to his responsibilities to his pregnant girlfriend.

In talking about the process of creating *Two Man Show*, Goalen and Greenland observe, 'it feels interesting to tell a story about a struggle with traditional ideas of masculinity through a form that obeys traditional, maybe even patriarchal, theatrical conventions'.[31] Echoing the ideas of the feminist critique of realism, they define these 'patriarchal' theatrical conventions as including 'believable characters who talk to each

[31] RashDash, 'Two Man Show: our feminist quest to smash the patriarchy', *Guardian*.

other in a realistic way, in a story told in a linear and chronological order'.[32] RashDash's deployment of a number of theatrical techniques associated with a particular manifestation of realism led several reviewers to call the play-within-a-play 'naturalistic'.[33] Alice Saville suggests the Dan and John scenes 'feel like they've been ripped straight from a piece of new writing staged unfussily in a black box somewhere, by an author schooled in naturalism'.[34] The association of the play-within-a-play with realism and/ or naturalism – created by the dialogue and naturalistic creation of the characters Dan and John – occurs despite the theatrical techniques that mitigate against a sense of realism: Goalen and Greenland play this scene in black dresses, making no attempt to disguise their female bodies through costume. This suggests the resilience of realism as a default mode for interpreting British theatre.[35] Indeed, *Two Man Show* demonstrates how theatrical techniques can function metonymically, conjuring up a whole theatrical form; *Two Man Show* is not realist or naturalistic, but conjures up a sense of these forms through deploying techniques associated with them.

This is seen in the use of dialogue in the play-within-a-play scenes. The first Dan and John scene opens:

J: Shit
D: Sorry
J: You made me jump
D: I thought about calling ahead but then I just. Didn't and –
J: Well it's your home too, so –
D: Well. Not really, but –
J: Nah, but you know what I mean
D: Yeah, yeah I know

[32] Ibid.
[33] See Williams, 'Edinburgh Festival: Two Man Show', *Independent*.
[34] Alice Saville, 'Review: Two Man Show at Northern Stage at Summerhall'. *Exeunt Magazine*. 24 August 2016. <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-two-man-show-northern-stage-summerhall/> [20 February 2018].
[35] For more on the privileging of social realism as Britain's 'national drama' and how this telling of theatre history excludes other theatrical forms, see Mary Luckhurst, 'Contemporary English Theatre: Why Realism?', *Contemporary Drama in English*, 9 (2002), 73-84.

J: You're welcome anytime
D: Thanks
J: It doesn't have to be Christmas or anything
D: No
J: Not that you come at Christmas, but –
D: Well no I didn't last year 'cause I was –
J: No I know, at thingy's parents –
D: Sarah's
J: Sarah's parents yeah I remember we don't have to –
D: Right yeah.
J: It's nice to see you
D: Yeah, you too, it's good.

(22)

It reads like a playwriting exercise in realistic dialogue, an attempt to reproduce how people actually speak that is so mundane that it mitigates against the reality effect. There are discourse markers ('well', 'yeah', 'right'), fillers, clichés ('you made me jump'; 'it's your home too'; 'you're welcome anytime'; 'you know what I mean'; 'It doesn't have to be Christmas or anything'; 'it's nice to see you'), inarticulacies and incomplete sentences. The scenes depend heavily on subtext, a psychological realist mechanism that requires audience members mentally to fill out the characters sketched by the dialogue and performances. It is possible to infer from this short exchange quite a lot about John and Dan's relationship: that they are brothers; that John still lives in the family home; that Dan does not often come to visit and they have not seen each other in a while; that they are not close. Although John and Dan resort to the comforting shorthand of clichés, they also highlight the inaccuracy of those conventional figures of speech when applied to their relationship by literalising and contradicting them: 'It doesn't have to be Christmas or anything […] Not that you came at Christmas'; 'Well it's your home too, so - / Well. Not really, but–'.

In juxtaposition with the extreme verisimilitude of the dialogue, there is no attempt to create a sense of Dan and John's domestic environment through the set, nor are props used when indicated by the script (for example, John says he is drinking a protein shake but

Greenland does nothing to indicate this physically). Such disjunctions between what is said and what is seen recruit the imaginative co-operation of the audience, both to register the disjunction but also to imaginatively fill in the blanks. This recalls, albeit in a less pronounced way, the demands made on audience members by the conceptual theatre work of Tim Crouch. Reflecting on the moment in Crouch's *An Oak Tree* (2005) 'where we are invited to look at a piano stool *as* a tree *as* a daughter', Dan Rebellato evocatively observes 'that we should find that deeply peculiar set of mental switches simple is, to me, one of the reasons why narrative fictional theatre remains at its heart a conceptual art practice, albeit a normalised one'.[36] This speaks to the conceptual work that the audience of *Two Man Show* are required to do in co-creating the characters of Dan and John with Goalen and Greenland, weighing the visual information (of Goalen and Greenland's bodies and costumes) against the mental image of Dan and John created by dialogue, tone of voice, physicality – a process that is difficult to describe but natural when watching as an audience member. Rebellato has developed his theory more fully in his article 'When We Talk of Horses' (2009), arguing that representational theatre, including realism, is not illusionistic but metaphorical, encouraging the audience to see one thing in terms of another. In reaching this conclusion, he tests a number of cognitive theories of what we see when we see a play against the telling example of a modern dress production of *Oedipus*. He shows the limitation of Kendall Walton's theory that spectators merely elide anything that does not fit with the fictional image they have created, as that then ignores the importance of design and directorial decisions 'and imagines Oedipus wearing some unspecified Theban

[36] Dan Rebellato, 'Adler & Gibb', *Dan Rebellato*, 15 July 2014. <www.danrebellato.co.uk/spilledink/2014/6/24/adler-gibb> [accessed 11 September 2020].

costume'.[37] Instead, seeing the theatrical production as a metaphor for the fictional play means that 'There is no make-believe involved, no amassing of propositional information, no artful subtraction from one to create the image of the other. We know the two objects are quite separate, but we think of one in terms of the other'.[38] Rebellato also applies this to acting, so, when David Tennant plays Hamlet, he is a metaphor for Hamlet, bringing his association with *Doctor Who* and his celebrity to the role.[39]

It is productive to apply Rebellato's idea of theatre as metaphor to *Two Man Show*; doing so reveals some of the dynamics of performing gender, which in turn complicates the theory. According to this theory, Goalen and Greenland are metaphors for Dan and John (or, in a more complicated formulation, Goalen and Greenland the performers are metaphors for Helen and Abbi the performance personae, who are metaphors for Dan and John the characters). As my distinction between 'performance personae' and 'characters' suggests, at least two styles of acting are deployed in *Two Man Show*. In the play-within-a-play sections, Goalen and Greenland approach and perform Dan and John as characters through psychological realism. In the final scene, in which the play-within-a-play breaks down, Goalen and Greenland play themselves, recalling the 'non-acting' style, in which performers, in Michael Kirby's words, pretend to '"be" nobody or nothing other than themselves; nor [do] they represent, or pretend to be in a time or place different than that of the spectator', adopted by avant-garde performance makers such as Forced Entertainment.[40] The

[37] Dan Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses: Or, what do we see when we see a play?', *Performance Research*, 14 (2009), 17-28 (p. 24).
[38] Ibid., p. 25.
[39] Ibid., p. 26.
[40] Michael Kirby, 'On Acting and Not-Acting', *The Drama Review*, 16 (1972), 3-15 (p. 3).

movement sections of *Two Man Show* are different again, as character and narrative are de-emphasised in favour of making images.

As I have suggested, the disjunction between the gender of the performers and the characters they play complicates how their performances in the play-within-a-play are received, yet it does not necessarily mitigate against an impression of theatrical realism. For instance, Sara Reimers suggests cross-gender casting in Shakespeare is compatible with realist performance styles when roles are re-gendered, giving Phyllida's Lloyd's all-female *Julius Caesar* (Donmar Warehouse, 2012), set in a women's prison, as an example.[41] Attempting to distinguish cross-dressing from drag, Jennifer Drouin argues,

> Cross-dressing is an attempt to imitate the 'real'. As such, it more closely resembles passing than drag, since drag involves parody, whereas parody would expose cross-dressing and passing as 'unreal', signifying their failure to perform the imitation accurately. The goal of theatrical cross-dressing is usually the goal of realist theater itself – to present the audience with a situation that mirrors real life; and while this may require a suspension of disbelief, the less required the better.[42]

Drouin's account relies on a simplistic definition of realism as 'mirror[ing]' real life and discouraging the 'suspension of disbelief', when, as Rebellato has demonstrated, realist theatre requires many acts of imaginative projection from the audience. Indeed, there is considerable slippage between cross-dressing and drag in *Two Man Show*: Greenland and Goalen play Dan and John 'straight', mimetically representing gendered realities, yet the play also parodies assumptions of stable gender identities and the very realist techniques it deploys. *Two Man Show* also lacks the queer desire that is often associated with drag.

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[41] Following Diamond and Dolan, Reimers argues casting must depart from realism truly to subvert heterosexist gender norms. Sara Reimers, 'Casting and the construction of gender in contemporary stagings of Shakespeare's plays', (unpublished doctoral thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2017), pp. 241-42. <pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/en/publications/casting-and-the-construction-of-gender-in-contemporary-stagings-of-shakepeares-plays(db37c27d-d9f0-4d6f-ac93-6768af2b6d43).html> [accessed 21 January 2021].

[42] Jennifer Drouin, 'Cross-Dressing, Drag, and Passing: Slippages in Shakespearean Comedy', in *Shakespeare Re-Dressed: Cross-Gender Casting in Contemporary Performance*, ed. by James C. Bulman (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2008), pp. 23-55 (p. 25).

The performances of gender in *Two Man Show* are further illuminated by comparison with Split Britches' *Belle Reprieve* (1991), a playful riposte to Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). The character list reads:

> MITCH, a fairy disguised as a man (Paul Shaw)
> STELLA, a woman disguised as a woman (Lois Weaver)
> STANLEY, a butch lesbian (Peggy Shaw)
> BLANCHE, a man in a dress (Bette Bourne)[43]

The witty character list and casting, which draws on the performers' public personae and sexual identities, are very much in accordance with Butler's theory that, 'in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency'.[44] There is a deliciously camp undecidability between 'real' and 'performed' gender, frustrating a clear distinction between the two. It is unclear whether we are meant to receive the character of Stanley as a butch lesbian, or to imagine that the butch lesbian Peggy Shaw is playing a man, an undecidability that is not resolved in the performance. Similarly, is Blanche – often taken as an icon by gay men – herself a drag queen or is she merely a drag queen because Bette Bourne is playing her? Even Lois Weaver, playing a character aligned with her gender, is described as 'a woman playing a woman', suggesting that femininity – particularly the high femme style Weaver adopts on and off stage – is just as much of a performance; drag does not have to be cross-gender. There is a concern throughout the play with passing and not passing, from the opening when Bette Bourne as Blanche has to pass through border control. Later in the play, Blanche speaks to Stella about her husband Stanley:

> I don't believe he's a man. I question his sexuality. […] The noises he makes, the way he walks like Mae West, the sensual way he wears his clothes, this is no garage-

[43] Bette Bourne, Paul Shaw, Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, *Belle Reprieve*, in *Split Britches: Lesbian Practice/ Feminist Performance*, ed. by Sue-Ellen Case (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 149-184 (p. 150).
[44] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 187.

> mechanic working-class boy, this is planned behaviour. This is calculated sexuality, developed over years of picking up signals not necessarily genetic is what I'm trying to say. [...] (*grabbing Stella's hand*) I'm the real woman for you. I can show you satisfaction.[45]

There is an amusing irony to the drag queen Bourne claiming to be a 'real woman' whilst questioning Stanley's masculinity, breaking it down into performative gestures, codes that Blanche can only interpret because she herself has 'developed [them] over years of picking up signals'. The reference to Mae West, popularly dubbed 'the queen of camp', further complicates the gender performance; if Stanley were playing a man, would he not find a male star to imitate? The queer desire that circulates in the play complicates things still further; if Blanche is read as a woman, she is proposing a homoerotic, incestuous union as an alternative to Stella's supposedly heterosexual marriage (which is, in fact, lesbian if Stanley is really a butch woman). Ultimately, *Belle Reprieve* takes camp pleasure in the artificiality of gender and role playing. Nonetheless, this is not to endorse the dichotomy between performance and reality that Drouin suggests. Rather, as shall be seen, acknowledging the construction of gender roles and revelling in their contingency does not make them unreal – both in terms of self-identity and the subjective sense of oneself as a particular gender, and in terms of gender norms and societal expectations.

Whereas the performance style of Split Britches and Bloolips in *Belle Reprieve* is camp, with the performers maintaining an ironising aloofness from the characters they play, Goalen and Greenland's performances of Dan and John create a sense of stable character and an absorption of the actor into the role until the final scene. Greenland recalled that, in early drafts of *Two Man Show*, she and Goalen were initially performing Dan and John's lines as women. However, Northern Stage director Lorne Campbell encouraged them to

[45] Bourne et al, *Belle Reprieve*, p. 172.

experiment with performing the lines as men would. He ran a workshop with male actors reading the lines, then asked the male actors to feed Goalen and Greenland the lines as they would deliver them. Goalen and Greenland then 'work[ed] on trying to, in our own voices, use intonation and use language like men do, rather than trying to be men, I guess. And then the characterisation followed that'.[46] Greenland's distinction between 'trying to be men' (which, Drouin suggests, would fall short as an imitation) and taking on characteristics, such as particular stress patterns and intonation, breaks down the performance of masculinity, and gender more broadly, into reciting a set of codes. As in Butler's theory of gender performativity and Jack Halberstam's project in *Female Masculinity* (1998) to dissever masculinity 'from the male body and its effects', the reality of gender does not inhere in the individual sexed body but in the performance of those signs.[47]

Therefore, in considering performances of gender, both on and offstage, metonymy is as crucial as metaphor: the characters of Dan and John, who are each anxiously performing masculinity throughout the play-within-a-play and conscious that they are falling short of its ideals, are created through, in Butler's words, 'repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being'.[48] Indeed, the characterisation of Dan and John in the script depends upon stereotypes: Dan has bought a new black Lexus; he has a personal trainer; John drinks protein shakes. Familiar with the mechanisms of realist characterisation, the audience of the play-within-a-play is encouraged to generalise from

[46] Greenland and Greenstreet interview. This description of RashDash's performance style seems completely different from Diamond's characterisation of naturalistic acting as 'laminat[ing] body to character' and her uneasiness around its potential to erase the historicity and materiality of the body of the female performer. Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 37.
[47] Jack (Judith) Halberstam, *Female Masculinity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), p. 1.
[48] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 45.

these details and acts what kind of men Dan and John are, filling in the gaps to create a perception of more rounded characters. Thereby, RashDash demonstrate that the performance of gender and the realist performance of character are analogous, metonymic mechanisms: both encode meaning through the (re)citation of certain signs that 'congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance' ('masculinity', 'femininity' or 'realism'), and invite the audience to project gender or genre through decoding those signs.

To develop this analogy still further between Goalen and Greenland's performance of masculinity and their deployment of realist theatrical codes, it is important to note the overlap between Butler's interest in specific aesthetics of gender performance, including drag, that deploy 'subversive repetition' in their re-enactment of gender norms and Linda Hutcheon's theory of parody as 'repetition with critical distance'.[49] As Butler suggests in her analysis of drag's subversive potential in *Gender Trouble* (1990), recognising that gender is performative makes space for such signs to be recited parodically.[50] (Nonetheless, she notes that 'Parody by itself is not subversive'; rather, she suggests that its political effect depends upon how and in what context those signs are deployed.)[51] There are clear connections between Butler's idea of gender parody and Linda Hutcheon's theories of literary parody. Hutcheon argues, 'Parody […] is a form of imitation, but imitation characterised by ironic inversion, not always at the expense of the parodied text. […] Parody is, in another formulation, repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than

[49] Butler, *Gender Trouble,* p. 44. Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms*, 2nd edn (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000; first published 1985), p. 6.
[50] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 187. It is important to be mindful of Butler's caution that her theory of gender performativity does not suppose a pre-existing subject choosing which parts of gender to perform. Rather, performativity always takes place in relation to and is constrained by a set of norms. As she clarifies in *Bodies That Matter*, 'Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance'. Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*: *On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2011; first published 1993), p. 59.
[51] Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 189.

similarity'.[52] Interestingly, Hutcheon suggests that, while parody deploys irony as a rhetorical strategy, it does not necessarily employ ridicule.[53] In this way, Hutcheon's concept of parody also includes pastiche, which is often defined as the (post)modern imitation of literary codes without ridicule. Considering the play-within-a-play of *Two Man Show* as a parody of both a certain kind of realism and certain manifestations of masculinity (but a parody without (much) ridicule, unlike *Belle Reprieve*, a parody in which ridicule abounds) helps to explain some of its tonal complexity. At certain points in the performance, it seems like Goalen and Greenland might be ironising their characters, for example, John's obsession with fitness and, more critically, Dan's abysmal treatment of his girlfriend.

Yet, due to the performance style, the characters also have some sense of an emotional reality and they are portrayed, for the most part, sympathetically. As Hutcheon notes, irony is a complex rhetorical device that depends on interpretation, as 'the attributing of irony to a text or utterance is a complex intentional act on the part of the interpreter, one that has both semantic and evaluative dimensions, in addition to the possible inferring of ironist intent (from either the text or statements by the ironist)'.[54] Moreover, 'there is no guarantee that the interpreter will "get" the irony in the same way as it was intended'.[55] Nonetheless, despite the difficulty in attributing irony, both the gap between Goalen and Greenland's female bodies and the male characters they play and their self-aware deployment of realist theatrical techniques for their association with masculinity facilitate an ironic critical distance. Rather than deploying full-scale Brechtian

[52] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 6.
[53] Linda Hutcheon, 'Parody Without Ridicule', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, 5 (1978), 201-211.
[54] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2005; first published 1995), p. 13.
[55] Ibid., p. 11.

defamiliarisation of realism, RashDash's ironising of the form is much subtler; they deploy it slightly askew, not quite playing it straight.

RashDash's ironising of realism is further illuminated by comparison with *Straight White Men* (Public Theater, New York, 2014), written by Young Jean Lee and directed by Anna Shapiro, which parodies a naturalistic American family drama.[56] Over the course of a family Christmas, Matt's brothers and father try to work out what is wrong with him, as his life and career have failed to live up to the promise he showed as a teenager. Matt has failed, both by the traditional standards of bourgeois American masculinity, and by a new kind of woke white masculinity that acknowledges and attempts to offset privilege. The ending of the play provides more of a sense of deflation than resolution, as it remains unclear what is wrong with Matt, which itself casts doubt on whether Matt's failure or refusal to conform to values of bourgeois American masculinity should be pathologised.[57] Lee imitates these theatrical conventions so well that only the framing by the title and curtain speech indicate that the play should not be read 'straight'. In addition to the cast of named characters (all played by white, cis male actors in the original production) there are two roles written into the script for 'Person[s] in Charge', who 'should be played by gender-nonconforming performers (preferably of color)'.[58] 'Person in Charge 1' delivers a curtain speech introducing themselves and their pronouns and drawing attention to naturalistic stage conventions: 'Each of the actors will play only one character. They will stay in character and pretend not to see you […]'.[59] Before the play proper begins, Person in Charge

[56] William Demastes suggests 'By far, the majority of American drama is heavily influenced by the naturalism of Zola's material determinism'. William W. Demastes, *Beyond Naturalism: A New Realism in American Theatre* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1988), p. 26.
[57] For a compelling reading of the play along these lines, see Patricia Ybarra, 'Young Jean Lee's Cruel Dramaturgy', *Modern Drama*, 57 (2014), 513-533.
[58] Young Jean Lee, *Straight White Men* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2017), p. 5.
[59] Ibid., p. 10.

1 and 2 position the white male actors playing Jake and Drew onstage like mannequins, a defamiliarising device that is designed to show 'that the show is under the control of people who are not straight white men'.[60]

Nonetheless, the critical reception of *Straight White Men* suggested that, instead of defamiliarising the codes and ideologies she set out to parody, Lee ends up replicating them; the curtain speech and scene transitions are simply not enough to counteract the default, naturalistic mode of receiving theatre and the default power structure of white men being in charge. In a damning review of the Broadway transfer, Hilton Als asserts that Lee 'wanted to make a "straight" play and hang with the Broadway boys, without appearing to aspire to anything other than the spectacle's success'; instead of critiquing the Broadway naturalist play, he suggests, she has reproduced it.[61] Charles Isherwood is far more sympathetic in his review, praising the play for going 'far beyond cheap satire, ultimately becoming a compassionate and stimulating exploration of one man's existential crisis'.[62] Ironically, Isherwood's praise also suggests that Jean Lee has failed to defamiliarise the default white-male-led American family drama as he engages with the struggles of the central character on those terms. The reception of *Straight White Men* suggests both the instability of parody and irony and the resilience of theatrical techniques associated with realism and naturalism such as character and story; Matt's journey as liberal white hero, even a failed one, proved irresistible to many audience members. Moreover, Jean Lee's strategy of defamiliarisation places pressure upon the bodies of the 'Person[s] in Charge' to

[60] Ibid., p. 5.
[61] Hilton Als, 'The Soullessness of "Straight White Men"', *The New Yorker*, 30 June 2018. <www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/08/06/the-soullessness-of-straight-white-men> [accessed 10 June 2020]. Lee was the first Asian American woman to have a show produced on Broadway.
[62] Charles Isherwood, 'My Three Sons and All Their Troubles', *The New York Times*, 18 November 2014. <www.nytimes.com/2014/11/19/theater/straight-white-men-opens-at-the-public-theater.html> [accessed 10 June 2020].

signify as other, as 'not straight white men', in relation to the 'default' cis, white, male actors playing the named characters in the play. The 'Person[s] in Charge' appear not as characters but perform themselves and are only very briefly introduced; only one of the roles is a scripted speaking part, which seems to belie the script's suggestion that they are really in charge of the show.

As in *Two Man Show*, *Straight White Men* deploys two performance styles to establish two levels of reality: the here and now of being welcomed into a theatre by a gender-nonconforming person and the fictive reality of the staged family home. Like *Straight White Men*, *Two Man Show* unsettles the fictive reality it set up by presenting the bodies of its performers, which do not conform to the cis, male characters they play, but RashDash's show does so more successfully. In *Two Man Show's* shift in form from (parody of) realist play to dance, the question under investigation shifts from 'What is considered a real (as in believable) performance of a male character within the context of a realist play?' to 'What is considered a real (as in authentic) performance of gender more broadly?', which will be explored in the following section.

Dancing gender: The female body in motion

Figure 3. The production photograph by The Other Richard, depicting Abbi Greenland and Helen Goalen dancing together in black dresses, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at www.rashdash.co.uk/look [accessed 22 January 2021].

RashDash's theatre is highly physical, deploying a distinctive style of movement developed by Goalen and Greenland over the course of their more than ten-year collaboration. One of their signature moves, as Tripney notes in her review of *Two Man Show*, is 'pick[ing] each other up and heft[ing] and drag[ging] each other around the stage, an action that is at times tender and at times violent'.[63] Rather than being concerned with line or technique in their movement, Goalen and Greenland use their similarly-proportioned bodies to make new shapes suggesting the malleability, strength and grace of their bodies and their connection as dance partners, lifting each other, leaning and balancing on one another. Often the movement is irreverent and it sometimes pastiches different styles of dance (such as a pop cheerleading routine in *Three Sisters*). Greenland notes that neither she nor Goalen have had formal dance training, making their use of dance 'quite unskilled', observing that 'we

[63] Tripney, 'Two Man Show Review', *The Stage*.

definitely approach making movement from a theatrical sensibility because it's about articulating something rather than necessarily investigating what arms do'.[64] Nonetheless, it is worth noting that what RashDash are trying to articulate in their movement sequences can be quite opaque (particularly to theatregoers unfamiliar with contemporary dance conventions), when juxtaposed with the Dan and John scenes; the two forms deploy different codes. Indeed, Greenland notes that, in making the show, 'we were interested in the difference between deconstructing to make meaning', which she identifies with the story of the brothers, 'and constructing to make meaning', which she identifies with the creation of visual images in the movement sections, and 'let[ing] them sit alongside each other'.[65] In offering a formal contrast to the play-within-a-play, the movement sections enable RashDash to explore performing gender in a different way and through a different style, paying particular attention to embodiment.

As Diamond suggests, 'Performance […] is the site in which performativity materializes in concentrated form, where the "concealed or dissimulated conventions" of which acts are mere repetitions might be investigated and reimagined'.[66] Dance, which carries the weight of gendered associations, especially in styles such as ballet, and the semantic weight of the dancer's body, seems highly conducive to this process as a form. Susan Leigh Foster argues that 'dancing dramatises the separation between the anatomical identity of the dancer and its possible ways of moving', observing that the choreographer 'fashions a repertoire of bodily actions that may confirm and elaborate on conventional expectations for gendered behaviour, or she may contrive a repertoire that dramatically

[64] Greenland and Greenstreet interview.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 47.

contravenes such expectations'.[67] Foster's account clarifies how, in dance, particular vocabularies of movement intersect with movements that have gendered connotations. An example of dissonance between the 'repertoire of bodily actions' created by the choreographer and 'conventional expectations for gendered behaviour' can be found in Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* (1995). In the first production, the role of the Swan was first performed by Adam Cooper, the muscular bodies and aggressive performance style of the all-male swans in tension with their traditional associations with softness and grace when danced by female dancers.[68]

Foster's idea that dancing stages the separation between the dancer's anatomy and how they move suggests the form's potential to denaturalise sex and gender binaries. Yet, at the same time, she argues that 'part of dance's compelling interest derives from the kinds of links the choreography makes between sex and gender'; dance has the power to put sex and gender in dynamic relationship with each other, as viewers of the dance recognise the codes of gendered behaviour performed by the dancer's body.[69] Crucially, Foster notes, 'This is not to say that the anatomical body of the dancer is a natural body. That body exists along a continuum of attributes that define male or female sexual identity', such as 'unusually broad' shoulders for a woman; the body can also be changed through training, for example developing greater muscle definition.[70]

Figure 4. The production photograph by The Other Richard, depicting Helen Goalen lifting Abbi Greenland, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at www.rashdash.co.uk/look [accessed 22 January 2021].

[67] Susan Leigh Foster, 'Choreographies of Gender', in *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*, ed. by Jane de Gay and Lizbeth Goodman (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 208-212 (p. 209).
[68] Anna Tims, 'How we made Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake*', *Guardian*, 14 October 2013. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2013/oct/14/how-we-made-matthew-bourne-swan-lake > [14 July 2020].
[69] Foster, p. 209.
[70] Ibid.

Throughout *Two Man Show*, RashDash's choreography plays with disjunctions and unexpected synergies between gendered expectations of certain movements and the anatomical bodies of the dancers that are performing them. Firstly, in dancing together, Goalen and Greenland disrupt the gendered agency of classical, male-female partner dance. This is set up from the transition between the Prologue and the first play-within-a-play scene, in which Goalen and Greenland move together wearing long, black shift dresses. They spin, they fall, they lift each other whilst making monkey noises; one wraps her legs round the other's waist and is held in a gesture of almost parental care. It is difficult to tell them apart as their bodies move together and conjoin, to pinpoint who is doing what to whom, and impossible to ascribe a leader and a follower to the dance. Secondly, in the movement sequence of scene 2, which Abbi and Helen perform wearing only black knickers, their breasts bare, their sexed bodies come into tension with ideas of how the female body

should move. For example, Abbi gives a war cry and jiggles her breasts four times, at each corner of the audience in turn. This movement is at once confrontational, unapologetic and comic, resisting gendered connotations of female decorousness. The movement also displays Abbi's clenched biceps; she later refers to having 'biceps bigger than my breasts' which she used 'to carry trees' (68), stressing her strength over conventional ideas of female beauty. Helen sits on the floor and squishes her belly, which could express anxieties over body image associated with women. Yet, as the movement is not mimetic, such an association is only an inference. Indeed, there are far more movements that emphasise care, partnership and strength, abstract movements that do not seem associated with a particular gender: Abbi lifts Helen over shoulders, like a fireman's lift, and rolls her down her body (for a similar movement, see Fig. 4); Helen holds Abbi under her armpits; they walk in time; they hold each other; they give each other piggy backs. Although Dolan argues that 'the naked female body can never be "bare"' as, 'from a materialist feminist perspective, the female body is not reducible to a sign free of connotation', here RashDash get as close to moving beyond gender as they possibly can by adopting movements that are not so insistently associated with a particular gender.[71] If they cannot completely remove entrenched gender stereotypes and binaries through their movement, RashDash can, at least, expand the repertoire of movements associated with the female body.

As suggested by Dolan's observation that the naked female body is an overdetermined sign, RashDash's use of nakedness in the movement sequences complicates and intensifies the dynamic interplay between sex and gender in their choreography. Greenland and Goalen carefully frame their nakedness in *Two Man Show* to give it the best

[71] Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, p. 63.

possible chance of being received on their terms, from the content warning on the advertising for the show, 'Contains full nakedness: non threatening and non sexual', to the traverse staging, chosen so, as Greenland put it, audience members are 'watching other people watching us being naked'.[72] RashDash associate being naked with naturalness and authenticity, asking, 'How often do you get to see women's bodies, with all their bumps and muscles and hairs, moving together in a non-sexual context?'[73] RashDash are, in fact, following in a tradition of feminist performances that employ nudity, such as Carolee Schneemann's confrontational performance 'Interior Scroll' (1975), in which she undressed and read from a scroll she pulled out of her vagina.[74] More recently, Nic Green's feminist performance *Trilogy* (2009) incorporated a community company of women of a range of ages, shapes, sizes and ethnicities performing a 'wobble dance' naked.[75] At the end of the show, female members of the audience were invited to come onstage, undress behind a curtain, then sing *Jerusalem* naked together, an invitation that many women took up.

Sarah Gorman has expressed her concern that the use of female nudity in *Trilogy* and shows like it 'acknowledges immanence, the imbrication of female experience with the body (leaving classical theories of ontology unchallenged) and embraces the conservative humanist ideology of individualism'.[76] Goalen and Greenland's association of the female body with naturalness and authenticity in their discussion of *Two Man Show* could indeed leave them open to this charge. Yet, in trying to 'bare' the naked female body from its

[72] 'Two Man Show', *Soho Theatre*, 9 October 2017 <sohotheatre.com/shows/rashdash-two-man-show/> [accessed 11 April 2018]. 'RashDash in conversation', Cambridge Interdisciplinary Performance Network.
[73] RashDash, 'Two Man Show: our feminist quest to smash the patriarchy', *The Guardian*.
[74] Elizabeth Manchester, 'Carolee Schneemann: Interior Scroll', *Tate*, November 2003. <www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-p13282 > [accessed 28 July 2020].
[75] Maddy Costa, 'Trilogy's naked truths', *Guardian*, 13 January 2010. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/jan/13/trilogy-nic-green > [accessed 28 July 2020].
[76] Sarah Gorman, 'Feminist Disavowal or Return to Immanence? The Problem of Poststructuralism and the Naked Female Form in Nic Green's Trilogy and Ursula Martinez's *My Stories, Your Emails*', *Feminist Review*, 105 (2013), 48-64 (pp. 57-58).

gendered associations, RashDash are attempting to make female bodies legible beyond a system of representation that sexualises them. Moreover, Greenland is careful to distinguish nakedness from nudity, as, in her understanding, nudity 'connects you to a history of titillation'; instead, they wanted to be 'bare', suggesting the 'absence of wearing anything rather than being naked for somebody'.[77] The difference between the two is vividly dramatised in the movement sequence of scene 4, in which Goalen and Greenland use their own bodies as canvases to demonstrate how the naked female body is aestheticised in classical art to become the nude. Helen stands, naked, on a pedestal in the middle of the stage, while Abbi, dressed in a painter's smock that only covers her top half, sculpts her into visually famous statue poses: typically male (Rodin's 'The Thinker'; legs planted wide, arm muscles clenched), then typically female (hands covering her breasts and pubis, looking coyly away; bending forwards and blowing a kiss, an ecstatic expression on her face). As they work, they hum a medley of famous, male-authored music; Andrew Haydon identifies pastiches of 'Mozart, Beethoven and Delibes'.[78] The comic parody of the male gaze in this movement sequence again suggests RashDash's care to frame their nakedness onstage in a way that encourages the audience to reflect upon how we consume their female bodies and how the female body has historically been consumed in art.[79]

Nonetheless, *Two Man Show*'s use of nakedness proved contentious in some reviews, echoing a wider debate within feminism about the politics of the naked female body in performance. Sarah Crompton gave *Two Man Show* two stars and, two months later, wrote a polemic against stage nudity, critiquing '*Two Man Show*, a supposedly

[77] 'RashDash in conversation', Cambridge Interdisciplinary Performance Network.
[78] Andrew Haydon, 'Two Man Show – Summerhall, Edinburgh', *Postcards from the Gods*, 9 August 2016 <postcardsgods.blogspot.com/2016/08/two-man-show-summerhall-edinburgh.html> [accessed 2 October 2020].
[79] For more on theories of the male gaze as applied to theatre, see Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 37.

coruscating attack on patriarchy, [which Goalen and Greenland performed] while wearing next to nothing a lot of the time. I felt very cross, although they obviously didn't'.[80] She was concerned at the power imbalance and worried 'that women feel that they have to be willing to take their clothes off as a visible symbol of their commitment', arguing that female nudity is 'a failure, in fact, to use the imagination'.[81] In her anxiety that staging the naked female body inevitably plays into the male gaze, Crompton was, herself, unable to imagine that the naked female body could exist beyond the sexualised paradigm in which we are so used to consuming it. In contrast, Amber Massie-Blomfield, writing in response to Crompton's article, shared RashDash's interpretation of their nakedness as something natural and not titillating: 'As their nakedness is sustained over the course of the show, something wonderful happens. It no longer seems a condition that may deliver a swift shock or dose of titillation – instead it is a reminder that this is, after all, a natural state'.[82] From my own experience as an audience member, the duration that the audience is required to sit with and look at Greenland and Goalen's naked bodies does make them seem unremarkable by the end of the show, once the initial embarrassment of not knowing where to look has passed. Catherine Love agreed, observing,

> Watching Abbi and Helen move through the space, oscillating in the movement sequences between traditionally "masculine" and "feminine" physicalities, what strikes me most of all is the *strength* of their bodies. Strength, like so many other things, has been socially and culturally constructed as masculine, but these women are so so strong. And in the space they hold open, nudity becomes power.[83]

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[80] Sarah Crompton, 'Female nudity on stage has got to stop', *WhatsOnStage*, 27 October 2016. <www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/news/nudity-on-stage-stop-blog-elizabeth-debicki-_42090.html> [21 February 2018].

[81] Ibid. Crompton's discomfort at RashDash's nakedness, to some extent, recalls the condemnation by anti-porn feminists, such as Andrea Dworkin, of the explicit performances of feminist artists such as Karen Finley and Annie Sprinkle in the 1990s, which blurred the boundaries between pornography and art. For an account of these debates, see Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, pp. 59-81.

[82] Amber Massie-Blomfield, 'Amber Massie-Blomfield: We need more female nudity, not less', *The Stage*. 28 October 2016. <www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2016/amber-massie-blomfield-we-need-more-female-nudity-not-less/> [21 February 2018]

[83] Catherine Love, 'Two Man Show', *Exeunt Magazine*.

In contrast to Crompton's criticism of RashDash for 'a failure of the imagination' in their use of nakedness, Love's description suggests how integral imagination is to their performance. RashDash demand imaginative collaboration from the audience, in the flickering interplay between seeing the sexed bodies of the dancers and seeing the genders conjured by the particular movements they employ. In *Two Man Show*, the dance sequences both make visible and play upon audience expectations of what female and male gendered bodies are supposed to look like, move like, sound like, and temporarily remake the body in motion beyond that framework.

Reinventing the body: Naked cross-dressing

Figure 5. The publicity photograph, depicting Helen Goalen and Abbi Greenland in suits, ties and sunglasses, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at www.rashdash.co.uk/two-man-show [accessed 22 January 2021].

It is through the interaction between movement, nakedness, and (imaginative) cross-dressing that RashDash forge their imaginative expansion of the possibilities of gender as inscribed upon the body. At the end of the statue sequence, Helen and Abbi put on boxer shorts to play the next Dan and John scene. Their bare chests (somehow culturally

acceptable for a man and not acceptable for a woman) are a reminder of their sexed bodies, made more evident by the partial covering up. Yet, by now, the disjunction between Goalen and Greenland's bodies and the gender of the characters they play has been established to the extent that it is possible to elide (but never forget or discount) their naked female bodies. Boxer shorts are enough of a costume to conjure up a fully dressed male character, recalling a similar process of metonymy at work in realist characterisation. For example, in scene 7, Dan says to John, 'You should wear a suit more often […] You look like a man' (59), when Abbi as John is still wearing only boxer shorts. However, by some kind of metaphorical theatrical transformation, we are ready to accept that John is wearing a suit.

In my memory of the first time that I saw the production at the 2016 Edinburgh Fringe, I thought that, after getting undressed, Abbi and Helen actually put on more clothes in each Dan and John scene until they were dressed in full suits by the end. However, on seeing it again at Soho Theatre in 2017, I discovered this to be a false memory; my imagination had clothed Helen and Abbi in full, masculine costumes. The root of this false memory can be traced in part to one of the publicity photos (Fig. 5), which has Helen and Abbi in tightfitting suits, tailored to a more feminine cut, tucked in white shirts, ties, sunglasses, slicked back hair and lipstick. They never wear these costumes in the production, but somehow their performances of masculinity conjure them up by association to clothe their (half) naked bodies. This is, I think, a similar imaginative process to building the characters of Dan and John from small textual and physical clues in the play-within-a-play scenes; the mental habit of watching a realist play is so strong that I make the play I am watching more realist than it actually is. I am not the only person to have had this

experience of watching *Two Man Show*. Clare Foster remarked that Abbi's performance was so convincing that she could not tell she was not a man:

> When Abbi got naked, I thought, that's impossible. Where's the genitalia? Of course, I knew she was a female performer.[84]

'Where's the genitalia?' is a loaded question, unintentionally evoking Freudian ideas of female genitalia as lack, and suggesting that the genitalia is the site of and arbiter of sex, an argument that has been used to deny the claims of trans women to self-identify as women.[85]

Butler's reformulation of the relationship between bodily matter, sex and gender in *Bodies That Matter* is a useful counterpoint to this. Butler argues that sex should be construed not 'as a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies'.[86] Therefore, '"Sex" is not simply what one has or a static description of what one is: it will be one of the norms by which the "one" becomes viable at all, that which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility'.[87] Although sex has been naturalised to the point that it seems pre-discursive, Butler suggests that sex, like gender, is 'a sedimented effect of a reiterative or

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[84] 'RashDash in conversation', Cambridge Interdisciplinary Performance Network.
[85] For a feminist response to Freud, see Luce Irigaray, *The Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985). For an example of recent debates around transgender identity in the British media, see the controversy over the Old Vic's adoption of gender-neutral toilets. Sarah Ditum, 'The Old Vic's gender-neutral toilets leave women worse off', *The Spectator*, 7 October 2019. <www.spectator.co.uk/article/the-old-vic-s-gender-neutral-toilets-leave-women-worse-off> [accessed 17 September 2020]. Ditum's article was originally published by *The Stage*, alongside a contrasting opinion piece by Amber Massie-Blomfield. Amber Massie-Blomfield, 'That piece that The Stage took down', *Amber Massie-Blomfield*, 8 October 2019. <www.ambermassieblomfield.com/post/that-piece-that-the-stage-took-down> [accessed 17 September 2020]. Both articles were taken down from the site following Twitter backlash and open letters. See Robin Craig, 'PISSED: An Open Letter to The Stage', *Medium*, 9th October 2019 <medium.com/@robincraig_66759/pissed-an-open-letter-to-the-stage-cda8c1b05774> [accessed 17 September 2020].
[86] Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xii.
[87] Ibid.

ritual practice' and that 'there is no reference to a pure body which is not at the same time a further formation of that body'.[88] This complication of the relationship between the body and its representation in discourse is fruitful for RashDash because *Two Man Show* explores the messy entanglement of sex and gender, further complicated by Goalen and Greenland's use of their naked bodies as media. When fully naked, Goalen and Greenland's sex organs are visible, but they do not limit their gender identities; they inhabit both masculinity and femininity through their performance. Nonetheless, Foster's simultaneous awareness of the material reality of Goalen's body and the gender of the character she performs in the play-within-a-play suggests that RashDash are also inviting a productive tension between the performer's ability to conjure gender through performance and a conception of sex as biological and embodied.[89]

The double consciousness of Foster's response to Greenland's performance resonates with Aoife Monks's description of cross-dressing, which I find more compelling than Drouin's. Monks argues,

> cross-dressing makes the difference between the actor and the role explicit. In order to know that we are watching cross-dressing, we must see that performers are not what they play. Costume must appear *as* costume, separate from the performer's "real body".[90]

[88] Ibid., p. xix.
[89] Katharine Stokoe notes that, when watching a drag performance, 'audiences may transpose cissexist attitudes to "real" gender onto the performances they witness'. Katharine Anne Louise Stokoe, 'Reframing Drag Performance: Beyond Theorisations of Drag as Subverting or Upholding the Status Quo' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Warwick, 2016), p. 108. <wrap.warwick.ac.uk/90883/1/WRAP_Theses_Stokoe_2016.pdf> [accessed 17 September 2020]. Even when performers consciously unsettle binaries such as real and false, male and female, audience members may bring their own binaries to bear in interpreting the performance they watch.
[90] Aoife Monks, *The Actor in Costume* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 79.

Yet, while cross-dressing might appear to offer the promise of a 'real', sexed body beneath the costume, the performance itself can be far more unstable than that, as 'theatre invokes and invents bodies through the act of crossing, and changing clothes can mean changing bodies on stage and in the audience'.[91] Monk continues, 'Cross-dressing allows us to see the connection between costumed performance, and the concept of "performativity": the ability of performance not just to imitate, but also to invent and perpetuate further ways of doing the body'.[92] A demonstration of Monks's evocative insight that crossing can 'invent and perpetuate further ways of doing the body' can be found in the movement section of scene 6 of *Two Man Show*. In this scene, Dan and John dance for the first time, or rather Goalen and Greenland dance in the physicalities with which they characterise them (when they had previously adopted semantically 'masculine' stances or movements in the show, they were not in character). They dance in a macho, even 'primal' (52) way (as one of the illustrations describes it), shoving each other, flexing their arm muscles, grunting, giving each other violent bear hugs, and even staging a metaphorical cock fight.[93] Even before the deconstruction of the form in scene 8, having Dan and John dance in character disrupts a simple equation of play-within-a-play with masculinity and movement with femininity. It also unsettles the assumption of the difference in performance style between realist acting and gender performativity, revealing both to depend, to a certain extent, upon stereotypes of masculinity and femininity.

Yet this example also puts pressure on the concept of 'cross-dressing'. Firstly, can Goalen and Greenland be said to be cross-dressing when they are naked for most of the

[91] Ibid., p. 97.
[92] Ibid., p. 97.
[93] In a sequence that is both comic and violent, Dan and John put rolling pins between their legs and gallop forward, legs together. They bash each other's rolling pins in a metaphorical cock fight; Dan drops his rolling pin, leaving John the winning man.

performance? Instead of 'men's' clothes, the 'bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds' that they repeat, recite and parody themselves come to seem costumes, blurring the distinction between costume and body that Monks suggests is essential for cross-dressing to be recognisable. Secondly, RashDash's systematic unsettling of gender binaries mean that the point from which the performer 'crosses' to the point at which the performer arrives are not stable but shifting. Can their practice, then, be called cross-dressing, or is it merely dressing – or undressing? Instead, it is productive to return to Rebellato's idea of theatre as metaphor, given its concern with 'the relationship between what we see on stage and the imagined fictional world'.[94] Metaphor enables one thing to be seen in terms of another without erasing the distinct identities of each. Thus, when Greenland is dancing as John, the tenor of the metaphor is John (and the 'masculine' attributes that characterise him) and the vehicle of the metaphor is Greenland's body, which is sexed female (or, from Butler's perspective, is materialised against the cultural norm of the female). It is not so much that there is a fictional body (John's), separate from Greenland's material body, but rather that they are overlaid on top of each other and constituted by each other, flickering in and out of focus.

Ironically, at the point in *Two Man Show* when Abbi and Helen's bodies seem to be becoming male through their imaginative crossdressing, the reality effect of the Dan and John play-within-a-play starts to break down. Scenes 5 and 7 should be the dramaturgical crisis points, with two big revelations that have been set up earlier in the piece: John tells Dan that their father is dead; Dan tells John that his girlfriend Sarah has had an abortion

[94] Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses', p. 18. Gender theory might complicate this distinction between the material reality onstage and 'the imagined fictional world' because, if one follows Butler, gender and sex are cultural fictions materialized on and by bodies.

after not hearing from him. In scene 5, there is more of a sense of bathos than catharsis. Dan tells John 'You don't seem surprised' and John replies, 'I am. I just. I don't know' (47). John and Dan seem to be following social scripts for dealing with death. John tells Dan, 'I think you should sit down' (46), before he tells him the news. Dan thinks they 'should […] talk about it' but 'I think we should hug first though, what do you think?' 'Yeah', John replies, 'whatever you want' (48), awkwardly tapping his brother on the shoulder. Whereas one might expect the crisis of a realist play to occasion change in a central character, Dan neither expresses remorse nor regret for not spending more time with their father; the characters are static. Both Scenes 5 and 7 are unresolved. Holly Williams observed that it was at this point that,

> the brothers' storyline really begins to grate. So tired, so clichéd seems the writing; such cruel, callous, macho-macho manly men. I didn't believe in them, and I thought about how furious I'd be if I watched a show purporting to be about feminism, written and performed by men, where women were such cut-out caricatures.[95]

Yet, rather than a failing of craft or empathy on RashDash's part, this seems deliberate, as Williams acknowledges later in her review. Greenland and Goalen situate themselves as two women writing about men even as they construct male characters that are deliberately difficult (though not impossible) to believe in, identify or empathise with. Compared with the complex explorations of how gender attaches to bodies, the characterisation of Dan and John no longer seems 'real' in the sense of believable. Frustration is the intended affective response to this part of the show, anticipating a full-scale formal and gender breakdown. This frustration is directed at the metonymic model of realist characterisation and gender performance that works by referencing gender stereotypes. By reciting the stereotypes, RashDash have made the audience complicit (by the very legibility of these stereotypes) in

[95] Williams, 'Edinburgh Festival: Two Man Show, Summerhall review', *Independent*.

reproducing a binary model of gender that they now show to be inadequate. This model depends upon a kind of intellectual short-circuit; extrapolating the whole from a part, generalising from one or two characteristics can never account for the whole person and the complexity of their gender identity. Instead of decoding someone's gender identity from a set of binaries, the final section of *Two Man Show* encourages assembling gender in all its hybridity and contradictions.

'AND I'M NOT PRETENDING. I'm real'

In the final scene, the alternating form between movement and play-within-a-play is disrupted. *Two Man Show* starts to deconstruct itself and stage an internal critique of its form and its gender politics. Helen goes to dance but Abbi is not there. Abbi comes on bare-breasted, in a tutu and Doc Martens. She is using her John voice and a larger, more pugnacious physicality. Abbi as John asks Helen what some audience members may have been thinking, 'Are you gonna do another one of your little dances?' and 'What's the point?' (60). Abbi won't stop 'being' John (60). Previously, the alternating forms have kept Helen and Abbi and Dan and John more or less separate, in alternate theatrical realities. However, now Abbi the performer in RashDash's *Two Man Show* is made visible behind John the character. Abbi's refusal to stop performing John draws attention to the roles of Helen and Abbi as constructs – Goalen and Greenland are not being themselves onstage but playing scripted versions of themselves. Abbi refusing to stop being John appears to give both Abbi and John equivalent ontological status as characters. At the same time as drawing attention to their stereotypical writing of male characters (John says he's meeting 'Some man friends actually, we're going to talk about man stuff', 61), John's ability to transgress his part of the show suggests he has a reality beyond the fictional container of the play-within-a-play,

when he should not really exist beyond it. As well as criticising how he and men in general are instrumentalised in *Two Man Show*, John also seems to criticise the dramaturgical structures in which Goalen and Greenland have situated him:

> J: Do you want me to talk about my feelings
> H: No
> J: Would that help the scene?
> H: Stop taking the piss
> J: Shall I vomit my heart out so that you can help me come to terms with my emotions, which I could never possibly comprehend on my own?
> H: We're not suggesting –
> J: Who's we? I hit my dad, when I was looking after him. He was in the loo and he was throwing his shit everywhere, literally picking it up out of the toilet, and throwing it around, and I couldn't be fucked to clean up again and I was tired and I hit him. Really hard in the face, he bled. What does that say about me? What does that say about men, Helen?
> H: This isn't real
>
> (64-65)

Although John mocks the emotional revelation required of him to make him a sympathetic character within a realist dramaturgical framework, he also delivers it in his confession that he hit his dad. However, it now seems exploitative of the characters to make them metonyms for 'men' in general. John could also be making it up to give Helen what he thinks she wants – and of course John is a fictional character made up by Greenland and Goalen so none of it is 'real'. After the two (false, bathetic) crises of the play-within-a-play, this scene seems the real crisis of *Two Man Show* as a whole dramaturgically speaking, as the partnership between Abbi and Helen is threatened. Yet, of course, the crisis has been engineered to serve the show. The show is never at risk. Therefore, a more conventional dramaturgical structure is detectable within *Two Man Show*, despite its formal experimentation.

Reviewers on the whole found this part of the show both clever and disconcerting. Andrew Haydon describes his experience of watching it as follows:

> I. Suddenly. Have. No. Idea. Who. Is. *Meant*. To. Be. "Right". Both? Neither? Abbi? Helen? John? It's kind of brilliant, but also kind of scary, given that we're so used to being spoonfed in this sort of piece; so very used to being positioned, as an audience, in terms of who or what we're meant to be agreeing with.[96]

Between them, Helen and John/ Abbi articulate conflicting views of gender and how the show should go on, undercutting and ironising each other. After dismissing the 'little dances' as a form of communication, John tells Helen 'You need to use words if you want everyone to understand exactly what you are clearly trying to say' (61). Helen replies that it will not work,

> H: Because the words don't exist that say exactly what I'm trying to say […] I don't want to make a show out of a man-made language that has hijacked my brain and stunted my imagination and do you know what? I don't have to. (62)

Helen articulates a feminist critique of language, especially in her choice of the words 'man-made language' and the negative connotations of 'hijacked' and 'stunted', a view that is reflected in the epigraphs to the published script of *Two Man Show*: quotations from Annie Leclerc's *Woman's Word* and from Virginia Woolf's essay on Dorothy Richardson.[97] Nonetheless, while the epigraphs might seem to give Helen's point of view authority, John's response that 'a lot of girls – sorry women – here are going to have a big fucking problem with that' (62) resonates too; the dance sections have exceeded this paradigm by (re)citing movements to unpick their gendering. The structure of the show allows RashDash to have it both ways at once: to be 'good with words' and to exceed language; to gender forms and to deconstruct that gendering; to do a realist play and to parody a realist play.

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[96] Haydon, 'Two Man Show – Summerhall, Edinburgh', *Postcards from the Gods*.

[97] Leclerc's call to create a female language, to express 'the pleasures of my woman's belly, my woman's vagina, my woman's breasts', is rooted in écriture féminine. However, as I have suggested, RashDash's practice and thinking about gender in *Two Man Show* moves far beyond écriture féminine. Annie Leclerc, 'Woman's Word', in *French Connections: Voices from the Women's Movement In France,* ed. and trans. by Claire Duchen (London: Hutchison, 1987), pp. 58-63 (p. 60).

Figure 6. The drawing by Oliver Townsend, depicting Abbi as 'man woman', originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image can be found in RashDash, Two Man Show (London: Oberon, 2017), p. 70.

At a certain point in the dialogue with Helen, Greenland's voice changes back to her Abbi voice; the character designation for her lines in the script changes from 'J' to 'A' (65). However, some of 'John' remains inside of 'Abbi' – his assertiveness, his pugnaciousness, his stance, as if her body has absorbed the styles of masculinity she has performed and made them part of her repertoire of performing Abbi (see Fig. 6). In the first of a pair of contrasting autobiographical monologues, in which Abbi and Helen reflect on their personal experiences of gender, Abbi declares she is a 'man woman' (67). Her monologue has a cumulative effect, building through parataxis, declarative statements and stereotypes:

> Man woman stuffs imaginary socks in her man woman mouth to stop her man woman tongue from going man woman rogue. Man woman gets described as a

> strong woman. She has balls. She punches walls. She thinks in straight lines. She thinks quick and speaks quicker. (67)

The extreme repetition of 'man woman' at once establishes the hybrid gender identity and serves to render it nonsensical. In the monologue, the imaginary body (for example, the cliché that 'strong' women 'have balls') rubs up against the physical body (man woman metaphorically gagging herself). The turning point of the monologue is when Abbi avows her gender identity as real:

> AND I'M NOT PRETENDING. I'm real. This is real. I'm no man. They didn't invent this. Men didn't invent being direct or taking over a room or being a loud Cunt who always thinks they're right. (69)

Immediately after Helen has said that she cannot express herself in a 'man-made' language, Abbi discursively deconstructs masculinity into a series of gestures and qualities ('being direct or taking over a room or being a loud Cunt who always thinks they're right'), challenging their gendering and claiming them for herself – the verbal equivalent of the movement sections. The juxtaposition of 'I'M NOT PRETENDING' and 'I'm real' seems to set performance against the idea of an authentic self, to claim Abbi as more real than John as she is 'not pretending'. Nonetheless, even though the monologue draws on autobiography, Greenland is still playing a version of herself. Abbi in the final scene therefore draws attention to the multiple realities that can coexist within theatrical performance.

The use of the word 'real' here also has a particular charge in the sense of legitimate. In *Undoing Gender* (2004), Butler discusses the 'real' in terms of normative conceptions of gender, stressing people's need for recognition to forge a 'livable life'.[98] She suggests that, 'On the level of discourse, certain lives [such as the lives of trans and intersex people] are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized; they fit no dominant frame for the

[98] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2015; first published 2004), p. 1.

human, and their dehumanization occurs first, at this level'.[99] Therefore, she argues, 'when the unreal lays claim to reality, or enters into its domain, something other than a simple assimilation into prevailing norms can and does take place. The norms themselves can become rattled, display their instability, and become open to resignification'.[100] There is, therefore, a great deal at stake in people, particularly marginalised subjects, claiming the reality of their experiences of gender and thereby widening or even prising apart existing norms. (Nonetheless, it is worth noting that challenges to gender norms, particularly the relatively minor ones posed in Abbi's monologue – such as talking loudly as a woman – can be neutralised. Abbi's 'unreality' seems to pose far less of a threat to the existing cultural norms than the queer and transgender people Butler writes about). Reflecting on this section of the piece, Goalen and Greenland wonder, 'Maybe there are as many genders as there are people, because it's more of a spectrum than a series of categories'.[101] Although noting the historic importance of the word 'woman' as a political rallying point, they suggest 'maybe, as we address and diminish the oppression that makes this word important, we can be less concerned with our gender and more concerned with being the most authentic version of ourselves'.[102] Using theatre to express 'the most authentic version of ourselves' in terms of gender resonates with a number of recent queer performances that foreground trans and nonbinary experiences, such as the Traverse's double bill of *Adam* by Frances Poet and *Eve* by Jo Clifford at the 2016 Edinburgh Fringe, Milk Presents' *Joan* (Edinburgh Festival, 2016) and *Bullish* (Camden People's Theatre, 2017) by Lucy J. Skilbeck and Outbox Theatre's *And the Rest of Me Floats* (Bush Theatre, 2019). Such an emphasis on authenticity may

[99] Ibid., p. 25.
[100] Ibid., pp. 27-28.
[101] RashDash, 'Our Feminist Quest to Smash the Patriarchy', *Guardian*.
[102] Ibid.

seem to conflict with Butler's ideas of gender performativity, yet it speaks to her recognition in *Undoing Gender* of the psychological need to have one's gender identity validated by others. At the end of *Adam*, in which Adam Kashmiry performs his story of coming to Scotland from Egypt and transitioning, a digital chorus of trans and non-binary people sing, 'We are real. We are just people' in a soaring melody of solidarity.[103] This could be seen as a demonstration of the 'unreal lay[ing] claim to reality' and rattling its norms, which also reveals how the category of the real can be used to oppress and enforce gender norms by denying marginalised people's need to assert their reality and humanity.

Abbi ends her monologue by drawing attention to her embodied presence, the reality effect that inheres in the relationship between performer and audience in live performance:

> I'm not a strong fucking woman. I'm a fucking woman. I don't wear the trousers, thank you. I wear nothing. Look at my bum. Look at my muscles. Look at my teeth. AHHHHHHHHHHHHH. (69)

The injunction to the audience to 'look' wrests back control of the gaze, directing our attention to her body parts as body parts rather than as signifiers of the female sex or sexual organs. Over the course of the monologue, she has redefined herself from 'man woman' to 'strong woman' to 'woman', suggesting that the repertoire of 'woman' should and can be made to contain everything she has performed, even if it causes the category to burst at the seams. It is possible to read this, in combination with Helen's quieter, contrasting monologue that follows, as an empowering and 'satisfying' 'acknowledgement that every woman is different', in the words of reviewer Olivia Gibbs-Fairley.[104] Greenland

[103] Regrettably, the words the 'Adam World Choir' sing are not reprinted in the script of *Adam* (London: Nick Hern, 2017), so I am relying on my memory of seeing the production at the Traverse Theatre in 2017.
[104] Olivia Gibbs-Fairley, 'Review: Two Man Show, Soho Theatre', *A Younger Theatre*, 11 September 2016. <www.ayoungertheatre.com/review-two-man-show-soho-theatre/> [accessed 27 February 2018].

delivers the monologue very fast, scarcely stopping to draw breath, and her virtuosic delivery occasioned applause in at least some performances, suggesting it was received as the climax of the show.[105] Ironically, this unintended climax of Abbi's declaration of womanhood risks replicating the 'maybe even patriarchal' dramaturgical structure of crisis and climax that RashDash had sought to avoid.[106] In effect, this could be compared to the first American production of Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* in 1981, directed by Tommy Tune, which ended with Betty's monologue about masturbation, seeming to construct a teleological narrative of progressive sexual liberation when the structure of the play aimed to avoid this.[107]

Moreover, although RashDash have explored a plethora of different styles of masculinity and femininity within the show, Abbi's kaleidoscopic performance of gender comes to rest at a point when the gender of the character and the sexed body of the performer, tenor and vehicle, align more snugly than before. Instead of feeling empowered by Abbi's speech, audience members might have felt a sense of loss for the alternative possibilities for doing the body that have been collapsed. There are, then, limits to RashDash's subversion of gender norms. At least part of this is due to Goalen and Greenland's use of a devised theatre-making practice that derives material from their bodies and their own embodied experiences. In using their bodies as material, the particularities of Goalen and Greenland's bodies both open up imaginative possibilities, as in the dance sections, but, to a certain extent, are also confined by their own visible markers of

[105] Cal Kenny notes applause in his review. Cal Kenny, 'Two Man Show', *Broadway Baby*, 12 September 2016. <broadwaybaby.com/shows/two-man-show/717478> [accessed 9 March 2018]. The Other Richard's archive recording of *Two Man Show* also picks up audience applause after this monologue.
[106] RashDash, 'Two Man Show: Our feminist quest to smash the patriarchy'.
[107] For Caryl Churchill's opinion on the edits, see Linda Fitzsimmons, *File on Churchill* (London: Methuen, 1989), pp. 42-43.

identification as white, cis, able-bodied women. To what extent can these bodies represent another person, or can they only represent themselves? Indeed, the song that concludes *Two Man Show* suggests the difficulty of representing oneself satisfactorily to others. Abbi, Helen and Becky chorus, 'I thought I could tell you with words who I am with words / how funny of me' (75). The desire for connection is represented by the performers' physical closeness, in contrast with lyrics suggesting the incommensurability of individual experiences of gendered identity. Having struggled throughout the show with different modes of representation and discovered the limitations of both movement and words, the problem of representation, including feminist representation, remains unresolved.

Re-citing Chekhov: RashDash's *Three Sisters*

RashDash's next show after *Two Man Show*, *Three Sisters*, continues to explore the representation of women, shifting focus from the construction of the gendered body in and through performance to examining the representation of women in the classic theatre repertoire. In *Three Sisters*, they continue *Two Man Show*'s dynamic sense of the relationship between the real and its representation, turning their attention to a classic text of nineteenth-century realism: Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1901). Casting their source text as synecdoche for the historical exclusion of women from and misrepresentation within the theatrical canon, RashDash's irreverent adaptation places a staid idea of Chekhov as the paragon of naturalism in dialogue with dramaturgies of fantasy and fun. Thereby, they both expand ideas of realism and, in accordance with Butler's concept of 'the critical promise of fantasy', suggest an alternative to the status quo.[108]

Three Sisters: after Chekhov was co-commissioned by Tobacco Factory Theatres, The Yard theatre, Cambridge Junction, Mayk and Bristol Old Vic, and co-produced by RashDash and the Royal Exchange Theatre. It opened at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester on 3 May 2018, where it played for two weeks, before touring to the Yard Theatre, London. Live music is given more emphasis in *Three Sisters* than in *Two Man Show*, aligning it more closely with the gig theatre style RashDash used in their earlier shows, such as *Scary Gorgeous* (Edinburgh Fringe, 2011), which tackled raunch culture and the sexualisation of young women, and *The Ugly Sisters* (Edinburgh Fringe, 2012), a feminist rewriting of *Cinderella*.[109] Greenland explains that 'We wanted to make a band show', in order to

[108] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 29. This is an extension of her idea of the challenge that the 'unreal' poses to norms.
[109] Costa, 'RashDash: Punking feminist theatre', *Guardian*. Gig theatre has become an increasingly popular form in British theatre in the 2010s, developed by companies such as Middle Child, with shows including *All*

celebrate Becky Wilkie, who had previously worked with RashDash as a musician, becoming a core member of the company.[110] RashDash also brought in drummer Chloe Rianna and violin and synth player Yoon-Ji Kim, as well as dramaturg Jude Christian, set designer Rosie Elnile and lighting designer Ziggy Jacobs as collaborators.

Greenland notes that *Three Sisters* 'came about partly because we had some conversations with artistic directors, producers from theatres and companies that said, "How about a classic text for you now?" [and we wondered] why should we have to do a classic text?'[111] In the first scene of RashDash's piece, an Artistic Director (played by Abbi) dressed in a long, military coat stands astride a chaise longue and declares,

> If you want to be taken seriously and to work on bigger stages and with more resource then at some point it would be sensible to engage with the classics. How about *Three Sisters*? That's got three women in it.[112]

As in the final scene of *Two Man Show*, RashDash are again 'putting our dilemma into the form and having that conversation we were having as makers onstage'; throughout *Three Sisters*, the dilemma that RashDash are grappling with is their relationship with Chekhov.[113] Adaptations can confer cultural capital upon theatremakers that enables them to 'work on bigger stages and with more resource' (as theatres can be more sure of selling tickets for a known quantity) but, as RashDash suggest throughout the show, the pressure to engage with the classics manifests in particularly gendered ways, for example critics declaring adaptations by female theatre-makers illegitimate. In a demonstration of such programming

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We Ever Wanted Was Everything (Edinburgh Festival Fringe, 2017); *The Canary and the Crow* (Edinburgh Festival Fringe, 2019).

[110] Greenland and Greenstreet interview. RashDash did, in fact, release the soundtrack of *Three Sisters* as an album in June 2019. Abbi Greenland, Helen Goalen and Becky Wilkie with Chloe Rianna and Yoon-Ji Kim, *Three Sisters* [album] (2019). <rashdash.bandcamp.com/album/three-sisters > [accessed 31 July 2020].

[111] Catherine Love, 'RashDash' [podcast], *Theatre Voice*, 31 May 2018. <www.theatrevoice.com/audio/rashdash/> [accessed 10 March 2020].

[112] RashDash, *Three Sisters: After Chekhov* (London: Oberon, 2018), p. 9. Further references to this script will be included in the body of the chapter.

[113] 'RashDash in conversation', Cambridge Interdisciplinary Performance Network.

considerations and supporting Greenland's experience that there is a sense of financial riskiness around devised as opposed to scripted work, playwright Rory Mullarkey's adaptation of *The Cherry Orchard* (2018) was programmed at the Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester on the mainstage at the same time that RashDash's *Three Sisters* was being performed in the studio space.[114]

In *Three Sisters*, RashDash are interrogating both the politics of the theatrical canon and its association with and valorisation of particular forms. The free sheet handed out to audience members before the show declares:

> **THIS IS AN EXPERIMENT WITH FORM.**
> **AND AN EXPERIMENT WITH THE CANON.**
> How can we tell stories in different shapes?
> Shapes that speak of our felt experience of the world, and of our fantasies?
> Who and what are the classics for?
> If they're not for me, then why do they get staged so often?
> If they're not for me, then how can I make them for me/ about me/ mine?
> What in this play speaks to me of my experience of the world, and what can we simply let go of?
> Who gets to decide what is good art and what does that mean for everyone else?[115]

RashDash's questioning of 'who and what are the classics for?' resonates with longstanding feminist critiques of the dramatic canon, exploding the association of the classics with universality by focusing on the individual's subjective, 'felt experience'.[116] It is not only that RashDash do not feel represented as women by the canon but also that, in their view, the very forms do not seem capable of representing female experience, requiring a search for new and/or alternative forms, as in *Two Man Show*. In this, it seems particularly important

[114] Royal Exchange Theatre, 'The Cherry Orchard'. <www.royalexchange.co.uk/whats-on-and-tickets/the-cherry-orchard> [accessed 22 January 2021].
[115] RashDash, *Three Sisters* (2018) [Free sheet, personal collection]. Emphasis RashDash's own.
[116] Dolan states that the first rule of the canon is that 'a play must conform to the rule of universality by transcending the historical moment and speaking to a generic spectator'- which, as she argues in her introduction, has been historically 'assumed to be white, middle-class, heterosexual and male' in American culture. Dolan, *Feminist Spectator as Critic*, pp. 20, 1.

that RashDash chose Chekhov, not only because of his status within the European theatre repertoire, but also because of his paradigmatic association with early twentieth-century realism.[117] In articulations of the feminist critique of realism, form is often conflated with canonical or classic status, making it unclear which is being critiqued. For instance, Elaine Aston suggests, 'Miller's *Death of a Salesman* […] is emblematic of the oppressive systems of closure which the dominant tradition of staging classic realism presents for the female subject. The "I" of the dramatic discourse is male, and the female subject, to paraphrase Case, is in "male drag"'.[118] Because of its status as a classic of American drama, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is made emblematic of a whole tradition of 'classic realism'. Aston also conflates form (the supposed association of realism with 'closure'), and the unsatisfactory representation of women in the play (in the characterisation of Linda as helper to the male hero, Willy Loman). Similarly, in *Three Sisters*, RashDash make Chekhov synecdoche for a theatrical tradition of dead, white, male playwrights, as suggested by the plaster bust of Chekhov that opens the show on an otherwise empty stage and then surveys the rest of the performance from the edge of the stage.

In approaching Chekhov's play, RashDash upend the expectation of reverence that often accompanies adaptation; rather than asking how they could serve the text, they asked, 'How can this text serve us?'[119] Greenland explains 'Helen, Becky and I went through all of the things in the play that we felt we could say about ourselves, all the things the characters say, regardless of who they are – men, women, old, young – […] and we stole

[117] For more on Chekhov's status, see Laurence Senelick, *The Chekhov Theatre: A Century of the Plays in Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[118] Elaine Aston, *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 39.
[119] Pippa Sa and Beth Watson, 'Three Sisters with RashDash' [podcast], *Bechdel Theatre*, Episode 14, 29 May 2018. <bechdeltheatre.libsyn.com/ep-14-three-sisters-with-rashdash > [accessed 12 March 2020].

them, and then we wrote around it'.[120] By combining Chekhov's lines with autobiographical details, they inserted themselves into the play, claiming the same weight for their lives as the lives of the characters. Goalen, Greenland and Wilkie each brought specific autobiographical strands they wanted to pursue into the rehearsal room. Greenland recalls,

> Helen was exploring wanting to have fun. Becky was exploring wanting to make stuff but not necessarily feeling like she has the right to say stuff about herself. And I was exploring a really painful breakup I'd just been through.[121]

RashDash's additions often result in comic anachronisms between their lived experience of being women in twenty-first-century Britain and Chekhov's representation of the lives of middle-class women in early twentieth-century Russia. For instance, Abbi's Masha reflects, 'But then you find yourself on Tinder at thirty and you realise you have to take your happiness in snatches' (40), echoing and reducing to bathos Masha's lines on losing Vershinin: 'When you have to take your happiness in snatches, in little bits, as I do, and then lose it, as I've lost it, you gradually get hardened and bad-tempered'.[122] RashDash's version of *Three Sisters* cuts all the male characters (but often redistributes their lines) to focus on the relationships between the sisters.

In the published script of RashDash's *Three Sisters*, scenes are categorised as either 'Drawing Room' or 'Art Room'. The four 'Drawing Room' scenes correspond loosely to the four acts in Chekhov's play and the seasonal changes between them. In the first drawing room scene it is Irena's birthday; in the second the sisters are having a party. The third scene opens in the aftermath of a terrible fire (interpreted by many who watched the first production as a reference to Grenfell Tower), in which the sisters feel powerless to

[120] Greenland and Greenstreet interview.
[121] Ibid.
[122] Anton Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, in *Plays*, trans. by Elisaveta Fen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959), p. 316. I use this translation because it seems to be the one that RashDash consulted. I follow Fen and RashDash in calling the third sister, Irena, rather than the now standard Irina.

intervene.[123] In the fourth drawing room scene, the sisters mourn that their friends are moving away and a military drum roll evokes Chekhov's departing soldiers. Goalen, Greenland and Wilkie perform these scenes, which were directed by dramaturg Jude Christian, in the style of a conventional, contemporary adaptation of a classic twentieth-century play; they act their characters naturalistically and, despite or even through the autobiographical details, subsume themselves within the roles. In contrast, in the 'Art Room' scenes, Helen, Abbi and Becky's performances seem closer to Hans-Thies Lehmann's description of the actor in postdramatic theatre as 'no longer the actor of a role but a performer offering his/ her presence on stage for contemplation', like Abbi and Helen in the final scene of *Two Man Show*.[124] The 'Art Room' scenes are further away from the Chekhovian source text, refracting the text and what it has come to mean rather than directly corresponding to it. They seem both to provide a space outside of Chekhov's play for RashDash to expose and deconstruct ideas of authenticity and value associated with productions of the classics, and also to serve as a space for imagining alternative forms. The different 'rooms' afford different kinds of behaviour: the Chekhovian drawing room encourages decorousness and ennui; the art room allows for wilder, more experimental expressions of femininity. The form of the piece, in its alternation of 'drawing room' and 'art room' scenes (recalling the alternation of movement scenes and play-within-a-play in *Two Man Show*), allows RashDash to comment upon the aesthetic and political difficulties of adapting *Three Sisters* as they stage it. The contrasting performance styles and frames of reference also allow RashDash to put pressure on the truth claims of Chekhov's realist

[123] See Sam Marlowe, 'Theatre review: Three Sisters at the Royal Exchange Studio, Manchester; This funny, furious takedown of the cult of the classic is loud, rude, provocative and messy - which is all part of its glorious defiance', *The Times*, 11 May 2018, p. 13.
[124] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 135.

representation, revealing moments when verisimilitude breaks down, as shall be further explored in the following section.

As suggested by naming the more formally experimental sections of the show 'Art Room' scenes, visual images are a hugely important part of RashDash's *Three Sisters*.[125] The opening stage directions instruct that, 'The costumes should be selected for maximum fun and pleasure for both the wearer and the watcher' (7), a principle also followed by the stage design. Rosie Elnile's design for the drawing room references classic productions of Chekhov, with a contemporary, ironic twist:

> *A drawing room. A comfy armchair, an uncomfortable, wooden chair, a chaise longue. A heavy, iron bath. A chandelier almost touching the ground. A drum kit, a piano, a synth, a violin, five microphone stands. A gauze changing room. A ticker-tape sign sits on top of the piano. A toy dog.*
>
> *Behind the drawing room, from ceiling to floor, a pair of curtains have been drawn shut.*
>
> *The room is full of colour. Pink floor, orange changing room, green armchair, pink piano stool.* (7)

In the drawing room furniture and the fallen chandelier, suggesting ruined grandeur, Elnile's design gestures towards traditions of naturalistic set design for Chekhov's plays, made famous by Victor Simov's designs for the Moscow Art Theatre.[126] Yet the introduction of colour subtly undermines pre-established ideas of the Chekhovian, combined with the incongruity of the ticker tape (which reads 'tick tock' throughout, emphasising and ironising the importance of the passage of time in Chekhov's play) and the band equipment. The opening stage directions also stress the importance of 'Seeing the costumes and seeing the changes' (7); the audience are privy to the construction of at least some of the stage images.

[125] Unusually (due to the expense of printing), the playscript published by Oberon includes colour production photographs.
[126] For more on Simov's designs and how they became paradigmatic of a certain style of producing Chekhov, see Senelick, *The Chekhov Theatre*, pp. 60-80.

While at points, RashDash do wear the period costumes that might be expected in a naturalistic production of Chekhov, their choices of costumes can also subversively undermine the claims to verisimilitude made by Chekhov's text, such as when Abbi, Helen and Becky play a scene in large bear costumes. When the performers remove costumes to change into new ones, they pile them in a heap downstage, which grows over the course of the show. This visual image reflects both a lack of reverence and an aesthetic of accumulation that characterises the show as a whole; images pile up, juxtaposed with each other rather than reaching unity or synthesis.

Elnile, Jacobs and RashDash collaborate to create a distinctive aesthetic – brightly coloured, throwaway (in contrast to the marmoreal presence of the classics suggested by the Chekhov bust), culturally omnivorous in terms of its blending of high and low reference points – that verges on the camp. Fabio Cleto's description of camp as involving 'representational excess, heterogeneity, and gratuitousness of reference', even as he recognises the difficulty those characteristics pose for defining what camp is, resonates strongly with the visual design of *Three Sisters*.[127] Moreover, RashDash's *Three Sisters* also demonstrates the aestheticism, sense of frivolity and fun, and ironic sensibility that Susan Sontag associates with camp. As Sontag writes,

> Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman". To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role.[128]

Elnile's set is not a naturalistic set, but a 'naturalistic set', just as RashDash's adaptation puts Chekhov's realism in quotation marks, like the play-within-a-play in *Two Man Show*. The

[127] Fabio Cleto, 'Introduction: Queering the Camp', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 1–42 (p. 3).
[128] Susan Sontag, 'Notes on Camp', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 53-65 (p. 56).

sliver of distance makes way for irony. Even when Goalen, Greenland and Wilkie are doing naturalistic acting, immersing themselves in their roles, on some level they are also performing Helen playing Olga, Abbi playing Masha, Becky playing Irena; they are being RashDash playing Chekhov.[129] The presence of irony makes for an unstable tone, as if RashDash are working out their own shifting, ambivalent relationship towards Chekhov in front of the audience.

'Figments of some old white guy's imagination': RashDash's engagement with Chekhov in *Three Sisters*

RashDash's *Three Sisters* opens with a series of tableaux. After a blackout with recorded applause, the lights come up on 'A white bust of Chekhov […] in the middle of the room' (7). The image emphasises Chekhov's huge symbolic weight as author of 'The Play' (8), which is how the stage directions refer to the source text. The lights next come up on:

> A drawing room. Five women sit completely still. They gaze listlessly at the furniture or into the distance. (7)

This tableau conjures up a stereotypical image of Chekhov's plays of women sitting around in living rooms in beautiful ennui. The women are dressed in 'big, fluffy ballgowns' (7) (Fig. 7). The next tableau subverts this image of women and the kind of decorous behaviour that might be expected from their costumes:

> A woman is dancing with a lampshade on her head.
> A woman is posing with a toy dog.
> A woman is swinging the chandelier.
> A woman is playing 'Sonata in G', badly.
> A woman is standing on a chair and vigorously conducting an imagined orchestra.

[129] As RashDash's work seems to depend so much on it being performed by those who devised it, it is interesting to note that *Three Sisters: after Chekhov* has been performed by another company: Curio Theatre Company in Philadelphia in 2019. Cameron Kelsall, 'Curio Theatre Company presents, "Three Sisters, by RashDash, After Chekhov"', *BroadStreetReview.com*, 12 February 2019. <www.broadstreetreview.com/artcross-cultural/curio-theatre-company-presents-three-sisters-by-rashdash-after-chekhov#> [accessed 22 January 2021].

(7-8)

After another blackout and applause, Chloe Rianna and Yoon-Ji Kim take up positions behind their instruments at the back of the stage, and Helen, Abbi and Becky take up the characters of Olga, Masha and Irina respectively and sit on the drawing room furniture.

Figure 7. The production photograph by The Other Richard, depicting Helen Goalen, Yoon-Ji Kim, Abbi Greenland and Becky Wilkie in ballgowns with musical instruments, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/three-sisters-rashdash-chekhov-review-yard-theatre-tickets-a8366716.html [accessed 22 January 2021].

The first lines spoken are a quotation from the opening of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, delivered by Olga: 'Father died a year ago today. May the 5th, your birthday Irena […]' (8), summoning the author of the source text through their familiarity. The quotations from Chekhov's *Three Sisters* are taken almost verbatim from Elisaveta Fen's Penguin Classics translation; a copy of this translation is the book Masha reads onstage. However, the familiar world of the Prozorov sisters soon starts glitching:

Olga: Everything was so beautiful in Moscow – the blossom was

MASHA starts banging her head into the book she is reading.

IRENA switches rhythmically between Happy Face and Sad Face.

The synth player becomes a giant metronome swinging from side to side.

The drummer is banging louder.

The blossom was

She is banging louder and a synth has come in now too – bash, bash, bash.

The blossom was

Black. The sound of a crowd applauding. (8-9)

The mechanical movements and the percussion make the sisters seem like windup dolls, running out of steam, provoking laughter.[130] Olga cannot even finish her sentence yet still there is (recorded) applause, suggesting unquestioning adoration for the classics.

The first song, 'Men Make Speeches', which channels punk and riot grrrl in musical style and sentiment, continues the attack on Chekhov and men:

Why do you always say all the lines?
Why do you always write all the plays?
Why do you always decide what's good?
Why do you make me feel so stupid? (10)

Nonetheless, the repeated phrase, 'Fuck you and your excellent words' (11), conveys a certain ambivalence towards Chekhov and the canon. On the one hand, it seems to dismiss the canon and want no part in it – the punk 'fuck you'. On the other, it seems to acknowledge the 'excellence' of canonical works, even while putting that excellence into

[130] RashDash's experimentation with a deteriorating source text recalls postmodern adaptations of Chekhov, such as the Wooster Group's *Brace Up!* (1990) and Dead Centre's *Chekhov's First Play* (2015), the latter of which takes a literal wrecking ball to the set and a metaphorical wrecking ball to naturalistic play structure.

question. The song ends with an operatic soprano singing a high minor arpeggio, suggesting that the female performers can be just as excellent on their own terms.[131]

RashDash's *Three Sisters* is therefore not a straightforward rejection of Chekhov, despite the combative attitude of the first scene. The three drawing room scenes that follow, based loosely on Acts 1 to 3 of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, demonstrate a surprisingly patient and productive engagement with the text and the production history of Chekhov's play. This relates to Hutcheon's observation that 'what is remarkable in modern parody is its range of intent – from ironic and playful to the scornful and ridiculing'.[132] RashDash's 'intent' or attitude towards *Three Sisters* changes over the course of the play (not necessarily linearly). In the transition between the 'Art Room' scene and the first 'Drawing Room' scene, Helen, Abbi and Becky change into modern dresses, Olga in blue, Masha in black and Irena in white (the colours associated with each character in Chekhov's text), as Yoon-Ji plays a Russian folk theme on the violin. In the scene transition, Helen, Abbi and Becky dance together, 'fall into each other, turn each other, lie on each other, carry each other' (12). The movement suggests a supportive relationship between the sisters. In the three drawing room scenes that follow, Helen, Abbi and Becky insert themselves into Chekhov's play and shift the Prozorov sisters' frame of reference from early-twentieth-century Russia to twenty-first-century London. The sisters no longer yearn for Moscow, but to get out of the city.

Yet, while RashDash's *Three Sisters* may appear, 'a classy adaptation of a classic' (11), as the stage directions suggest, RashDash's use of irony makes it an uneasy adaptation. This

[131] This ambivalence towards the canon resonates with a debate in feminist literary criticism about whether it is better for women's theatre to be excluded from the canon or to be admitted to it with the risk of replicating dominant values. For example, Jill Dolan asserts that for a play 'to be inserted into the canon, it should not substantially threaten the canon's dramatic or ideological values'. Dolan, *Feminist Spectator*, p. 20.
[132] Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody*, p. 6.

is particularly apparent in the treatment of the class privilege of the Prozorov sisters. The first 'Drawing Room' scene begins with Olga declaring, 'Why can't I do anything positive about homelessness?', basing her belief that 'giving money is not the right thing to do' 'because my friend who worked for a homeless charity once told me so' (13), thereby absolving herself from doing anything. However, her concern is more for herself than homeless people as, 'I just can't stand seeing it, it makes me feel quite faint. It gets me down' (13). Irena responds with a non-sequitur quoted from the source text, musing 'I don't know why but I'm so happy today. Just like I'm sailing along in a boat with big, beautiful sails, and above me the endless, blue sky, and in the sky, little birds floating around' (13). As in Chekhov's play, the characters are in their own little worlds, which verge upon solipsism. Abbi as Masha declares, 'You're such silly and horrible people. Forgive me for saying so, but you are' (14), another recited quotation from Chekhov. Masha's judgement of her sisters could encourage audience members to view the characters from an ironic, critical distance. Yet, due to the combination of naturalistic acting with autobiographical details from the performers' own lives, it is unclear whether it is Chekhov's characters that are being ironised, RashDash's contemporary versions of them, or even the performers themselves.

Indeed, over the course of the three drawing room scenes, the sisters begin to seem less laughable in their privilege and more morally culpable for doing nothing to help. The third drawing room scene, echoing the aftermath of the fire in Chekhov's play, begins:

OLGA: I am so tired. I didn't sleep at all last night. I just keep watching the videos of the smoke billowing from the tower, knowing I can do nothing. It's so hard to watch a tragedy unfold and be able to do nothing. I just keep updating my news app and feeling so sick. It makes me feel so faint. It's happening in our city and I can do absolutely nothing.

IRENA I'm going to go on the march. There's a march being organised and we should all go.

OLGA If only there was something we could do. (24)

Olga's protestation that she can do absolutely nothing to help is undercut by her sister's suggestion that they go on a march. Helen's Olga is even less effective than Chekhov's, who at least donates clothes and house space to victims of the fire. Catherine Love notes in her review for *The Stage* that RashDash walk 'a precarious tightrope between subversion and replication' in *Three Sisters*; in parodying the sisters' privilege and ineffectiveness they also risk drawing attention to their own as middle-class artists.[133] Indeed, RashDash's three sisters express doubts over the purpose and efficacy of art; in the second drawing room scene, Irena declares that she will 'help people by creating' (20) but by the third scene she has 'realised I have absolutely nothing to say', as 'It's so hard being happy and content all the time' (24), implying that those who have suffered greater hardship would be better equipped to create. In the absence of a more direct social critique, RashDash seem to deliberately cultivate audience frustration with the characters in order to suggest the insufficiency of producing yet another 'classy version of a classic', which ends up replicating the status quo it sought to undermine.

This becomes evident in the third drawing room scene, when the form RashDash have established starts to break down. The attitude of gentle satire towards *Three Sisters* is intensified to ridicule by the costume choices: the five performers are dressed as the Spice Girls (Helen/Olga as Posh, Yoon-Ji Sporty, Abbi/ Masha Ginger, Chloe Scary and Becky/ Irena as Baby). The costumes provide a visual gag in their incongruity. They also could convey a dissatisfaction with representations of women in popular culture and the fine line between

[133] Catherine Love, 'Three Sisters review at Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester – "a powerful interrogation of the canon"', *The Stage*, 11 May 2018. <www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2018/three-sisters-review-royal-exchange-theatre-manchester-2/> [22 Aug 2018]

discourses of empowerment and post-feminist co-option, though this idea is not explicitly developed further by RashDash. Masha declares, 'We're all just figments of some old, white guy's imagination, saying versions of what he thinks we would say' (25). This sudden metatheatrical turn is a confrontation with the limitations of Chekhov's writing of his female characters. However, Masha's line does not lead to the characters Irena and Olga realising their fictional status; Irena responds, 'Don't worry Masha, you'll find someone soon' (25).

Indeed, it is not the text but Elnile's set design that seems to provide a catalyst for the characters Olga, Masha and Irena to break out of the conventions of decorous female behaviour demanded by Chekhov's text. Masha starts dancing to a beat on the drums and singing a wordless melody and Irena starts to open the curtains to reveal the light boxes behind, much to Olga's chagrin:

OLGA: Irena, not both of them, no. You've had a look and that's enough!

IRENA: I just want to let some light in and to see that view

IRENA draws the other curtain to reveal more light, more art, more collage.

IRENA: Ah! / OLGA: No!

MASHA is dancing / worshipping the lightboxes.
IRENA joins her.

OLGA: What are you doing? You look mad. I don't know what to do.

MASHA is rubbing herself against the furniture.

OLGA: Masha go to your room if you want to do that. You can't do that in here.

That's enough Irena, I'm closing the curtains. (28-30)

As the older sister, Olga desperately tries to maintain order. Masha challenges her through her behaviour – the intrusion of her sexuality that Olga says should be confined to her room – rather than through words. Irena's desire to open the curtains to 'let some light in and see

that view' when, according to Olga, 'We always keep the curtains closed in here' (26), suggests an illuminating alternative to the sisters' lives, proscribed by gender roles (in Chekhov's play, the army men leave at the end, but the sisters must stay). A movement sequence follows in which the sisters, still dressed in their Spice Girl costumes, wrestle with each other and try to pull each other's pants down, accompanied by a waltz (Fig. 8). It is silly and childish, playful rather than sexual.

Figure 8. The production photograph by Richard Davenport, depicting Helen Goalen, Abbi Greenland and Becky Wilkie leaning on each other in Spice Girls outfits, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at theculturevulture.co.uk/featured/rashdash-three-sisters/ [accessed 22 January 2021].

The lightbox collage, designed by Elnile and lighting designer Ziggie Jacobs, combines famous representations of women in classic art, such as Leonardo da Vinci's 'Lady with an Ermine' with images of body parts, often cropped out of context (a bare-breasted torso, a foot flexing; see Fig. 9). Elnile held a photoshoot for the company, in which she photographed them in different, athletic positions, so that, in Goalen's words, 'all of the

women who had made that show in some way, whether they were onstage or offstage were represented in that collage lightbox'.[134] There is a Microsoft Paint feel to the deliberately abrupt and blocky combination of graphics and images. In the background, there is a painted forest scene with trees and ferns. In this, the collage playfully references the stage direction at the beginning of Act 4 of *Three Sisters*: '*The old garden belonging to the Prozorovs' house. A river is seen at the end of a long avenue of fir-trees, and on the far bank of the river a forest* […]'.[135] Elnile's collage design draws attention to the construction of visual images, particularly those of women. In its juxtaposition of photographs of real women with images from the plastic arts, it highlights the gap between real female bodies and their representation. In the company's insertion of parts of themselves into the picture in order to subvert the authority of classic art and reclaim some of its aesthetic status, it is a visual analogue of what RashDash do with Chekhov's text. It seems to propose an alternative, female-led aesthetic, that can offer, as the stage directions put it, 'a different view' (26) in its hybridity.

[134] Goalen and Greenstreet interview. The collage has been reproduced on pp. 26-27 of the playscript of *Three Sisters*.
[135] Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, p. 311.

Figure 9. The production photograph by Richard Davenport, depicting Yoon-Ji Kim playing a violin solo in front of the lightbox collage, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at <www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/news/rashdash-three-sisters-feminist-chekhov-blog-matt-trueman_46545.html> [accessed 22 January 2021].

Nonetheless, the subversion does not break 'The Play'; following the Art Room, Abbi, Helen and Becky return to the drawing room to take up their characters. They frantically change out of cheerleading outfits into oversized bear costumes (without the heads), which make it difficult to take anything they say seriously. Very little seems to have changed in the sisters' lives, although Masha is 'getting out there again' (39) and their friends are leaving. The world of the Chekhov play has stagnated and is no match for the vibrancy of the Art Room scenes. The scene descends into full-scale parody of the end of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*. They ask a series of questions, about their lives ('Masha: When will I want to fuck other people?', 'Irena: When will people stop treating me like a child?' 'Olga: When will I earn enough money to have a baby?', 40), about art ('Olga: When will this play stop being performed?', 41), about the world ('Irena: When will people be worried about this

weather?', 41). Between them, they say, 'If only we knew' (41), nine times, the repetition reducing Chekhov's aimed-for tragicomedy to bathos. Nonetheless, from their delivery, it sounds like they are genuinely seeking answers. In RashDash's *Three Sisters*, sincerity and ironic distance rub against each other, allowing RashDash both to do 'naturalism' and to subvert it.

Cannibalising the canonical Chekhov

Over the course of RashDash's performance, it becomes clear that it is not Chekhov per se that is under attack but a particular style of producing Chekhov's plays that is entangled with the stage history of naturalism. Laurence Senelick argues that 'a consensus of what is Chekhovian has congealed over the last century', following in the style of the naturalistic Moscow Art Theatre productions that made Chekhov famous, which has become 'prescriptive'.[136] Because of this, Senelick locates a 'sense of proprietorship' around Chekhov, remarking that 'audiences, expecting to be sucked into a plausible and *gemütlich* world of bygone gentility, react angrily to productions that are more abstract, more physical or more surrealistic than what they expected'.[137] That RashDash are engaging with and ironising the production history of *Three Sisters* as much as Chekhov's text is suggested by the movement sequence in the third 'Art Room' scene, in which Abbi, Helen and Becky 'dance together, landing in the poses from posters for productions of *Three Sisters* or clichéd images of three women together' (42). For instance, they sit on the floor back-to-back, wearing sultry expressions that are incongruous with the glittery, mock-Tudor costumes they put on in the previous scene. Their bodies ooze over a chair, landing in a

[136] Senelick, p. 2.
[137] Ibid.

tangle of limbs, parodically recalling the poster for Benedict Andrews's production of *Three Sisters* at the Young Vic in 2012, set in contemporary Russia (Fig. 10).

Figure 10. The publicity image, depicting three women in dresses lolling on each other on a chaise longue, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The photograph was sourced at www.youngvic.org/whats-on/three-sisters [accessed 22 January 2021].

The visual images they create with their bodies draw attention to the ridiculousness of some of the clichéd representations of women in theatre: '*WOMAN 2 dies in the bath, beautifully*' and '*makes love to and sacrifices herself for the bust of Chekhov*' (42), satirising the trope of female self-sacrifice and mocking the hallowed status of the author. They also parody famous moments from productions of *Three Sisters*, such as when '*Woman 3 finds a spinning top and watches it decelerate, slowly*' (42), an intertheatrical reference to Peter Stein's famous production at the Schaubühne in 1984. The spinning top, quoted in many other productions and parodied by the Wooster Group in *Brace Up!* (1990), has become a trope in productions of *Three Sisters*. The 'Reviews Song' that follows quotes a review by Michael Billington that speculates that Benedict Andrews's use of the spinning top was 'copied direct from Stein'.[138] RashDash's ironic re-citation of Billington's admiring nod to

[138] This excerpt was included in the version of the Reviews Song that was performed, but not recorded. See Michael Billington, 'Best Theatre of 2012, No. 3: *Three Sisters*, Young Vic', *Guardian*, 19 December 2012. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/dec/19/best-theatre-2012-three-sisters>

Chekhovian tradition heavily implies that such sincere intertheatricality resides in a homosocial tradition sustained by male directors.

'The Reviews Song' combines extracts from reviews of recent productions of *Three Sisters*. Abbi, dressed in a ruff, which skims her bare breasts, sequinned hot pants and a Henry VIII-style cloak, first reads the reviews over music, then speaks them rhythmically, then raps them. The script does not print the text of the song for copyright reasons but the stage directions note that it lasts 'about fifteen minutes' and 'for this production all the reviews happen to be by male critics' (43), a choice that suggests that the theatre review enforces set ideas of theatrical form, rooted in patriarchal values. In RashDash's production, the names of the directors and actors were replaced with 'Woman' or 'Man' as appropriate, drawing attention to gender differences in critical reception. The song begins:

> I think it's high time Woman got on with writing original plays rather than mucking about with classics. At the barely graduate age of 22, she's clearly going places. I just wish she'd stop detouring to the shelves housing the European repertoire.[139]

This patronising pronouncement casts the female writer as an interloper in the (male-authored) 'European repertoire', 'mucking about with classics', and placing a value judgement on original work as better than adaptation. The review excerpts chosen also reveal the objectification of actresses by (male) reviewers, one observing: 'The sadness is that the three principals, Woman, Woman and Woman, combine expressive intensity with Vogue-cover beauty. They deserve better'.[140] In contrast, replacing male directors' names with 'man' gives the sense of a homogeneous tradition, with one of the quoted reviews

[139] This quote is from a review of Anya Reiss' adaptation of *Three Sisters*, dir. Russell Bolam (Southwark Playhouse, 2014). Dominic Cavendish, 'Three Sisters, Southwark Playhouse, review', *The Telegraph*, 10 April 2014. <www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/10757430/Three-Sisters-Southwark-Playhouse-review.html> [accessed 20 March 2020].
[140] Ibid.

declaring that a production 'is like an anachronistic mix of Man and Man'.[141] The quotes from reviews were not attributed to their authors and were spliced together to form a collage of soundbites, which both undermined the critics' authority and made many of their observations seem ridiculous outside the context of the arguments in which they were made. The usual speech rhythms and pitches are comically distorted to fit the rhythms to music, including singing phrases, which also comically distorts the sense. By the time Abbi has been joined by Helen and the two are rapping the reviews over music, the reviews are scarcely audible; the content of the reviews is no longer important but the general impression of a potentially overwhelming critical tradition, complicit in maintaining a theatrical canon that limits acceptable forms of expression. The song devolves into the comically reductive repetition of 'very good' and 'not good', sung in harmony. With the question, 'When will people stop marking my work out of five?' (41), which also references Masha's schoolteacher husband awarding her marks for conduct in Chekhov's play, RashDash suggest that reviews that focus on value judgements are a reductive way of experiencing art.[142]

The majority of the quotations that make up the 'Reviews Song' were taken from Michael Billington's many reviews of *Three Sisters* over the course of his career as lead theatre critic for the *Guardian*, a position from which he only retired in December 2019.[143] For many in the theatre industry, Billington represented the critical establishment, an

[141] As the 'Reviews Song' was not published in the script, I am quoting from the version released by RashDash on the album of *Three Sisters*, which, at only five minutes long, does not contain all the reviews that were referenced in the production.
[142] In their feminist attack on critics, RashDash recall Zoe Coombs Marr, Ursula Martinez and Adrienne Truscott's *Wild Bore* (Traverse Theatre, Edinburgh, 2017), which played at the Edinburgh Festival in the same year as *Two Man Show* was in the British Council Showcase there. In the show, the three female comedians read out negative reviews of their own work, with their bare bottoms sitting at a conference table.
[143] Chris Wiegand, 'Guardian theatre critic Michael Billington to step down', *Guardian*, 5 November 2019. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/nov/05/guardian-theatre-critic-michael-billington-to-step-down > [accessed 25 March 2020].

example of one of the 'dead white men' Nicholas Hytner infamously attacked in 2007 for alleged bias against female directors (an accusation that Billington vociferously refuted).[144] The quotations that RashDash choose for their Reviews Song reveal set ideas of what a Chekhov production should be, against which new productions are measured. Billington seems particularly protective of Chekhov as a self-confessed Chekhov-lover; in the 'Reviews Song', Abbi and Helen shout in unison 'I love Chekhov', recalling the Chekhov cheerleading routine that takes this attitude to its parodic conclusion.[145] From the reviews that RashDash quote, it becomes clear that the Chekhov Billington loves is one based in 'psychological realism'.[146] He dismisses Krystian Lupa's 2006 production of *Three Sisters* at King's Hall, Edinburgh as 'an arbitrarily imposed concept' 'true neither to the spirit or the letter of Chekhov'.[147] (Billington is notoriously critical of German director's theatre, as evinced by his review of Sebastian Nübling's production of Simon Stephens' *Three Kingdoms* at the Lyric Hammersmith in 2012, and the reviews RashDash select almost make his aesthetic preferences seem like prejudice.[148]) Writing on Sean Holmes and Filter Theatre's production at the Lyric Theatre of Christopher Hampton's translation, he remarks, 'I miss the textured,

[144] Ben Hoyle, 'Dead white men in the critics' chair scorning work of women directors', *The Times*, 14 May 2007, p. 3.
[145] In his review of Benedict Anderson's production at the Young Vic (2012), Billington writes, 'Something of the play's everyday realism may be sacrificed, but this is a production that gets to the drama's heart, and made me realise all over again why I love Chekhov'. Michael Billington, 'Three Sisters – review: Young Vic, London', *Guardian*, 14 September 2012. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/sep/14/three-sisters-review> [accessed 20 March 2020].
[146] Michael Billington, 'Uncle Vanya/ Three Sisters review – Chekhov with cinema, spectres and sex', *Guardian*. 25 April 2014. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/apr/25/uncle-vanya-three-sisters-review-chekhov-cinema-sex> [accessed 20 March 2020].
[147] Michael Billington, 'Three Sisters: King's Theatre', *Guardian*, 31 August 2006. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/aug/31/theatre.edinburgh2006> [accessed 22 January 2021].
[148] Michael Billington, 'Three Kingdoms review', *Guardian*, 9 May 2012. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2012/may/09/three-kingdoms-review> [accessed 22 January 2021]. In an article reflecting on his critical career, Billington clarifies that he is not 'anti-director' per se but rather his 'quarrel lies with directors who see themselves as creators rather than interpreters'. Michael Billington, 'What I've learned from 10,000 nights at the theatre', *Guardian*, 4 December 2019. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/04/what-ive-learned-from-10000-nights-at-the-theatre> [accessed 25 March 2020].

symphonic realism and emotional fullness of vintage Chekhov' and criticises the loss of material detail.[149] He even criticises the 'lack of fir trees' in the non-naturalistic design for Michael Blakemore's production of *Three Sisters* at the Playhouse, London in 2003, suggesting a preoccupation with surface realism.[150]

Set against RashDash's playful irreverence for author and text throughout their *Three Sisters*, Billington's insistence on the primacy of the playwright and a limiting concern with verisimilitude come to seem absurd. Yet, rather than vindicating the accusation that they are merely 'messing about with the classics', RashDash's feminist, creative-critical intervention into *Three Sisters* excavates another side of Chekhov as a playwright of hybrid forms. Although Chekhov has become associated with naturalism through twentieth-century productions of his work, J. Douglas Clayton notes that his plays also contain elements of symbolism and the vaudeville.[151] In Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, this can be seen in the fragments of poetry that Masha and Soliony repeat, the colour symbolism of the sisters' costumes, the structuring of the play around the four seasons, and the importance of music. RashDash's interventions and improvisations emphasise the divergence from a limited conception of realism as verisimilitude within the source-text itself. Lyn Gardner insightfully observes RashDash's deep engagement with Chekhov in her review,

> If you know the original you will note how the company both honour its structure and smash it. It's a form of creative vandalism but this show doesn't despise Chekhov – at one point there are actual Chekhov cheerleaders. Instead, it understands that each generation must take what they need from a play and that it

[149] Michael Billington, 'Three Sisters: Lyric Hammersmith, London', *Guardian*, 26 January 2010. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/jan/26/three-sisters-lyric-hammersmith> [accessed 20 March 2020].
[150] Michael Billington, 'Three Sisters: Playhouse, London'. *Guardian.* 4 April 2003. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2003/apr/04/theatre.artsfeatures3> [accessed 20 March 2020].
[151] J Douglas Clayton, 'Diagnosis and Balagan: The Poetics of Chekhov's Drama', in *Adapting Chekhov: The Text and Its Mutations*, ed. by J. Douglas Clayton and Yana Meerzon (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 17-31 (p. 28).

> must speak not to the past but to the millions of Olgas, Irinas and Mashas of today. Otherwise, why bother?[152]

Not only do RashDash 'take what they need' from Chekhov but they also dissever Chekhov from the naturalism with which he has come to be firmly associated in twentieth-century Western theatre history, revealing that there are alternative ways of doing Chekhov and of doing realism. The epigraph to RashDash's script reads, '"We should show life neither as it is nor as it ought to be, but as we see it in our dreams". Anton Chekhov', suggesting that it was this version of Chekhov from which they took most inspiration.[153] Therefore, two versions of Chekhov emerge from RashDash's show: the classic, canonised Chekhov that must be resisted because of the prime position it occupies within the theatrical repertoire; and Chekhov as a facilitator of theatrical innovation and fantasy that can be embraced.

Perhaps ironically given its skewering of theatre critics, the 'Reviews Song' was singled out for praise by many reviewers. Matt Trueman vows, 'Thanks to RashDash, I'll never look at a Chekhov play – any old play – in the same way again'.[154] Contrary to *WhatsOnStage'*s editorial practice, he chooses not to give the show a star rating, suggesting that RashDash's scorn for reviews that 'mark […] my work out of five' (41) has hit home. Lyn Gardner, reflecting on the production two years later, recalled that the Reviews song was 'an electric shock of recognition for me', reminding her of enduring issues women

[152] Lyn Gardner, 'Three Sisters review – RashDash's gloriously playful take on Chekhov', *Guardian*, 11 May 2018. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/may/11/three-sisters-review-rashdash-royal-exchange-manchester> [accessed 29 September 2020].
[153] This quote is from Treplev's words to Nina in *The Seagull*, just before his formally experimental play is rejected by an audience. *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, ed. by Elizabeth Knowles, 5th edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 208. Fen translates the line as 'We don't have to depict life as it is, or as it ought to be, but as we see it in our dreams'. Chekhov, *The Seagull*, in *Plays*, p. 126.
[154] Matt Trueman, 'RashDash's #TimesUp *Three Sisters* pushes male plays off their pedestal', *Whatsonstage*. 11 May 2018. <www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/news/rashdash-three-sisters-feminist-chekhov-blog-matt-trueman_46545.html> [accessed 18 March 2020].

playwrights face when making work that does not conform to dramaturgical norms.[155] Gardner remembers being frustrated in the 1980s by the reviews by her mostly male colleagues, which would 'in particular question form and structure of the plays that were being written and suggest that the problem was not that women were seeking and trying to find new and experimental forms to express what they wanted to say and tell the stories that they wanted to tell, but it was a failure on their part that they had not understood, or were not capable of using the existing structures that were in place'.[156] RashDash's Art Room sections therefore develop *Two Man's Show*'s exploration of gendered forms to imagine what forms theatre could take beyond a system of patriarchal valuation.

Yet RashDash's formal experimentation is not merely utopian. Rather, they forge a new form through feminist parody of its Chekhovian source text. Hutcheon argues that 'Parody is an act of incorporation. As such it seeks, not to debase or ridicule the backgrounded material, but rather to come to terms with it, through irony or criticism (in the broadest sense)'.[157] Through parody, RashDash come to terms both with Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and the patriarchal theatrical tradition in which classics representing a limited number of people's experiences as universal have been venerated. Moreover, Hutcheon argues that parody can be key to the development of the literary tradition, suggesting, 'the dialectic synthesis of parody is a kind of prototype of the pivotal stage in that gradual

[155] Lyn Gardner, interview with Hannah Greenstreet (10 June 2020, Telephone). Similarly, Carole Woddis observed that, as critics, 'We all write to a certain unspoken, scarcely even acknowledged, set of conventions in which a general sense of what is "good" follows along lines still mainly laid down according to determinants settled long ago by the male rule of logic, reason and objectivity, which seem to deny the existence of any personalized hidden agendas'. Carole Woddis, 'Feminism and the theatre critic', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 5:2 (1994), 192-197 (p. 195).
[156] Gardner, Ibid.
[157] Hutcheon, 'Parody Without Ridicule', p. 211.

process of development of literary forms'.[158] Through synthesis, RashDash's feminist parody of Chekhov creates 'something else' (47).

'Something else now': Form, fantasy and fun

Figure 11. The production photograph by The Other Richard, depicting all the performers wearing period costumes lying on the floor and draped over the furniture, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The photograph was sourced at www.rashdash.co.uk/look [accessed 22 January 2021].

At the beginning of the final scene, all the performers change into 1901 period costume while the lights are up. They help each other with the buttons, taking the time they need. The period costume no longer seems restricting but facilitating, wearing it a form of re-appropriation. The performers have found a way to inhabit and to take up space in Chekhov's play, to mould it to their shapes. The final scene, entitled 'Drawing Room 5', echoes and subverts one of the opening images of the production of women sitting listlessly in a drawing room: '*Five women sit in the drawing room together. They are looking at us*' (46). The female gaze is directed back on the audience. There are tableaux, interspersed

[158] Ibid., p. 209.

with blackouts, of the women 'hugging', 'hiding behind the furniture' and 'taking up lots of space' (46, Fig. 11), lying spread-eagled over furniture and the floor. Irena declares, 'Something else now', and '*They turn over the furniture to reveal recreations of classic pictures but featuring women in the company that have made the show'* (47) – it is an extension of the lightbox collage that has been underneath the drawing room furniture all along, waiting to be revealed.

After another blackout, the electric guitar starts up for the final song, 'Work', which all the performers sing. They chorus:

> Work work work
> Work is pure
> Work work work
> Work for more
> The future will be beautiful
> If we work
> It's our fucking duty to
> Work work work
> (50)

RashDash's emphasis on work reflects the importance of work as a theme in Chekhov's play, along with its connection to social change. Toozenbach proclaims 'there's a terrific thunder-cloud advancing upon us […] and it's going to blow away all this idleness and indifference, and prejudice against work, this rot of boredom that our society is suffering from. I'm going to work, and in twenty-five or thirty years' time every man and woman will be working'.[159] Toozenbach's vision of inexorable social change that will sweep away bourgeois ennui reflects the upheaval occurring in early-twentieth-century Russia before the revolutions of 1905 and 1917.[160] Yet there is a noticeable lack of work – at least work as conventionally

[159] Chekhov, *Three Sisters*, p. 253.
[160] For more on the social context of Chekhov's plays, see Vera Gottlieb, 'The "dwindling scale": The Politics of British Chekhov', in *Chekhov on the British Stage*, ed. by Patrick Miles (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 147-155.

understood – in RashDash's *Three Sisters*. Whereas Chekhov's highlights Olga and Irena's exhaustion and disillusionment with their respective jobs as a teacher and post-office worker, the only work we see in RashDash's version is artistic work: changing costumes, sweating, getting out of breath, making images, a kind of work that does not take place within the fictional world of the play.[161]

Moreover, in order to mount their feminist critique and parody of *Three Sisters*, the subtle social critique that is already present in Chekhov's play is de-emphasised by RashDash. In narrowing the focus of the play to Olga, Masha and Irena, RashDash sacrifice the rich social texture of the realism of Chekhov's play, which is able to represent characters of different social status and classes: for example, the sisters' snobbishness towards their sister-in-law Natasha, and Natasha's abuse of the servant Anfisa. In contrast, Inua Ellams's recent adaptation of *Three Sisters* (National Theatre, 2019), which relocated the play to Nigeria in the middle of the Biafran Civil War between 1967-1970, successfully employed the naturalistic style of Chekhov's play to capture the hopes and disappointments of a whole social milieu. Michael Billington called the production 'a startlingly vivid account of the civil war and a direct assault on British neocolonialism' but mused, 'I just wish Ellams had been less faithful to Chekhov', as 'Chekhov sometimes gets in the way' of the story Ellams is telling.[162] Ellams's making use of both the content and style of Chekhov's play in his postcolonial adaptation resonates with Michelene Wandor's recognition of the usefulness

[161] Sheila Rabillard discusses the Wooster Group's *Fish Story* (1993), which combined a loose adaptation of Act 4 of *Three Sisters* with a film about traditional Japanese performance techniques, as 'a meditation on theatre work'. Sheila Rabillard, 'The Work of the Theatre: The Wooster Group Adapts Chekhov's *Three Sisters* in *Fish Story*', in *Adapting Chekhov: The Text and Its Mutations*. ed. by J. Douglas Clayton and Yana Meerzon (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 238-260 (p. 239).

[162] Michael Billington, 'Three Sisters Review: Inua Ellams transfers Chekhov to Nigeria', *Guardian*, 11 December 2019. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2019/dec/11/three-sisters-review-inua-ellams-chekhov-lyttelton-theatre-london> [accessed 29 September 2020].

of realism for 'represent[ing] the experiences of oppressed groups' with 'a realistic and immediately recognisable clarity', as 'such realism has a radical impact when the content is new, when the selection of ordinary everyday elements in life are shaped into a work of art'.[163] In her review for *The Stage*, J.N. Benjamin observers that 'the specificity of Chekhov's Three Sisters creates a universality that proves fertile ground for Ellams'. This suggests that radical deconstruction is not the only possible approach to tacking the exclusions of the canon; Ellams shows the continued valence of such classic plays to represent the experiences of minority groups and make them accessible to a wider audience.[164] Moreover, Lyn Gardner remarks that Ellams's play brought a more than usually 'diverse audience' to the Lyttleton, which received the adaptation 'as if it is fully alive, urgent and necessary' rather than 'with the hushed awe that too often accompanies revivals of classic plays'.[165] RashDash take a different tack to Ellams in adapting *Three Sisters*, forgoing the direct political impact of the grounding in a recognisable social world that naturalism facilitates. Instead, the political impact of RashDash's play lies in forging an expanded sense of realism, one that can embrace fantasy, fun and camp in the service of imagining alternative realities, which will be further explored in the next section.

[163] Michelene Wandor, 'Introduction', in *Strike while the iron is hot: Sexual Politics in Theatre*, ed. by Michelene Wandor (London: The Journeyman Press, 1980), pp. 5-15 (p. 11).
[164] J.N. Benjamin, '*Three Sisters*: Inua Ellams' stirring adaptation', *The Stage*, 11 December 2019. <www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/three-sisters-review-at-national-theatre-london--inua-ellams-stirring-adaptation> [accessed 30 September 2020].
[165] Lyn Gardner, 'Diverse theatre means diverse audiences – so expect change', *The Stage*, 20 January 2020. <www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/lyn-gardner-diverse-theatre-means-diverse-audiences--so-expect-change> [accessed 30 September 2020].

Feminist camp

In contrast with a staid idea of the classics, RashDash's *Three Sisters* foregrounds fun, something observed by many of its reviewers.[166] Greenland reflects that in making *Three Sisters*, 'we talked about radical pleasure', the idea that 'if we're taking huge pleasure in our work and in the work that we make, are we somehow undermining this capitalist idea that you go to work in order to feed yourself and you have a miserable time and then you go home?'[167] This registers the political importance RashDash give to the process of making their work. Goalen notes that striving for equality in the rehearsal room and giving everyone involved in a project a voice, whatever their role, is 'a major part of what it means to be a feminist company'.[168] Yet, although fun is often opposed to work, having fun is not inherently radical; it depends upon the context in which it is deployed.[169] Nevertheless, RashDash's centring of fun in *Three Sisters* reshapes the form of the show, resulting in an episodic collage of images, text, song, and movement. Thereby, RashDash achieve their goal to 'tell stories in different shapes'; they could even be said to forge a dramaturgy of fun in opposition to conventional play structures.[170]

Feminist theatre and feminist theatre criticism have often opposed fun and fantasy to realism. For example, in *Belle Reprieve* when Blanche (Bette Bourne) complains that she

[166] See Williams, 'Three Sisters'; Trueman, 'RashDash's #TimesUp *Three Sisters* pushes male plays off their pedestal'.
[167] Greenland and Greenstreet interview.
[168] Goalen and Greenstreet interview.
[169] For a theorisation of the politics of fun in relation to performance, see Ben Walters, 'Queer fun, family and futurity in Duckie's performance projects, 2010-2016' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Queen Mary, University of London, 2018). <qmro.qmul.ac.uk/xmlui/handle/123456789/56817> [accessed 15 January 2021].
[170] A number of reviewers noted *Three Sisters*' departure from conventional dramaturgical structures. See Julia Beasley, 'Three Sisters – Tobacco Factory Theatre, Bristol', *The Reviews Hub*, 14 June 2018. <www.thereviewshub.com/three-sisters-tobacco-factory-theatre-bristol/ > [accessed 20 March 2020].

wants to be in 'a real play', Stella (Lois Weaver) retorts, 'You want realism, you can have it', before Stanley (Peggy Shaw) attempts to rape Blanche:

> STANLEY: If you want to be in this play you've got to drop the stiletto.
> BLANCHE: If you want to be in this play you've got to make me!
> STANLEY: If you want to play a woman, the woman in this play gets raped and goes crazy in the end.
> BLANCHE: I don't want to get raped and go crazy. I just want to wear a nice frock, and look at the shit they've given me![171]

Through this comic but powerful exchange (Blanche is holding a stiletto shoe rather than a stiletto knife), Split Britches emphasise that the narrative trajectory of many realist plays limits female characters to 'gett[ing] raped and go[ing] crazy'. In *Belle Reprieve*, the violence is averted by the arrival of Stella and Mitch for a musical number, shifting the performance from realism to fantasy for a camp celebration of the artificiality of the roles the performers have been playing, in terms of both characters and gender roles; Stanley declares to Stella, 'The person we've been referring to as your sister is an imposter', and none of the other characters are as they seem.[172] From Split Britches' work, Sue-Ellen Case has theorised the concept of the 'butch-femme aesthetic', in which

> The point is not to conflict reality with another reality, but to abandon the notion of reality through roles and their seductive atmosphere and to lightly manipulate appearances. Surely, this is the atmosphere of camp, permeating the *mise-en-scène* with 'pure' artifice. In other words, a strategy of appearances replaces a claim to truth.[173]

Reading RashDash's *Three Sisters* alongside Split Britches' *Belle Reprieve* illuminates the elements of camp in RashDash's show: its creation of distinct aesthetic that borders on the

[171] Bourne et al., *Belle Reprieve*, pp. 179, 181.
[172] Ibid., p. 182.
[173] Sue-Ellen Case, 'Towards a Butch-Femme Aesthetic', *Discourse*, 11 (1988-89), 55-73 (p. 70).

kitsch, its parodic humour and sense of fun, its cultivation of ironic distance between the performers and the Chekhovian characters they play.

Yet, in contrast with *Belle Reprieve*, RashDash's *Three Sisters* lacks the queer desire that is often associated with camp.[174] Instead, it demonstrates what Pamela Robertson calls 'feminist camp', which she argues, like gay camp, functions 'queerly' 'to express their [artists'] discomfort with and alienation from the normative gender and sex roles assigned to them by straight culture'.[175] Robertson theorises feminist camp as a 'guilty pleasure', suggesting that it enables 'a kind of parodic play between subject and object in which the female spectator laughs at and plays with her own image – in other words, to imagine her distancing herself from her own image by making fun of, and out of, that image – without losing sight of the real power that image has over her'.[176] RashDash's cultivation of feminist camp is particularly visible in the three promotional videos they made for *Three Sisters* in collaboration with The Other Richard (photographers and videographers Richard Davenport and Richard Lakos). The first of these depicts the five cast members sitting very still, looking down demurely, in a drawing room in long, colourful dresses as tense violin music plays.[177] It resembles a stylish film of a Jane Austen novel, or a Chekhovian drawing room. The second shows Helen, Abbi and Becky dancing, falling into each other, leaning, catching each

[174] Robertson notes that camp is most often associated with the gay male sensibility, resulting in a critical scorn of 'straight' camp. Pamela Robertson, 'What makes the feminist camp?', in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*, ed. by Fabio Cleto (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), pp. 266-282 (p. 266).
[175] Ibid., p. 271. In making space for a 'feminist camp', Robertson is both countering early feminist arguments that camp is misogynistic or reinforces stereotypes about women and recuperating female performers' agency as subjects and producers of camp, rather than merely unconscious objects of camp appropriated by gay male culture.
[176] Ibid., p. 277.
[177] The Other Richard, 'Three Sisters by RashDash Promo 1', *YouTube*, 1 June 2018. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=FzRgxuS2wXA> [accessed 7 August 2020].

in a dark corridor, accompanied by Yoon-Ji playing the Russian violin theme pizzicato.[178] It ends with Abbi, Helen and Becky looking towards the camera mysteriously, perhaps gesturing towards typical publicity imagery for productions of *Three Sisters*. In the third of these trailers, all five performers are dressed as the Spice Girls and perform their song, 'Work', in a warehouse or prop store. They sway to the beat, holding power tools. Abbi drives a miniature forklift truck, Becky puts some wood into a skip, Chloe blows on a drill as if clearing the powder from a gun.[179] It is like a parody of a 'girl power' music video; although the performers dance with the power tools and sing about work, they show no indication of actually being able to use them to make something. Together the promotional videos capture the three distinct aesthetics of the production (pop-culture and DIY; period costume; contemporary adaptation of a classic), and also radiate an ironic distance from these overdetermined representations of women even as they enact them. Thus, RashDash's camp play with representations of women in art and popular culture in *Three Sisters* participates in an equivalent gender parody to RashDash's use of cross-dressing in *Two Man Show*.

In contrast with Sue-Ellen Case's reading of Split Britches' camp as a 'strategy of appearances replac[ing] a claim to truth', *Three Sisters* does not completely abandon a stake in reality, as seen in the use of autobiographical material and the incorporation of images of the company into the lightbox collage. Instead, RashDash's use of camp provides access to fantasy beyond the bounds of realism – and reality – as they are conventionally understood.

[178] The Other Richard, 'Three Sisters by RashDash Promo 2', *YouTube*, 1 June 2018. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=-nKhrg5QyIE > [accessed 7 August 2020].
[179] The Other Richard, 'Three Sisters by RashDash Promo 3', *YouTube*, 1 June 2018 <www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7o9lL56NIY> [accessed 7 August 2020].

This resonates with Judith Butler's rethinking of the relationship between fantasy and reality in *Undoing Gender*:

> Fantasy is not the opposite of reality; it is what reality forecloses, and, as a result, it defines the limits of reality, constituting it as its constitutive outside. The critical promise of fantasy, when and where it exists, is to challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality. Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home.[180]

Butler's idea of 'the critical promise of fantasy' as 'the possible in excess of the real' demonstrates one way in which fantasy and camp can be political, not accepting the limitations of the world as it is but giving space 'to imagine ourselves and others otherwise'. Butler makes this argument particularly in relation to expressions of gender that deviate from the norm, as I explored in my analysis of the ending of *Two Man Show*. Yet it also seems to speak to the feminist critique of realism's central question about the relationship between theatrical representation and reality. RashDash's *Three Sisters* does not participate in the feedback loop whereby, in Diamond's words, realism 'produces "reality" by positioning its spectator to recognise and verify its truths: this escritoire, this spirit lamp affirms the typicality, the universality of this and all late Victorian bourgeois drawing rooms'.[181] RashDash take the lampshade and they dance with it on their heads. They question the claims to universality and verisimilitude made by nineteenth-century naturalism by staging Chekhov's *Three Sisters* in quotation marks. They also make space to stage their subjective experiences through dance, song and visual images within their adaptation of Chekhov's classic, creating 'shapes that speak of our felt experience of the world, and of our fantasies' (freesheet). This could be seen as a continuation of modernist

[180] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 29.
[181] Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 4.

experiments to find expression for subjective experiences of reality; one of the epigraphs to *Two Man Show* is, aptly, Virginia Woolf writing on Dorothy Richardson: '*Miriam is aware of the atmosphere of the table rather than that of the table – she doesn't describe what it looks like but how it feels*' (13). Crucially the experiment in expression remains in dialogue with realism, pushing at the limits of the kinds of realities the form admits.

Butler's idea of fantasy is a not a utopia, which means 'no place', but a heterotopia, defined by Foucault as 'real places […] which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted'.[182] Therefore, as Joanne Tompkins suggests, 'Heterotopic spaces act as experimental zones for possibilities to be tried out'.[183] It seems significant that RashDash conceive of their two different forms, the drawing room and the art room, spatially. Indeed, Greenland recalls that they drew a map of the form of the show with the drawing room at the centre, with rooms for each of the sisters, as well as the art room off the drawing room.[184] In RashDash's *Three Sisters*, the art room functions as a heterotopia in relation to the space of the drawing room. The drawing room represents decorous constrictions upon women's behaviour, frustrating artistic representations of women, the cultural capital of the classics' reinforcement of gender inequalities in the theatre industry, and a limiting conception of realism. In contrast, the art room scenes offer 'Something else now' (47), feminist fun and fantasy, a crucible for artistic experimentation. Crucially, though, Greenland notes 'we knew that we had to go into the drawing room in order to go into those other rooms, because geographically the

[182] Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias', trans. by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16 (1986), 22-27 (p. 24).
[183] Joanne Tompkins, *Theatre's Heterotopias* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. 27.
[184] Greenland and Greenstreet interview.

way we'd written it you had to'; they have to go through the drawing room to enter the art room, just as they get to experimentation through engaging with and parodying Chekhov.[185] As in *Two Man Show*, it is the juxtaposition of contrasting forms that proves most productive and political.

Although, unlike Foucault, Tompkins does not believe that all theatre is necessarily heterotopic, she locates a political potential in heterotopia within theatre, as 'holding the potential to spatialize how socio-political relationships might work differently beyond the stage'.[186] This means that while 'heterotopic theatre may not in itself directly create political change (theatre almost never has that capacity), […] it is possible that a performance might affect audiences significantly by demonstrating how change for the social good (however incremental) might take place off the stage'.[187] Like fantasy, heterotopia 'establishes the possible in excess of the real'.[188] Yet it also gives a glimpse of 'an effectively enacted utopia', in which societal norms and hierarchies are questioned, providing a model that could inspire audience members to seek change beyond the stage.[189]

Butler's concept of 'the critical promise of fantasy' and Tompkins and Foucault's theories of heterotopia complicate the dichotomy between real world and artistic representation upon which Diamond depends in her limiting characterisation of realism. Within the world of RashDash's *Three Sisters*, the art room is a 'real place' of 'effectively enacted utopia' (Foucault), offering an alternative to the 'real place' of the 'drawing room'. The theatre is also a 'real place' of social relations and work, however fun it may seem. It is therefore important to acknowledge where RashDash fall short in their aspiration to a

[185] Ibid.
[186] Tompkins, pp. 20, 29.
[187] Ibid.
[188] Butler, *Undoing Gender*, p. 29.
[189] Foucault, p. 24.

politically 'radical' process and theatre.[190] With *Three Sisters*, RashDash were criticised for seeming to deny a voice to the musicians, Chloe Rianna and Yoon-Ji Kim, both women of colour who had instrumental solos but did not speak in the show.[191] In an essay entitled, 'The Racist Case for Diversity?', Tom Cornford argues that 'the decision not to further integrate Kim and Rianna into the production's response to Chekhov did little to address the cultural networks of white privilege in which productions of his plays have generally participated', failing to 'develop an intersectional response to Chekhov's play'.[192] Although this was not RashDash's intention, it is a plausible interpretation of the resulting show; it is a particularly bitter irony that a show so interested in excavating the exclusions of the classic theatrical repertoire with regard to gender should not be aware of its own potential for perpetuating exclusion and hierarchies with regard to race.

Similarly, in a piece of longform criticism reflecting on RashDash's work, Maddy Costa dubs the company 'the riot grrrl of theatre', going on to highlight the failures in intersectionality of the Riot Grrrl as a movement. Costa emphasises the impossibility of a white middle-class feminist movement speaking for all women, particularly women of colour, and notes that Helen and Abbi's 'bodies are particular bodies: white, slim and cisgender', suggesting the limitations of 'these bodies in particular to speak to, of and for female experience'.[193] Costa here seems to get stuck in a theoretical knot around feminist

[190] RashDash's work is often described as 'radical' in press coverage and in theatres' marketing materials. When I asked Greenland whether she considered herself a 'radical' theatre-maker, she was circumspect about the difficulty of being radical because of the funding structures of theatre in the UK, so 'we can try and be radically formally and content-wise but, outside of that, it's really hard'. Greenland and Greenstreet interview.
[191] For a review that picked up on this, see Hailey Bachrach, 'Three Sisters at the Yard raises important questions about criticism'. *The Tung*, 25 May 2018. <www.thetung.co.uk/thetunghome/review-three-sisters-at-the-yard> [accessed 1 October 2020].
[192] Cornford, 'The Racist Case for Diversity?', p. 556.
[193] Costa, 'Criticism & Love #9: RashDash'. It is worth noting that RashDash are striving to become more intersectional in their work, vowing in the 'Values' section of their website that they will 'Make work with / about / for people with different experiences of the world. People of different GENDER, RACE, SEXUALITY, CLASS, AGE and with different BODIES', RashDash, 'Values'. This is visible in their

representation that could also very easily subsume *Three Sisters*; a single artistic work can never speak for everyone, nor should it attempt to for the very reasons RashDash suggest in their critique of the classics' pretensions to universality. Yet, in offering their personal experiences of being women to the audience of both *Two Man Show* and *Three Sisters*, RashDash are not claiming to speak to a universal female experience, at least not in a way that would exclude others from having and expressing different experiences. As Goalen and Greenland observe about the ending of *Two Man Show,* 'We both identify as women, but how we are women is so different. […] Maybe there are as many genders as there are people, because it's more of a spectrum than a series of categories'.[194] RashDash's representations of the different ways of being women and men in *Two Man Show* are not intended to be exhaustive, but generative of further possibilities.

Whether it is expanding the category of 'woman', or contesting a singular style of staging Chekhov, RashDash's shows are not about reproducing sameness but about celebrating difference. This resonates with bell hooks' observation of the importance of solidarity within feminism:

> Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. We do not need to share common oppression to fight equally to end oppression. We do not need anti-male sentiments to bond us together, so great is the wealth of experience, culture, and ideas we have to share with one another. We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs, united in our appreciation for diversity, united in our struggle to end sexist oppression, united in political solidarity.[195]

As well as a parodic homage to a major theme in Chekhov's play and a campy cannibalising of discourses of female empowerment, the 'Work' song that concludes RashDash's *Three Sisters* is an expression and performance of solidarity. Still dressed in period costume,

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collaborations with other companies, such as the inclusive casting of Ellie Kendrick's experimental feminist play *Hole* (2018) at the Royal Court, which RashDash directed.

[194] RashDash, 'Our Feminist Quest to Smash the Patriarchy', *Guardian*.

[195] bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (London: Routledge, 2000; first published, 1988), p. 67.

accompanying themselves on electric guitars and drums, five women sing about the necessity of collective action: 'The future will be beautiful/ If we work/ It's our fucking duty to / Work work work' (50). It is catchy, fun and cool, firing me up as an audience member to want to join the 'rebellion' RashDash sing about and continue the political and aesthetic work of contesting the canon.[196]

Both *Two Man Show* and *Three Sisters* are experiments in representation. They confront the difficulties of representing women in theatre, staring down the male gaze through nakedness in *Two Man Show* and exposing the exclusions of the established theatrical canon in *Three Sisters*. Instead of presenting their audiences with a solution to these knotty problems, they stage their process of encounter with them, not shying away from difficulty and contradiction. Such an approach to staging a process and 'putting our dilemma in the form' often challenges conventional ideas of what makes 'good' dramaturgy and the limiting system of aesthetic value judgements that RashDash skewer in the 'Reviews Song'. Hybridity, of both form and frame of reference, is key to RashDash's work. It is the interaction of the dance sections and play-within-a-play of *Two Man Show* and the deconstruction of that form that makes space for irony and 'critical difference'. In *Three Sisters*, it is the collage of Chekhov's play with the performers' autobiographical input and their subversive improvisations around the 'original' text that allows a new form to begin to emerge, a form that I have argued is an expanded, more formally and politically capacious idea of realism. Throughout this chapter, I have suggested that RashDash's work recalls Diamond's idea of 'feminist mimesis'. Yet, where Diamond suggests that feminist mimesis is an alternative to realism, RashDash lean heavily upon realism, putting it in dialectical

[196] For more on my personal, affective response to watching *Three Sisters*, see Hannah Greenstreet, 'RashDash's Three Sisters at the Yard Theatre', *Exeunt Magazine*, 24 May 2018. <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-rashdashs-three-sisters-yard-theatre/> [accessed 1 October 2020].

relationship with other forms rather than abandoning it altogether. Similarly, in *Three Sisters*, RashDash do not completely abandon the theatrical canon, despite their gendered critique of it, instead taking what they need from Chekhov to germinate their own show. They put realism and Chekhov to work for their feminist purposes.

There is, in RashDash's work, as in Diamond's concept of 'feminist mimesis' (and perhaps all mimesis), a dynamic relationship between representation and the real. Rather than abandoning truth claims for a postmodernist free play of meanings dissevered from their referents, RashDash have a stake in the real through the presence of performing bodies, working, moving, sweating in front of an audience and through the autobiographical experiences from which they devise their shows. However, this sense of the real is subjective and open to question, just as the truth claims of both the play-within-a-play in *Two Man Show* and Chekhov's representation of the Prozorov sisters are interrogated. RashDash's critical self-awareness, by which they deconstruct their own forms, seems key to keeping open the boundaries between the real and fantasy – what currently exists and what could exist – refusing the fixity of what is currently visible or imaginable. In the way that they collage ideas in their shows, piling them on top of each other and sometimes tearing them up, RashDash seem quite prepared to deconstruct their own, provisional forms to make way for 'Something else now' (47).

Chapter 2: Haunted Naturalism: Tracing Character in *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide*

Having explored how RashDash develop new theatrical forms through parodying the canon, I turn now to a rather different engagement with the theatrical past: the dialogue between naturalism and experimentalism in collaborations between Katie Mitchell and Alice Birch. As of March 2021, Mitchell and Birch have collaborated on five productions, often in languages other than English: *Ophelias Zimmer* (Schaubühne Theater, Berlin, 2015), based on *Hamlet*; *Schatten (Eurydike Sagt)* (Schaubühne, 2016), an adaptation of the Eurydice story by Elfriede Jelinek, in which Eurydice resists leaving the Underworld with Orpheus; Birch's play *Anatomy of a Suicide* (Royal Court, 2017); *La Maladie de la mort* (Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, Paris, 2018), an adaptation of Marguerite Duras's novella; *Orlando* (Schaubühne, 2019), an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel; with two more collaborations in train for 2021.[1] The majority of these productions focus on female characters within patriarchal systems, which Mitchell sees as a 'political intervention' into the theatrical canon to create an alternative body of texts that bear witness to patriarchal oppression.[2] Since 2010, Mitchell has explicitly referred to her work as feminist.[3] Alice Birch has said in an interview with Maddy Costa that she and Mitchell are '"a real match" in their interest in looking directly at the damage wrought by social, specifically gender, inequality'.[4] Mitchell reflects that 'We work well together because I love formal experimentation – the harder the better

[1] Bryce Lease, 'Interview with Katie Mitchell', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 30.2 (2020), 253-259 (p. 256).
[2] Maddy Costa, 'Alternative point of view: The Malady of Death', *Barbican Blog*, 4 December 2017. <blog.barbican.org.uk/2018/05/alternative-point-of-view-the-malady-of-death/> [accessed 16 May 2018].
[3] See Ben Fowler, *Katie Mitchell: Beautiful Illogical Acts* (London: Routledge, 2020), p. 171. Fowler's monograph (published when I was making the final revisions to this chapter) offers a lucid and well-informed overview of Mitchell's directing career.
[4] Costa, 'Alternative point of view'.

– and she loves writing complex forms; she knows I will always encourage her to go further with her formal logic, confident that I will execute the impossible', such as the staging of three plays simultaneously in *Anatomy of a Suicide*.[5]

Mitchell is known for her experiments with naturalism, developed over the course of her career and through her reading of Stanislavsky, her training under Lev Dodin, Tatiana Olear and Elen Bowman, and her research into the biology of the emotions.[6] This rigorous application of naturalism extends from the research for the production and the compiling of 'facts and questions' with the writer and actors, to the aesthetics of the production (in collaboration with the designer), to breaking down the script into a series of 'events' and identifying the characters' 'intentions' in each.[7] She is also known for cultivating a style of performance that precisely realises the effects of extreme emotional states on the body, an approach that has often been dubbed 'clinical' or 'forensic'.[8] Writing about Mitchell's 2004 production of *Iphigenia at Aulis* at the National Theatre, Kim Solga has described her directing style as 'radical naturalism' because it is 'not interested in the promises of discovery made by standard-issue psychological realism' but adopts 'a science-based method of physical action that foregrounds the visceral experience of affect rather than affect's mimesis, both for actors and for audiences'.[9] Mitchell's naturalism, then, seems somehow extreme; as Ben Fowler argues, her recent work combines 'an interest in indeterminate writing with a hyperbolic concentration on individual women protagonists

[5] Lease, p. 256.
[6] Katie Mitchell, *The Director's Craft: A Handbook for the Theatre* (London: Routledge, 2009), pp. 225-232.
[7] On facts and questions, see *The Director's Craft*, pp. 11-15. On Events and Intentions, see pp. 55-65.
[8] See Anna Harpin, '"You Were an O. Your Black O in the Middle of Your Face": Madness and Catastrophe in Katie Mitchell's *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide*', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 30.2 (2020), 193-210 (p. 193).
[9] Kim Solga, 'Body Doubles, Babel's Voices: Katie Mitchell's *Iphigenia at Aulis* and the Theatre of Sacrifice', p. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 18:2 (2008), 146-160 (p. 149).

who never leave our sight, generating continuous, excessive, uninterrupted, and immersive experiences that are often hyperbolic in their realist commitments'.[10] Dan Rebellato argues that Mitchell 'is trying to recover […] some of that original radicalism of Naturalism that has perhaps been lost' by 'taking the logic of Naturalist stage practice much further, to the extent that it starts to break down some of the conventions of theatrical Naturalism', such as dependence upon linear time and the resemblance to the world.[11] Part of the reason for this is, I believe, because her naturalism is belated or even anachronistic in its combination of theatrical styles (if naturalism is taken to be a late nineteenth-century form). Mitchell's naturalism – at least when she is directing new plays and adaptations – comes emphatically after the modernist and postmodernist challenges to the certainties of dramatic character. Therefore, although on the surface her techniques might seem to offer the comfort of psychological insight and understanding, the female characters in her recent work lack a stable core.

Much of the critical reception of Mitchell and Birch's collaborations has focused on their claim to feminism, particularly in the plays that stage the suicide of their central female characters, including *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide*. As Maddy Costa wonders, 'Can that act of suicide be seen as a feminist protest? Or does it express abject defeat at the impossibility of finding agency in a patriarchal world?'[12] Although these are important questions, they are not easily answered and, as Fowler suggests, can lead to a reductive debate about whether Mitchell is a 'good' feminist.[13] Nonetheless, the debate

[10] Fowler, p. 185.
[11] Dan Rebellato and Kim Solga, 'Katie Mitchell and the Politics of Naturalist Theatre', in *The Theatre of Katie Mitchell*, ed. by Ben Fowler (London: Routledge, 2018), pp. 39-70 (p. 45).
[12] Costa, 'Alternative point of view'.
[13] Fowler, *Katie Mitchell*, p. 180.

demonstrates the continued influence of the feminist critique of realism in contemporary theatre studies, as a number of critics who criticise the politics of Mitchell's work see the fault as lying partly with her use of naturalism. Although Kim Solga admits that Mitchell's use of naturalism 'allows women's lives to be rendered in precise, well-researched detail in her work and therefore to be taken seriously as substance for aesthetically rich, complex art', she is wary of what she sees as the conservative ideological underpinnings of naturalism as a form.[14] She argues that 'the narrative structures that govern Naturalism – that is what we might call a naturalist *dramaturgy* – are also governed by a sense of inevitability, or social and psychological determinism', so 'however sympathetic that production might be to her [the female character's] circumstances, her story is likely to lead to an expected or predictable end' – that of death or disciplining her to meet societal norms.[15] While the importance of dramatic structure in creating a sense of character will be explored later in the chapter, too much focus on the ending of a play 'negates the possibility of cumulative experience', as Sheila Stowell reminds us.[16]

Anna Harpin's critique of Mitchell's representation of mentally ill female characters in *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide* is more compelling. Harpin writes that although Mitchell challenges some stereotypes of stage madness, 'her work repeatedly sustains cultural narratives of female madness as ultimately, and always, personal, catastrophic affliction'.[17] Harpin argues that this is because Mitchell's 'realist model of theatre making […] that lays heavy claim to certainty and truth, is unavoidably tethered to ideological systems of understanding about normal, familiar categories of behaviour',

[14] Rebellato and Solga, p. 49.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Sheila Stowell, 'Rehabilitating Realism', *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, 6 (1992), 81-87 (p. 86).
[17] Harpin, pp. 196-97.

reinforcing what members of the audience think they know about madness.[18] She takes particular issue with Mitchell's '"forensic" approach to character', which 'conditions the spectatorial gaze as diagnostic' and problematically 'lays claim to a static and finite range of emotions and behaviours that are fixable, communicable, readable, and understandable'.[19] Harpin raises valid concerns about the representation of characters in mental distress in Mitchell's recent work, which will be considered more fully in the rest of the chapter. Yet, like Solga's appraisal of Mitchell's use of naturalism, Harpin's argument also strongly recalls Elin Diamond's critique of 'Ibsenite realism', which Diamond believes encourages a pathologising reading of female bodies.[20]

There are two issues with applying the feminist critique of 'Ibsenite realism' to Mitchell's work. Firstly, as suggested in the introduction, Diamond draws upon a limited corpus of naturalist plays to create a seductive myth of naturalism as a patriarchal form, which can spur productive critical and creative resistance but is not historically accurate. Secondly, Mitchell is not simply replicating nineteenth-century naturalism and to argue such underestimates the contributions of Birch as a playwright and her formal experimentation. Birch's plays often undermine naturalist certainties of character, recalling the postdramatic innovations of Martin Crimp and Sarah Kane. *Ophelias Zimmer* encourages its audience to search for traces of Ophelia in the set, physical action and snatches of text, inviting them to bear witness to her violent disappearance. In *Anatomy of a Suicide*, a sense of character is constructed relationally across the three plays by tracing the echoes between mother, daughter and granddaughter, but is inaccessible to the characters themselves. As I will show

[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid., pp. 195, 196.
[20] Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 4. Where Diamond uses the term 'Ibsenite realism', I use the term naturalism in order to differentiate it from realism more broadly. Harpin does not cite Diamond in her article.

in the next section, Diamond's critique of the figure of the hysteric is partly a critique of the construction of character in naturalism – so by questioning the formation of character, Birch's plays avoid Diamond and Solga's 'inevitable' conclusions. Therefore, rather than seeing Mitchell and Birch's *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide* as throwbacks to nineteenth-century naturalism, I suggest that mentally-ill female characters in these plays are used to mobilise a naturalism haunted by its own feminist critique.

Naturalist character and the hysteric

One of the innovations of late-nineteenth-century naturalist drama was its treatment of character, inspired by scientific developments in psychology and the theory of evolution. Raymond Williams suggests, 'The novelty of the naturalist emphasis was its demonstration of the *production* of character or action by a powerful natural or social environment'.[21] In his manifesto, 'Naturalism on the Stage' (1881), Émile Zola declares,

> I am waiting for someone to put a man of flesh and bones on the stage, taken from reality, scientifically analysed, and described without one lie. I am waiting for someone to rid us of fictitious characters, of these symbols of virtue and vice which have no worth as human data. I am waiting for environment to determine the characters and the characters to act according to the logic of facts combined with logic of their own disposition. […] I am waiting for everyone to throw out the tricks of the trade, the contrived formulas, the tears and superficial laughs.[22]

Zola opposes established theatrical conventions to biology and truth, applying the scientific lexis of experiment to relate the individual to their environment. The naturalist character, the 'man of flesh and bones', is not a type but 'human data' that can be situated within a

[21] Raymond Williams, 'Social Environment and Theatrical Environment: The Case of English Naturalism', in *English Drama: Forms and Development*, ed. by Marie Axton and Raymond Williams, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 203-224 (pp. 204-5).
[22] Émile Zola, 'Naturalism on the Stage' (1881), trans. by Samuel Draper, in *Playwrights on Playwriting: from Ibsen to Ionesco*, ed. by Toby Cole (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2001), pp. 5-14 (p. 6).

recognisable social world. His/ her motivations can be traced, in the meeting of 'the logic of facts combined with logic of their own disposition'. This scientific approach to character is also suggested by August Strindberg's 1888 'Preface to *Miss Julie*', in which he lists the 'multiplicity of motives' for Julie becoming sexually involved with her servant Jean, including 'her mother's "bad" basic instincts; her father's improper raising of the girl; her own nature and the influence her fiancé's suggestions had on her weak, degenerate brain; but also, and more immediately: the festive atmosphere of Midsummer Eve; her father's absence; her period; her preoccupation with animals; the intoxicating effect of the dance; the summer twilight; the powerful aphrodisiac influence of the flowers; and finally chance that drives the two together in a secluded room, plus the boldness of the aroused man'.[23] While the number and range of motives might suggest a complexity of character, the description gives Julie little agency over her own life and reduces her to her female body, reflecting late-nineteenth-century assumptions that women's minds were peculiarly subject to the biological mechanisms of their bodies.[24]

There is, then, a certain ambivalence about applying naturalist discourses of scientific experiment to female characters. In the first chapter of *Unmaking Mimesis*, Diamond argues that 'Ibsenite realism guarantees its legitimacy by endowing the fallen woman of popular melodrama with the symptoms and etiology of the hysteric'.[25] She reads Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* (1887)*, The Lady from the Sea* (1888), and *Hedda Gabler* (1891)

[23] August Strindberg, 'Preface to Miss Julie', in *Strindberg on Drama and Theatre*, ed. and trans. by Birgitta Steene and Egil Törngvist (Amsterdam University Press, 2007), pp. 61-72 (p. 63).
[24] Lyn Pykett writes that in the mid- to late nineteenth-century, 'Medical science, which as Foucault has argued was one of the chief instruments for the definition and regulation of women and sexuality in the nineteenth century, represented woman as a creature totally in thrall to biology and her body. Woman's nature and her social role were seen as the inevitable consequences of her reproductive function: the womb and the ovaries controlled the delicate organism that was woman'. Lyn Pykett, *'The Improper Feminine': The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 13-14.
[25] Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 4.

alongside Freud's case histories; all are characterised by 'retrospective action, the process whereby the past remembered produces or explains a hysteria, its necessary confession, and its cure'.[26] This, she contends, places the spectator in the position of the psychoanalyst, 'assured of completing the narrative, of discovering the secret, of judging its truth'.[27] Diamond attributes this dynamic, in part, to naturalist innovations in character. As Gay Gibson Cima argues, the 'retrospective' form of Ibsen's plays, in which the main action has occurred in the past and is revealed through its impact upon the present, gave more freedom to actresses to explore the complexity of their roles.[28] Rather than 'choosing from a stock of passions and accompanying gestures' associated with that character type as had been the case in melodrama, the actresses had to study the script to detect hints and fill in the backstory imaginatively in order to 'discover the line of action for both play and character'.[29] In Diamond's understanding of the naturalist play, traces of the past are manifested somatically and verbally by the actor, which are diagnosed by the audience to (re)confirm the truth of the play as a representation of reality. For this reason, Diamond also objects to naturalistic acting, which she argues 'laminates body to character' and presents the female body as an object to be read.[30] Therefore, throughout this chapter, character shall be considered both in the sense of the impression of character constructed through plot and in terms of the impression of a character created by an actor's performance, which are, of course, interconnected.[31]

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[26] Ibid., p. 35.
[27] Ibid., p. 20.
[28] Gay Gibson Cima, *Performing Women: Female Characters, Male Playwrights and the Modern Stage* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 21.
[29] Ibid., p. 30. Greater depth of dramatic characterisation in the late nineteenth century was also enabled by the development of the long run and more extended rehearsals. Michael R. Booth, *Theatre in the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 35.
[30] Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 52.
[31] Bert States muses that 'character is so elusive because it is at once cause and effect, both the fuel that drives the plot and a kind of exhaust or emanation given off by the plot'. Bert States, 'The Anatomy of Dramatic

Diamond's is a particular narrative of the origins of naturalism and neither does it apply to all naturalist plays, nor does it follow that the conservative gender politics she describes are intrinsic to and residual in the form as a whole. Even *Hedda Gabler*, which might seem a paradigmatic example of a dramatic representation of hysteria, does not quite fit. Hedda has no climactic confession, the influence of the past upon the present is far weaker than in a play like *Ghosts* (first performed 1882) and, although she may be presented as a puzzle to be solved, she is ultimately an enigma. Within the play, Hedda's actions are met with incomprehension by the other characters; as Brack says, 'But God have mercy - people don't actually *do* such things!'[32] Diamond interprets the difficulty characters have with reading Hedda as evidence that, in representing hysteria, realism unmakes itself from within. For instance, she analyses the moment when Hedda puts her head through the curtain of the inner room just before her suicide as fracturing 'the wholeness and completeness of the mimetic body, in which actor is subsumed in character, and for one moment the hysterical body is explicitly equated with the unseen: that which realism represses'.[33] While Diamond's idea of 'realism's hysteria' is an imaginatively compelling one, the exceptions she finds to her own rule could, in fact, suggest that naturalism is more politically and aesthetically diverse than she herself supposes.[34] For instance, Sos Eltis and

Character', *Theatre Journal* 37:1 (1985), 86-101 (p. 87). In differentiating dramatic character from character in the novel, William Storm suggests that 'the physical presence and immediacy of the actor, whose embodiment of a theatrical character is, by definition, abbreviated and made succinct by the limit on performance time, aids tremendously in an audience's ability to perceive both completeness and roundedness in the representation of the character in a play – that is, a fully realized stage figure'. William Storm, *Dramaturgy and Dramatic Character: A Long View* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 2.

[32] Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler*, trans. by Deborah Dawkin and Erik Skuggevik, in *Hedda Gabler and Other Plays* (London: Penguin, 2019), Act III, p. 377. There is an irony to this line; the male characters, particularly the willfully inobservant Tesman, have not observed Hedda closely, certainly not as closely as the audience, which is privy to more than any individual character. Yet it does not follow that encouraging the audience to observe Hedda is necessarily pathologising, rather than inviting empathy.

[33] Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 28.

[34] Ibid., p. 25.

Kirsten Shepherd-Barr argue that 'the British [late nineteenth-/ early twentieth-century] New Drama asked its audiences to re-envision the world from a new perspective – most obviously that of women in plays by Githa Sowerby, Elizabeth Robins, Cicely Hamilton, and Clo Graves, as well as a host of suffrage plays, and in works by men such as Galsworthy, Masefield, St John Hankin and Stanley Houghton – but also from the point of view of servants, miners, shop assistants, clerks, the unemployed, the criminal, and the work-shy'.[35] Moreover, they suggest that, 'far from being opposed to meta-theatrical self-consciousness, realism in the theatre has often gone hand in hand with a heightened awareness of the mechanisms and conventions of dramatic representation and make-believe'.[36] Therefore, Diamond's characterisation of naturalism as imposing an idea of absolute truth seems as limiting as its opposite: hysterical naturalism leading to 'the ruination of truthmaking'.[37] Nonetheless, whether or not Diamond's critique of the gender politics of naturalism is accurate as theatre history (it has some basis), it is an idea that *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide* are in conversation with, through both their subject matter and theatrical techniques.

Post-naturalist character

Although the naturalist conception of character has proved remarkably resilient in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, some of its norms have been challenged by post-war British theatre and post-dramatic theatre. Actor Billie Whitelaw observed in her autobiography,

[35] Sos Eltis and Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, 'What *was* the "New Drama"?', in *Late Victorian into Modern*, ed. by Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn and Kirsten Shepherd-Barr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 133-149 (p. 145).
[36] Ibid., p. 140.
[37] Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 4.

> None of the Beckett plays I did later had much to do with normal characterisation or psychology. To me, they have all been hooks on which to hang a specific human condition. They are not plays *about* anything, they represent emotional states of mind.[38]

What Whitelaw is describing is not so much an absence of character but a distillation of its essential elements and an abstraction to a 'state of mind', rather than grounding the character in a recognisable social world. In the first production of *Not I* (1971) at the Royal Court with Billie Whitelaw playing Mouth, only her mouth was lit, appearing to hover eight feet above the stage; the rest of her face was painted black and she was swathed in a black cloak.[39] Mouth, the visual focus of attention, seems to have no external, embodied existence as a character beyond the moment of enunciation. Her speech is compulsive, as the words 'start pouring it out…steady stream' like vomit, continuing inaudibly and interminably before and after the scripted monologue, which Whitelaw described as an 'inner scream'.[40] Pinter's characters are notorious for the conflicting information they give about themselves and others. In *Old Times* (1998), husband and wife Deeley and Kate and Kate's old flatmate Anna assert their memories of each other in a bid for control of the other person's identity. However, there is no external verification of which (if any) of the memories are true. At the end of the play, Kate tells Anna 'I remember you dead', the revelation unsettling the grounding of the rest of the play in material reality by suggesting the possibility that Anna might be a ghost.[41] The opacity of the characters in *Old Times* is fundamentally disturbing in its deliberate frustration of dramaturgical expectations for what makes a satisfying or coherent character. The play seems to suggest that incidental details

[38] Billie Whitelaw, *…Who He?: An Autobiography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), p. 76.
[39] Ibid., p. 123.
[40] Samuel Beckett, 'Not I', in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p. 382. Whitelaw, p. 116.
[41] Harold Pinter, *Old Times*, in *Plays 3* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 309.

about a person's life or appearance, as performed by an actor can only get you so far in determining who someone is; other people seem fundamentally and threateningly unknowable. Nonetheless, although the plays of Beckett and Pinter explore unstable and opaque subjectivities, they contain residual elements of naturalist character. The figures in their plays retain what Bert States calls 'Personality': 'the person we recognise as Oedipus each time he appears; that is, the Oedipus-body (on stage the actor, in the text our mental image of the man) who keeps saying "I" in reference to a self that persists'.[42]

The development of postdramatic theatre at the end of the twentieth century has led a number of critics to declare that dramatic character no longer exists. A classic example is Martin Crimp's *Attempts on Her Life* (1997), which scatters tantalising, conflicting fragments of information about Anne – variously a dead woman, an artist, even a car – across the play through lines that are not allocated to named parts.[43] In her influential book *The Death of Character* (1996), Elinor Fuchs diagnoses the 'death of character' from the postmodern theatre she saw between the 1970s and 90s in New York, which she sees as a reflection of a wider postmodern crisis in subjectivity, due to challenges by poststructuralist and feminist theories. The subject is no longer perceived as a coherent whole but a linguistic position, resulting in a 'dispersed idea of self'.[44] Cristina Delgado-Garcia, who refutes both the liberal humanist model of character and Fuchs's postdramatic model, provides a welcome nuancing of the concept of character in contemporary theatre, drawing on examples from Martin Crimp, Simon Stephens, Caryl Churchill and Tim Crouch. She argues

[42] Bert States, 'The Anatomy of Dramatic Character', *Theatre Journal* 37:1 (1985), 86-101 (p. 89).
[43] For her production of *Attempts on Her Life* (2007), Mitchell worked with the actors to create a backstory that they were all appearing on a gameshow, which arguably made the text less indeterminate. Liz Tomlin, 'Citational Theory in Practice: A Performance Analysis of Characterisation and Identity in Katie Mitchell's Staging of Martin Crimp's Texts', *Contemporary Theatre Review* 24 (2014), 373-377 (p. 374).
[44] Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theatre after Modernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 8.

that pronouncements of the 'death of character' depend upon too rigid a definition of character as 'the illusionistic representation of a person generated by an actor'.[45] Instead, she traces character in plays that might be considered postdramatic through alternative theories of subjectivity to the liberal humanist model.[46] Her 'ultimate aim is to offer a less prescriptive definition of character – namely, that character can be any figuration of subjectivity in theatre, regardless of how it looks on the page, of how it is materialised (or not) on the stage, and irrespective also of the idea of subjectivity it figures'.[47] Delgado-Garcia's approach is particularly productive for suggesting that character can persist in the absence of a stable self.

This resonates with Birch's recent plays. *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2014), which is structured almost as a series of sketches that deconstruct patriarchal language, neoliberal ideas of work, and the body, only includes named characters in the central scene. For *[BLANK]* (National Theatre Connections, 2018; Donmar Warehouse, 2019), which explores the impact of the criminal justice system on women and children, Birch gives the director and cast free rein to select which of the hundred, brief scenes they play and in which order. This, in turn, shapes the play, as 'This play might have a narrative and recurring characters, or it might not – it is entirely up to you'.[48] Leaving fundamental decisions about narrative and characters up to the creative team suggests both a remarkable openness to collaboration and a faith in the resilience of the form to withstand such an experiment through the 'rules' Birch sets out in how the

[45] Cristina Delgado-Garcia, *Rethinking Character in Contemporary British Theatre: Aesthetics, Politics, Subjectivity* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), p. 2.
[46] Ibid., p. xii.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Alice Birch, *[BLANK]* (London: Oberon, 2019), Author's note, n.p.

scenes should be cast and combined.[49] *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy*'s experiments with character are more explicitly in dialogue with the theatrical past. *Ophelias Zimmer* constellates its Elizabethan source text with a twentieth-century setting, delivering post-dramatic character through nineteenth-century naturalist techniques. In its simultaneous structure, *Anatomy of a Suicide* disrupts the logic of causation and 'retrospective action', upon which Diamond argues naturalist characterisation depends, frustrating the characters and audience's search for an explanation of Anna and Bonnie's suicides.

'Watch me vanish': Witnessing character in *Ophelias Zimmer*

Ophelias Zimmer (*Ophelia's Room*) was created in close collaboration between director Katie Mitchell, designer Chloe Lamford, and playwright Alice Birch. Birch said in an interview with Simon Stephens that when Katie Mitchell approached her to work on the project, 'she [Mitchell] had had the idea that we would be in Ophelia's room and Chloe [Lamford] had designed it already and she needed some text, and that was sort of the offer'.[50] *Ophelias Zimmer* was first performed in German (translated from English by Gerhild Steinbach) at the Schaubühne on 8 December 2015; after its run in Germany, it played at the Royal Court in May 2016 with English surtitles for five performances. *Ophelias Zimmer* is set up in the vein of a naturalist experiment, with the premise of filtering the action of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* through Ophelia's perspective and Ophelia's room. In an interview with Sarah Hemming in the *Financial Times* about the production, Katie Mitchell says, 'We have kind of syringed her [the character of Ophelia] out and put her on a Petri dish to do a proper

[49] Ibid.
[50] Simon Stephens, 'Alice Birch talks to Simon Stephens', *Playwrights' Podcast*, Season 2, Episode 1, Royal Court Theatre, 2018. <https://royalcourttheatre.com/podcast/s2-ep1-alice-birch-talks-simon-stephens/?> [accessed 15 January 2019].

forensic examination', echoing the scientific, anatomizing rhetoric of Émile Zola's 'human data'.[51] In paying attention to a woman's daily life and showing it to be worthy of significance, *Ophelias Zimmer* has continuities with the democratic political impulse of some early naturalist works.

Removing Ophelia from *Hamlet* for a 'forensic examination', similar to how a naturalistic actor might approach the part, highlights how little information is revealed about Ophelia in Shakespeare's play. 'Everyone abuses her. Including, somewhat, the playwright. She's so underwritten', Helena Bonham Carter observed when playing Ophelia in Franco Zeffirelli's 1990 film.[52] Mitchell tells Sarah Hemming, 'We've tried to be rigorous: we've only allowed the character to do what she says she does [in *Hamlet*]. Which is sew and read books. And the action has to move in relation to the [Shakespeare] play – so all her exits and entrances have to be clear'.[53] This description of the process suggests that they applied a version of Mitchell's facts and questions technique to *Hamlet* in order to generate the new text of *Ophelias Zimmer*, presenting their discoveries as already buried within *Hamlet*.[54] (They do, in fact, add events to *Hamlet*, notably Hamlet depositing Polonius's dead, bleeding body on the floor of Ophelia's room and an Official drugging Ophelia after the murder of Polonius in a state cover-up of Hamlet's involvement). Mitchell, Lamford and Birch's version also explores unanswered questions posed by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The listing for *Ophelias Zimmer* on the Schaubühne website includes a stream of questions:

> What is going on in Ophelia's private life? Does she really only read, sew and write love letters to her boyfriend, the prince? How does she feel about her body, her gender and her dead mother? What happens when she comes back home after the strange events in the palace? How does she find out that her father has died? How

[51] Sarah Hemming, '*Ophelias Zimmer*: a spin off of *Hamlet*', *Financial Times*, 11 December 2015. <www.ft.com/content/3258fdf4-9a9c-11e5-a5c1-ca5db4add713> [accessed 22 May 2018].
[52] quoted in Hemming, Ibid.
[53] Ibid.
[54] See Mitchell, *The Director's Craft*, p. 15, for more on 'facts and questions'.

> does she feel when she discovers that her boyfriend killed him with a knife in his mother's bedroom? Who is the strange man who suddenly appears after her father's death? How does she go mad? And does she really die sliding comfortably into a stream covered in flowers as her boyfriend's mother reports? Or is there something more sinister and strange going on? And what does the bloated dead body of a young girl floating in a river really look like?[55]

The list of questions captures the dual status of Ophelia as both dramatic character and cultural icon, in representations that have taken her beyond *Hamlet* without penetrating her psychological opacity. *Ophelias Zimmer* also challenges the myth of Ophelia, which Chloe Lamford describes as 'the cult of the despairing young woman', particularly the representation of Ophelia in visual art, and investigates the oppressive gender politics contained within it.[56] Nonetheless, as Lyn Gardner observes in her review, 'Anyone expecting a feminist reclamation of Ophelia that allows her to take centre stage and remake and change her own story may be disappointed'.[57] *Ophelias Zimmer* relies upon the overall structure of *Hamlet* and does not answer many of the questions it poses. However, subtle political engagement can be seen in its refocusing of attention, and interrogation of the mechanisms used to produce character. *Ophelias Zimmer* is concerned with asking the questions of who Ophelia really is, what her life is like and where we can find her. Paying attention to Ophelia is itself presented as a feminist act.

As the script of *Ophelias Zimmer* has not been published, I will provide an extended description of the production, as performed at the Royal Court in 2016 and recorded by the

[55] 'Ophelias Room', *Schaubühne* [n.d.]. <www.schaubuehne.de/en/produktionen/ophelias-zimmer.html> [accessed 24 October 2018]
[56] Royal Court Theatre, 'Katie Mitchell and Chloe Lamford discuss Ophelias Zimmer', *YouTube*, 5 May 2016. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGUTiCr3Snk> [accessed 22 May 2018].
[57] Lyn Gardner, 'Ophelias Zimmer review – Katie Mitchell brings Hamlet's real ghost into focus'. *Guardian*. 18 May 2016. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/may/18/ophelias-zimmer-review-katie-mitchell-hamlet-royal-court> [accessed 22 May 2018].

National Video Archive of Performance at the V&A.[58] The whole of *Ophelias Zimmer* takes place in Ophelia's bedroom; in the moments when all the characters are offstage, the room is empty. *Ophelias Zimmer* is divided into five parts, separated by the lowering of a black curtain and a description by a male voiceover of one of the five stages of drowning: surprise, involuntary breath holding, unconsciousness, hypoxic convulsions, clinical death. Within each of these parts, Ophelia enacts her daily routine; the performance score is divided into nine days, as well as an 'epilogue' depicting Ophelia's suicide.[59]

Figure 1. The photograph, depicting Jenny König as Ophelia, wearing white pants and bra, in her room facing out towards the audience, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The photograph was sourced at chloelamford.com/ophelias-zimmer/ [accessed 18 January 2019].

At the beginning of the play, the black curtain rises to reveal Ophelia (Jenny König) standing alone onstage, in white pants and a white bra, facing out towards the audience

[58] Katie Mitchell, dir., *Ophelias Zimmer*. Text by Alice Birch. Trans. into German by Gerhild Steinbuch. Royal Court Theatre. 20 May 2016. [video recording]. 16/07/A2/9000. National Video Archive of Performance, at the V&A.
[59] Alice Birch, *Ophelias Zimmer* (unpublished performance score), 2015.

with a blank expression on her face (Figure 1). She rolls up a black dress, holds it over her head, and unrolls it onto her body, as a female voiceover addresses her. 'Smile Ophelia', the voiceover says.[60] Ophelia smiles. Ophelia hums a few bars of a tune. She takes her coat off the coat rack, puts it on, and sits on the chair to put on her boots. She goes out the door, leaving the stage empty. She comes back. Her maid (Iris Becher) comes in bringing a bunch of flowers and puts them in a vase on the dresser. Ophelia observes, 'The flowers again', and the maid leaves.[61] A male voice offstage calls, 'Ophelia'.[62] Ophelia puts the flowers stem up in the wastepaper basket. Ophelia goes out the door and comes back with a cup. The sound of birdsong plays, as she looks out the (imaginary) window downstage. The maid comes in, carrying an envelope on a silver tray, announcing, 'A letter'.[63] She tuts when she sees the flowers in the bin and goes out. Ophelia goes to sit down on her bed to open the letter. It is a cassette tape. She crosses the room to put it in her cassette player. It is a male voice on the tape – a love message from Hamlet? (The messages veer from love letters to the obscene, to the insulting, for example, on the second day, 'I thought of your cunt. Your little wet'.[64]) She stops the tape and fast forwards. She sits in the chair and sews. There is the sound of steps and male voices outside, jazzy music playing beyond the room. She goes out the door, returns with a cup, pauses at the door. There is the sound of male voices – presumably her father and brother – saying 'Good night'. She shuts the door. She puts on the tape. She sits on the bed. She crosses the stage and stands facing forwards. She puts on a dress over the dress she is wearing, as the female voiceover speaks to her. Ophelia takes the cassette from the machine, puts it in a drawer by her bed, and lies down. She sleeps.

[60] Ibid., p. 1.
[61] Ibid., p. 1.
[62] Ibid., p. 2.
[63] Ibid., p. 2.
[64] Ibid., p. 7.

She sits bolt upright, breathing heavily, as if waking from a nightmare. She turns over and sleeps again. The light changes. It is morning. Ophelia's routine starts again.

Figure 2. The production photograph by Tristram Kenton, depicting Ophelia putting on her boots as the maid enters with the flowers, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The photograph was sourced at www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2016/ophelias-zimmer-review-at-the-jerwood-theatre-downstairs-london/ [accessed 18 January 2019].

After this scene, Ophelia's routine is repeated eight times within the play. The first two times it is enacted, it is almost exactly the same, apart from the changing text of the female voiceover, which is later suggested to be the voice of Ophelia's dead mother, and Hamlet's messages. Ophelia herself does not speak until the third repetition of the routine, asking the maid, 'Am I to go too?' when she mentions 'The wedding', to which the answer is 'no'.[65] The routine starts to be varied and disrupted by the intrusion of the plot of *Hamlet*: when Ophelia's father withdraws his permission for her to go outside; when she refuses Hamlet's letters; when Hamlet (Renato Schuh) bursts into her room. On the eighth repetition, Chloe Lamford's set starts to fill with water, which seemingly only Ophelia could

[65] Ibid., p. 11.

see (Fig. 3). By now, Ophelia's routine has broken down entirely; the maid dresses Ophelia to attend her father's funeral and a strange man, the Official, drugs Ophelia and locks her in her room. In the epilogue, Ophelia slits her throat with her sewing scissors and slides into the water. Her body is framed by bedraggled flowers that float in the water, a deliberately deglamourised visual allusion to John Everett Millais's painting *Ophelia* (1851-2). A glass box comes down, trapping Ophelia behind the fourth wall.

Figure 3. The production photograph, depicting Ophelia sitting on her bed with her feet in the water in her flooded room, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The photograph was sourced at https://catherinelove.co.uk/2016/05/20/ophelias-zimmer-royal-court/ [accessed 18 January 2019].

In his review for *The Stage*, Tim Bano observed that *Ophelias Zimmer* is 'oppressively and impressively boring. Gripping, in a way. But still boring'.[66] Watching *Ophelias Zimmer* feels like watching a durational performance, although it is less than two hours long; Ophelia's actions (sewing, reading, sleeping etc) feel like they are being completed in real time, though they are not, because they are allowed to take up more time than they

[66] Tim Bano, 'Ophelias Zimmer review at Royal Court, London – "impressively boring"', *The Stage*, 17 May 2016. <www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/ophelias-zimmer-review-at-royal-court-london--impressively-boring> [accessed 8 August 2018].

normally would onstage. Expecting dialogue, I found myself wondering through the first sequence of Ophelia's daily routine when the action of the play would start. Then it repeats, and repeats. I fidget. I am conscious of my body fidgeting and my wandering attention. I wonder how many times they will repeat the sequence. In an attempt to occupy my thoughts as I watch, I try to map the narrative of *Hamlet* onto the play. The wedding Ophelia asks to go to in the third day must be that of Gertrude and Claudius, I infer. *Ophelias Zimmer* therefore starts slightly before the plot of *Hamlet*. On the seventh day, the maid dresses Ophelia up in a red dress and heels and does her makeup, reminding her of 'The play, Ophelia'.[67] 'Do I really have to go?', asks Ophelia.[68] She returns to her room walking slowly, mascara trailing under her eyes. When she later prepares to see the Queen, she covers herself in flowers from her bin, visually anticipating Ophelia's flower-garlanded mad scene in *Hamlet*.

There is, then, a sense of a narrative taking place elsewhere, just beyond the room; key events in *Hamlet* that occur 'offstage' in *Ophelias Zimmer* are indicated in the performance score.[69] Ophelia cannot exist without *Hamlet* the play and Hamlet the character, despite Mitchell's rhetoric of extraction and dissection, which suggests that character is not created in isolation. The intertext of *Hamlet* does a lot of work, not least in creating a base level of characterisation and biographical information around the character of Ophelia, expectations which *Ophelias Zimmer* invokes and manipulates. The actor Jenny König is addressed as Ophelia, and therefore I identify her with the character of Ophelia: a

[67] Birch, *Ophelias Zimmer*, p. 40.
[68] Ibid.
[69] For instance, on day 7 the performance score indicates 'Time passes. [From 7.35 – 12pm] Nunnery Scene [in blue font] /12pm. / OPHELIA comes into the room with box of tapes and sits on the bed in shock. / She holds the box'. Ibid., p. 37.

young woman who goes mad and commits suicide. Without at least a vague cultural awareness of *Hamlet*, *Ophelias Zimmer* would be even more disorientating to watch.

Yet there is another way to watch *Ophelias Zimmer*: one that does not look for a narrative elsewhere; one that accepts the pace and pays attention to the subtle changes between cycles. In tension with the naturalist dramaturgy of *Ophelias Zimmer* (or perhaps an extreme extension of it), is the structuring principle of repetition that recalls Beckettian dramaturgy. As I have suggested in the introduction, Beckettian dramaturgy proposes an alternative model of character to the linear, psychologised character assumed by naturalism, closer to a 'state of mind' that accumulates through repetition. *Ophelias Zimmer* recalls *Happy Days* (1961) by Samuel Beckett, which Katie Mitchell directed as *Glückliche Tage* at the Schauspielhaus, Hamburg in 2015.[70] Like Ophelia, Winnie has a limited repertoire of actions, determined by the objects she has in her bag. The objects have a dual status as part of a physical reality and theatrical props: '[*She takes up mirror.*] I take up this little glass, I shiver it on a stone – [*does so*] – I throw it away – [*does so far behind her*] – it will be in the bag again tomorrow, without a scratch, to help me through the day'.[71] Winnie here seems to be acknowledging the inherent theatricality of repetition, not just within the play, but between performances of *Happy Days*. *Ophelias Zimmer* also captures this duality between forward movement and repetition; the flowers accumulate in her bin and Ophelia's body acquires layers and layers of dresses until it resembles a bloated corpse, gesturing inexorably to Ophelia's prescribed ending.

[70] She and set designer Alex Eales chose to set the play in a flooded house, burying Winnie not in sand but water, giving the play the frame of narrative causality of an ecological disaster, rather than a more abstract setting. Katie Mitchell & Anna McMullan, 'Katie Mitchell on Staging Beckett', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 28 (2018), 127-132 (pp. 129-30).
[71] Beckett, *Happy Days*, in *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 154.

Although at times Winnie seems to be able to choose what to do next, many of her actions are shown to be prompted by external stimuli, which can make Winnie seem almost an automaton. For example, when Winnie puts the parasol up and wants to put it down, she says, 'I cannot. [*Pause*.] I cannot move. [*Pause*.] No, something must happen in the world, take place, some change, I cannot, if I am to move again' (153). She is only able to dispense with the parasol when it spontaneously combusts. It is similarly unclear how much agency Ophelia has to choose to act and how much of her routine has been prescribed by someone else. There is less of a sense of Winnie or Ophelia as pre-existing, self-determining subjects, choosing to act.

This sense of female character confined by and created through a repeated routine is even more extreme in Beckett's later play *Footfalls* (1976). The main action of *Footfalls* is May's precisely choreographed pacing for nine steps from right to left, then a turn, then back from left to right, pausing at either end to face the front. May is to a large extent characterised by this compulsive movement, obsessively 'revolving it all' in her mind.[72] In the first section, May is in dialogue with her mother (a voiceover). Each of May's verbal offerings of care, such as 'Would you like me to inject you again?', are met with the Voiceover's reply, 'Yes, but it is too soon'.[73] As in *Happy Days*, the voiceover has a sense of a precisely timed routine running just beneath the surface, contrasting with May and her mother's imprecision about their own ages. In the second section, the Voiceover (presumably now dead) provides a ghostly narration of May's stillness and movement, focusing the audience's visual attention upon May's body; the stage image of a daughter facing front, accompanied by her mother's voiceover, recurs in *Ophelias Zimmer*. Therefore,

[72] Beckett, *Footfalls*, in *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 400.
[73] Ibid.

although the impulse to stage the parts of a woman's life that would not normally be represented is a naturalistic one, Mitchell's use of extreme repetition pushes *Ophelias Zimmer* from naturalism into something more Beckettian. In so doing, the play asks fundamental dramaturgical questions: What counts as action? What counts as agency? How are female characters to access it?

Searching for Ophelia: Naturalist performance and scenography

One of the central challenges of acting, particularly naturalistic acting, is how to convey an impression of what is going on internally through external, bodily signs. As mentioned, one of Mitchell's key developments of naturalism is her treatment of emotions; in her work in the 2000s, Mitchell's direction of her actors has resulted in performances that manage to create an impression of psychological depth, whilst the exact content of the thoughts and emotions their characters are experiencing remains opaque. At the end of *The Director's Craft* (2009), her handbook for directing, Mitchell describes her work on 'the physiology of emotions' as a breakthrough in her work with actors, as she realised 'that they [the audience] can only read what is happening *inside* someone by what they see on the *outside*'.[74] This changed her relationship with the audience as,

> It was no longer essential for the actors to feel the emotions; now what mattered was that the audience felt them. What was essential was that the actors replicated them precisely with their bodies. They could do this either from the inside, by recalling the emotion (by remembering a time in their own lives when they experienced the same thing), or from the outside, by an almost clinical reconstruction of what the body does when a particular emotion hits it.[75]

[74] Ibid., p. 232.

[75] Ibid. Whether or not an actor should feel the emotions he/she portrays has been the subject of debate in acting theory since at least Denis Diderot's *Paradoxe sur le Comedien* in the eighteenth century (Diderot argued that an actor should not). See Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985). It is worth recognising that Mitchell's practice has developed in the more than ten years since *The Director's Craft* was published, particularly as she has extended her Live Cinema work. However, this style of acting continues to be a signature of her work.

Ophelias Zimmer leaves the audience to infer many details which are not explained or are left implicit. By not making things explicit, *Ophelias Zimmer* encourages its audience members to observe Ophelia closely in order to attempt to piece together an impression of character from her behaviour and interactions with objects. As I watch, I try to infer from Ophelia's behaviour how Ophelia feels about Hamlet. Did she enjoy receiving Hamlet's attentions before the relationship turned sour? Did she give him up voluntarily or under pressure from her father? Ophelia puts the flowers stem up in the wastepaper basket, which could suggest that she does not reciprocate Hamlet's feelings towards her. However, she does not bin the flowers immediately. She looks at the flowers, then crosses the room to make her bed. It is when a male voice (her father Polonius, I infer) calls 'Ophelia' that she crosses the room to put on her shoes, and puts the flowers in the bin, almost as an afterthought. She does it deliberately, not angrily or sadly. Does she throw away the flowers because she knows her father will not approve of the courtship?[76] Ophelia's feelings towards Hamlet are made even more ambivalent by her relation to the cassette tape letters. She replays bits of Hamlet's messages, where he describes 'the potential of you' (one of Hamlet's rare moments in this play when he departs from egotism), which could suggest she sees a romantic future for them together.[77] When the maid brings another letter, she tells her 'I am to refuse it/ I think', suggesting that it is not her choice.[78] She sleeps with Hamlet's final tape, on which he repeats 'FUCKYOUFUCKYOUFUCKYOU', under her pillow, suggesting that she continues to love him, despite his abuse.[79]

[76] In *Hamlet*, Polonius tells Ophelia, 'I would not, in plain terms, from this time forth/ Have you so slander any moment leisure/ As to give words or talk with the Lord Hamlet'. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), I.3.132-134.
[77] Birch, *Ophelias Zimmer*, p. 13.
[78] Ibid., p. 19.
[79] Ibid., p. 33.

Although it asks the questions that *Hamlet* does not pursue, the answers *Ophelia Zimmer* provides are at best inconclusive, even to the central question, 'Why did Ophelia commit suicide?' In an analysis of Hattie Morahan's performance of Iphigenia in Mitchell's production of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Kim Solga states,

> Mitchell […] is not at all interested in the promises of discovery made by standard-issue psychological realism, and she is not interested in representing the 'why' of Iphigenia's choice. Instead, she offers her audiences the 'how', in excruciating detail: how Iphigenia enacts the erasure of her impending violence, how the spectacle of sacrifice is built and on the burial of what precarious, vulnerable bodies it relies.[80]

Solga suggests that this technique is deployed 'not to make us feel for them, but to make us feel alongside them, to feel *what they are doing*'.[81] A comparable relationship between performer and spectator operates in *Ophelias Zimmer*. However, rather than 'the body that rushes, retches, panics, feels *too much*, and makes *us* feel too much in the process', which is how Solga describes Morahan performing Iphigenia, the primary affect of *Ophelias Zimmer* is blankness or numbness.[82] Tim Bano describes Jenny König's performance as 'subtle' and 'quietly haunting', 'mostly silent and impassive', until a 'distraught outburst' when Hamlet brings in the body of her father.[83] After that, 'her expression goes blank again – like the blank expressions of the maid and the rest of the cast – but without the boredom and acceptance that were there before; now there's a shade of despair, of complete resignation'.[84]

The performance style of Mitchell's recent work, particularly *Ophelias Zimmer* (2015), *Anatomy of a Suicide* (2017) and *La Maladie de la mort* (2017), has been criticised by several for being too opaque, a critical response that I shall discuss further in the section on

[80] Solga, 'Body Doubles', p. 149.
[81] Ibid., pp. 149, 158.
[82] Ibid., p. 150.
[83] Bano, 'Ophelias Zimmer review', *The Stage*.
[84] Ibid.

Anatomy of a Suicide. Yet the impassive performance style generates the boredom and affectlessness that I experienced as an audience member, capturing something of what it is like to be Ophelia day after day. Obscuring the emotional legibility of Ophelia and preventing audience identification with her could be seen as a political choice as well as a stylistic choice. In not delivering what Solga describes as 'the promises of discovery made by standard-issue psychological realism', *Ophelias Zimmer* reverses some of the expected power dynamics between actor and audience member and neither pathologises nor explains Ophelia, which could generate frustration.[85] *Ophelias Zimmer* both invokes the naturalist mechanism of projection in order to see into Ophelia's mind and shows that mechanism to be broken.

In *Ophelias Zimmer* the expected access points to character – script and actor – are, then, strangely reticent on who Ophelia actually is. The audience is therefore encouraged to look elsewhere to discover Ophelia's character. Perhaps because Ophelia speaks so few words in *Ophelias Zimmer*, her subjectivity seems to permeate her sparse room. Designer Chloe Lamford states, 'we've looked at Hamlet through the eyes of Ophelia, so it's Ophelia's world, inside Hamlet's play'; the set design creates a psychological space as much as a physical one.[86] Due to the mode's interest in the influence of the environment upon the individual, highly detailed renderings of the characters' material environment are a feature of naturalism. Kirk Williams argues that 'in focusing so relentlessly upon material specificity as an irreducible locus of meaning, Naturalist theatre takes a stand against subjective interpretation; leaving very little to the imagination, it seems to reject metaphor utterly, embracing in its stead the metonymic "truth" that seems to reside in detail', which 'brings

[85] Solga, 'Body Doubles', p. 149.
[86] Royal Court, 'Katie Mitchell and Chloe Lamford discuss Ophelias Zimmer'.

together material existence and psychic life as never before, resulting in what one might call a kind of 'hystericization' of the stage space'; every detail could be significant to interpretation but the details are cumulatively excessive.[87] Lamford meticulously renders Ophelia's sparse bedroom, helping to create the impression that Ophelia is a real woman that lives there. The furniture consists of a drab brown dresser, bedside cabinet and chair, a metal bedstead and a coat stand on which are hung all the dresses that Ophelia will put on during the performance. The furniture and props, especially the cassette player, seem oddly anachronistic when set alongside the Elizabethan gender roles.[88]

The extreme naturalism of Lamford's design co-exists with theatricality. At the back, stage right is a glass walled Foley booth, in which Ulrich Hoppe, Renato Schuch and occasionally Iris Becher create all the sounds from outside that permeate the room. In a sense, then, the outside world, the world of Hamlet's play, does not exist; it is a theatrical creation, against which the theatrical creation of Ophelia's room somehow seems more real. The positioning of the Foley booth also creates the impression of male surveillance of Ophelia, which becomes more sinister if the audience view Hoppe and Schuch in character as the Official and Hamlet, not just as performers making sound effects. The set is, then, at once a domestic and a theatrical space, hitting upon a potential paradox within naturalism – that it is both highly theatrical and tries to conceal this theatricality. Alex Eales, a regular designer-collaborator with Mitchell and the designer of *Happy Days* and *Anatomy of a*

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[87] Kirk Williams, 'Anti-Theatricality and the Limits of Naturalism', in *Against Theatre: Creative Destructions on the Modernist Stage*, ed. by Alan Ackerman and Martin Puchner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 95-111 (p. 96).

[88] In his review, Andrew Haydon expands upon the uncertain time period in which the play is set, suggesting, 'We can perhaps surmise that the production is set somewhere between June, 1980 (when Joy Division's 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' was released as a single) and sometime around 1999, when people stopped using cassettes and started burning CDs. And in dark ages/medieval Denmark. And in Jacobethan England. And in a side room offstage in every production of William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* ever since.' Andrew Haydon, 'Ophelias Zimmer – Royal Court, London', *Postcards from the Gods*, 30 May 2016. <postcardsgods.blogspot.co.uk/2016/05/ophelias-zimmer-royal-court-london.html> [accessed 22 May 2018].

Suicide, talks about the importance of 'sealing the world of the stage from the audience' in order to achieve immersion, with strategies that include covering up the surrounding of the stage with black serge.[89] This effect is replicated in Lamford's design for *Ophelias Zimmer*, which is a room with the fourth wall taken off, surrounded by darkness in Fabiana Piccioli's lighting design. This potential tension between theatricality and naturalism (though perhaps a false dichotomy) is central to the project of *Ophelias Zimmer* in extracting a pre-established theatrical character from a play written in a non-naturalistic style in order to dissect her naturalistically.

Mitchell, Lamford and Birch's experiments with feminist naturalism are further illuminated by comparison with Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916), an exemplar of female-centred, detailed naturalism that is often anthologised. In Glaspell's one act play, Mrs Hale (a neighbour) and Mrs Peters (the wife of the sheriff) infer a motive for Minnie Wright's murder of her husband, from the quilt with disordered sewing and a dead canary in a fancy box:

> Mrs Hale: She liked the bird. She was going to bury it in that pretty box.
>
> Mrs Peters: [*In a whisper*.] When I was a girl my kitten – there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes and before I could get there [*Covers her face an instant*.] If they hadn't held me back I would have [*Catches herself, looks upstairs, where steps are heard, falters weakly*] – hurt him.
>
> Mrs Hale: [*With a slow look around her*]. I wonder how it would seem never to have had any children around. [*Pause.]* No, Wright wouldn't like the bird – a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too.
>
> Mrs Peters: [*Moving uneasily*] We don't know who killed the bird.
>
> Mrs Hale: I knew John Wright.

[89] Alex Eales, 'Considerations for Designing Realism', *Staging the Real: Theatre Design Symposium*, National Theatre, London, 28 November 2018.

> Mrs Peters: It was an awful thing was done in this house that night, Mrs Hale. Killing a man while he slept, slipping a rope around his neck that choked the life out of him.
>
> Mrs Hale: His neck. Choked the life out of him. [*Her hand goes out and rests on the birdcage*]
>
> Mrs Peters: [*With rising voice*.] We don't know who killed him. We don't know.[90]

The women infer details about the offstage character Minnie and a narrative of marital discord from their reading of the objects. With the anecdote of her kitten, Mrs Peters projects herself empathetically into Minnie's situation. Mrs Hale draws an equivalence between Mr Wright's inferred psychological and physical violence against his wife, 'he killed that too', and the violence committed against Wright, making it seem a reasonable response. Yet they also recognise that the empathy is potentially incriminating for Minnie, insisting, 'We don't know who killed him', which could apply to the bird or Mr Wright, and later concealing the objects which could become evidence. The plot of *Trifles* centres upon different ways of reading material objects, between the dramatic irony of the men's dismissal of potential evidence as mere 'trifles' because of their association with women's work and the women's attention to their significance. *Ophelias Zimmer* encourages a similar recalibration of audience attention to women's lives. However, it also frustrates a mode of reading the set that looks for individually significant objects; although the flowers and the cassette tapes are important to Ophelia, they do not provide the key to her character, unlike objects being enough to convict a woman in *Trifles*. Alex Eales calls this the 'myth of the significant object', suggesting that the effect of the realist scene is through 'cumulative visual information' that together creates a mood rather than individual symbolic objects.[91]

[90] Susan Glaspell, *Trifles: A Play in One Act*, in *Plays* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1996), pp. 25-26.
[91] Eales, 'Considerations for Designing Realism'.

Ophelias Zimmer encourages naturalist attention without the reward of insight into her psychology. Again, the search for Ophelia is frustrated. She is right there, but also not there.

It is in the moments when the set departs from naturalism into expressionism that the audience gets closest to Ophelia's mind. In Lamford's set, the material and the metaphorical coexist. The key example of this is the water that slowly begins to fill the stage in part four. Ophelia remarks upon it, asking no one in particular 'Is that water?' and later telling the maid 'There is water. / In my room'.[92] Although the audience can hear the actors sloshing through water and can see their visibly wet feet and legs, the water is not acknowledged by the other characters. This could suggest that the set is an expression of Ophelia's subjectivity, that we are witnessing her metaphorical drowning. Yet it could also suggest that the maid and the official are denying the existence of the water – or, indeed, material reality – in order to drive Ophelia mad, as when the Official gets Ophelia to say that Hamlet never sent her any letters and did not kill her father.[93] In putting on layers and layers of dresses in each iteration of her routine, Jenny König has been preparing for the final stage image of the bloated corpse of Ophelia throughout the production, the predetermined ending slowly accumulating before the audience becomes aware of it. In the final minutes of the production, a glass box descends, trapping Ophelia in a glass case. Her floating body seems to have become a museum exhibit, an aesthetic object, her mind impenetrable and unreachable. The final image of the play raises a disturbing question about naturalist attention: when does close observation become surveillance or voyeurism? By making the audience watch Ophelia without the reward of psychological insight, Mitchell

[92] Birch, *Ophelias Zimmer*, pp. 52, 53.
[93] Ibid., p. 47.

makes us aware of the voyeurism of our looking, whilst still demanding that we bear witness to Ophelia's drowned body.

Subjectivity and *Hamlet*

In the frustrating and frustrated search for Ophelia, *Ophelias Zimmer* makes a broader critique of a liberal humanist understanding of (dramatic) character, which John Frow summarises as 'the representation of autonomous, unified, and self-identical subjects', 'predicated on the ownership and control of the self'.[94] William Storm stresses the importance of subjectivity and agency in his definition of dramatic character 'as a viable reflection of what may be termed selfhood in relation to mind, thought, personified ideas and feelings, actions contemplated and embodied, and as a key point of identification for a spectator'.[95] Such a definition of character does not account for Ophelia as represented either in *Hamlet* or *Ophelias Zimmer*, nor many other female characters: Ophelia's capacities to act and for speech are restricted by patriarchal control; she does not seem like a unified subject, as the audience gather her subjectivity in snatches. Moreover, Hamlet has come to be identified as the paradigmatic character by a number of liberal humanist critics writing about dramatic character, including A.C. Bradley and Bert States.[96] Indeed, in *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, Harold Bloom goes so far as to claim that 'Hamlet and Western self-consciousness have been the same for about the last two centuries of Romantic sensibility', arguing that Shakespeare invented 'the internalization of the self' and even 'the human as we continue to know it'.[97] It is no accident that Mitchell, Birch and

[94] John Frow, *Character and Person* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 16.
[95] Storm, *Dramaturgy and Dramatic Character*, p. 165.
[96] Bert States' *Hamlet and the Concept of Character* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1992) uses *Hamlet* as a test-case through which to theorise character. A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1919).
[97] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999). pp. 420, 409, xviii.

Lamford picked Ophelia for this dissection of character; Ophelia is a foil to and casualty of Hamlet's self-expression.

Bloom's claim has been challenged by several early modernists, including Emma Smith, who points out 'the primacy of Hamlet's inner self is a later invention', a projection by 'Romantic' critics.[98] She argues Hamlet's primacy has become a 'self-perpetuating discourse', and 'the self that is thus perpetuated is attractively reflective, mordant, interrogative and intelligent (hence its appeal to poets and critics), but it is also crucially defined by its violent misogyny and solipsism (perhaps ditto)'.[99] She argues that this version of Hamlet is in service of 'a fantasy of human agency' at the centre of tragedy.[100] Instead, she contends, 'tragic characters are acted upon by their plots rather than being complete or primary agents of those plots'; it is not only female characters whose agency is limited, although the restrictions placed upon them may be more extreme.[101] Nonetheless, despite its anachronism, thinking of *Hamlet* as a symbol of a particular mode of liberal humanist subjectivity (and a particular version of character) can spur productive resistance. The Schaubühne programme note for *Ophelias Zimmer* asserts that the play

> interrogates our fascination with these old historical plays whose male heroes repeatedly crush or destroy women. It asks whether there isn't something toxic and deeply misogynist being dragged through history on the coat tails of heroes, like Hamlet, Romeo and Macbeth, something that may still be influencing our own modern day gender relationships.[102]

[98] Emma Smith, 'Character in Shakespearean Tragedy', in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, ed. by Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) pp. 89-103 (p. 91).
[99] Ibid., p. 92.
[100] Ibid., p. 93.
[101] Ibid.
[102] 'Ophelia's Room', Schaubühne.

One of the 'toxic and deeply misogynist' things that Mitchell, Lamford and Birch's excavation of *Hamlet* discovers is that the liberal humanist supposedly universal conception of character does not accommodate women.[103]

In *Ophelias Zimmer*, Hamlet is emphatically denied access to Ophelia's room, but his subjectivity intrudes through the cassette tapes – the 'letters' he sends Ophelia. These cassettes are mini soliloquies, soaring from philosophical heights to obscene sexual comments. Whenever he talks about Ophelia (addressed in the second person) he always situates her in relation to himself. In his first message, Hamlet tells Ophelia:

> You are keeping me warm now it's winter. […] I can't sleep anymore. […] The thought of you keeps me warm, but it stops me from sleeping in case I close my eyes and you stop breathing. […] So let me be sleepless and famished and […] it doesn't matter. As long as I can have the image of you in my head, as long as I can keep the picture of you and your days in my head then nothing else matters.[104]

Although Hamlet appears to express concern for Ophelia, he manages to internalise the concern to make it about him – he can't sleep. Is his image of Ophelia, 'the image of you in my head', who Ophelia really is? To express one's own subjectivity so forcefully means to deny the subjectivity of another. Yet Ophelia exerts some control in fragmenting, even editing, Hamlet's messages in stopping the tapes, fast-forwarding and replaying them. In one of the play's few moments of comedy, she cuts off and fast-forwards Hamlet's 'to be or not to be' speech – probably the most famous expression of subjectivity in Western literature.[105] Ophelia herself is given no soliloquys; her psychological inaccessibility is thrown into relief by Hamlet's existential garrulity.

In a particularly shocking moment of symbolic psychological violence in *Ophelias Zimmer*, Hamlet bursts into Ophelia's room, grabs Ophelia by the arm and forcibly sits her

[103] Ibid.
[104] Birch, *Ophelias Zimmer*, pp. 3-5.
[105] Ibid., p. 13.

down on a chair. Ophelia looks away and closes her eyes. He puts on Joy Division's 'Love Will Tear Us Apart' on his portable cassette player and dances at her, violently, arms flailing, head banging for 3 minutes, 24 seconds.[106] Ophelia puts her hands over her face. When the track is nearly at its end, Ophelia turns off the tape and starts sewing. Hamlet puts on his coat and throws a tape on the floor. There is no live speech in this scene. Yet Hamlet's dancing and song choice prove an emphatic articulation of his hurt and frustration. The chorus, 'Love, love will tear us apart again', seems particularly cruel, at once suggesting that Hamlet and Ophelia are in love, but also disclaiming responsibility and human agency for the cruelty and violence of that love. As well as his literal invasion of Ophelia's private domestic space, which has been identified with Ophelia's mind, Hamlet's dancing situates himself centre stage and the focus of audience attention; it seems so violent because it is a completely different pace from the patient attention we have been encouraged to pay to Ophelia. His solipsistic gestures of wounded male subjectivity literally take up space. He is expressing his subjectivity at Ophelia's expense.

However, *Ophelias Zimmer* does not offer a positive alternative model of female subjectivity, in response to its critique of liberal humanist male character. One might expect the voiceover, which occurs twice in Ophelia's routine – once when she wakes up and gets dressed and once when she gets ready for bed – to provide an insight into Ophelia's subjectivity, perhaps as an inner monologue. Yet the voiceover uncannily addresses Ophelia in the second person, calling her 'little O', a nickname that is at once affectionate and threatens to reduce her to nothing.[107] On the second day, the voiceover says (in a neutral voice),

[106] Fowler, *Katie Mitchell*, p. 204.
[107] The Fool in *King Lear* tells Lear after he has given away his kingdom, 'Thou wast a pretty fellow when thou hadst no need to care for her frowning. Now thou art an O without a figure. I am better than thou art now: I

> Flatten. Flatten. Flatten. Eyes down, Ophelia. Eyes down, little O. Bind your feet. Keep them small. Quieter now. Quieter. Slide into the wall. Slip between the floorboards. Hide under the carpet. Put your face in my skirt. They won't see you there. They can't get you there.[108]

The voice repeats commands familiar to women in patriarchal society, 'eyes down', 'quieter' and later 'get smaller', merging them with the domestic image of a child hiding her face in her mother's skirt, bodily restriction and pain to meet a patriarchally imposed standard of beauty ('bind your feet'), and the lyrically impossible imagery of Ophelia merging with her environment. Ophelia has a voice in her head telling her to self-destruct. Is the voiceover advising a self-protection mechanism for Ophelia in response to a patriarchal environment – the mysterious 'they' who are threatening to 'get' her? Or is the voiceover contributing to the oppression of Ophelia? Does Ophelia conduct her routine because of the instructions from the voiceover, out of choice, because it is what she always done, or a combination of all three?

The sense of Ophelia that accrues through her repeated routine suggests a very different model of being and self from the liberal humanist free agent. It is closer to Butler's concept of performative gender as 'the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being'.[109] Ophelia does not perform her subjectivity through her routine as a liberal humanist self-expression; rather, the impression of her subjectivity is constituted through her routine, within 'a highly rigid regulatory framework' that determines the permissible actions for a woman within a patriarchal

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am a fool, thou art nothing'. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), I.4.191-94.

[108] Birch, *Ophelias Zimmer*, p. 9.

[109] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 45. I follow Delgado-Garcia in using Butler's theories to explore alternative processes of subject formation that can, in turn, expand who is regarded as a subject. Delgado-Garcia, *Rethinking Character*, Chapter 2.

society. Butler's theoretical framework helps to capture the ambivalence of Ophelia's routine. Like the repeated actions of Beckett's Winnie and May, Ophelia's routine simultaneously oppresses her and is the closest she gets to a sense of self, which is perhaps why she tries so hard to cling onto the routine when it is disrupted. Having been locked in her room by the Official after Hamlet has killed Polonius and gone on the run, Ophelia plays one of (what I infer to be) her father's music tapes on the cassette player and calls her own name. On the eighth cycle, when the routine has broken down entirely, Ophelia does the voiceover to herself: 'Breathe in, little love. Smile. Smile. Breathe in'.[110] Whereas the voiceover's previous instructions to Ophelia to breathe in seemed part of the instruction to get smaller, to disappear, now, as the stage is filling with water, it seems an instruction to remember to keep breathing. Ophelia's complete dissolution occurs when her routine has broken down irreparably, due to the imposition of more patriarchal restrictions from the Official. As well as preventing her from enacting her routine, the Official unmoors Ophelia from her narrative of self and what she knows about the world, telling her 'Hamlet has nothing to do with you. / Hamlet does not even know you exist'.[111] Ophelia, who has been repeatedly told who she is by the voiceover and Hamlet, is now told that she does not exist. Is it any wonder that Ophelia goes mad?

In recollecting performing in Samuel Beckett's *Footfalls,* Billie Whitelaw observes 'May seems to be in the process of disappearing like smoke, of becoming more and more inward, the movements getting ever slower, the body gently spiralling inwards as the play proceeds – towards nothingness'.[112] Whitelaw's description of May as a character 'gently spiralling inwards […] towards nothingness' is illuminating for Ophelia, particularly in

[110] Birch, *Ophelias Zimmer*, p. 55.
[111] Ibid., p. 53.
[112] Whitelaw, *…Who He?*, p. 141.

relation to Jenny König's inward-facing performance style and the muffling of her body in layers and layers of dresses. A key part of *Ophelias Zimmer* is about bearing witness to Ophelia's disappearance – not a disappearance in the sense of a vanishing (Ophelia/ König's body remains emphatically onstage, in contrast to Gertrude's poetic reporting of Ophelia's death in *Hamlet*) but in the violent sense of a state-sanctioned disappearance.[113] Ophelia's suicide is 'an *active* vanishing', as Peggy Phelan conceives of the phrase in *Unmarked*, 'a deliberate and conscious refusal to take the payoff of visibility'.[114] Phelan argues 'Within the psychic and aesthetic economy of the Western gaze, the visible image of the other necessarily becomes a cipher for the looking self', so representation reproduces that unequal power dynamic.[115] However, she suggests that performance can offer 'a model for another representational economy, one in which the reproduction of the Other *as* the Same is not assured'.[116] Perhaps this is why Mitchell, Birch, Lamford and König make it almost impossible for the audience to identify with Ophelia – in identifying with the character, one would be making her a cipher for oneself and therefore not really seeing her, continuing the violent representative process by which Ophelia has been marked and overwritten by others (Hamlet, Polonius, Laertes; representations of Ophelia after *Hamlet*). Ophelia's 'active vanishing' provides a way to bear witness to state and patriarchal violence against women. In an interview with Maddy Costa, Katie Mitchell declares, 'To show the effects of patriarchy, […] you have to show what happens to women who are oppressed', or 'How do you critique something without exposing what it does?' [117]

[113] For Gertrude's description of Ophelia's drowning, see *Hamlet*, IV.7.3315-3332.
[114] Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 19.
[115] Ibid., p. 26.
[116] Ibid., p. 3.
[117] Costa, 'Alternative point of view'.

Yet the political valence of this strategy has been debated. Solga was troubled by the ending of *Ophelias Zimmer*, asking, 'Is suicide framed by the production as the *only* plausible outcome of that character? Or is suicide made visible to an audience as the consequence of a series of converging material forces – forces that audience might debate, discuss and perhaps even change?' [118] It is both: Ophelia's death is theatrically inevitable (through the intertext of *Hamlet* and the Beckettian repetition), and the material pressures upon Ophelia are conveyed through the naturalist scenography. Crucially, despite the play's political ambivalence, in *Ophelias Zimmer* naturalism is not incompatible with feminism; Mitchell relies upon naturalist techniques and expectations to question some of the fundamental assumptions of dramatic character and their potential imbrication and implication within gendered power imbalances. In re-encountering the 'toxic' gender politics of *Hamlet* through naturalist techniques, Mitchell could be said to be 'reclaiming' the play and, more broadly, naturalism as a form. As Harvey Young writes,

> *Re*-claiming does not require that we erase the past and script a new one. […] To reclaim is to take something back. It is to possess something in the present while knowing that it has only recently been back in your possession. It is to know the past in the present as you work toward creating a future.[119]

In its concertinaing of multiple times and theatrical styles, *Ophelias Zimmer* suggests a theatre practice haunted by its own history, which can be activated and even contested in performance.

[118] Rebellato and Solga, 'Katie Mitchell and the Politics of Naturalist Theatre', p. 54.
[119] Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 135.

'A shell of a person': Constructing character in *Anatomy of a Suicide*

Although this haunting is slightly less direct in *Anatomy of a Suicide*, the play cannot help but summon through its subject matter the legacy of the theatrical representation of mentally ill women, particularly the overdetermined figure of the hysteric. As an original play by Alice Birch rather than an adaptation, *Anatomy of a Suicide* followed a different creation and production process from *Ophelias Zimmer*. Mitchell reflects, 'When I'm directing her [Birch's] plays there is a subtle shift in the relationship and we move from being collaborators to Alice becoming the lead practitioner and me ensuring her formal ideas are rigorously followed through and executed on the floor'.[120] Due to the production's greater emphasis on the text, this section pays more attention to the role that the structure and form of *Anatomy of a Suicide* play in challenging the sense of structural inevitability often associated with naturalism, as well as drawing on insights from members of the cast in considering the role of performance in shaping character.

Anatomy of a Suicide was performed at the Royal Court from 3 June to 8 July 2017 and won the 2018 Susan Smith Blackburn Prize for playwriting.[121] The play explores the impact of suicide and mental illness on three generations of women in the same family. It stages three, interconnected plays simultaneously; each is set in a different time period and focused on the life of a central character: Carol (mother of Anna, grandmother of Bonnie) in the 1970s, Anna (daughter of Carol, mother of Bonnie) in the 1990s and 2000s, and Bonnie (daughter of Anna, granddaughter of Carol) in the 2030s. The stage is split into three

[120] Lease, 'Interview with Katie Mitchell', p. 256.
[121] Annalisa Quinn, 'Alice Birch Wins 2018 Blackburn Prize for 'Anatomy of a Suicide', *New York Times*, 12 March 2018. <www.nytimes.com/2018/03/12/theater/alice-birch-blackburn-prize.html> [accessed 17 May 2018].

sections (see Fig. 4), the division emphasised by the years projected at the top of the set in Alex Eales's design. Each individual storyline follows a chronological progression, which culminates, for Carol and Anna, in suicide. In a more traditionally structured family drama, the stories might be played after each other. However, the individual narratives would not make for very satisfying plays; there are too many gaps in the narratives and the selection principles of which scenes from life to represent are unexpected – for example, in Carol's story, the mundane (meeting an old school friend at a wedding; seeing wolves at the zoo with her baby) and the significant (suicide attempt; giving birth) are intertwined. This structure both encourages a rethinking of what is narratively significant and provides counterpoint for the other scenes.

Figure 4. The production photograph by Stephen Cummiskey, depicting (from left to right) Hattie Morahan as Carol, Kate O'Flynn as Anna and Adelle Leonce as Bonnie being changed during a scene transition, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The photograph was sourced at royalcourttheatre.com/whats-on/anatomy-of-a-suicide [accessed 18 January 2019].

In a note on the playscript, which is presented in landscape, Alice Birch writes, 'The text has been "scored" – I wrote the piece across the page, so it ought to be read as written'.[122] Yet the reader of the play must still read from left to right, rather than experiencing all three scenes simultaneously as when watching the play in performance. Watching *Anatomy of a Suicide* reveals an intricate web of repeated lines and images across the three stories, which sometimes synchronise into lines said in unison, and sometimes diverge. In the script, each scene has a title, such as 'Hospital', 'Cooking' and 'Party', and these titles recur across the strands, from left to right and chronologically. For example, in the first scene '1. A. Hospital', which Carol and her husband John play alone on the left hand third of the stage, Carol is returning home after a suicide attempt. In the next scene, Carol plays a scene called 'Cooking', silently peeling apples, and Anna plays a scene called 'Hospital', appearing with a bandage on her wrist and saying, 'I'm sorry', like Carol did in the previous scene. Birch uses the repetition to play with audience expectations, as the assumption that Anna is in hospital after a suicide attempt is disproved when Anna's injuries are revealed to be accidental. In the third scene, Bonnie is an A&E doctor bandaging a patient Jo (although it only becomes clear that Bonnie is the focus of the strand when she reappears in the next scene, as the parallel structure of the play leads us to expect to focus on her patient), while Carol plays a scene called 'Balloons', in which she talks to a child at a birthday party, and Anna plays a scene called 'Cooking', in which she injects herself with heroin and dances to the Velvet Underground. *Anatomy of a Suicide*, then, has been musically 'scored' not only in the passages of silent action, which allow the focus to be on another part of the stage, and the precise rhythm of the overlapping lines, but also in the

[122] Alice Birch, 'Notes on the play', *Anatomy of a Suicide* (Oberon: London, 2017) [n.p.]. All following references to this play will be given in the main body of the chapter.

way it builds in texture like the musical structure of theme and variation, originating with Carol and reprised in the other parts. The double time scheme of the play, at once linear and simultaneous, captures both a sense of narrative progression and a sense of cyclical repetition, allowing for change but also looping back. Presenting the three stories simultaneously means that Carol and Bonnie, who have never met, share stage time; the baby and child Anna exist onstage at the same time as adult Anna.

Naturalist experiment?: Traumatic repetition

The title of *Anatomy of a Suicide* sets up an expectation of a scientific investigation or even a psychological case history: 'anatomy' both in the sense of the dissection of a body and of the organisation of a body of facts; 'suicide' as in the act of a person ending their life and a suicidal person. The question suggested by the title is 'Why did these women commit suicide'? In fact, the only other work entitled 'The Anatomy of a Suicide' is a case history of a 55-year-old woman with 'agitated depression or involutional melancholia', published in *The New England Journal of Medicine* in 1965.[123] The article works systematically through the circumstances of her life and illness, including an unhappy marriage, a hysterectomy and her daughter leaving home, to determine the causes of her suicide. The author emphasises the importance of looking behind what the patient says 'to determine what the patient *really* means. Just as in a physical problem, the practitioner is expected to determine the lesion *behind* the symptom'.[124] Such pathologising rhetoric recalls Diamond's analysis of naturalist plays in relation to Freud's case histories, as characterised by 'retrospective

[123] Leston L. Havens, 'The Anatomy of a Suicide', *The New England Journal of Medicine*, 272 (1965), 401-405 (p. 401).
[124] Ibid., p. 404.

action, the process whereby the past remembered produces or explains a hysteria, its necessary confession, and its cure'.[125]

As seen in Anna Harpin's response to *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide* discussed in the introduction of this chapter, Birch's play has been criticised for its representation of mentally ill female characters. In her review of *Anatomy of a Suicide* for *The Psychologist*, clinical psychologist Erminia Colucci suggests that the play's representation of suicide unhelpfully perpetuates nineteenth- and twentieth-century stereotypes of 'mad' women, asking, 'Is not now, the 21st century, time to stop propagating an image of women as weak, crazy and unbalanced?'[126] She continues,

> What is particularly problematic to me with this play is that the message given to the public is not only that suicide is possibly hereditary and (genetically?) transmitted, a hypothesis for which there is no sound scientific evidence; but also that women who are suicidal are mad (perhaps even 'bad'), they have some dramatic personal struggle, and are fundamentally unable to live and cope with their traumatic experiences.[127]

Colucci not only takes issue with the play's representation of its female characters, whereas I would contend that they are emotionally complex, rather than simply negative, but also conflates and critiques the play's theme of inherited trauma with an 'inevitable' structure (in the vein of Kim Solga's critique of naturalist plays' 'inevitable' endings).[128] Michael Billington, in an otherwise positive review, also expressed himself troubled by the 'genetic determinism' of *Anatomy*, as 'Birch's play leaves little scope either for self-invention or the

[125] Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis*, p. 35.
[126] Erminia Colucci, 'An unhelpful dissection?', *The Psychologist*, 30 (August 2017), 78-79 (p. 78). <thepsychologist.bps.org.uk/volume-30/august-2017/unhelpful-dissection> [accessed 17 May 2018].
[127] Ibid.
[128] See Rebellato and Solga, 'Katie Mitchell and the Politics of Naturalist Theatre'.

impact of social and economic forces'.[129] In several ways, the storyline of Carol does set up the expectation that she will commit suicide: the play starts with the aftermath of her failed suicide attempt, and Carol expresses suicidal intentions, telling a psychiatrist, 'I came to the decision a long time ago that it would be Necessary to end my life' (215). The end of the storyline, with John reporting Carol's death to the child Anna, does not come as a surprise, especially because her absence has been palpable in Anna's section of the play. Anna's mental health narrative, however, follows a far less linear trajectory, showing addiction and several relapses and recoveries, before the birth of her daughter; her suicide is more unexpected and, as she electrocutes herself in the bath onstage, more shocking. In the scene before she gives birth, Anna declares herself 'really happy' (163) for the first time in the play; after Bonnie's birth, she describes a disturbingly vivid dream of giving birth to a dead baby made of glass. Yet, while post-partum depression or psychosis might be suggested by O'Flynn's performance, the play does not offer an explicit diagnosis for Anna's condition or her suicide.[130]

Although the question of whether suicidal ideation can be inherited was a focus of many reviews, *Anatomy of a Suicide* is less interested in answering the question 'why did Carol and Anna commit suicide?', than 'what is the impact that their mothers' suicides have had upon Anna and Bonnie?' In an interview for the *Guardian*, Liz Hoggard points out to Alice Birch, 'You wrote the play after having your son, and the brutality of birth is a key

[129] Michael Billington, 'Anatomy of a Suicide review – a startling study of mothers and daughters', *Guardian*, 12 June 2017. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jun/12/anatomy-of-a-suicide-review-royal-court-alice-birch-katie-mitchell> [accessed 16 May 2018].

[130] When I presented an excerpt of this chapter at the Theatre and Performance Research Association conference in 2019, Benjamin Fowler kindly told me, from his observation of Katie Mitchell's rehearsals, that Mitchell does attribute specific mental health conditions to the characters in discussion with the actors. However, this was not obvious to me as an audience member watching *Anatomy of a Suicide*.

theme'.[131] Birch replies, 'I didn't sit down consciously to take that on. But, yes, it's such a strange time. You're told: "Well, it's something that so many women go through", and you're expected just to deal with it; but at the same time it's a violent and wonderful thing, enormous and completely life-changing'.[132] Later in the interview, Birch says,

> I was interested in whether trauma can be passed on through our DNA; how much is nature and nurture? I'd read somewhere that when the mother kills herself, it's chaos. Once the suicide taboo has been broken in a family, does it become easier to repeat later? And I wanted to look at how does one break out of that pattern so the cycle doesn't become inevitable.[133]

On one level, this could be seen as a reprise of late-nineteenth-century naturalist plays' interest in heredity, or even a kind of 'retrospective action', the traumatic past resurfacing and explaining the present.[134] In Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1882), Oswald is told by his Doctor, 'the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children', when he diagnoses him with an inherited venereal disease.[135] Mrs Alving is horrified to observe Oswald repeating his father's actions in seducing a servant; she warns them that their union would be incestuous. Yet Birch's use of the word 'cycle' also suggests another, alternative dramaturgical model: that of Greek tragedy. It particularly recalls the idea of a cursed house or familial line, such as the house of Atreus in the *Oresteia*, described by Ted Hughes in his translation as 'Bloody footprints staggering through this palace/ Generation to generation'.[136] Orestes manages to break the cycle of retribution by being pardoned by Athena; repetition is not inevitable.

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[131] Liz Hoggard, 'I'm interested in whether trauma can be passed on through DNA', *Guardian*, 4 June 2017. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/jun/04/alice-birch-anatomy-of-a-suicide-play-interview> [accessed 1st August 2018].
[132] Ibid.
[133] Ibid.
[134] Diamond, p. 35.
[135] Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, trans. by James McFarlane, in *Ibsen: Four Major Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), Act 2, p. 138.
[136] Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, trans. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. 11.

Rather than deliberate revenge in *The Oresteia* or intergenerational punishment in *Ghosts*, the characters in *Anatomy of a Suicide* are often (but not always) unconscious of the repetition and echoes between the generations, made visible to the audience by the parallel structure. In her review, Rosemary Waugh observes how words, images and gestures are repeated:

> The most poignant passages of overlap, however, occur through gestures not words. Mother and daughter existing at different junctures in history both slump slightly onto a kitchen table, one elbow on the surface, and one hand towards the forehead. It is often in our unconscious gestures that we are reminded of parents and relatives. Each time I clumsily grasp a tea mug and cause my wedding ring to crash against the crockery, I see clearly for one microsecond my mother's hand making the same movement, her silver jewellery clanging on a cup.[137]

Waugh's evocative description of her personal, affective response to the play resonates with Joseph Roach's concept of surrogation. In *Cities of the Dead*, Joseph Roach argues that performance is a form of embodied cultural memory. Culture, he argues, reproduces itself by 'surrogation', a process of substitution by which survivors attempt to replace someone who is dead with someone who exceeds or falls short of the original.[138] Developing Richard Schechner's definition of performance as 'restored behaviour' (which goes far beyond theatrical performance to encompass rituals, sporting events, and everyday life), Roach explains that 'no action or sequence of actions may be performed exactly the same way twice; they must be reinvented or recreated at each appearance', so 'Performance, in other words, stands in for an elusive entity that it is not but that it must vainly aspire both to embody and to replace'.[139] As Roach coins surrogation in the context of the circum-Atlantic slave trade, surrogation is associated with inherited trauma. For Anna and Bonnie in

[137] Rosemary Waugh, 'Anatomy of a Suicide at the Royal Court', *Exeunt Magazine*, 11 June 2017. <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-anatomy-suicide-royal-court/> [accessed 25 May 2018].
[138] Joseph R. Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), p. 2.
[139] Ibid., pp. 29, 3

Anatomy of a Suicide, to perform oneself is to perform one's mother and to fall short in that performance.

Furthermore, Birch's interest in 'whether trauma could be passed down through our DNA' suggests the psychological idea of intergenerational trauma. In *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* (2017), Meera Atkinson coins the term 'cyclical haunting' to capture the intergenerational transmission of trauma, a phrase that seems a peculiarly apt description of the structure of *Anatomy of a Suicide*.[140] Atkinson admits, 'The question of whether trauma and memory *can* be transmitted is a controversial one, and I do not mean to suggest that, assuming it can, the process is a literal one'.[141] Rather, she describes the transmission as a bodily and affective process, suggesting, 'even with little to no cognitive knowledge, it is possible for an individual to exhibit posttraumatic symptoms from which they can and do act, speak, and write'.[142] Rather than literally presenting suicidal ideation or mental illness as inherited, the structure of Birch's play demonstrates the affective repercussions of familial trauma, for example, Bonnie sitting down on the floor of a swimming pool changing room, unable to get up, when a woman comes in calling the name 'Anna', the mother that Bonnie never knew (228). The structure of *Anatomy* places scenes side by side, leaving the audience to infer the connections between them, rather than asserting a direct causational relationship. Despite Billington's criticism, the parallel structure of *Anatomy* does also make visible, to some extent, the changing material circumstances of women and, particularly, the difference in attitudes to mental illness between the 1970s and the 2000s, as seen in the gentle delivery of Anna's ECT treatment

[140] Meera Atkinson, *The Poetics of Transgenerational Trauma* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017). Introduction [ebook n.p.].
[141] Ibid., Chapter 4.
[142] Ibid., Introduction.

onstage (216). Although Birch is clearly interested in whether something about mental illness and suicidal ideation can be genetically inherited, the play does not suggest that suicide is the inevitable outcome for either Anna or Bonnie. Correlation does not equal causation.

Naturalist experiment?: Searching for a reason

Anatomy of a Suicide engages with a question that emerged from my analysis of *Ophelias Zimmer*: is there something inherent to naturalism as a theatrical form that means it inevitably pathologises women? *Anatomy of a Suicide* poses a challenge to etiological understandings of mental illness, not only through its simultaneous structure, but also through modelling characters trying to explain themselves and each other in this mode. Although it might appear naturalistic, the first scene of *Anatomy of a Suicide* is highly disorientating. There is a lack of information, leaving the audience to infer who the characters are and the situation in which they are. From a combination of Carol's opening 'I'm sorry' (1), her claim 'it was an accident' (3), the title, and the bandages of her wrists, I infer that the play starts after she has attempted to commit suicide. However, it is not explicitly referred to until the end of the scene. In some ways, the dialogue has a high level of verisimilitude, with pauses, broken sentences, and Carol's repetition of 'No':

John: Do you
Carol: No
John: Want a drink or
Carol: No
John: Something to Eat or
Carol: No thank you
(1)

However, the dialogue also seems too rhythmic and too stylised to be naturalistic. With her repeated 'No', Carol is closing down the conversation and denying John's attempts to offer

care. From the grey, mock-concrete walls of Alex Eales's set, they could be anywhere. There are references to physical objects ('the floorboards are still wet', 3) and a sense of an external social reality ('There's a pub on the corner', 1), but they are not staged. There is also a sparseness to the characterisation of John and Carol; a few details about their lives can be inferred from their dialogue (e.g. that John has a sister) and from their costumes but much is left out. They do not seem to be completely grounded in a social world. If this is naturalism, it is a strangely unrooted naturalism.

For much of the scene Carol and John seem to be skirting around the suicide attempt, 'why did you do it?' an unspoken subtext between them:

John: The floorboards are still wet.
Carol: .
It was an accident.
John: Your uncle
Carol: That wasn't an accident
John: No
Carol: This was an accident
John: Your arms
Carol: Why are you talking about my uncle
John: Because he
Carol: I was ten
John: Because you
Carol: Why are you deciding to ask me about my uncle Now
John: Your Arms

(3-4)

John's line, 'the floorboards are still wet', seems at once a practical statement of why they cannot go home and an accusation, material proof of what Carol tried to do. Carol's response, 'It was an accident', could be an attempt to save John's feelings or to stop the conversation. If it was an accident, then there is no motive to be discovered. Neither of them directly refer to suicide, as if they cannot say it, working with their own private shorthand of euphemisms and allusions. John saying 'Your uncle' brings up the idea that suicide may run in families. However, John either cannot or is not allowed by Carol to

complete the implications of his comparison, 'Because he…Because you'; she rejects that it is relevant, 'Why are you deciding to ask me about my uncle Now'. John comes back to material, bodily proof of Carol's action: 'Your arms'.

Rather than directly accusing Carol of attempting suicide, John gathers more oblique statements of proof: 'The freezer was full […] Of casseroles and pies and lasagnas and fish. And fish. And fish. You hate fish.' (6) Although the statements may seem like non sequiturs, there is a logic of intention behind them, leaving the audience to fill in the gaps of what is left unsaid: Carol cooked fish; therefore she was preparing food to John to eat when she would not be alive; therefore her suicide attempt was not an accident. Carol resists John's search for a cause:

Carol:	You were away
John:	It was because I was away
Carol:	Not Because you were away, it's just a. I was just Stating. It's not a
John:	The accident Happened because I was away
Carol:	Not what I
John:	I won't go away then
Carol:	I like it when you're away
John:	You Like it
Carol:	I don't mean

(6-7)

John takes Carol's line, 'You were away', as an explanation, establishing causation through the connective 'because'. Yet Carol feels instantly that her words are being misconstrued; to her a statement is just a statement, not a motive. In John's urge to extrapolate and infer Carol's motivations, he reads her actions and dialogue like a spectator of a nineteenth-century naturalist play in overdrive: the spectator as detective/ psychoanalyst that Diamond describes. At the end of the scene, John no longer allows Carol to insist that it was an accident, finally graphically referring to the violence of Carol's act in the longest sentence of the scene, 'You took a razor and you slit your wrists, you slit Up your fucking wrists you ran a

Bath and you drank gin and you took pills and you left food and you Tried really fucking hard to Die, Carol' (8). John's anger comes through in the swearing, graphic description, the accusatory use of the second person and the repetition of 'and', listing the signs of premeditation. Yet although John asserts the intentionality of Carol's suicide attempt, he cannot work out why she did it. This frustrated quest to find out Carol's and her daughter's and granddaughter's motivations continues throughout the play. Rather than regarding Birch's characters' opacity as a failure in dramatic composition (as seems to be the implication of some of the complaints in reviews of Birch's writing not giving enough scope to the actors to perform the depths of their emotional capacities), the characterisation of Carol, Anna and Bonnie can be seen to be deliberately resisting diagnosis and legibility.[143]

In *Anatomy of a Suicide*, the leading female characters are repeatedly called upon by other characters to explain or give an account of themselves. In *On Stories* (2002), Richard Kearney claims that identity is founded upon linear narrative:

> When someone asks who you are, you tell your story. That is, you recount your present condition in the light of past memories and future anticipations. You interpret where you are now in terms of where you have come from and where you are going to. And so doing you give a sense of yourself as a *narrative* identity that perdures and coheres over a lifetime.[144]

Yet this model of identity does not work for the characters in *Anatomy of a Suicide*. Anna attempts to construct a narrative identity in her interview for Jamie's documentary; in Mitchell's production, Kate O'Flynn sits in a chair facing the audience, delivering the lines as an extended monologue. When Jamie asks her to talk about her 'Journey' (85) to the commune, Anna meanders through quite a lot of her life story, circling round things,

[143] See Sarah Crompton, 'Review: *Anatomy of a Suicide* (Royal Court)', *WhatsOnStage*, 12 June 2017. <www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/reviews/anatomy-of-a-suicide-royal-court_43823.html> [accessed 17 May 2018].
[144] Richard Kearney, *On Stories* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 3-4.

repeating herself, in more of a stream of consciousness than a linear narrative. She attempts to isolate her mother's death as the moment her life fell apart: '[…] my mother she was she was dead by this point which I suppose was the uh the Trigger or the for the drugs, for the heroin and the other, but the all of it really, all of it that was definitely the Moment I And so I I I suppose then I suppose the Moment was I I Overdosed […]' (97). Through her use of words like 'Trigger' and 'Moment', Anna tries to construct an etiology for her heroin addiction, perhaps appealing to a psychoanalytic way of rooting present trauma in childhood trauma (Carol committed suicide when Anna was a teenager). However, the disordered sentences (putting 'my mother' before the parenthetical 'she was dead by this point'; the lack of punctuation; interrupting herself; the repetition of words) and the repetition of 'Moment' when describing her overdose complicate things. Later in the monologue, when Anna is talking about losing her job and her lack of stability, her mother comes back in a kind of word association:

> […] I mean, there was no stability, there has been no stability I couldn't describe stability to you or identify it for you when your Mother it just – there isn't – it's the Opposite of Stability – it's not – I didn't, I don't feel that I seek it, that I Sought it but I suppose there will always be the thought in me that if my Mother couldn't – then I must be an almighty piece of shit and because I suppose that is – what happened is – the Opposite of – but that's not what What you're asking – yeah – so what I mean is, what I'm trying to explain is that – how I ended up in rehab […] (99-100)

Anna fixates on the word 'stability', repeating it like a talisman in an attempt to convey the unconveyable loss of her mother, reflecting Birch's idea of 'chaos' after a mother's suicide. Anna's speech is laced with negatives, aposiopesis and diversions. It seems impossible for Anna to isolate the specific cause and effect, or to tell her story in chronological order; she does not have a viable or stable identity in Kearney's narrative mode.

Crucially, Anna does not demonstrate particular self-knowledge or a special insight into herself, in contrast with the confidence of Kearney's model of narrative identity. Birch's

model of character is closer to Harold Pinter's idea of a character 'who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour, or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives'.[145] Pinter famously disempowers the audience through the opacity of his characters and dialogue. Comparably, through its characterisation, dialogue and structure, *Anatomy of a Suicide* denies the power of the pathologising audience gaze that Diamond identifies as a hallmark of 'Ibsenite realism'.[146] This opacity, in turn, raises a question around form. Pinter remarked, 'If you press me for a definition, I'd say that what goes on in my plays is realistic, but what I'm doing is not realism'.[147] Mitchell's production of *Anatomy of a Suicide* deploys several naturalistic techniques but challenges a fundamental expectation of naturalism: that characters should be knowable to an audience.[148]

In addition to characters struggling to make sense of themselves narratively, the structure of the play as a whole poses a still greater obstacle to audience members wishing to construct an etiology for the characters' behaviour. Concurrently with Anna's monologue, on the left-hand section of the stage, Carol has just given birth to baby Anna and her baby has been taken away for tests. Hattie Morahan stands, a vacant expression on her face, gazing out into the audience, repeating in a haunted voice 'a baby' (92-102), over and over again. At the beginning, there is space between her repeated line, 'a baby'. Then, it picks up pace and the repetition becomes denser after Anna mentions 'Trigger'. Carol repeats 'a baby' rhythmically throughout Anna's monologue. There is a haunting quality in pairing the scene of Anna's birth with the monologue in which she tries to give an account of her life.

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[145] Harold Pinter, 'Introduction: Writing for the Theatre', in *Plays One* (London: Faber & Faber, 1991), pp. vii-xiv (p. ix).
[146] Diamond, p. 4.
[147] Harold Pinter, 'Introduction: Writing for Myself', in *Plays: Two* (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 9-12 (p. 11).
[148] There are, of course, exceptions to this rule, notably Hedda Gabler.

Her mother has an insistent stage presence as loud as her absence in Anna's monologue and life; the split stage disrupts the audience's complete focus on Anna, calling our attention away. At the end of the scene, Carol's husband John enters with flowers and breaks the repetition. John and Anna (in parallel scenes) say 'Carol' in unison (102). Anna's last line in the scene, when Carol is silent, is 'My Mother's name was Carol' (103). This recognition is one of the first direct assertions of the relationship between the scenes and the characters, although John has appeared as Anna's father in a previous scene. Yet rather than asserting direct causality, the line asserts an affective connection. The simultaneous structure of *Anatomy* frustrates the etiology behind the idea of retrospective action; the past suffuses the present, unsettling attempts to contain it in linear structures.

Moreover, Carol, Anna and Bonnie's lived experiences do not fit the teleological narratives of how women's lives are expected to be. The child Daisy tells Carol at a party, 'Maybe you should get a job and have a baby. / . / Something to live for' (43). When Carol replies 'I think you're supposed to live for yourself', Daisy retorts, 'Not if you can't. Not if you're a shell of a person. / That's another thing my Mum says about you' (43). Daisy bluntly articulates the shocking assumption that women who cannot or will not fit the expected narratives of life and behaviour are somehow not fully human but 'a shell of a person'. Susan Bordo suggests 'the psychopathologies that develop within a culture, far from being anomalies or aberrations, […are] characteristic expressions of that culture; […are] indeed, the crystallization of much that is wrong with it'.[149] In this vein, Carol's mental illness and suicide can be read politically, as a response to the constricting pressures upon women in the 1970s; it seems telling that Carol cooked for John before her suicide attempt and in the

[149] Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 141.

first scene she pleads, 'can we go home and I'll dry the floor and I'll cook your tea' (4). In representing the expectations upon women as oppressive, Birch complicates Harpin's idea that realism 'is unavoidably tethered to ideological systems of understanding about normal, familiar categories of behaviour'; Carol, Anna and Bonnie are not entirely legible by these standards.[150]

'A shell of a person': Character in performance

There is another way of interpreting the image of 'a shell of a person': resembling a person on the outside but hollow within, lacking the expected psychological depth. Or, rather, the naturalistic tools for inferring psychological depth from reading surface appearance have been broken, as in *Ophelias Zimmer*. Similarly to the earlier play, the central female characters of *Anatomy* still have the 'personality' element of character. However, they lack self-knowledge and are frustratingly resistant to other people's explanations of them as well. Several reviewers were frustrated by an inscrutability about the characters in the writing and performances of *Anatomy of a Suicide*. Sarah Crompton writes '[Adelle] Leonce as Bonnie, in particular, is given very little explanation or opportunity for character development and has to convey her fears within a very narrow compass. That she does so excellently doesn't quite justify how little we are allowed to understand her'.[151] Crompton's resentment at not being 'allowed' to 'understand' the character of Bonnie suggests an expectation, when watching, particularly naturalist, drama, that female characters should be comprehensible to the audience. Hattie Morahan, the actor who played Carol, was aware of the challenge of representing 'someone who's very contained and internally

[150] Harpin, p. 196.
[151] Crompton, 'Review: *Anatomy of a Suicide*'.

there's this absolute dead weight of sorrow and pain and anxiety', questioning, 'how can you make that read on a stage, how can you make it dynamic and interesting to watch?'[152] She notes 'depression's quite a pretty tricky thing to kind of communicate onstage, without it just looking like there's someone who's really morose'. She wonders, 'what to do to make the struggle legible?', an apt question for Birch and Mitchell's work more generally.[153]

The four-week rehearsal period granted by the Royal Court for *Anatomy of a Suicide* (when Mitchell prefers to rehearse over longer periods), combined with the technical demands of staging three plays at once, resulted in a unique rehearsal process.[154] In interviews I conducted with Morahan and Kate O'Flynn, who played Anna, both said that where they were expecting a more psychologically focused process, the majority of rehearsal time was dedicated to the technical logistics of scene transitions. Morahan recounts that when she worked with Mitchell previously on *Iphigenia in Aulis* (National Theatre, 2004), *The Seagull* (National Theatre, 2006), Martin Crimp's *The City* (Royal Court Theatre, 2008), 'One would spend a lot of time in rehearsal working through relationship history, improvising, […] doing research, working out what you're playing moment by moment. And we did a certain amount of that in *Anatomy of a Suicide* but it was just very reduced'.[155] Rather than working on character biographies collectively with the actors, Mitchell handed out character biographies she had created with Alice Birch at the start of rehearsals, which filled in the characters' lives until the start of the play. Birch was also on hand in rehearsal to answer questions, particularly about what was happening in the

[152] Hattie Morahan, interview with Hannah Greenstreet (Telephone, 5 July 2018).
[153] Ibid.
[154] Mitchell says that the ideal rehearsal period for a play is between six and eight weeks. Mitchell, *The Director's Craft*, p. 116.
[155] Morahan and Greenstreet interview.

characters' lives in the gaps between scenes and their mental states within each scene.[156] Morahan recalls Mitchell saying 'most of the kind of acting stuff, working on what your character's intentions are or backstory we shall do, but it's going to be pretty swiftly done and a lot's going to have to be in your own time'.[157]

Despite the reduced space for actors to explore their characters psychologically in rehearsals, Morahan's description of how she approached the part of Carol chimes with naturalist approaches to character: 'you get a text and from that you draw clues and from that you start to make decisions which seem to support the text to help you to find a through line'.[158] However, she says her ability to find this through line was challenged by the discontinuities of the structure of *Anatomy of a Suicide*, which felt like 'often quite random snapshots' into Carol's life.[159] The key to playing Carol, she says, was to 'plot and discover […] the mental health journey and grade that': 'in this scene, how bad is it? Is this a good day? Is this a bad day. […] And so one had to sort of just try and fathom those things. But at the end of the day […] you've just got to focus on playing the scenes'.[160] Her choice of the word 'fathom' suggests that there might be an unfathomability about Carol's mental state. Moreover, Morahan's 'fathom[ing]' of Carol is a separate process from the audience's attempts to fathom Carol. What is notable about Mitchell's process of staging *Anatomy* is that the rigorous psychological naturalist approach to the characters has occurred but is not necessarily visible to the audience.[161] While the actors may have filled in the gaps and

[156] Kate O'Flynn, interview with Hannah Greenstreet (Telephone, 25 May 2018).
[157] Morahan and Greenstreet interview.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Ibid.
[160] Ibid.
[161] In her interview with Stephens, Alice Birch said that Katie Mitchell's normal approach to excavating the backstory of the characters was all done before the start of rehearsals: 'so day one, well the no, the first week, she delivered everyone their bios, based on those famous 500 questions [about the characters' lives] you get with her'. She comments that in the last week before the performance when the actors were unsure that they

discontinuities in the lives of the characters by studying their backstories, the absences in the playscript remain unfilled.

O'Flynn describes a slightly different approach to her character, although she also worked with Birch to build a through line for Anna. She comments, 'Alice's writing is so good for an actor, it's so psychologically very specific, each character is very individual and has an individual speech pattern, you could just go on instinct really, and you didn't have time to overthink because you were thinking so much about where your cue's coming'.[162] What O'Flynn seems to be (perhaps modestly) describing is letting the writing do the main work of characterisation, or at least being heavily guided by the writing (like Morahan saying 'you've just got to focus on playing the scenes'). In some ways this recalls Billie Whitelaw's approach to playing Beckett's characters: accessing the emotional state of the character by performing the musicality of the piece in precise rhythm. O'Flynn also found the technical focus of rehearsals enabling, as it 'took the pressure off trying to get there emotionally because you just had to make that happen without delving. You had to get on with it, which I think with that type of material is useful'.[163] In contrast, Morahan found the technical demands of this way of working made it more difficult 'to fully inhabit' Carol's state of mind when she is very depressed, 'while also trying to play to a rhythm and listening for other cues', as 'your mind was working on all sorts of funny levels trying to achieve it' and 'there remained a lot of thinking'.[164] Both Morahan and O'Flynn seem to be describing a kind of double consciousness when playing their parts, at once trying to 'inhabit' their characters' minds and being aware of themselves as actors playing a part, listening for cues. This double

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could perform the play 'that backstory and all the events between scenes and stuff that we'd gone through in the first week was totally essential. […] a huge amount of work went into it'. Stephens, *Playwrights' Podcast*.

[162] O'Flynn and Greenstreet interview.

[163] Ibid.

[164] Morahan and Greenstreet interview.

consciousness is present, to some extent, in most acting but the experience seems particularly acute in *Anatomy* due to the intricate overlapping of the dialogue. The actors are not able to lose themselves in the characters, as might be the expected goal of naturalist acting. Morahan seems to suggest that she would have liked to fully inhabit Carol's mental state but could not.

The barriers to total immersion in the world of the play for both actors and audience are twin effects of the structure of *Anatomy of a Suicide* and its refusal of narrative diagnosis and closure. Kate O'Flynn recalls that they rehearsed the three plays simultaneously throughout, as 'there was no way of picking apart and rehearsing one scene of one play because […] I was taking my cue to speak from an unrelated bit of dialogue from another play. So we didn't actually rehearse in the normal way'.[165] The cues were so dense in some sections that composer Paul Clark composed a score for them to be spoken in rhythm.[166] Morahan was also highly aware of the intricate ensemble nature of the play, although she found the technical implications of this a challenge: 'you could just never let go of the […] technical strictures […] if one person had thought, "I'm just going to go off and take my own rhythm of this bit," it would have ruined it for like nine other people'.[167] The actors are required to balance (or even, at points, subordinate) the journeys of their individual characters to the needs of the ensemble. Indeed, Kate O'Flynn says, not having been able to watch *Anatomy*, 'I don't know what the piece was totally': 'Because I only know my story but the impact of the play, I'd like to know what it feels like to watch three things happening at the same time and what that does, and I don't/ can't really answer that

[165] O'Flynn and Greenstreet interview.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Morahan and Greenstreet interview.

because I don't know'.[168] To get the full effect of the play, she suggests, you have to watch the three stories simultaneously. Whilst the actors may know more about their characters than the audience through excavating their backstories, it is the audience that knows more about the characters by seeing them in relation to the other characters and storylines.

Thus, although several naturalist family dramas, such as Ibsen's *Ghosts* (1882) and Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (written 1941-42), construct characters, in part, through their relationships with other characters, *Anatomy of a Suicide* takes this much further: Anna and Bonnie's identities are inextricable from their mothers' – they cannot be staged without them or, indeed, after them. Rather than reading a character's trajectory linearly, the play demands that you read across time and space. This might be what caused Matt Trueman to observe, in his review, 'All three [central characters] feel emblematic, rather than idiosyncratic individuals, and it can feel like Birch's thesis [of inherited suicide] is leading her play', suggesting that 'a play works entirely through patterns' can feel too 'schematic', 'the causal chain too certain to ring true'.[169] As I have argued earlier, I am unconvinced that Birch's play has a thesis of inherited suicide; the causal chain that Trueman infers from the patterns is his act of interpretation. Yet Trueman is insightful in detecting an 'emblematic quality' to the production – less in the sense of a type, as Trueman means it, more in the sense of an object serving as a symbolic representation of an abstract quality. This is particularly visible in Sarah Blenkinsop's costume design, which dresses Carol in red, Anna in blue and Bonnie in white. Once the association of a character with a colour has been established, it can serve as another means

[168] O'Flynn and Greenstreet interview.
[169] Matt Trueman, 'London Theater Review: Anatomy of a Suicide', *Variety*, 8 June 2017. <variety.com/2017/legit/reviews/anatomy-of-a-suicide-review-royal-court-1202464426/> [accessed 17 May 2018].

of asserting a visual and asynchronous connection between the characters. Bonnie wears a red stethoscope with her white doctor's scrubs and, in the final scene, a blue dress, symbolically close to her mother. Describing Carol, Anna and Bonnie as 'emblematic' does not mean that they are not psychologically specific, but that their resistance to legibility makes them seem superficial; they seem 'a shell of a person' because they do not fully understand themselves and cannot be fully understood. Mitchell's direction and Birch's writing allows the audience to engage with the characters emotionally to a certain point but also, by denying complete access to the characters' minds and feelings, encourages the audience to conceive of the characters structurally as well as psychologically. Not being able to identify with the characters as real people encourages the audience to read the play spatially as well as temporally, across as well as down, as the reader of the play must.

Spatial character: Scenography

The scenography of *Anatomy of a Suicide* plays an important part in creating character, although in a rather different way from Chloe Lamford's extremely detailed design for *Ophelias Zimmer*. Designer Alex Eales said that the practicalities of designing for *Anatomy of a Suicide*, which has almost sixty scene changes and multiple short scenes set in many different locations and time periods, meant that he needed to conceive of the design more abstractly. He therefore designed a 'holding container for the three timelines': 'a concrete box' (see Fig. 5).[170] The grey walls and fluorescent lighting strips of Eales's design make it feel institutional, suggesting a hospital or a psychiatric ward, with hints of his design for Mitchell's 2016 production of *Cleansed* by Sarah Kane at the National Theatre. Period-specific furniture, such as tables and chairs, a desk, a toilet, which is moved onstage as

[170] Eales, 'Considerations for Designing Realism'.

required, helps ground specific scenes in material reality. Yet the 'holding container' of the grey walls also creates a sense of rootlessness; there is no point scouring the environment for clues about the characters, as the grey walls give no purchase for that naturalist mode of projection. Instead, the dingy grey walls summon a depressive state of mind and the seven doors paradoxically create a sense of entrapment, which are both, to some extent, affectively transferred to the audience. Splitting the stage into three, one segment for each play, is also claustrophobic, drastically reducing the playing space and what the characters can do in it.

Figure 5. The production photograph, depicting Alex Eales's grey set with 7 doors, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The photograph was sourced at www.alexeales.co.uk/portfolio_page/anatomy-of-a-suicide/ [accessed 18 January 2019].

In rehearsals, Eales said that they discussed the house that Carol buys and Anna and Bonnie inherit as a 'character' in the play.[171] Although the house is the most important place

[171] Ibid.

in the play and the setting for many of the scenes, it is not represented visually until the final scene. It is an imagined space, created from verbal details dropped by the characters of 'fruit trees' and fields around it (102). This withholding of visual representation heightens the psychological significance with which the house is imbued by the characters. The house is particularly important to Bonnie's sense of herself; having been asked to sell the house by her father, she starts spending more and more time in it. In scene 10C 'Dinner', Bonnie's on-off girlfriend Jo turns up uninvited at the house, imploring 'I want to be in your life' (169). Bonnie responds angrily:

Bonnie	Okay. Okay. My Life. You want to be In my life. Here. Fine. Here's where I was born. Right there. Apparently. They thought they had plenty of time and then out I fucking shot.
Jo	.
Bonnie	This is the sort of thing you meant right

(174-75)

Having played Bonnie with an almost flat affect up until this point, Adelle Leonce delivered this speech as an angry, desperate outburst, suggesting intense emotional pain burning beneath the surface of Bonnie's usually cool, or even cold, exterior. Bonnie's response to Jo suggests the violence in Jo's attempt at intimacy, of asking herself to explain herself in this way (narratively). Bonnie's life narrative starts chronologically with her birth but it is rendered unexpected by the lack of sentimentality of Bonnie's phrasing 'then out I fucking shot'. The other beats in her life narrative are less expected. Bonnie tells Jo, 'And here – you can't see it now but there are plum trees and cherry trees out there by a barn that don't

really flower anymore, but my Grandmother loved them – it's what made her buy the house. Apparently' (175). Talking about Carol's love of the trees is not chronological and is something Bonnie could never have known herself, as Carol died before she was born. Rather than operating chronologically, Bonnie's sense of herself functions deictically. It is grounded in place: 'Here's where I was born./ Right there'; the psychologically significant place of the inherited house keeps alive multiple times in the present, memories inhering in the walls.

Bonnie, perhaps giving Jo what she thinks she wants to hear, presents the trauma of her mother's suicide as the key to her life:

Bonnie	And here – and now's the good stuff, now's the really intimate stuff – Here – Right above our Fucking heads, you could not get more of me now – directly above where you are standing is where my Mother died.
Jo	Bonnie
Bonnie	Whilst I slept. Apparently
Jo	Bonnie
Bonnie	I say Apparently because I don't have Access to this – this is all stuff I have Wrestled to be Told because it causes Immense and Profound fucking Pain and my being here, my choosing to Be here is really quite fucking Personal and Difficult and Complicated Actually and not something I have comprehensively dealt with and can package up and feed to you

(176-177)

With her sarcastic lines 'now's the good stuff, now's the really intimate stuff', Bonnie casts Jo as prurient, demanding too much information about her for selfish reasons, which could also be an implicit censure to the audience. This scene is the first mention of Anna's death in the play and, although the audience may assume it is suicide, Bonnie does not specifically identify it as such. While Anna's suicide might be presented as the key to Bonnie's life if this

were a certain kind of naturalist play, it does not fully explain Bonnie in *Anatomy of a Suicide*. There is a parallel here in the repetition of the word 'apparently' and the concept of 'access'. On one level, 'access' could be read as psychological access; Bonnie has repressed these painful memories. However, it is more access in the physical or practical sense; later in the play when Anna's suicide is staged, a baby representing Bonnie is onstage for the beginning of the scene. She cannot remember her mother's suicide, so she has had to ask people, presumably her father, about it, causing both them and her 'Immense and Profound fucking Pain'. She has had to construct her identity around what people have told her about herself and her mother, and by gaining access to the physical space in which her mother grew up and she was born. When Anna moves back into her mother's house with Jamie, she says 'She's just right here in a way that she hasn't been since. / . / Jamie, I can Smell her. / I can Feel her. / She's sitting at the table she's' (135). Being in the house with the tangible memories and presence of her mother provides a less intrusive form of 'access' to self than the 'access' that is gained through questioning that demands the characters justify and provide explanations of themselves.

While Bonnie has struggled to get access to memories of her mother, the audience has been granted privileged access through the simultaneous structure of the play – we know more about Bonnie than she does herself because we have seen all the moments she describes and more. In scene 10, the simultaneous structure of the play reinforces Bonnie's account of herself by representing some of the moments she describes. In the parallel B scene, Anna is in labour. In the A scene, Carol rocks the child Anna on her knee, singing her a song. 'And here is where my/ Grandmother sat and held my/ Mother. Apparently' (178), Bonnie tells Jo before she tells her to get out. This scene is one of the closest moments of connection between the three plays. Carol, Anna, Bonnie, and child Anna (and, as an

imaginative projection into the future, baby Bonnie) are not only sharing physical stage space, they are also sharing the imaginative space by all being in the house/ garden that Carol bought. The house provides a deictic locus of memory – the force of the place disrupts the linear chronology of narrative by asserting that all these things are simultaneously present. Not only does Bonnie keep returning to the house in the hope of gaining access to herself, the audience gains a sense of the characters not so much through what they say about themselves but how they share the metaphoric and stage space.

In the long scene transition before the final scene, the now dead Carol and Anna walk slowly across the stage, opening up the space. They brush past Bonnie and she feels their presence. The back wall of the set lifts, revealing a large staircase and magnolia painted walls (Fig. 6). The room is filled with light. The house has been behind there all along, the naturalistic set ghosting the psychological, expressionist one. In a sense the revelation of the house acts as a kind of proof, grounding the play in a reality that is material, whereas previously the experiences of the characters lacked external referents in the set. The final stage direction reads '*The light changes. Just a little*' (237), suggesting a subtle shift in Bonnie's psychological state with the lifting of the grey walls. She is finally selling the house, perhaps suggesting that she might be ready to begin to move on from the cycle of traumatic repetition, from obsessively returning to the place of the memory of her mother and grandmother.

Figure 6. The production photograph, depicting two actors in a light and open room in the last scene of the play, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The photograph was sourced at www.alexeales.co.uk/portfolio_page/anatomy-of-a-suicide/ [accessed 18 January 2019].

No future: Refusing narrative closure

'I need to know that I am where it ends' (234), Bonnie tells the doctor Diane in the penultimate scene, when she requests sterilisation. She explains:

Bonnie It's not even that I would feel better, steadier, happier, able to somehow engage with my life continuing – which I would but I have to know – biologically, completely, with absolute certainty that I am where it ends.

That there is no further line.

.

That it goes no further, no deeper, no longer.
That it finishes here.

Diane Bonnie

Bonnie Please.

.

.

(234-35)

The vehemence and even violence of Bonnie's insistence upon ending the familial line, against the threat of a cycle of endless violent repetition, recalls W. B. Yeats's play *Purgatory* (1938), in which an Old Man returns to his childhood home and kills his son in an attempt to stop his mother's ghost from replaying his own conception, as he grew up to murder his father (which, in turn, recalls Sophocles' *Oedipus*). The Old Man declares 'That finishes – there – there – there' as he stabs his son, explaining, 'I killed that lad because had he grown up / He would have struck a woman's fancy, / Begot, and passed pollution on'.[172] Although *Anatomy* represents women and childbirth far more positively than *Purgatory,* to Bonnie the possibility of having a child would be to pass 'it' on (whether 'it' is mental illness, suicidal ideation, or the family curse). Bonnie's speech is a dense nexus of verbal repetitions from earlier in the play, suggesting the inevitability of repetition. 'Steadier' and 'happier' have become loaded words, representing the fragility of the mental health of Bonnie's mother and grandmother: Carol is asked by Daisy 'Are you happy?' (31) and John asks 'Is today happy?' (23); child Anna is asked by Carol 'Do you feel steady?' and she replies, 'Steady is boring Mummy' (211); adult Anna tells her father in a parallel scene that 'She [Carol] didn't want me to be steady' (212). As well as suggesting a familial line, 'No further line' picks up on the line and fish hook imagery used by both Carol and Anna: Carol says of child Anna, 'She's a line she's a fish hook round/ my middle pulling me up when I / want to be Under.' (158); Anna ominously says 'Hook's gone/ Line's gone/ Down' (232) in the monologue before she commits suicide, suggesting an untethering.

[172] W. B. Yeats, *Two Late Plays: The Words Upon the Window-pane/ Purgatory* (Co. Clare: Clare Press, 2016), p. 31.

Bonnie's request for sterilisation is presented by Diane as extreme; it is 'an Enormous decision' (234). It is structurally equivalent in Bonnie's character arc to her mother and her grandmother's suicides and is played in parallel with Anna's onstage suicide. In *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005), Jack Halberstam develops the concept of 'queer time' as 'the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing', defining it as referring to 'those specific models of temporality that emerge within postmodernism once one leaves the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance'.[173] Halberstam argues, 'in Western cultures […] we create longevity as the most desirable future, applaud the pursuit of long life (under any circumstances), and pathologise modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity', such as drug addiction.[174] The suicides and elective sterilisation of *Anatomy's* central female characters would also seem to fit the mould of 'modes of living that show little or no concern for longevity' and depart from norms of respectable behaviour for women, and are therefore pathologised as a result. Perhaps, then, Birch's experiment with theatrical form and structure in *Anatomy of a Suicide* can be seen as a deployment of queer time, particularly because of Bonnie's sexual orientation. This would make the repetition that occurs in *Anatomy of a Suicide* not just a result of trauma but also a more radical challenge to social and structural norms.

Indeed, thinking of *Anatomy* as a wider challenge to, for example, norms of the structure of the family, illuminates that the repetition of words, actions and images in the play occurs not just between characters who are related but also between characters far more loosely connected in time and space, for example the recurring estate agents and

[173] J. Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), pp. 14, 20.
[174] Ibid., p. 17.

doctors. The play as a whole, and Bonnie in particular, are haunted by the figure of a recurring child, played, in Mitchell's production, by the same teenage actor who plays young Anna. Even though the child Daisy in scene 3A 'Balloons' and the Child in scene 5C 'Balloons' are in different time periods, they have uncannily similar encounters with Carol and Bonnie. From their speech patterns, apart from the period specific slang, they seem like the same character. Both ask direct, blunt (even rude) questions and both try to get a reaction out of the adult woman by asking to do something they know they are not allowed to do: Daisy asking Carol for a cigarette and Child asking Bonnie for some MDMA. Neither Carol nor Bonnie react to the requests as might be expected – they do not attempt to protect the child: Carol watches Daisy smoke a cigarette; Bonnie does not intervene to stop the Child drinking. Bonnie and Carol do not fulfil patriarchal expectations of how a woman should behave in terms of maternal instincts. Perhaps more significantly, that unrelated children repeat each other might suggest an alternative explanation for the repetition in *Anatomy of a Suicide* than family curse or inherited suicide, complicating both the linear progression of time and the impression of causality. The pattern of repetition is more intricate and complex than first appears, far more so than Oswald's unconscious re-enactment of his father's degeneracy in Ibsen's *Ghosts*. Although repetition is used differently in *Ophelias Zimmer*, in which the same character repeats the same routine many times, and *Anatomy of a Suicide*, in which characters unconsciously echo each other, in both productions, repetition has a similarly disruptive effect upon linear dramaturgical structures.

There is a paradox at the end of Anatomy; it reaches a temporal impasse. On the one hand, Bonnie is desperate to break the cycle of traumatic repetition by being sterilised; she calls for closure. However, the play as a whole has resisted narrative closure because it is connected with diagnosis, linearity, a closing down of possibility. From the ending of the

play, it is unclear whether Bonnie will be sterilised. There is a risk of reading the revelation of the house and the change in lighting state too teleologically, as signifying Bonnie's recovery. Bonnie's more hopeful storyline does not somehow redeem the others. Moreover, there are limits to the application of Halberstam's theory of queer time to *Anatomy of a Suicide*, which, aside from Bonnie's sexuality, does not seem a particularly queer play in terms of subject matter. The ending of *Anatomy* suggests three possible interpretations, none quite right on their own but resonating with shades of each: Bonnie's request for sterilisation suggesting a defiant, queer assertion of no future, an emphatic ending; the change in lighting state and sale of the house suggesting Bonnie's recovery and return to the functional naturalist play she should have been in all along, now she has moved on; the lack of resolution suggesting the inevitable purgatorial repetition of the cycle continuing. The coexistence of conflicting time schemes (or, perhaps, visions of time – time as a line and time as a circle) at the end of the play holds the three interpretations together, refusing to close it down to one. Ultimately, *Anatomy of a Suicide* accommodates those whose lives are not usually legible within established, normative structures.

Conclusion: Political Depression?

In an interview with Katie Mitchell, Maddy Costa recounts Mitchell's daughter's objection to some of her work: 'Why do the women in some of your stories kill themselves? Can't they go forward and do something positive in the world?', echoing the political critique several have made of her work.[175] The choice to have the characters commit suicide is seen as

[175] Costa, 'Alternative point of view'. In contrast, Ben Fowler argues that in 'foreground[ing] (female) acts of vanishing', 'Mitchell's [work] is a hauntology which, in its reproach of late capitalist "timelessness", defiantly contests its losses and amnesias, particularly those produced by problematic forms of neoliberal feminism' that suggest that patriarchal oppression is in the past. Ben Fowler, 'The Meaning of Peeling Paint (Notes on a Mitchell Mise-en-Scène)', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 30.2 (2020), 151-167 (p. 153).

politically quietist or conforming to so-called patriarchal structures of dramatic inevitability. In *Depression: A Public Feeling*, which is part academic study, part memoir, Ann Cvetkovich argues for 'political depression': 'Rather than seeing negative feelings of failure, mourning, despair, and shame as getting in the way of politics or needing to be converted to something more active in order to become politics, such work attends to felt experience as not only already political but as transforming our understandings of what counts as political'.[176] From Cvetkovich's perspective, the depressive affectlessness of Ophelia and Carol could be interpreted as political; their suicides, particularly Ophelia's suicide, could even be seen as acts of political resistance to the patriarchal structures that have disempowered them. It is no accident that all Mitchell's characters that die by suicide are female, despite the fact that men are three times more likely than women to die by suicide in the United Kingdom.[177] Their suicides are socially situated – in part, a response to and a protest against the unreasonable expectations placed upon women within patriarchal societies. Elizabeth Robins's observation on *Hedda Gabler*, 'It is perhaps curious Ibsen should have known that a good many women have found it possible to get through life by the help of the knowledge that they have the power to end it rather than accept certain slaveries', published in her memoirs in 1932, is also a peculiarly apt description of Mitchell's plays.[178] Yet, while Cvetkovich's theory is a salutary expansion of the acts that count as political expression, particularly for women who have historically been denied agency to act

[176] Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 110.
[177] 'Suicide: Facts and Figures', *The Samaritans*, 2018. <www.samaritans.org/about-us/our-research/facts-and-figures-about-suicide> [accessed 18 January 2019].
[178] Elizabeth Robins, *Ibsen and the Actress* (London: Leonard and Virginia Woolf, 1932), p. 30. In her review of *Anatomy of a Suicide*, Megan Vaughan writes, 'I remember *The Children*, on this stage, just months ago. I remember thinking then that I was surprised more women don't commit suicide', unconsciously echoing Elizabeth Robins. Megan Vaughan, 'Anatomy of a Suicide', *Synonyms for Churlish*, 6 July 2017. <synonymsforchurlish.com/anatomy-of-a-suicide-74a178fe658b> [accessed 18 January 2019].

politically in the public sphere, I am uncomfortable with a theory of politics that ascribes political resistance to acts of self-harm or even depends upon female self-harm for political resistance. The private nature of Carol and Anna's suicides and their refusal to give reasons makes them seem different from more direct acts of political protest.

Instead, the resistant politics of *Anatomy of a Suicide* and *Ophelias Zimmer* lie in their exposure of the structures of patriarchal oppression. Katie Mitchell responds to her daughter's political critique as follows: 'To show the effects of patriarchy, to some extent you have to show what happens to women who are oppressed. […] I show the effects on women inside patriarchal structures, their attempt to cope with them and fight them, but I don't offer alternative structures'.[179] The form of Birch's play and Mitchell's production of *Anatomy of a Suicide* demand that suicide, in relation to three women's lives, is viewed structurally rather than individually. Naturalistic performances and costume give insight into social and political conditions in which these women live but there are also barriers to too much identification, to getting lost in the play or in the women's heads.[180] That is one reason why the play has been criticised by some for being intellectual, emblematic, superficial. Yet to say that *Anatomy* is concerned with surface rather than depth is not to say that it is a bad play; or, rather, it is only a bad play if one unquestioningly subscribes to

[179] Costa, 'Alternative point of view'.

[180] My response to watching *Anatomy of a Suicide* at the Royal Court was primarily intellectual. However, others, particularly young female viewers, have described having extremely emotional responses to the play, drawing on their own experiences of mental ill health, their relationship with their mothers and their experiences of being a woman, in their writing about it, which prioritises the subjective. See Eve Allin, 'anatomy of a suicide', *Walking with Headphones*, 6 July 2017. <walkingwithheadphones.wordpress.com/2017/07/06/anatomy-of-a-suicide/> [accessed 18 January 2019]. Ava Wong Davies, 'Voices and Echoes in Anatomy of a Suicide', *ava talks about theatre*, 2 August 2017. <web.archive.org/web/20180131202305/https://avatalksabouttheatre.wordpress.com/2017/08/02/voices-and-echoes-in-anatomy-of-a-suicide/> [accessed 18 January 2019; original blog no longer publicly available]. Emily Davis, 'Anatomy of a Suicide (Response Response)'. *The Singing Bookshelf*. 7 August 2017. <thesingingbookshelf.wordpress.com/2017/08/07/anatomy-of-a-suicide-response-response/> [accessed 18 January 2019].

the naturalist convention that central female characters should prove their psychological depth by confessing their darkest secrets. The word 'anatomy' suggests an anatomical drawing, only peeling back one layer of the skin but not penetrating what is beneath.

This refusal to let the audience penetrate the characters' heads in *Anatomy of a Suicide* and *Ophelias Zimmer* is also a political choice. The frustration of the expectation of psychological depth reveals it to be a fundamental, unquestioned assumption of naturalism. The defamiliarisation thereby makes one question how naturalism has traditionally represented women's psyches as legible and how that representation has often depended upon a power imbalance between audience and the actor, by which the audience is expected to scrutinise the actor's body for clues about the character's mental state. Indeed, *Anatomy of a Suicide* could be seen as a dissection of naturalism's dependence upon the figure of the mentally ill woman. This is an analogous investigation to the dissection of *Hamlet* that takes place in *Ophelias Zimmer*, which asks, according to its programme note, 'whether there isn't something toxic and deeply misogynist being dragged through history on the coat tails of heroes, like Hamlet, Romeo and Macbeth, something that may still be influencing our own modern day gender relationships'; it investigates not just the marginalisation of female characters within Western theatre history, but also the wider attitudes of toxic masculinity the male characters of these plays espouse, which have violently impacted upon women beyond the theatre.[181] The programme note of *Ophelias Zimmer* is not exactly saying that Western's theatre's cultural fascination with Hamlet directly results in toxic masculinity, but rather, by putting the two ideas alongside each other, they ask the audience to make connections between the two. In their deployment of

[181] 'Ophelia's Room', Schaubühne.

a version of naturalism in *Anatomy of a Suicide*, but a naturalism that is superficial, off-kilter, unrooted, haunted, Birch and Mitchell demonstrate that naturalism does not have to utilise such unbalanced gender politics; they are not intrinsic to naturalism as a form. They cleanse naturalism, so to speak, of its association with compromised gender politics by deploying those very associations.

There is, of course, a risk that a play that aims to show the effects of patriarchy accidentally replicates them. This criticism could be levelled at Mitchell and Birch's adaptation of Marguerite Duras's novella *La Maladie de la mort* (*Malady of Death*, Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord, January 2018).[182] In the adaptation, a female sex worker is employed by a man, who seems to take no pleasure in anything, to spend a number of nights with him in a hotel to teach him 'how to love'.[183] A camera crew, whose presence is not acknowledged in the fictive world of the play, film their often pornographic scenes together, which are projected live in greyscale onto a large screen above them. The screen also shows pre-recorded footage of the sea, scenes from the Woman's past, and scenes from her life outside the blankness of the hotel room. In a Foley booth downstage, another actor (Irène Jacob) reads a voiceover of the narrative, the Man referred to in the second person, the Woman in third person (though somehow the narrative seems more focalised through the Woman's perspective). *Maladie* takes the opacity of its female character, the affectlessness and detached performance style and even the excruciatingly unflinching naturalism of *Anatomy of a Suicide* and particularly *Ophelias Zimmer* even further. However, while Mitchell suggests in the interview with Maddy Costa that the production intends to

[182] The production toured to the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh as part of Edinburgh International Festival in August 2018, where I saw it, and the Barbican, London in October 2018. In the United Kingdom, the production was performed in French, with English surtitles.
[183] The quotation is from the surtitles.

challenge the male gaze, it often replicates it.[184] For example the Man uses his phone camera to zoom in on different parts of the woman's body, the body parts, dissected by the close up, projected onto the screen.[185] The actor playing Woman barely speaks and is expected by Man to submit to his fantasies. Nonetheless, there is a sense through the voiceover that the Woman, unlike the Man, has an interior life. It is the Man who is trapped in the hotel room in *Maladie*, whereas the Woman is able to come and go, in contrast with the entrapment of Ophelia in *Ophelias Zimmer*. In the corridor outside the hotel room, which is also filmed and projected onscreen, we watch the woman prepare to enter the hotel room, taking off her trainers and putting on high heels. She puts on makeup, putting on concealer to cover the shadows under her eyes. Once she even gnaws on a chicken leg as a hurried dinner. From her mundane activities outside the room in the corridor and in the pre-filmed sections, there is a sense that Woman exists as a real woman, not just the man's fantasy. The tension between cinematic and theatrical naturalisms in *Maladie* allows Mitchell to reveal the construction of the character and image of Woman as a fantasy in two different media, the presence of the cameras in the hotel room detracting from the illusion of a naturalist play, the presence of the actors distracting from absorption in the screen.

Several reviews of *Maladie* dubbed it 'clinical' or 'intellectual'. In her review for *The Guardian*, Kate Wyver called the production a 'clinical unpicking of intimacy through dissociation', 'numb by design'.[186] She criticises the characters Woman and Man for being types, observing that Woman is 'utterly opaque' to Man.[187] Natasha Tripney observes in her

[184] Maddy Costa, 'Alternative point of view'.
[185] The woman does also use the camera to photograph the man when he is asleep, zooming in on unflattering close ups of his body parts with her camera phone.
[186] Kate Wyver, 'La Maladie de la Mort review – clinical dissection of the male gaze', *The Guardian*, 17 August 2018. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/aug/17/la-maladie-de-la-mort-review-lyceum-edinburgh-festival> [accessed 14 January 2019].
[187] Ibid.

review for *The Stage*, 'A sense of emotional disconnection is built into the production. […] The lens catches everything. It is merciless, intimate, and clinical'.[188] She concludes, 'The form of Mitchell's production, the way it plays with the gaze, resisting and embracing it, is potent and hypnotic yet also numbing and frustrating: it feels at times as if Mitchell has created an immaculately engineered refrigerator'.[189] The technical skill of the production, the immaculately choreographed movements of the cameras and the painstaking construction of the stage and screen images, Tripney suggests, architect emotional disconnection between the characters and in the audience response. *La Maladie de la mort* builds on the themes explored and techniques deployed in Mitchell's collaborations with Birch in *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide*, each resulting in a production even more affectless than the last. What made *Maladie* so frustrating to watch, for me, is that the audience is not allowed to penetrate beyond the visual, not allowed to empathise with the characters, only allowed to pick up scraps of Man and Woman's backstories, their affectless playing styles resisting speculation about their missing inner lives. While the impermeable nature of the surface of *Maladie* may be a political choice, the lack of access to the characters on a level beyond the physical puts the audience in a complicated, or even compromised, interpretative position. Does *Maladie* disempower the audience so much by removing the possibility of empathy and the majority of narrative causality that it actually has the opposite effect on the power dynamic: the clothed audience watching the naked performers for gratification? Yet perhaps the intense discomfort I felt at watching *Malady* was the intended audience affect. As Solga suggested in her analysis of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *La*

[188] Natasha Tripney, 'La Maladie de la Mort review at Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh – "hypnotic, numbing and technically audacious", *The Stage*, 20 August 2018. <www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2018/la-maladie-de-la-mort-review-royal-lyceum-theatre-edinburgh-hypnotic-numbing-technically-audacious/> [accessed 14 January 2019].
[189] Ibid.

Maladie de la Mort generates an affective rather than empathetic response: an intellectual horror at my complicity as an audience member in the unequal power structures of film and theatre due to the male gaze.

As Katie Mitchell says, *Maladie*, like *Anatomy of a Suicide* and *Ophelias Zimmer* does not 'offer solutions' to the structural problems of patriarchy it reveals.[190] Whether one believes these plays to be feminist depends upon whether one believes there is an efficacy in pessimistic politics, or whether one is committed to utopian feminist thought. In the same interview with Costa, Alice Birch echoes Mitchell's interest in 'exposing' the effects of patriarchy: 'When I sit down to write, I tend to feel quite hopeless – and galvanised by feeling hopeless'.[191] The ending of Birch's play *Revolt. She said. Revolt again* (2014), which was commissioned as a response to the provocation 'well-behaved women seldom make history' as part of a season of four plays by female playwrights at the Royal Shakespeare Company's Other Place, captures this mixed feeling of galvanising hopelessness.[192] After the chaos of Act 3, entitled 'Galvanise', which presents a cacophony of overlapping lines and verbal images representing conflicting messages surrounding gender, four women are left upon the stage. They 'feel ready' for a feminist revolution, promising,

> –We're going to dismantle the monetary system
> […]
> –And overthrow the government
> […]
> –All jobs will be destroyed
> –And all couples broken

[190] Maddy Costa, 'Alternative point of view'.
[191] Ibid.
[192] Birch's play was part of the 2014 'Midsummer Mischief' season, which followed on from the Swan Theatre's 'Roaring Girls' season. 'Midsummer Mischief 2014', *Royal Shakespeare Company* [n.d.]. <www.rsc.org.uk/mischief-festivals/midsummer-mischief-2014> [accessed 18 January 2019]. Erica Whyman's RSC production of *Revolt* then toured to the Traverse, Edinburgh in August 2016, where I saw it. For analysis of the 'Roaring Girls' season and the role of new writing within it, see Peter Kirwan, 'The Roared-at Boys? Repertory casting and gender politics in the RSC's 2014 Swan season', *Shakespeare* 11 (2015), 247-261 and Kate Wilkinson, 'Girls and boys: The Royal Shakespeare Company's 2014 summer season', *Shakespeare* 11 (2015), 241-46.

> […]
> –And we'll eradicate all men.[193]

One of the women turns to another and observes,

> –You sound sad
> –I am sad
> –It won't work if you're sad
> –It won't work if you aren't.
>
> It failed. The whole world failed at it. It could have been so brilliant. How strange of you not to feel sad.
>
> Who knew that life could be so awful.
>
> .[194]

The subject of 'its' failure is unclear. Is 'it' referring to previous manifestations of feminism and the women's movement? Is 'it' referring to the revolution the women are planning, forestalling the possibility of change before it has even started? Or, like the cyclical structure of *Anatomy*, is 'it' suggesting, like the play's title, that revolt must be a continuous process, continually revolting against the prevailing conditions of gender oppression. Whichever interpretation a director chooses to bring out in production, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* ends on a downbeat note: 'Who knew that life could be so awful'. Such an unflinching attitude to the world in all its ugliness seems a fitting reiteration of the philosophy of nineteenth-century naturalists, albeit in an altered form.[195]

[193] Alice Birch, *Revolt. She Said. Revolt Again* (London: Oberon, 2016), p. 74.
[194] Ibid., p. 75. Formatting Birch's.
[195] It accords with Zola's theory and application of naturalism, at least. Henry James declared, 'Zola's naturalism is ugly and dirty, but he seems to be doing something', 2 November 1879, qtd. in Virginia Harlow, *Thomas Sargeant Perry: A Biography* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1950), p. 304.

Chapter 3: 'I want the world to change shape': Form, desire and anti-materialist critique in *The Writer* by Ella Hickson

Introduction

Having explored how Katie Mitchell and Alice Birch experiment within existing structures of naturalism in order to make patriarchal oppression visible, I turn now to *The Writer* by Ella Hickson (Almeida Theatre, London, 2018), which dramatises a search for a form that will allow the female Writer within the play to express herself.[1] The play brings together many of the questions explored in this thesis, cannibalising and chafing against the constraints of existing organisational and aesthetic structures. Hickson sets the director of *The Writer* the challenge of how to represent female sexuality on stage without it being compromised by or co-opted into the male gaze that, Jill Dolan would argue, is the structuring principle of commercial theatre.[2] Crucially, *The Writer* asserts and enacts an intimate relationship between theatrical form and politics. In the first scene, the young female Writer confidently declares to the Director, 'I want the world to change shape'.[3] The Writer's statement is a utopian speech act; the sheer force of the wish is halfway to enacting the change in imagining a different reality. Yet the older male Director answers her with a laugh and an expression of doubt, 'I'm not sure theatre can' (p. 19), if not dismissing her desire for social change then at least questioning whether theatre is an effective tool with which to

[1] To avoid confusion, I will capitalise Writer and Director when referring to characters in Hickson's play.
[2] Jill Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, 2nd edn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2012), p. 1.
[3] Ella Hickson, *The Writer* (London: Nick Hern, 2018), p. 19. References to this edition of the script will be included in the body of the chapter.

accomplish it. The pragmatic crashes against the utopian. In this encounter, two versions and visions of reality collide: the world as it is, the world as it could be.

Despite its utopianism, the Writer's vision of socio-political change as changing the 'shape' of the world is satisfyingly material and structural. 'Shape' also suggests aesthetic form, particularly as the Writer's declaration comes in response to the Director asking what she wants her play to accomplish, establishing an implicit analogy between socio-political structures and aesthetic structures. This resonates with recent moves in neo-formalist criticism towards a more social understanding of literary form, such as Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish and Brandon Woolf's view that form 'encompasses the modes of production, consumption and circulation that give shape to and are shaped by theatre'.[4] This broader conception of theatrical form as inherently social, as well as grounded in the material reality of production, chimes with discussions of theatrical form staged within *The Writer* and the importance of form to the play's politics. As will be shown, form is the meeting point of *The Writer*'s two most powerful strands: desire and anti-materialist critique. Moreover, *The Writer* does not only stage discussions of theatrical form but also theorises its own form through formal experimentation. The play questions whether ideas that are alternative to the status quo require forms that are alternative to the mainstream for their fullest expression, and what shapes those ideas might take. The play also explores the limitations and compromises, as well as the benefits, involved in using established forms and working within existing structures.

Intriguingly, although she had not encountered the work of Elin Diamond or Elaine Aston before I interviewed her, Ella Hickson has come to similar conclusions about the

[4] Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish and Brandon Woolf, 'Introduction', in *Postdramatic Theatre and Form*, ed. by Michael Shane Boyle, Matt Cornish and Brandon Woolf (London: Methuen, 2019), pp. 1-19 (p. 15).

political implications of naturalism as the feminist critique of realism through seeing and writing plays. In her work, she resists 'a received idea of realism that is built on capitalism and therefore patriarchy' (which does not necessarily mean that she resists realism altogether but rather realism as it is conventionally understood).[5] In an article published in the *Guardian* a month before *The Writer* opened at the Almeida in April 2018, Hickson wrote, 'No matter how subversive the conversation, if the form is naturalistic, the argument dialectical and the protagonists – as the genre tends to have them – white, male and middle-aged, then the play is part of the establishment'.[6] Nonetheless, Hickson's critique of conventions of realism is subtler than it might first appear from her statements. In her opposition between 'subversive' content, dialectical form and white male characters (which presumably also limits casting to white male actors, thus reinforcing the underrepresentation of women and people of colour onstage), she seems to be indicting a certain genre of leftist political theatre that has become identified with the establishment through the career success of the leading white male playwrights associated with it, such as David Hare, Howard Brenton and David Edgar.[7] Indeed, such a critique of the combination of aesthetics, political content and production elements suggests that Hickson is conceiving of form in a similar way to Boyle, Cornish and Woolf: form in terms of 'modes of production, consumption and circulation', in addition to 'practices of representation and meaning

[5] Ella Hickson, interview by Hannah Greenstreet (22 March 2019, Oxford). When she says it is 'built on capitalism and therefore patriarchy', it is unclear whether she means the commercial production context or the version of the world represented, or both.

[6] David Hare, Ella Hickson, James Graham, Timberlake Wertenbaker et al., 'The best political plays, from The Crucible to The Jungle – picked by David Hare, James Graham and more', *Guardian*, 15 March 2018. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/mar/15/political-plays-david-hare-james-graham-timberlake-wertenbaker-jack-thorne> [accessed 28 February 2019].

[7] In January 2019, it was observed that David Hare had had 10 plays programmed in the Olivier at the National Theatre; in contrast, only nineteen plays by women had been programmed on that stage until that point. Eleanor Ross, 'British theatre has a problem with women: these playwrights want to solve it', *INews*, 8 January 2019. <inews.co.uk/culture/theatre-women-playwrights-national-170519> [accessed 29 November 2019].

making within the theatre'. Similarly, one of the reasons the feminist critique of realism was so persuasive to many in the 1980s and 90s was because realism was identified as the dominant form in commercial American theatre and on the West End; it was a critique not primarily or not merely of the aesthetics of realism but an ideological critique of the dominant culture it was identified with through synecdoche.[8]

The feminist critique of realism also seems to be a critique of a particular attitude to reality, which is represented by the Director when he says 'I'm not sure theatre can [change the world]'; it seems significant that one of the colloquial uses of being a realist means looking at the world pragmatically or even pessimistically. One of the charges levelled against realism by the feminist critique is that it precludes change in its representation of the world – which is, they suggest, an ideological interpretation reflecting the dominant culture as it is, rather than as it could be. For instance, Janelle Reinelt argues that realist playwrights 'police or reinforce a particular version of reality' as 'they depict reality from the dominant view of the white male and pass it off as universal experience'.[9] Yet the insistent utopian strain in the feminist critique of realism can mean that representations that focus on the limitations of the world as it is currently can be overlooked, along with more complicated, negative affective responses like uncertainty, doubt and self-criticism, as seen in criticism of Birch and Mitchell's work as overly pessimistic. In contrast, in her choice of the phrase 'received idea of realism', Hickson leaves scope for other, alternative realisms, which might look very different from established ones. In focusing on finding forms to express a subjective experience of reality, even if it does not look real by the established standards of realism, Hickson comes to an expanded definition of realism within *The Writer*,

[8] See Dolan, *The Feminist Spectator as Critic* (2012), p. xxxii.
[9] Janelle Reinelt, 'A feminist reconsideration of the Brecht/ Lukács debates', *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* (1994) 7, 122-139 (p. 124).

one that can accommodate the utopian wish to change the shape of the world without forgetting the very real material barriers that stand in the way of the world changing shape.

This chapter will use theatrical form – specifically versions of realism – as a focus to illuminate *The Writer's* treatment of the themes of anti-materialist critique and desire. A description of the production process of Blanche McIntyre's original production of *The Writer* will be followed by an analysis of the affect of ambivalence cultivated through *The Writer's* shifting form. Then I will explore *The Writer's* anti-materialist critique, which exposes the power imbalances that structure the theatre industry and heterosexually organised relationships through their reliance on capitalism. Finally, I turn to the role of desire as at once a utopian and unruly thing embodied through sexual encounters. Taking my lead from the play, I will not attempt to give false resolution in my analysis, instead inhabiting the complexity, difficulties and ambivalence raised by Hickson's play as a whole and the final scene in particular.

The Writer: creation and first production

The Writer by Ella Hickson opens with an encounter between a young woman and a director on the stage of a theatre after a show. The young woman tells the director that the commercial theatre he makes is embroiled in patriarchal and capitalist systems and ideology. The director finds her rage 'zeitgeisty' (21) and, after some intellectual sparring, offers her the opportunity to write for this stage. The young woman reveals that she met the director at a student drama festival and he tried to kiss her. Then, with a deconstructive turn that comes to be characteristic of *The Writer's* form, the scene is revealed to be a play-within-a-play and the characters actors; the 'real' Writer and the 'real' Director participate in a 'post-show' discussion with the actors and audience plants, critiquing the previous

scene. In Scene 2, which may or may not be part of the play the Writer is writing for the Director, the Writer and Boyfriend argue over whether she should accept a large advance to turn her play into a film: the Writer says she would feel compromised; her Boyfriend says she has to grow up and start living in the real world. Scene 3 takes the form of a stream of consciousness monologue for the Writer and is, according to the stage directions, '*an attempt at staging female experience*' (57). It expresses a fantasy of escape, connection with nature, and a romantically fulfilling sexual relationship between women. It is completely different in style from the rest of the play. The fantasy world is punctured by the Director's critique of it in Scene 4 as 'not real' and not 'good drama' (67), compared with the first scene; the Writer argues with him about the politics of the kind of theatre he values. In Scene 5, the Writer and her girlfriend are having dinner together in a swanky flat. They have sex and the Writer hurts the girlfriend, re-enacting Boyfriend's lack of care for the Writer in the second scene. However, even this summary of the play risks suggesting a kind of linear progression – one that is repeatedly unsettled by the shifts in form and level of reality within the play.

Ella Hickson received an open commission from the Almeida theatre and wrote the first draft of the play in five weeks in the summer of 2017, while on writing retreat at the MacDowell colony.[10] The play was written for the Almeida's stage, a space with which Hickson had become very familiar from the production of her play *Oil* there in 2016.[11] The commission also gave Hickson the opportunity to reflect upon her professional relationships with Almeida Artistic Director Rupert Goold and Associate Director Robert Icke, both of whom had been highly influential upon her career. When asked about why the Almeida felt

[10] Stephanie Bain, Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre, 'Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre in Conversation | The Writer', *YouTube*, June 26 2018. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=jJZi5xCfspQ> [accessed 22 February 2019].
[11] Hickson and Greenstreet interview.

apt for *the Writer*, Hickson replied 'I think the Almeida felt, I had to do something. I knew that there was like real heat to my…needing to break free of being a kid'.[12] *The Writer* is in part a reflection upon her career as a writer, a kind of declaration of her coming of age as a playwright, on her own terms. She describes how 'I always work with two artistic directors or commissioners in my mind, and there's an approval seeking there and had been, and that had been quite destructive for a long time'.[13] Hickson says that she found the process of creating *The Writer* freeing, in rejecting her urge to seek approval and the inherited theatrical forms that she had been taught, instead searching for a form that reflected 'what goes on inside my own body and mind'.[14] Once she sent the script to Rupert Goold, it was programmed quickly – in part to take advantage of its topicality given the surfacing allegations of sexual harassment against Harvey Weinstein and Max Stafford-Clark (Hickson wrote the play before the scandals broke) and a wider movement against sexual harassment and abuses of power within the entertainment industries.[15]

The first production of *The Writer* was directed by Blanche McIntyre, opening on 24 April 2018 (with previews from 14 April) and playing until 26 May 2018. McIntyre has forged her career across Greek tragedy, revivals of classic plays and new writing.[16] Unusually both for a piece of new writing and for Hickson's normal playwriting process, the script was not

[12] Ibid.
[13] Chris Goode, 'Thompson's Live: Ella Hickson' [podcast], Series 5 Episode 9, July 18, 2018. <www.podbean.com/site/EpisodeDownload/PB956264RXCIY> [accessed 20 February 2019]. Although Hickson does not identify the directors beyond the fact that they are male, Icke and Goold seem reasonable guesses as she has worked with them most frequently.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Initiatives in response to #MeToo from the theatre industry include Vicky Featherstone's organisation of two days of action at the Royal Court in October 2017, during which people could share stories of abuses of power they had experienced in the industry and attend Town Hall meetings to discuss policies and best practice. A code of behaviour was created in response to the day and published on the Royal Court website and has since been adopted by several other theatres. 'Code of Behaviour', Royal Court Theatre. <royalcourttheatre.com/code-of-behaviour/> [accessed 16 January 2020].
[16] Holly Williams, 'Blanche McIntyre: "Staging violence against women responsibly keeps me up at night", *The Stage*, 30 June 2017. <www.thestage.co.uk/features/interviews/2017/blanche-mcintyre-stage-violence-women-responsibly/> [accessed 22 August 2019].

changed very much in rehearsals.[17] The only major addition Hickson made to the script was scene 4, which was written to incorporate notes that Hickson received on the script from a range of people in the theatre industry.[18] Hickson notes that 'you often change things to make it a better made play and […] the point of it was never to be a well-made play, so you weren't trying to dramaturgically solve it in a sense, which is both its success and its failure. It's a sort of experiment in expression […] so the terms on which you're trying to improve it, I guess, are not to make it meet an objective standard'.[19] As *The Writer* rejects many of the standard 'rules' for playwriting and questions the attachment of aesthetic value to certain forms over others, it is a challenging play to give notes on or, indeed, review. Indeed, by framing the play as an 'experiment', Hickson is, to some extent, circumventing the paradigms of success/ failure, good/ bad; the play demands engagement upon its own terms and those terms keep shifting. Blanche McIntyre, aware that Hickson had written over sixty drastically different drafts of her play *Oil* (Almeida Theatre, 2016), was determined to 'preserve' the script of *The Writer,* commenting 'if Ella is made to feel like there is a change, even a slight change that needs to happen, she has it within her to completely rewrite the play and turn it into something absolutely different'.[20] This careful approach to dramaturgical feedback, along with the sense of the director being in the service of the writer's text, stands in stark contrast to the antagonistic and unbalanced relationship between the Writer and Director represented within the play, in which the Director puts pressure on the Writer to rewrite the play according to his taste, under threat of cancellation. Hickson notes a consultative, light-touch style of directing from McIntyre,

[17] Hickson and Greenstreet interview.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Blanche McIntyre, interview by Hannah Greenstreet (Telephone, 15 April 2019).

whom she describes as a 'really really brilliant adjustor', 'allowing people to follow their instinct and then hone their […] impulses around instinct'.[21] This reflects the 'simplicity and clarity' noted by Rachel Tackley in McIntyre's directing work, who comments, 'It's very thoughtful, and isn't lightly achieved – but she works very hard to make it all look easy'.[22]

Blanche McIntyre remembers that 'it was a different rehearsal process from standard rehearsal processes that I have', partly because the non-naturalistic form of *The Writer* made it unreceptive to those character-based processes.[23] Instead, she reflects, it was far more 'political':

> It was one in which we spent more time talking about abstract concepts, how they work in real life systems, but also what we understand by them and the company feeding in with their ideas and experiences of that, than I did working on the actual scenes. Because this is a play which, more than any play that I've done, every word, every moment, every gesture […] can be read in a political way. Every choice that we made had a bigger resonance. And so everything had to be scrutinised, not just from the point of view of whether it worked theatrically but also of the specific thing of that raised hand, look, scene change, gesture, word was trying to do.[24]

McIntyre's description of a process focusing on political effect varies significantly from Katie Mitchell's psychologically focused approach described in the previous chapter. Indeed, McIntyre suggests that the play was intended to provoke, its intention 'to make the audience question the system that they find themselves in […] by provoking, by asking questions, by leaving loose ends untied, by asking the audience to fill in the gaps, to get them thinking critically about their assumptions and the culture that they live in, and how

[21] Ibid.
[22] David Jays, 'Blanche McIntyre: The stage director who works hard to make it all look easy', *The Guardian*, 5 October 2014. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/oct/05/blanche-mcintyre-stage-director-accolade> [accessed 22 August 2019].
[23] McIntyre and Greenstreet interview.
[24] Ibid.

those two things interact'.[25] The conversations the play provoked about power were facilitated by what Hickson describes as a 'really egalitarian' rehearsal room.[26]

The first production of *The Writer* produced a polarised critical response. In her review for the *New Statesman*, Helen Lewis declares, 'This isn't a boring, safe three-star play: you're either Team Five or Team One'.[27] Ann Treneman opened her one-star review for *The Times* with the pronouncement, 'This play has to be one of the most irritating, self-involved, intellectually pretentious pieces of theatre on the planet'.[28] Several reviewers, including Ian Shuttleworth, criticised *The Writer's* capacity to be 'navel-gazing', due to its focus on the theatre industry.[29] However, *The Writer* was awarded five stars by *The Daily Mail*, *Evening Standard* and *The Stage*, and four stars by *The Independent, The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*. In her review for *The Stage*, Natasha Tripney enthuses, '*The Writer* is an eloquent, intellectually agile, vividly written and frequently furious play', exploring the ideas the play raises about gender politics and the difficulty of navigating a career as a woman writer.[30] McIntyre notes that *The Writer* 'tended to divide them [the audience] along age lines, that the younger you were, and actually […] often the closer to the industry you were as well, the more likely you were to find it interesting and invigorating and get onboard with

[25] Ibid.
[26] Hickson and Greenstreet interview.
[27] Helen Lewis, 'The Writer at the Almeida: a drama which tries to have its meaning-cake and eat it', *New Statesman*, 26 April 2018. <www.newstatesman.com/culture/music-theatre/2018/04/writer-almeida-drama-which-tries-have-its-meaning-cake-and-eat-it> [accessed 24 September 2019].
[28] Ann Treneman, 'Power, patriarchy and two hours of utter pretentiousness', *The Times*, 26 April 2018, p. 23.
[29] Ian Shuttleworth, 'As meta as they come: The Writer at the Almeida, London: Ella Hickson's play tilts at power structures but feels fatally self-absorbed', *Financial Times*, 25 April 2018. <www.ft.com/content/34e6f778-4874-11e8-8ee8-cae73aab7ccb> [accessed 25 February 2019].
[30] Natasha Tripney, 'The Writer review at Almeida Theatre, London – "formally inventive and vividly written"', *The Stage*, 25 April 2018. <www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/2018/writer-review-almeida-theatre-romola-garai-london/> [accessed 28 February 2019].

it. There was also obviously a strong, a strong gender divide', although of course there were exceptions.[31]

However, the idea of a starkly polarised audience obscures the complexity and ambivalence that many reviewers expressed in their responses – primarily, I would suggest, due to the form of the play. Dominic Cavendish remarks the play 'proceeds as an ingenious series of ambushes that invite a set of conflicted responses', noting he felt 'goaded, irritated, delighted, challenged' over the course of the play.[32] Lewis observes, '*The Writer* is an endlessly tricksy piece, trying to have its meaning-cake and eat it, showing you scenes and then immediately undercutting them with meta-narrative'.[33] While, from their choice of adjectives, Lewis appears to have found this structural uncertainty frustrating, Cavendish appears to have found it exhilarating; whether someone enjoys the experience of watching *The Writer* seems to depend, in part, on how willing they are to sit with the discomfort of not knowing exactly what it means.

Whereas the first two scenes of the play proceed through argument, scenes 3 and 5 make themselves felt affectively, in the 'conflicted responses' they inspire, including confusion, frustration and uncertainty. Indeed, it is a challenge to pin down what the politics of *The Writer* actually are; although the play is focalised through the character of the Writer, the play does not seem to endorse one particular viewpoint unequivocally or come down on one side of the argument. This might explain why a feminist reviewer like Helen Lewis, whom one might expect broadly to agree with *The Writer* in political terms, could have such a negative reaction towards it. Similarly, Libby Purves awarded *The Writer* two stars in her

[31] McIntyre and Greenstreet interview.
[32] Dominic Cavendish, 'The Writer at Almeida Theatre, review – Romola Garai is endearingly plausible in this sophisticated play for the MeToo generation', *Telegraph*, 25 April 2018 <www.telegraph.co.uk/theatre/what-to-see/writer-almeida-theatre-review-searing-romola-garai-places/> [accessed 25 February 2019].
[33] Lewis, 'The Writer at the Almeida', *New Statesman.*

review, declaring 'I'm a woman, and a fiction writer, and frankly, if this is feminism and a plea for creativity I am a banana. It speaks only for the narrowest of demographics: a notional angry, unloving, sexually militant mythoholic 24-year-old riddled with humourless artistic vanity and self-pity'.[34] Troublingly, in expressing her frustration at a younger generation of feminists – 'None of our '60s victories counts: one wrong pass or incautious phrase and they cry outrage' – and mocking them for their oversensitivity, Purves's rhetoric recalls right-wing reviewers Patrick Marmion and Lloyd Evans's dismissal of the gender politics of *The Writer*. In his review for *Sp!ked*, Marmion pronounces, 'Hickson's play is an uptight, self-absorbed, wilfully neurotic confession, virtuously wringing its hands over its perceived powerlessness' and is 'a work paralysed by a sense of overwhelming victimhood'.[35] Writing in *The Spectator*, Evans dismisses *The Writer* as a 'two-hour polemic which wants to bask in #MeToo topicality but which feels dated and remote' and questions, 'Are female scribblers still being creeped out by rapist theatre directors?', suggesting 'a writer who feels wary of predatory males could always try a gay director'![36]

In contrast, Gwen Smith praises *The Writer's* representation of sexism as 'grimly recognisable' in her five-star review for *The Daily Mail*.[37] Fiona Mountford enthuses in her five-star review for the *Evening Standard*, 'Wow. Here's a drama that channels all the righteous anger of the moment, the pent-up fury that women have found themselves at last

[34] Ibid.
[35] Patrick Marmion, 'The #MeToo era needs some hippy spirit', *Sp!ked*, 2 May 2018. <www.spiked-online.com/2018/05/02/the-metoo-era-needs-some-hippy-spirit/> [accessed 28 February 2019].
[36] Lloyd Evans, 'A dated and remote two-hour polemic basking in #MeToo topicality: The Writer reviewed', *Spectator*, 5 May 2018. <www.spectator.co.uk/2018/05/a-dated-and-remote-two-hour-polemic-basking-in-metoo-topicality-the-writer-reviewed/> [accessed 25 February 2019].
[37] Gwen Smith, 'With a dazzling lead performance from Romola Garai, Ella Hickson's new play The Writer takes a furious and fiercely intelligent swipe at the status quo', *Daily Mail*, 28 April 2018. <www.dailymail.co.uk/home/event/article-5659737/The-Writer-review-fiercely-intelligent-swipe-status-quo.html> [accessed 25 February 2019].

allowed to express since the Me Too movement burst into blazing life last autumn'.[38] However, reflecting on the reception of *The Writer* a year after its first production, Hickson states, 'It got totally co-opted into a narrative – a #MeToo, #BurnItDown narrative, whereas the play was about the inescapability of capitalism in our current state'; to focus on only the gender critique as divorced from the critique of capitalism is only to pay attention to the first scene of the play.[39] The narrative she refers to was spread not only by more traditional reviews but also in the reactions to the play on social media. In the same interview, Hickson expressed her frustration with a critical tendency to pigeonhole plays by women, commenting, 'Every time *Hamlet* goes on, people don't talk about it as a treatise on masculinity. But if a woman happens to write a play with a woman in it, it gets called feminist'.[40] Hickson even suggested in my interview with her that, if the play had been produced at another time before #MeToo, that 'the perspective on it would have been much more about capitalism than it would have been [about gender]'; *The Writer* is materialist and intersectional in its investigation of unequal power dynamics, which are not limited to a gender binary.[41] A new production of *The Writer* in a post-#MeToo theatre landscape may therefore be interpreted differently, although Hickson does seem to be minimising her play's integral engagement with gender issues in her reframing.

[38] Fiona Mountford, 'The Writer review: Romola Garai blazes in a defiant attempt to rewrite the script', *Evening Standard*, 25 April 2018. <www.standard.co.uk/go/london/theatre/the-writer-review-romola-garai-blazes-in-defiant-attempt-to-rewrite-the-script-a3822836.html> [accessed 28 February 2019].
[39] Gwendolyn Smith, 'Ella Hickson on her new play Anna: "If a woman happens to write a play with women in it, it gets called feminist"', *INews,* 21 May 2019. <inews.co.uk/culture/anna-national-theatre-ella-hickson-interview-501671> [24 September 2019].
[40] Ibid.
[41] Hickson and Greenstreet interview.

Form

Since her early plays, including the monologue play, *Eight* (2008), and naturalistic, three-act play, *Boys* (2012), Hickson's work has become more politically engaged and more formally experimental, in combination with the expansion of her subject matter to more ambitious topics (due perhaps, in part, to her being granted commissions and larger stages as she advanced in her career). In an interview I conducted a year after *The Writer* was first produced, Hickson commented, 'I feel increasingly clear about my management of idea and form, like how idea has to speak to form […] The interrogation has to be formal, it just has to be, because that is the point at which all subversion operates'.[42] *Oil*, which was first produced at the Almeida in 2016 and directed by Rupert Goold, demonstrates this ambition of subject matter and formal innovation. The play explores the history and geopolitics of human dependence on oil across continents and over almost two hundred years.[43] Each of its five scenes is a dramatically coherent unit with its own internal logic, varying substantially in their setting and somewhat in their style. The scenes are connected by the focus on the mother and daughter relationship of May and Amy, who carry their lived experience between scenes, despite the timescale of the play being beyond the span of a single human-life. May and Amy's negotiations of power, love and control in their relationship act as a human vector for the wrangling over energy. Although the scenes take place in chronological order, May and Amy do not age at the same rate; the time of the play world and the time of the main characters are out of sync. This recalls the temporal

[42] Ibid.
[43] Sam Solnick, 'How Theatre is Tackling the Biggest Issue of All: The Future of Our Planet', *Theatre Times*, 23 October 2016. <thetheatretimes.com/how-theatre-is-tackling-the-biggest-issue-of-all-the-future-of-our-planet/> [accessed 31 July 2019].

disjunction between the acts in Caryl Churchill's *Cloud Nine* (1979), during which a hundred years have passed but the characters have only aged twenty-five years.

Following *Oil*, one might expect *The Writer* to follow a similar pattern of formal experimentation: using a strong human relationship to focus an exploration of a large political issue. However, rather than disrupting chronology as *Oil* does, *The Writer* challenges the logic of causation that still underpins *Oil* in a vestigial form (for example, the suggestion that Amy's failure to find a partner in later life might be her mother's fault for sending her boyfriend away as a teenager; May's regret at leaving Joss that continues to haunt her in the form of his ghost). Hickson does this through the juxtaposition of scenes written in vastly different styles, without giving much guidance about how the different scenes relate to each other. Hickson explained that she wrote the play working on 'instinct and juxtaposition of idea, rather than following […] a linear or sort of empirical line of argument'.[44] Whereas the audience is provided with a path through *Oil* by the emotional bond of the psychologically realised characters of May and Amy, the majority of the characters in *The Writer* seem like allegorical figures, there to illuminate the Writer's psyche. *The Writer*'s metatheatricality also differentiates it from *Oil*. The later play does not just experiment with form; its characters argue about form. Indeed, through its constant shifts and self-criticism, the play almost seems to theorise its own form. As Blanche McIntyre puts it, 'It's self-aware of its constant reshaping of itself. So it allows you to think about form in the abstract, where a lot of plays disguise their form'.[45]

Ella Hickson has previously explored the form of metatheatre and reflected upon the occupation of playwright in her play *The Authorised Kate Bane* (Traverse Theatre,

[44] Hickson and Greenstreet interview.
[45] McIntyre and Greenstreet interview.

Edinburgh, 2012), which uses a metatheatrical frame to explore the provisional nature of memory and the author-character's anxieties about writing – notably, that it makes her an observer of her own life, rather than actually living it. In the play's framing scene, set in London, playwright Kate is preparing to introduce her boyfriend Albin to her parents Ike and Nessa, who have not seen each other in the twenty years since they divorced. She starts to script a fantasy meeting between them all in her childhood home in Kelso, Scotland, stepping out of the London scene where she is typing to perform herself in the scene she is writing. In the play-within-a-play, Kate presents the visit home to Albin as an attempt to grapple with the past before she can commit fully to her own relationship and accept Albin's marriage proposal. The instability of memory is thematised in the play through the character of Albin, a neuropsychologist, who offers scientific information on the workings of memory in conversation and attempts to arbitrate Ike and Nessa's disagreements about the past.

Kate articulates a view of the purpose of theatre that anticipates one of the young woman's points in scene 1 of *The Writer*. Kate is disappointed with her play that has been produced, described in a review as 'a charming satire of a West London Tennis Club', because 'it doesn't *do* anything'.[46] She bemoans:

> I thought I'd written something in – in opposition, I thought I'd written against the… I thought I'd written something important – but instead the very people I tried to oppose came along and bought their tickets and had a jolly good laugh. They just laughed and laughed. They were entertained.[47]

The argument between Kate and her dad, who liked the play and is offended by Kate's attack on it, raises the question of the purpose of theatre and its efficacy: is it to entertain,

[46] Ella Hickson, *The Authorised Kate Bane* (London: Nick Hern, 2012), p. 71
[47] Ibid.

or should it be in opposition to the dominant value system? These anxieties undergird and inform *The Writer*, although in the later play the ideas emerge thematically through the relationships between the young woman and the Director, and the Writer and her girlfriend.

The Writer, then, explores some similar issues to *The Authorised Kate Bane* but in a more formally sophisticated way. Although the script of *The Authorised Kate Bane* encourages merging between the London sections and the Kelso scenes, with props and people passing from one world to the other, the play is contained within a metatheatrical frame, which gives it a kind of stability. In the last scene of the play, set in London, Kate prints out her script and Albin reads it, commenting on the differences between their lives and the play: his parents are not dead and he has not asked Kate to marry him. In the final moments of the play, Kate's parents arrive for the visit. In *The Writer*, it is much harder to keep the different layers of theatricality distinct from each other. The shift from a named central character to one identified only by her occupation also suggests a looser conception of character.

Realisms and metatheatre

In keeping with Hickson's interrogation of a 'received idea of realism', *The Writer*'s mercurial form creates an impression of reality as malleable and open to change, the capacity for 'the world to change shape' (19). This worldview resonates with David Barnett's description of Brechtian dialectic, which resists the idea 'that reality is in some way inevitable and that it is beyond human control to effect substantial change':

> A dialectical worldview […] understands reality as composed of entities that are always in opposition with each other. […] The tensions between opposing entities, be they people, conditions or ideas, suggest a fundamental instability in reality. When reality is unstable, it is subject to change and is mutable. Correspondingly,

> contradiction becomes a motor of change and its identification a potential source of momentum.[48]

It might seem ironic to locate dialectic in *The Writer*, when the Writer explicitly disavows the form, declaring, 'Two people, you and me, standing on stage, intellectual back-and-forth is dialectic, one oppressing the other, it's wordy, it's Stoppard, it's Pinter, it's power struggle, it's patriarchy – that's what it is, it's how it's learnt and how it's meant to be, it's elitist' (67). *The Writer* as a whole moves away from the 'intellectual back-and-forth' of the first scene to a more complex and ambivalent form. Indeed, Ben Poore argues that *The Writer* puts 'dialectical, argumentative episodes themselves in dialectical tension with more open, ambiguous forms […] offering a Shavian discussion play using a Churchillian approach to character and language'.[49] At the heart of *The Writer*, there is a profound contradiction between idealism and pragmatism, reflected in the juxtaposition of different theatrical forms expressing different visions of reality. Unlike more traditional forms of dialectic, this contradiction is not resolved at the end of the play, leaving a tangle of ideas and conflicting feelings; the social change has yet to be accomplished.

Hickson creates the sense of a mutable play world through the unsettling interaction between realisms and layers of metatheatricality. When watching *The Writer*, it is very difficult to determine what is 'real' within the world of the play and what is part of the play the Writer is writing: the play-within-a-play. This instability is set up from the metatheatrical shock halfway through the first scene, when the performers we have taken to be the writer and director (Lara Rossi and Samuel West in McIntyre's production) are revealed to be

[48] David Barnett, 'Dialectics and the Brechtian Tradition', *Performance Research* (2016) 21, 6-15 (6). The feminist critique of realism was inspired by Brecht's theories of theatre, so it is unsurprising there are significant similarities between the two.
[49] Benjamin Poore, '"You Can't Be Here": The Playwriting Dialectic in Ella Hickson's *Oil*', *Modern Drama*, 63 (Spring 2020), 21-38 (p. 32).

actors performing a play(-within-a-play). They are replaced by the 'real' Writer and Director, played by Romola Garai and Michael Gould, who lead a post-show discussion on the 'scene' we have just watched. Watching character be so easily transferred between two performers raises an uneasiness about the potential fictional status of the Writer and Director as characters in the play.

Plays such as Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of An Author* (1921) and Jean Genet's *The Blacks* (1959) provide precedents for experiments with metatheatre.[50] Tom Stoppard deploys a comparable metatheatrical device to Hickson's in *The Real Thing* (1982). The first scene, which appears to represent the breakdown of Max and Charlotte's marriage, is afterwards revealed to be a scene in Henry's play; audience members are forced to recalibrate their assumptions of what is real. Nonetheless, despite Stoppard's play's questioning of reality through the use of metatheatrical allusion and echoes between the 'real' scenes and the 'theatrical' scenes, the play has a secure grounding in the reality of Henry's world.

The Writer's (meta)theatricality is more complex. Scenes 2, 3 and 5 seem to have dual status as scenes from the Writer's play and scenes from her life, complicated by the choice in McIntyre's production to have Garai play the Writer in each of them. For example, scene 2 could be seen as the Writer's response to the Director's instruction at the end of the previous scene to continue writing the play; she presents him with a domestic scene exploring how the Writer's politics manifest in her personal life with her boyfriend, answering the Director character's question in the first scene. This metatheatrical

[50] For more on metatheatre, see Richard Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama and Perception* (London: Associated University Presses, 1986); Ariel Watson, *The Anxious Triangle: Modern Metatheatres of the Playwright, Actor, and Spectator* (unpublished doctoral thesis), Yale University, 2008, in ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global <ezproxy-prd.bodleian.ox.ac.uk:2082/docview/304389956?pq-origsite=primo> [accessed 15 January 2021].

interpretation is strengthened by the appearance of the Director lurking in the wings at the side of the stage, as if directing proceedings. Yet, from a naturalist standpoint, it is not Garai but Rossi who should play the Writer in this scene, as it is Rossi who is the 'actor' in the play; the 'real' Writer should not get mixed up in the theatricality of her own play. The casting decision emphasises the theatrical elements of the Writer's life, for example the Boyfriend's restaging of her entrance to the flat, and also gives the play a very unstable feeling as if the illusion could collapse at any moment – which it does, with the collapse of the set at the end of scene 2. As well as this, the timescale of the Writer's fictitious play does not make sense. The offer for the Writer to turn her script into a film in scene 2 suggests that she has already written the script and the existence of the 'Angry Young Woman' (37) poster mentioned in the stage directions suggests that it has already been performed under that name. Yet, throughout the play the Director character is asking her to write more and write the ending, suggesting that she is still in the process of writing it. How can she both be in the play and be writing it at the same time?

In Blanche McIntyre's production, Anna Fleischle's set design played a key part in creating the impression of a mutable, highly theatrical play world. At first, the scenography appears minimal. At the start of the production, the stage is empty, pieces of furniture and plants ranged around the walls like someone has cleared the stage in a hurry after a rehearsal (Fig. 1). However, it has been intricately constructed to generate a series of scenographic surprises in performance, reflecting the shifts in style and setting between Hickson's scenes. The vast majority of props that will be used in the play are onstage from the beginning. The floor is a Tetris tapestry of different coloured pieces. This only becomes noticeable in the transition between scenes 1 and 2, in which walls are hoisted up from the floor by a team of female stagehands to assemble what the stage directions describe as 'a

naturalistic set of a young, arty, intellectual, urban couple's front room' (37) (Fig. 2). While Romola Garai watches, stagehands bring on furniture and set dressing: a table, a picture, lamps, books, knickknacks, and a sofa in plastic wrapping. This transition takes at least two minutes, encouraging the audience to dwell on the logistics of the construction of the theatrical illusion.

Figure 1. The production photograph by Manuel Harlan, depicting Lara Rossi and Samuel West talking in a theatre space in the first scene of the play, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The photograph was sourced at www.theguardian.com/stage/2018/apr/25/the-writer-review-almeida-romola-garai-sexual-revolution [accessed 26 January 2021].

Figure 2. The production photograph by Manuel Harlan, depicting Romola Garai against the wall of the set of the flat in Scene 2, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The photograph was sourced at www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/writer-metoo-romola-garai-ella-hickson-blanche-mcinture-almeida-theatre-london-a8319561.html [accessed 26 January 2021].

The verisimilitude and detail of the room, along with the domestic setting, strongly evoke realist drama. William Worthen argues 'realism not only asserts a reality that is natural or unconstructed, it argues that such a reality can only be shown on the stage by effacing the medium – literary style, acting, mise-en-scène – that discloses it', casting the spectator as 'an impartial observer, constructed outside and beyond both the drama and the theatrical activities'.[51] Worthen makes a political critique of the distanced relationship that he argues realism establishes with its audience, suggesting that spectators are not made aware of themselves as agents imbricated within the social system represented by the play.[52] In contrast, Fleischle's design and McIntyre's production makes the artifice of such

[51] W. B. Worthen, *Modern Drama and the Rhetoric of the Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 20, 25.
[52] Ibid., p. 29.

realist settings and scenes visible; it might be setting up a realist scene, but it is preparing the audience to apply a metatheatrical and potentially critical awareness, rather than to consume the scene as passive observers.

Nonetheless, Hickson's play and McIntyre's production challenge a dichotomy between reality and theatricality and, indeed, realism and metatheatre. A piece of art can feel real, encouraging the audience's willing suspension of disbelief. For instance, scenes two and three present representations of reality that exceed the material (and depart from conventional understandings of realism) in order to capture some kind of inner truth, rather than absolute mimetic fidelity. In scene 4, the Director tells the Writer that the mythic monologue was 'not real' (66), suggesting that its confessional form and mythic allusions make it appear contrived. Yet she suggests that it has 'The kind of heat that comes from being very honest' (69); it feels real without displaying the typical conventions of realism – indeed, it feels real because it rejects those conventions. Moreover, in redefining realism as something felt affectively rather than something determined in relation to the deployment of existing theatrical conventions or in its relation to the material world, *The Writer* seems to come to an expanded definition of realism that recalls Elin Diamond's call for a 'feminist mimesis', which 'would take the relation to the real as productive, not referential, geared to change, not to reproducing the same'.[53] Crucially, this conception of a 'productive', change-making realism is inextricable from material reality. It is based in materialist critique and depends upon making visible the means of production of its stage images.

[53] Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theater* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. xvi.

Plot, causation and character

Reflecting on the audience response to *The Writer* in an interview with Chris Goode, Hickson remarks, 'in Britain at the moment we've got such a weird affection for naturalism. We like coherent, linear story, because it makes us believe that we live coherent linear lives, and of course we don't'.[54] A causational structure is an important part of naturalism, reassuring in its ability to provide an explanation for events. As seen in chapter 2, structure also contributes to a naturalistic understanding of character as psychologically consistent and having motivation for his/her actions. Even in plays which disrupt a linear chronology by experimenting with the discontinuity between *fabula* and *sjuzhet*, such as Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* (1982) or J.B. Priestley's *Time and the Conways* (1937), both of which have third acts that are set temporally prior to the preceding act, the ordering of the scenes ultimately provides some explanation for characters' actions. The structure of *The Writer*, with its discontinuous combination of scenes (so discrete they could almost stand alone) written in different styles, does not provide such a justification, hence making it disorienting to watch; it is trying to work out the logic of their combination that poses a challenge and is frustrating. Nonetheless, *The Writer* does have a vestigial narrative trajectory, unified by the play's central focus on the Writer.

The Writer follows in the wake of plays in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century that have challenged naturalistic conceptions of character by drawing on what Elinor Fuchs calls 'the dispersed idea of self'.[55] In contrast, as the Writer is supposedly authoring the play in which she appears, she is creating an impression of her character from the inside out; her creative vision – which at times seems so strong as to exceed the play –

[54] Goode, 'Thompson's Live'.
[55] Elinor Fuchs, *The Death of Character* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 9.

serves as unifying factor. The Writer tells her boyfriend in scene 2, 'I want awe. I feel like I need blood. All the time. And anything less than that makes me feel desperate. It makes me feel like I want to die' (52). This extreme expression of subjectivity recalls Richard Hornby's description of expressionist plays, which 'often had a central "Ich" figure (usually an artist), whose vision the audience shared. Sometimes it might be implied, vaguely, that he was dreaming the whole thing; more often, that he simply had a unique and fascinating subjectivity, which enabled him to see the world more sensitively and genuinely than the rest of us'.[56] The Writer's 'unique and fascinating subjectivity' is depicted as a curse as much as a gift, making her 'feel desperate'. Indeed, at several points, the play seems to be focalised through the Writer's subjectivity, particularly the stream of consciousness monologue of scene 3.

The sense of the Writer as a consistent character, when, arguably, she emerges as rather a discontinuous presence through the different scenes, was emphasised in Blanche McIntyre's production by the casting of Romola Garai. McIntyre started from 'the premise that there is one single character called the Writer and that […] although she changes and ages during the course of the play, she is, in various respects, consistent, and that you understand her through her interaction with other characters onstage, who are also partially available to you'.[57] This sense of a consistent character called the Writer was reflected in McIntyre's decision to have Garai play 'the Writer' in each scene, apart from the opening of the play. That this was successfully communicated to the audience is demonstrated by how several reviewers praised Garai's performance for providing a through line to the play and described her performance in terms of her character's journey.

[56] Hornby, *Drama, Metadrama and Perception*, p. 41.
[57] McIntyre and Greenstreet interview.

In an otherwise lukewarm three-star review, Ian Shuttleworth states, 'Romola Garai effects a convincing emotional and intellectual journey in the title role, although it's arguable whether the writer is an individual figure throughout, or a series of avatars of a general type'; the magnetism of Garai's powerful performance provides a sense of coherence to the discontinuity.[58] Natasha Tripney also identifies a change in the characterisation of the Writer across the play, but interprets it in terms of character development:

> Garai is spectacular. She morphs from a tongue-tied aspiring new writer – cowed by those around her and almost constantly apologising, for occupying this platform at all, for having the temerity to have something to say and a wish to say it in the way she wants – to an altogether more confident figure who nonetheless lets men shut her down or sway her choices. There are moments when she rages, when she burns with fury, at herself and the world.[59]

Indeed, one possible path through *The Writer* is to read it in terms of the main character's journey: a writer struggles against a patriarchal system (represented by the Director and the Boyfriend) to get her voice heard and succeeds by getting her play put on in the West End but at the cost of damaging her relationship with her female partner. Or, from an alternative perspective, a writer struggles against a patriarchal system to get her voice heard, succumbs to the Director's pressure to reshape her play, gets corrupted by money and sells out. Such a narrative approach was encouraged by the marketing copy on the Almeida website, which was accompanied by a triptych of close-up, black and white images of parts of Romola Garai's face, photographed by Clara Giaminardi (see Fig. 3): 'A young writer challenges the status quo but discovers that creative gain comes at a personal cost. // She wants to change the shape of the world. But a new way of thinking needs a new story'.[60] The description suggests a fundamental dramatic structure: a character wants

[58] Shuttleworth, 'As meta as they come', *Financial Times*.
[59] Tripney, 'The Writer review', *The Stage*.
[60] 'The Writer', *Almeida Theatre*. <almeida.co.uk/whats-on/the-writer/16-apr-2018-26-may-2018> [accessed 5 November 2019].

something, and he/ she has to confront an obstacle to get it.[61] Yet both versions of the Writer's story leave out the middle part of the play, which has its own story – a writer goes into the woods, finds herself, her power as a writer and a woman, discovers lesbian sex and comes back changed – an alternative dramatic trajectory that is not supported by the scenes that follow.

Figure 3. The publicity image by Clara Giaminardi, depicting a black and white collage of images of parts of Romola Garai's face, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. Versions of this image were used on the Almeida's website and posters, and for the cover of the playscript. The image was sourced at ohcomely.co.uk/stories/thewriter [accessed 26 January 2021].

Moreover, a description of the play that focuses solely on the Writer's individual journey does not seem true to the spirit of the play. Indeed, it seems to play into the

[61] For more on the importance of a character wanting something as a driver of narrative, see John Yorke, *Into the Woods: How Stories Work and Why We Tell Them* (London: Penguin, 2013), pp. 7-18. Although he is writing primarily about screenwriting, Yorke's work is often taught on playwriting courses.

capitalist emphasis on the individual and the related problems with story structures that are focused on satisfying individualistic desires that the play is criticising. A more structural interpretation of *The Writer* is possible, which sees individuals as products of the systems in which they are historically situated and could even be activated by the tension between the narrative of the Writer as capitalist success story and the alternative trajectory glimpsed in scene 3; the sense of wrongness and resistance I felt as an audience member in response to the last scene reminded me that there were alternatives in the Writer's story. However, this is not to say that McIntyre imposed an individualistic narrative onto *The Writer* in interpreting the Writer as a 'consistent' character; that potential is written into the play and is a key tool of sense-making for an audience. Yet it can be emphasised or downplayed in production. It is perhaps a reminder of how hard it is to escape those conventional narrative structures as they are so deeply ingrained in consciousness, not only in dramatic form, but in marketing and in life narratives. Despite its experimentalism, *The Writer* is ghosted by vestigial forms of naturalist character and conventional narrative structure.

'A systemic awareness': Anti-materialism and structural critique

In the opening scene of *The Writer*, the young woman informs the Director that a play is 'A formal expression of a political statement' (27). She continues, with disdain, 'You are not skewed toward a systemic awareness. I'd say. You're more of a – good-night-out – kinda guy' (27). The scene centres upon a debate around the purpose of theatre: is it to entertain and to get 'bums on seats' (20) by selling tickets, as the Director says; or is theatre something 'sacred […] communal and civic' (26), charged with trying to change the world, as the Writer believes? The commercial imperative and all the power imbalances that are shown to come with it are juxtaposed with the Writer's utopian desire for a theatre that

both transcends and transforms the material world – a desire that the director suggests is naïve and impractical in his laughter at the young woman's grand ambition to 'Dismantle capitalism and overturn the patriarchy' (23).

The young woman conducts a 'systemic' critique of the director's play and the theatre industry more broadly. She denaturalises stage conventions by drawing attention to their artificiality: 'Two people walking on stage pretending to be two other people and saying – "Hi", "hi"' (13). Ironically the first sentence could also describe the opening of Hickson's own play; the metatheatrical acknowledgement prepares the audience for a departure from those conventions of dramatic writing. The play that the young woman describes having watched seems an absurd amalgam of different theatrical modes and casual sexism, with 'a miraculous army of – builders, soldiers, scientists, fucking women in completely unnecessary hotpants' (13), 'real-life babies' (15), a dog. The young woman finds the truth claim of the play insulting, as 'it's like you actually think that we're meant to think it's real, like we're meant to think, with the current state of things that a perfectly charming front room with people being funny is motherfucking real life' (13). The young woman appears to suggest that the artificiality of the realist theatrical convention of representing 'a perfectly charming front room with people being funny' is irresponsible in its distance from 'real life' and pressing social and political issues. She suggests that the theatre has an ethical responsibility to represent 'real life' when 'the world is imploding' (14). This recalls the Marxist and feminist critiques of theatrical 'illusionism' (the charge that realism as a form passes itself off as a transparent reflection of reality, when it is in fact an ideological interpretation of it).[62]

[62] See Catherine Belsey, 'Constructing the Subject, Deconstructing the Text', in *Feminist Criticism and Social Change: Sex, Class and Race in Literature*, ed. by Deborah Rosenfelt and Judith Newton (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 45-64.

Indeed, the young woman's critique strongly recalls the materialist feminist approach to theatre adopted by the major proponents of the feminist critique of realism, which aimed, in Jill Dolan's words, 'to disrupt the narratives of gender ideology, to denaturalize gender as representation, and to demystify the workings of the genderized representation apparatus itself'.[63] Hickson's critique of the theatre industry expands the focus from gender to power imbalances more broadly as an integral part of capitalism. Hickson reflected in our interview, 'There is something about the commercialism of the West End that means that the work that is presented there is inevitably patriarchal, because capitalism and feminism are not friends'.[64] The form in which the arguments are presented also makes a difference, as presenting such a direct polemic within a play could be viewed as contravening the rules of dramatic composition – as the Director highlights in the 'post-show' discussion when he says the scene was 'a real outpouring' and 'ranty' (32). Rather than conveying what her characters thought through subtext, Hickson chose directness as, 'I just really wanted to break things in a really strong way'; the young woman's critique of the artificiality of established forms is carried through into the form of the play, although there are limits as to what extent Hickson 'break[s] things'.[65]

Blanche McIntyre's production also responds to the challenge the play raises to demystify the theatrical production process and the ideologies behind it. The base set of Anna Fleischle's design is not a bare stage but specifically the Almeida stage, to which the production repeatedly returns amidst the construction and deconstruction of the domestic sets of scenes two and five. Fleischle's set is not only drawing on the visual architecture of the theatre setting, but also its discursive resonances as a theatre institution. The design, in

[63] Dolan, p. 101.
[64] Hickson and Greenstreet interview.
[65] Bain, Hickson and McIntyre, 'Ella Hickson and Blanche McIntyre in Conversation'.

combination with the play, asserts that a theatre space – even when apparently 'empty', in Peter Brook's words – is not a neutral space; institutional politics will always be at work and add another layer of interpretation.[66] The choice of the Almeida for the first production of *The Writer* gives the play's critique of gendered power imbalances in the theatre industry special piquancy, as, until 2018, Goold had programmed only one female writer per year on average during his tenure as Artistic Director.[67] The summer 2018 season contained two other plays by women alongside *The Writer*: Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* and Claire Barron's *Dance Nation*. However, this could be viewed cynically as a gesture towards representation when gender issues were in vogue without proper commitment to inaugurate gender parity in programming.

Blanche McIntyre recalls that Hickson was highly conscious of the institutional context of the first production:

> She was very aware that […] her play was only being put on because two powerful men [Rupert Goold and Robert Icke] agreed […] to stage it. And therefore the power was not seized by her; it was given by them […] which you could argue is a demonstration of how much power they have. You know they can […] freely allow somebody to rail against the patriarchy on their stage; that's a good sign that the patriarchy isn't really being threatened.[68]

McIntyre compellingly articulates the equivocal feelings and conflicting political and practical impulses at the heart of the production. In the way she describes it, Hickson's situation mirrors that of the Writer: granted the ability to have her voice heard but with the potential for what she says to be co-opted, the opportunity to advance her career but at the risk of selling out. Nonetheless, some reviewers thought that the choice to programme *The*

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[66] Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996; first published 1968), p. 7.
[67] Andrzej Lukowski, 'Shaming theatres into programming more women writers is fine by me', *The Stage*, 14 February 2018 <www.thestage.co.uk/opinion/2018/andrzej-lukowski-shaming-theatres-into-programming-more-women-writers-is-fine-by-me/> [accessed March 15, 2019].
[68] McIntyre and Greenstreet interview.

Writer at the Almeida compromised the play's radical politics. In a blog post on the play, which described the Almeida audience as 'people who pride themselves on their progressiveness, their open mindedness but betray themselves through their laughter', Ava Wong Davies wonders, 'How can this be a radical, dangerous thing to say when you are speaking from this seat of wealth and power?'[69] Yet I would argue this prospect – the prospect of political failure, of realising the ultimate inefficacy of theatre to change the world – is something that *The Writer* courts throughout, particularly in the final scene. Nicholas Ridout argues that moments of theatrical 'failure' result in 'an apprehension of our own position in relation to the economic and political conditions of our theatre-going'.[70] Rather than failing in Ridout's sense of the intrusion of the unexpected into performance, *The Writer's* 'failures' – such as the shifts in tone and form, the discontinuity between characters, the breakdown of theatrical illusion – are deliberately deployed.[71] As Dan Rebellato puts it in his review, *The Writer* 'proceeds by a kind of *via negativa*, continually undermining itself', 'a piece of despairing utopianism; the play hates where we are and tries to imagine somewhere else and is really not at all sure it has succeeded or that it *can* succeed'.[72] In its courting of theatrical and political failure, *The Writer* grapples with the ambivalent position theatre occupies under capitalism and does not solve it, releasing a discomfort that permeates the play.

[69] Ava Wong Davies, 'Thoughts on The Writer and this DANG INDUSTRY', *ava wong davies*, 25 April 2018, <avawongdavies.wordpress.com/2018/04/25/thoughts-on-the-writer-and-this-dang-industry/> [accessed 5 March 2019].
[70] Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 34.
[71] Ibid., p. 3. In some ways, although he is writing about theatre, Ridout's interest in failure seems more relevant to performance – both in the sense of performance work that is less reliant on a pre-existing script, and the unexpected eventualities that occur when theatre is performed.
[72] Dan Rebellato, 'The Writer', *Dan Rebellato*, 14 May 2018. <www.danrebellato.co.uk/spilledink/2018/5/14/the-writer> [accessed 24 September 2019].

As well as exposing the artificiality of standard conventions of realism, the young woman's critique reveals the reliance of commercial theatre on the male gaze. The young woman declares:

> It's looking that does it. I walk on stage; first thing people think is – how old is she? How hot is she? How fuckable is she? You walk on stage – they think – what's he got to say? What's he going to *do*? (23)

In *Presence and Desire* (1993), Jill Dolan suggests, 'If all representation is structured by male desire [as scholars using the male gaze theory believe], then sexuality is as integral a part of constructing spectator subjectivity in a Shakespeare production at Stratford as it is in live sex shows in Times Square. Any representation can be seen as essentially pornographic, since the structure of gendered relationships through which it operates is based on granting men subjectivity while denying it to women'.[73] Dolan's characterisation of 'any representation' as 'essentially pornographic' is extreme but conditional. She leaves space for pieces of theatre, like *The Writer*, to explore ways of undermining that 'if', while recognising the importance of desire as a structuring principle of theatre. Yet, within *The Writer*, the desire projected upon and circulating within the theatre industry has been exploited: the Director exploited the young woman's desire to work in the theatre to attempt to sleep with her. In the Writer's interpretation of the scene in the post-show discussion, the director 'exploits' the 'potential' (35) of the young woman again in a different mode by commissioning her to write a 'zeitgeisty', commercially successful play. However, he also provides her with the resources and the stage to realise her desire to have her play put on. Therefore, although the commercial may be characterised by the young woman as perverting desire (which, like theatre, is 'sacred' and transcendent in its ideal

[73] Jill Dolan, *Presence and Desire: Essays on Gender, Sexuality, Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1993), p. 122.

form), the play as a whole recognises that desire and capitalism are inextricably entangled, which makes the politics of desire very complicated.

In scene 2, the focus of the play shifts from the theatre industry to a structural analysis of the pressures and power dynamics within a heterosexual relationship, as if responding to the Director's curiosity about 'how this political stance operates in – your – personal life' (24). Whilst in scene 1, the young woman presented a materialist critique of the theatre industry, in scene 2 the Writer is anti-materialist in her commitment that she and her art somehow transcend the capitalist, material world and the life narratives that accompany that. The scene presents a sharpening of the dialectic around the purpose of art explored in the first scene (whether art should be commercial or 'sacred') to an explicit focus on the value of art and whether it can be conceived of in financial terms. The Writer does not want to accept a large commission to turn her play into a film, fearing the interference of producers will distort her work and explains that writing is not something she can do on command, as 'It has to be the wanting. Or it feels like death. Like I'm breaking' (50). However, as far as the Boyfriend is concerned, writing is a job like any other and by turning down the 'promotion' (45), she is jeopardising their financial future as a couple. The Writer presents her worldview as being fundamentally different from her Boyfriend's. He is someone who can 'genuinely enjoy a sofa' (51) and is 'perfectly happy in the world as it is' (52), whereas she experiences a 'constant need for something – bigger – all the time' (52). The Writer portrays the Boyfriend's enjoyment of and desire to accumulate material things – an expensive sofa, Waitrose snacking nuts (carefully chosen as a signifier of class) – as a sign that he is happy with the world as it is, both in the sense of the status quo and in the sense of noumenal reality. In contrast, the Writer's desire is not for

the material but the transcendent. She describes this yearning in epic, hyperbolic language, where the stakes are life and death, resonating with her conviction that writing is sacred.

Yet, although the Writer positions her and her Boyfriend's views of the world as incompatible, being able to hold both the material and the transcendent, and the real and the theatrical together in one's mind at once is exactly the double consciousness that is required to watch a play. This negotiation is highlighted by the shifting theatrical modes within the scene. The Boyfriend and his investment in conventional life narratives of success, such as buying a house, getting married and having a baby, are associated with a 'received idea of realism'. The Boyfriend displays no awareness that he is in a play, despite the set having been constructed around him. For example, he enacts conventional stage behaviours without seeming to notice their artificiality, as shown in the stage directions: '*He goes to the fake window and stares through the window at the blank, theatre wall for some time. He breathes like the view is giving him freedom*' (51). In 'When We Talk of Horses', Dan Rebellato takes on Lehmann and Brecht's critique of dramatic theatre as 'illusionistic', arguing,

> Representational theatre is not illusionistic. In illusion we have *mistaken beliefs* about what we are seeing. No sane person watching a play believes that what is being represented before them is actually happening.[74]

As a character, the Boyfriend believes the stage world he inhabits to be real, which the audience and the Writer know to be a fallacy but still wish to invest with reality by suspending their disbelief. In contrast, the Writer invests emotional reality elsewhere, in a world beyond the material, accessed through the transcendence of art.

[74] Dan Rebellato, 'When We Talk of Horses: Or, what do we see when we see a play?', *Performance Research*, 14:1 (2009), 17-28 (p. 18).

Two theatrical interventions in this scene disrupt the stability of the Boyfriend's version of realism and the version of reality that underlies it. The first is when the Boyfriend, infuriated that the Writer presumes to compare herself to Picasso, upends the pot of cassoulet he has cooked over the Writer's laptop. For good measure, he opens the laptop and spreads sweet potato mash on the keyboard. This symbolically violent destruction of the Writer's tools is a shocking moment in performance. It is also a jarring rupture in the theatrical illusion of the scene, which I found took me out of the play. In McIntyre's production, which used real food, the Writer's laptop was a MacBook, an expensive status symbol of hipster writers (so, despite her protestations of transcendence, the Writer is not completely exempt from interaction with the material world). As I watched, I found myself worrying about the welfare of the laptop. Had the Almeida bought a MacBook to destroy it in the production, which seemed like a waste of resources, or procured a display model? In the auditorium, there was an audible gasp – both, I think, out of sympathy for the Writer and outrage at the Boyfriend's action and what it meant, and in watching the seeming destruction of a valuable piece of electronics. It seems ironic that, despite all the play's twists and its structural critique of capitalism and patriarchy, this was the most shocking moment of the play in production for many people in the audience. As Emily Hart notes wryly in her review, 'For all its radical intention and verbal attack on the theatrical establishment, the biggest laugh of the night in the Almeida Theatre comes from the Writer's aim to "dismantle capitalism and overturn the patriarchy", and the loudest gasp is elicited by the enraged smearing of sweet potato mash into a Macbook', perhaps an encouragement for us to reflect on our own implication within the capitalist system.[75]

[75] Emily Hart, 'Review: The Writer at the Almeida', *Reaction*, 27 April 2018. <reaction.life/review-writer-almeida/> [accessed 28 February 2019].

The second theatrical intervention in this scene is when the Boyfriend brings a real baby onto the stage. It is the climax of the sound effects of a baby crying that have been increasing in volume throughout the scene, suggesting an insistent pressure upon the Writer to choose motherhood rather than pursuing her writing (that the two are in opposition is suggested by the violence of the Boyfriend's shouted insistence, 'YOU ARE NOT PICASSO' (50)). The Boyfriend hands the baby to the Writer and declares, 'We had a baby' (55), concocting a whole alternative life by the performative force of the utterance and the logic of realism (if a baby appears onstage, it must be related to the characters). The Writer insists, 'That baby has been bought. It's being paid to be here. I did not give birth to that baby' (55), puncturing the Boyfriend's illusion-making by drawing attention to the economics involved in performance. Perhaps alarmingly, when watching McIntyre's production, I noticed that I was more concerned for the MacBook's welfare than the baby's, which should perhaps prompt me to reflect on what it means for them both to be treated as props that can be 'bought'. In a further irony, bringing 'real life babies' (15) onstage was one of the theatrical devices that the young woman indicted in the first scene as a cheap thrill and distraction from politics.

Both dousing the laptop with cassoulet and bringing a real baby onstage serve as moments of what Hans-Thies Lehmann describes as the 'irruption of the real' in *Postdramatic Theatre*, a self-reflexive drawing attention to the real.[76] These devices make a more insistent truth claim – they seem comparatively more real than the rest of the scene – which, in turn, makes the truth claims made by the established theatrical conventions in the scene (i.e. realism) less convincing. Although it is not stated explicitly, this scene seems

[76] Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. by Karen Jürs-Munby (London: Routledge, 2006), pp. 100-104.

underscored by the idea, familiar from Marxist and feminist critiques of realism, that ideology inheres in how reality is represented artistically and the kinds of realities and possible lives that are chosen to be represented; the Boyfriend is associated with both a conventional idea of realism and conventional heteropatriarchal life narratives. The analogy between the two is reinforced by the Writer's feeling of being constricted by both the Boyfriend's expectations and the material domestic set that they inhabit; she tells the Boyfriend, 'I feel like I can't breathe most of the time' (51), and at one point in the scene goes to stand outside the set but still onstage. While the material world may seem incontrovertibly solid, the Writer de-realises and dematerialises it by showing that this vision of life – assumed to be concrete, based in bricks and mortar, is as provisional as any other version of reality and that other versions are available. Complimenting a sofa, making conversation and feeding a child are all 'making shit up' (41). When the Writer rejects the stage baby, the Boyfriend admonishes her, 'Just because you can't imagine it doesn't mean that we can't be happy', and she retorts, 'I'm sorry. But I've got a really good imagination' (55), precipitating the collapse of the domestic set. She is brave enough to withdraw her suspension of disbelief in the fabric of this more conventional life and to imagine alternatives to the established path.

'I want the world to change shape': Structures of desire

In the first scene, the Director asks the young woman:

> Why don't you find older men attractive?
>
> I find the fact that they're attracted to younger women – repellent.
>
> That's politics, that's not desire. What we want and what we believe to be right are different things.

> No. It's desire.
>
> You can find something sexually attractive even when you find it politically offensive.[77] (27)

The young woman asserts that who we desire and how we act upon that desire are always political, a structural perspective borne out by the rest of the play. Yet the Director's response suggests that there is something about desire that is unruly, complicating abstract political certainties by bringing in real bodies. Female sexuality and desire are important themes that run through almost all of Hickson's plays, particularly her most recent work.[78] The first scene of *Oil* includes a passionate sex scene between May and her husband Joss. Furthermore, desire is used as a metaphor; in William Whitcomb's seduction of May to abandon her husband for the promise of oil, the energy source and the freedom it represents seem to have an almost sexual pull for May. After the first two scenes of *Oil*, May's sexual desire seems to be superseded by a fierce, stifling love for her daughter Amy, which her daughter experiences as 'control and manipulation'.[79] Hickson explains that 'the co-dependence of a mother daughter relationship was a useful metaphor for our co-dependence with the oil producing nations'; the human relationship becomes a vector to convey colonialism.[80] In positioning desire between the literal and the metaphorical,

[77] The first scene in the published script does not attribute character names to lines, perhaps to capture some sense of the metatheatrical surprise occasioned by watching the play in performance; a line break suggests the alternation of speaker.
[78] Hickson's most recent play, *Swive [Elizabeth]* (Sam Wanamaker Playhouse, Shakespeare's Globe, 2019), a historical drama about Queen Elizabeth I, explores, in part, the cost of Elizabeth's choice to deny her own desires in order to remain inviolate. See Hannah Greenstreet, 'Review: Swive [Elizabeth] at Sam Wanamaker Playhouse', *Exeunt Magazine*, 22 December 2019. <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-swive-elizabeth-sam-wanamaker-playhouse/> [accessed 28 January 2021].
[79] Ella Hickson, *Oil* (London: Nick Hern, 2016), p. 123.
[80] Simon Sladen and Ella Hickson, 'Playwright Ella Hickson discusses Oil at the Almeida' [podcast], *Theatre Voice*, 15 November 2016. <www.theatrevoice.com/audio/playwright-ella-hickson-discusses-oil-almeida/ [accessed 27 September 2019].

Hickson explores desire as something fundamentally ambivalent. Staging female desire proves to be far more complex than merely a question of breaking the taboo of representing women as actively desiring subjects; desire is revealed to be enmeshed within capitalist and heteropatriarchal systems that threaten to co-opt its expression into something oppressive.

Hickson further explores the destructive potential of enmeshed commercial and sexual desire in *ANNA* (National Theatre, 2019), co-created with sound designers Ben and Max Ringham. The set is a 1968 Berlin apartment, designed with meticulous naturalism by Vicki Mortimer, complete with glass windows as a literal fourth wall. The audience wear binaural headphones to eavesdrop on the events of the party taking place in front of them. Only Anna, the focus of the play, wears a microphone, so there are conversations between characters that cannot be heard distinctly. *ANNA* takes the form of a thriller, its several twists inducing a paranoid atmosphere of not knowing whom to trust, demonstrating the potential of the political climate of suspicion in Communist East Berlin to erode trust in romantic relationships. At first it seems like the happily married Anna is being pursued and blackmailed by Christian Neumann/ Max, a man from her past, who has become her husband's boss. When Neumann/ Max engineers for Anna to be alone with him, their past sexual history is revealed, the scene resolving into a dangerous seduction with rapidly shifting power:

> ANNA. I love my husband. I love our life.
> MAX. But do you want your husband?
> ANNA. You can't build a country on want.
> MAX. Your Party leaders are all want – they're living like kings in Wandlitz – they want for nothing whilst the rest of the country queue for food.[81]

[81] Ella Hickson, Ben and Max Ringham, *ANNA* (London: Nick Hern, 2019), p. 71.

Sexual desire, 'want', becomes separated from love, and redefined by Anna as threatening to the communist society, as 'It's individualistic to be loyal to your partner before the state'.[82] Up until now, Max has played a fervent supporter of the state, Christian Neumann. Here he reveals heretical views in his description of the party leaders as 'all want', their association with capitalism and excess contrasting with the other meaning of 'want' as poverty. Later in the play it is revealed that Anna has set up Neumann to betray his disloyalty to the cause of socialism, partly as revenge but partly to stop herself from 'wanting' him, recognising the threat that desire for another man posed to her marriage.[83] The individualistic, capitalistic wanting is in tension with another kind of wanting: the idealistic desire to forge a society for the collective good, an ideal in which Anna really does seem to believe. However, the play as a whole also reveals the violence and brutality of the Communist regime and how easily people can betray its founding ideals in practice.

The Writer is even more explicit in its focus on physical desire in its multiple sex scenes. In the scene 2, the Boyfriend and the Writer have a perfunctory sexual encounter on the sofa he has bought in celebration (and, it is implied, financial anticipation) of the commission the Writer has not yet decided to accept. The Boyfriend's approach to sex therefore seems acquisitive. This scene also suggests that desire and sex can be separated, as the Writer compares having sex with the Boyfriend to 'Going to the gym, I'm always glad I've gone afterwards' (50). In an interview with Holly Williams, Hickson commented that she used the Director's past attempt at sexual exploitation of the young woman in the first

[82] Ibid. Maddy Costa also notes the importance of the word 'want' and its multiple meanings in her review. Maddy Costa, 'Review: Anna at National Theatre', *Exeunt Magazine*. 23 May 2019. <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-anna-national-theatre/? [accessed 7 January 2021].
[83] Hickson, *ANNA*, p. 86.

scene as a metaphor for capitalist exploitation.[84] As in *Oil*, relationships between the characters are used to convey subtle negotiations of power; from a structural perspective, desire is always political.

Nonetheless, despite the play showing desire's co-option by commercialism, there is also a strongly utopian strand in *The Writer*, in which desire is a catalyst for change by illuminating the difference between how things are and how they could be. This resonates with Jill Dolan's concept of 'utopian performatives', which she describes as 'small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense'.[85] She argues, 'Utopian performatives, in their doings, make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better'.[86] For Dolan, the political power of performance resides in its ability to move the audience, to impart affectively how the world might be different. Although Dolan's concept of 'utopian performances' remains nebulous, this theoretical approach does illuminate Hickson's treatment of desire in *The Writer* as activator of and vehicle for progressive social change. Crucially, Hickson makes this feeling palpable through the form of her play.

Scene 3: 'Out from under'[87]

[84] Holly Williams, '"Dismantle capitalism and overturn the patriarchy": Why *The Writer* is more than just a #MeToo play', *Independent*, 24 April 2018 <www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/features/the-writer-metoo-romola-garai-ella-hickson-blanche-mcinture-almeida-theatre-london-a8319561.html> [accessed 25 September 2019].
[85] Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), p. 5.
[86] Ibid., p. 6.
[87] Hickson tells Chris Goode that 'scene 3 always was called "Out from under"', suggesting 'a moment of transcendent freedom' in which the Writer was 'free from contract, whatever that contract was'. Goode, 'Thompson's Live'.

The central monologue of *The Writer* is the point at which the play's twin foci on structures and desire, at once embodied and utopian, converge in the testing of a new theatrical form through which to express and activate female sexuality. The stage direction at the start of scene 3 poses the 'provocation' to a director of '*staging female experience* […] *avoiding the inherently patriarchal nature of theatre*' (57). The text instructs,

> Female characters should do – they are not having things done to them. Bodies are for action, not titillation or decoration. There should be no looking. The protagonist should own the space.

Hickson's manifesto for staging female experience resonates with theories of *écriture féminine*.[88] In 'Aller à la Mer', Hélène Cixous criticises the theatre for the violence against women at the centre of its plots, epitomised by Greek and Shakespearean tragedy.[89] She proposes an alternative theatre, drawing on the dual metaphor of stage production and birth as 'the body in labour', describing its features thus:

> If the stage is woman, it will mean ridding this space of theatricality. […] This will be a stage/ scene without event. No need for plot or action; a single gesture is enough, but one that can transform the world.[90]

As well as the shared thematic emphasis on the female body, several ideas resonate with Hickson's dramatic methods in this scene, particularly the turning away from 'event' and the minimising of (the impression of) theatricality. Scene 3 is a notable departure in style from the rest of the play in its adoption of diegesis; it reads more like prose than drama and

[88] See Hélène Cixous, 'Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1.4 (1976), 875-893. It is worth noting that Hickson is by no means the first woman playwright to seek a form more conducive to staging female experience, or even a specifically 'female' form. Predecessors include Hélène Cixous's own play *Portrait of Dora* (1976) and Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal* (1928), which followed *The Writer* at the Almeida in June 2018 in a production directed by Natalie Abrahami. The programming decision directly invited comparison between the two plays; Helen Lewis was commissioned to write a reflective piece on the subject of canonising women writers for the Almeida website. Helen Lewis, 'Women Writers vs. the Literary Canon', Almeida Theatre website, n.d. <almeida.co.uk/women-writers-vs-the-literary-canon> [accessed 13 December 2019].

[89] Hélène Cixous, 'Aller à la mer', trans. by Barbara Kerslake. *Modern Drama* 27 (1984), 546-548.

[90] Ibid., p. 547.

registers the influence of Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Jeanette Winterson.[91] The turn from mimesis to diegesis could be an attempt to reduce the impact of the male gaze, as the scene relies on verbal images more than visual ones.

Hickson's monologue swoops from the everyday to the epic, with dislocating jumps in time and place through the vivid present and the insistent first-person pronouns. It starts with the Writer (Garai) speaking confessionally about having an IUD contraceptive device fitted, then shifts into a feminist rewriting of the myth of Semele, reclaiming her as the mythic mother of female playwrights.[92] Rapidly condensing time and space, the next section of the monologue simultaneously describes a swim across a freezing lake and makes the swim a metaphor for an internal transformation, growing into strength as a writer. The pronouns switch from 'I' to 'You', as if the Writer is giving herself, her companion or even the audience advice: 'You're going to die a thousand times, lose sight of shore for days, and with every rasping breath you feel the full weight of all the loss in the world. […] Skin and flay and burn and throw it all away again and again and again' (59). On the other side of the lake, in the woods she finds her 'tribe' (61).[93] The final section of the monologue recounts a mutually fulfilling sexual relationship with another woman and the destruction of the idyll by the intrusion of the male gaze.

In its textual density, the scene demands far more concentration to process than the previous scenes. Some audience members found its difficulty rebarbative rather than

[91] Hickson has spoken of how these authors have influenced her writing on Chris Goode's podcast. Goode, 'Thompson's Live'.

[92] In the original myth, Semele was incinerated by Zeus when she asked him to reveal himself to her. Semele and Zeus' son was Dionysus, the god of theatre. See Arthur Cotterell, 'Dionysus', in *A Dictionary of World Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[93] Ella Hickson said that she based this scene on how she felt on the writing retreat at the MacDowell Colony, where she wrote the play, and has talked frequently in interviews about the loneliness of being a playwright and the importance of finding one's 'tribe'. She describes the MacDowell Colony as a utopian space, which seems outside capitalism (although she acknowledges it is funded by wealthy philanthropists). Goode, 'Thompson's Live'.

rewarding. In his review, Paul Taylor remarks, 'A real pity, then, that the mythic monologue in which she [the Writer] gives unfettered expression to the intuitive form she hankers for is so embarrassingly over-written', a criticism that is anticipated in the play by the Director's critique of scene 3 in the following scene.[94] Indeed, in rehearsals, Hickson and McIntyre came under pressure to cut the scene, which they resisted.[95] McIntyre recalls that she found scene 3 'intensely challenging to direct', due to its 'combination of deep personal expression […] and absence of plot mechanism for justifying or supporting that', which meant 'you can't use any of your standard kit' that she would for directing a scene in a naturalist style.[96] Scene 3 was very different from the rest of McIntyre's production, in the style of writing, the theatrical idiom and the visuals of its staging. Whereas Anna Fleischle's design for scene 2 was characterised by an overabundance of the material, in scene 3 the stage is bare. The minimalism of the set could suggest the Writer's temporary respite from the pressures of capitalism. The stage presence of Garai, who starts the scene alone on the bare stage (joined later by Rossi, who echoes her movements but does not speak), carries the monologue. The focus is on Garai as the Writer and her internal transformation.

The monologue is accented and underscored by atmospheric lighting design by Richard Howells and sound design by Emma Laxton. A large proportion of the monologue is delivered in darkness or semi-darkness, allowing greater focus on the auditory experience of the text, as well as making it more difficult for the audience to 'look' at Garai and Rossi's bodies. Discontinuities and jumps in focus of the text are registered through a series of flashes of light and static bursts. For the most part, the sound and lighting is more focused

[94] Paul Taylor, 'The Writer, The Almeida, London, review: Unflaggingly provocative', *Independent*, 25 April 2018. <www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre-dance/reviews/the-writer-almeida-review-romola-garai-ella-hickson-metoo-gender-power-a8321321.html> [accessed 25 February 2019].
[95] McIntyre and Greenstreet interview.
[96] Ibid.

on creating an atmosphere rather than mimetically representing what is described in the monologue. However, some sound effects, such as the sound of plunging into water for the swim across the river, and a crackling fire for the camp, help to transport the imagined setting to another place. McIntyre allows the text to generate many of the theatrical transformations in the audience's imaginations, rather than deploying extensive technical effects. The bodily transformations the monologue describes are physicalised at points by Sasha Milavic Davies's choreography, which also forges a sense of visual connection between Garai and Rossi. For example, as she describes swimming across the lake, Garai moves in a slow motion, abstract rendition of swimming, bending down to touch the floor, then stretching up, movements that are echoed by Rossi behind her (see Fig. 4). The movement here suggests that Rossi is both Garai's shadow and her double, anticipating the Writer's description of her sexual union with her 'swimming mate' (63) as an encounter with sameness later in the monologue.

Figure 4. The production photograph by Manuel Harlan, depicting Lara Rossi standing behind Romola Garai, both with their arms outstretched, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at www.newstatesman.com/culture/music-theatre/2018/04/writer-almeida-drama-which-tries-have-its-meaning-cake-and-eat-it [accessed 26 January 2021].

Like RashDash in *Two Man Show*, Hickson grapples with and sets the director the challenge of grappling with how women can have an embodied stage presence beyond the titillating paradigm of the male gaze. Rather than staging the naked female body as RashDash do, Hickson explores embodiment textually. The monologue is rooted in embodied experiences, such as swimming, dancing and having sex, activities that recall Cixous's idea of the female 'body in labour'. The Writer describes her physical transformation, from a body that can be objectified to a practical body with 'Longer limbs, broad-shouldered, with an impressive gait. Six feet or more' (60), a transformation that can be imagined more easily than it can be staged. McIntyre's direction of scene 3, which foregoes mimetic reference for a disjunction between the textual and the physical body, left space for members of the audience to overlay the bodily transformations that the Writer describes onto the physical body of Garai through their imagination. The productive interplay between the textual and physical bodies, emphasised by the lighting design and projections which at points provide a bridge between the two, suggests the transformative potential of theatre when outside the constraints of received ideas of realism.

Hickson and McIntyre also avoid mimetic representation of the transformative sexual encounter in this scene. Mimesis has been diagnosed as a problem earlier in the play, when the young woman declares in the first scene, 'It's looking that does it' (23). Throughout scene 3, Romola Garai and Lara Rossi remain fully clothed and do not touch. Garai sits alone on the edge of the stage, with Rossi sitting further upstage, as she describes the sexual encounter:

> You've done it to yourself a thousand times and how delightful to negotiate your sameness on another and celebrate it from the outside. That is the only outside there is. No one is sexy. Everything is sex. There is no looking. There is only being. (63)

The description of the sexual encounter focuses on sameness rather than difference in the mutual masturbation. Their bodies seem to fuse together to become one entity, completely immersed in each other, with no 'outside'. In contrast with 'being', which is implied is an authentic state, 'looking' seems to have been connected with a kind of performance, whether that looking is done by the sexual partner or by someone else.

The sexual encounter is followed by a utopian revisioning of the world, as if these new forms have been generated by it. As Garai describes how 'We feel the possibility of new constructions – systems, schemes and structures – We are making a space conceived entirely by the architecture of our wanting' (64), she sits opposite Rossi, mirroring her position (see Fig. 5). 'The Power of Two' by Todd Baker plays, a magical, electronic-sounding piece of music, which morphs into 'Light of a Clear Blue Morning' by Dolly Parton. Projections of white circles are sketched on the floor of the stage, responding to but not mimetically representing the images in Hickson's epic stage directions:

> *A chalk circle. A structure. A system. A scheme. For a new world: the whole earth changes its face*. (64)

Garai and Rossi sit watching each other and talking, lit up by the squiggles. White projected circles are sketched on the dark back wall, until the entire back wall and stage are covered with scribbles.

Figure 5. The production photograph by Manuel Harlan, depicting Romola Garai and Lara Rossi in shadow hugging their knees, originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The image was sourced at exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-writer-almeida/ [accessed 26 January 2021].

The formal departure of scene 3 from the rest of the play makes space to envision new societal structures, echoing the connection the young woman drew between artistic and social structures in the first scene when she declared, 'I want the world to change shape' (19). The line, 'We are making a space conceived entirely by the architecture of our wanting' (64), brings together the imagery of form and desire that runs throughout the play. It reconceives of desire as a positive agent of change, emphasising its connection to the material world without being materialist. It also conceives of form as something far broader and more social than the aesthetic, paralleling new forms of sex, new forms of relating to other people, new theatrical forms, new ways of organising society, new buildings. At the same time, as the swirling projections write themselves over Garai and Rossi's bodies that mirror each other in their posture, the 'architecture of our wanting' is rooted in the co-presence of the performers' bodies, the desire given a concrete shape through flesh. It is not the audience projecting desire onto Rossi and Garai and thus objectifying them, but a

charge between the two performers that is inward-facing and private but radiates outwards.

However, this utopia, held between bodies, is precious and fragile. It breaks down with the re-intrusion of the male gaze, with the arrival of a tourist 'with binoculars held to his eyes', making the Writer again self-conscious of her body 'in a flood of shame' (65) in a post-Edenic loss of paradise. The feeling of disillusionment is as palpable as the transcendent moment of utopian desire. Hickson explains that she wanted to 'put in[to the audience] both the ecstasy of freedom and the inevitability of reality, which is what that final act really does', when these new societal structures prove unsustainable.[97] Another layer of meaning of the word 'want' becomes apparent: to lack. Desire encodes within it a sense of loss. There is something unrealisable about the utopian world sketched out in scene 3 (indeed, perhaps the definition of utopian is that it should be unrealisable). As Hickson notes, the projections of the new world are 'not a blueprint or anything that we can actually live by'.[98] She suggests that the final scene of the play recognises, 'if anything was going to be remade it has to be remade from within that system [of capitalism]. And I really take that reality onboard and I really try to engage with the inevitability of compromise'.[99] Nonetheless, the glimpse of an alternative in scene 3 leaves a powerful affective residue, a sense of unease or wrongness, in which to root a critique of the status quo. As the Writer observes, 'This strange cage is so much more visible for having spent some deific time without it/ Enough, perhaps to make you wish, you'd never tasted freedom' (65).

The phrase 'strange cage' suggests not only the restrictions imposed by a return to capitalist society, but also the constrictions involved in a return to a more conventional

[97] Hickson and Greenstreet interview.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid.

theatrical form. Through the Director's dramaturgical critique of the central monologue, scene 4 reintroduces the 'rules' of dramatic composition, which had been temporarily suspended for the experiment of scene 3. He says that the scene is 'not good theatre' (67) because it lacks conflict and a power struggle and says that it 'needs an ending' (66). Interestingly, the Director considers the prospective audience's engagement with the form of the play in terms of desire, but it is desire framed as a financial transaction that is not fulfilled: 'We've invested in the relationship between the writer and director. That's what you set up at the beginning and it doesn't pay off' (66). Whereas scene 3 attempted to stand outside or beyond capitalism temporarily and to consider the alternative forms that could be generated there, the Director reintroduces the commercial imperative of needing to sell tickets to the play, making whether or not the audience is satisfied a pressing concern. He even implies that the Writer is disingenuous in suggesting that she is not motivated by what sells, predicting that her 'next play will be a male protagonist and good-old fashioned commercial naturalism' (70). Whereas critics and audience members often attributed the Writer's arguments to Hickson and even considered the character to be a thinly veiled autobiographical sketch, Hickson stresses that she also wrote the Director character, who is 'my internal critic, that's as much me'.[100] She reflects that, in writing the central monologue, 'I was really committed to the rules of engagement [that she would write without self-censorship or sense of constraint], but no-one can be committed to the iteration', suggesting that Hickson herself recognises the utility of established dramatic conventions, even if she believes them to be politically suspect.[101] To write scene 3 with absolute

[100] Dan Rebellato and Ella Hickson, 'Playwrights in Lockdown: Ella Hickson', *YouTube*, 7 May 2020. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIsUahE9wiY> [accessed 7 January 2021].
[101] Ibid.

sincerity, only to ironise it in the following scene, suggests a deep ambivalence at the heart of the play that Hickson describes as 'somebody arguing with themselves'.[102]

Scene 5: 'This strange cage'

The final scene suggests, in several ways, a return to the 'good-old fashioned commercial naturalism' the Director predicted in scene 4. Scene 5 recalls scene 2, in both the set and the situation, but with the boyfriend replaced by a girlfriend; the Writer and Girlfriend have dinner together, have sex and discuss their relationship. Indeed, in some ways, scene 5 is more conventional in form than scene 2, as the characters do not display the metatheatrical awareness that the Writer did in that scene, nor the willingness to challenge social and aesthetic conventions. The stage directions describe the set as '*the West End version of the apartment from Part Two. It's high-end, smart, glitzy – the commercialism sings out through the reserved luxury of it, the seamlessness*' (75). The Writer and Girlfriend's costumes and make-up should make them '*look like hot, hipster versions of their previous selves*' (75), suggesting a translation into commercial theatre of the lesbian relationship depicted in scene 3. Like the previous scenes, this scene occupies a dual status as a scene from the Writer's life with its own narrative logic (the glitzy apartment has been paid for by the Director's offer of more money and/ or by the Writer's play transferring to the West End) and a scene within the play the Writer is writing or, as is suggested in the dialogue of the scene, has just handed in.

The stage direction '*We should, if possible, get the sense the DIRECTOR has directed the scene*' (75) raises a number of challenges for staging and interpretation – not least how

[102] Ibid.

to make the Director's intervention in the scene visible to an audience. It could suggest that the Director has won the argument of the previous scene and the Writer has bowed to pressure to deliver an ending that satisfies his aesthetic sensibilities. This possibility, in turn, reanimates questions of artistic influence and control that circulated earlier in the play. The polished set reflecting the trappings of wealth raises the possibility that the Writer has allowed herself to be bought, compromising her artistic vision and her radical politics. Describing how she and the rest of the production team approached the final scene, Blanche McIntyre said, 'we can make it look like it's been directed by the male director in the materials that we use to stage it, the flashness of the apartment, the glitziness of the design, the production values that have gone into it'.[103] The fictional Director's input, in other words, was conceived of in terms of commercialism rather than a gendered style of directing. Yet, in *The Writer*, patriarchy and commercialism are inextricably intertwined. The high production values of the last scene as staged by the Director therefore render it politically compromised, just as the Writer's mutually fulfilling lesbian relationship is perverted by the introduction of wealth and power differentials.

Nonetheless, McIntyre said that, beyond the set and costuming, the stage direction specifying the scene should look like it was directed by the fictional male Director was 'mostly ignored', as 'the play is not giving the audience what the director wants, that is a nice, neat, satisfying character and narrative arc. It's detonating all kinds of ideas, which are subversive and so to that extent, it's not possible to direct it in […] the way that that male director would direct it, without squashing all of that subversion'.[104] In the last scene of McIntyre's production of *The Writer* there were, then, two directorial presences: choices

[103] McIntyre and Greenstreet interview.
[104] Ibid.

made in accordance with the metatheatrical conceit of the scene being directed by the male Director, and choices made to amplify the subversion in Hickson's play, creating a kind of double consciousness. The image of 'detonating ideas' seems a particularly apt description of the last scene of *The Writer*, which does not resolve so much as reach an impasse. It gathers together the threads of materialism, desire and form in a knot, tightened around sex as the material embodiment of desire.

Sex under capitalism

In the final scene of *The Writer*, the Writer and Girlfriend have sex onstage three times. The first time, they have sex on the sofa (obscured by its back), the positioning mirroring the sexual encounter in scene 2, although this time Rossi and Garai make noises of mutual pleasure. It is quick and matter of fact, seeming part of the characters' day-to-day lives. As described in the stage directions, '*It's good sex, the best we've seen. They know what is good and they get it done'* (78). The second time, the Writer asks, 'Can I go down on you?' and the Girlfriend replies, bathetically, 'I'm doing emails' (81), a response that does not make it seem like she is particularly keen on the idea. Rossi sits on a chair with her back to the audience, while Garai puts her face in her crotch. Rossi rests her hand on the top of Garai's head and lifts her face up to kiss her.[105]

The third sexual act has the most build up, created by its position in the scene and the dialogue preceding it:

> WRITER. I want to.
> GIRLFRIEND. Really?
> WRITER. Yes I think so.

[105] In our interview, McIntyre noted that when blocking these scenes, 'It was very very important that the women when they're having sex, or when the Writer is having sex with her boyfriend, are either not seen or the sex is obviously not genuinely taking place, which was a conscious effort to take the predatory gaze out of those scenes'. Ibid.

> GIRLFRIEND. With the /
> WRITER. / Yes. I think so. I still feel fundamentally opposed to prosthetics, I just don't think we can make anything better than what we were born with but seeing as you're an advocate – I don't see why *not*. (82)

That they are referring to a sex toy is at first withheld from the audience, which at once increases anticipation and suggests that the Writer and the Girlfriend have had this conversation before. (It is also significant that the Writer suggests that the sex toy is artificial, stressing the contrast between the naturalness of the sexual encounter as described in scene 3, and the one that takes place within the context of a snazzy living room and a West End show that requires a supplementary object.) The stage directions suggest that the sex toy 'has real presence' (83), emphasised by the Writer's reluctance, almost fear to have it used on her.[106] The stage directions also focus on the logistics of staging the sexual encounter, sex as a material practice: '*GIRLFRIEND takes her own trousers off – arranges herself over the WRITER, inserts the object and is about to begin. […] Suddenly the WRITER gets out of there as fast as she can*' (83). In response, '*GIRLFRIEND just sits, quietly, looking in the WRITER's direction, gently, kindly – and lets whatever the tension is, whatever the ball of pain is, unfurl a bit*' (84). The sudden aborting of the sexual act encourages speculation about which part of the Writer's sexual history makes being penetrated such a scary thing, recalling the violence and war imagery of the Writer's description of 'sex with men' as 'the land-grab, the Blitzkrieg, the small strange impulse to cry' (64) in scene 3. The Girlfriend gently asks the Writer, 'What's wrong?' (84), and agrees to let the Writer use the dildo on her, even though she has not used it before.

[106] The stage directions specify that the sex toy is 'a pegging penis – it's not a strap on' (83), which suggests anal rather than vaginal penetration. However, from the positioning of the actors on the sofa in McIntyre's production, vaginal penetration with a double-ended dildo seems more practical.

The sex toy should offer mutually fulfilling sex as '*it's held inside one person and offers a dick to be used on the other person*' (83). However, when the Writer uses it on the Girlfriend the stage directions say, '*there's no connection, the concentration is all logistical – and focused on the groin area'* (85). Indeed, '*there's something strangely aggressive about it – she's in the zone, it's all her, the Girlfriend has all but evaporated*' (85), producing an orgasm for the Writer but none for the Girlfriend. The Writer displays a lack of care for the Girlfriend, telling her 'Can you stop talking?' (85), in contrast to the care and understanding the Girlfriend displayed when the Writer said she did not want it used on her. In McIntyre's production, this was conveyed by positioning Garai on top of Rossi, who was obscured from view, on the sofa. Garai does not look down at her partner, but makes rhythmic, almost violent grunts as she thrusts. Garai slows and subsides. Rossi gets up, puts on her trousers, and goes offstage into the kitchen as Garai is still in the aftermath of her orgasm.

Whereas the previous two sexual acts in the scene seemed unremarkable and everyday, this bad sexual encounter accrues metaphorical weight. The Girlfriend's physical removal of herself from the room and immediately changing the subject when she returns suggest that something has gone wrong. The Writer gradually realises, 'I feel like I've done something terrible' (87) but is not able to articulate exactly what or how she has hurt her girlfriend; it is more of a general, free-floating sense of unease. The Girlfriend responds to the Writer's expression of guilt by asking, 'Have you ever fucked someone taller than you?' (87), the seeming non-sequitur charged with symbolic weight. The Writer is horrified at the idea of having sex with a woman who is taller than her. 'But you're tall' (87), the Girlfriend points out. The line, delivered in a matter-of-fact manner by Lara Rossi, who is mixed race and physically smaller than Garai, seems to be a declaration of the Writer's privilege, or even accusing her of a penchant for exerting power over her sexual partners in a non-

consensual way. Yet it is also quite an oblique statement and this reading has the potential to oversimplify the workings of structural privilege and power imbalances.

The power difference between the two women is also conveyed by comparing the Girlfriend to a child and the Writer to a man. The vulnerability of the Girlfriend is emphasised by the childish way she speaks, 'Really yummy. Yum scrum in my tum', and the way she eats her biscuit: '*licks all the sugar off, eats round the sides, it's ravenous but also, oddly – kid-like'* (86). Earlier in the scene when they were first having sex, the Girlfriend compares the Writer to 'The kind of guy that puts his hands behind his head like that after he makes someone come' (79). In this scene, the Writer is repeatedly paralleled with the Director and the Boyfriend, from emphasising the importance of her work and devaluing her partner's, to adopting a more assertive role in bed, to ambushing her partner with a marriage proposal. The Writer assuming the dildo is the climax of her taking on a role coded as 'male' and associated with power (a troubling conflation but one suggested by the play).[107] The dildo takes on a metaphoric significance beyond its material presence. As McIntyre observes, whereas for the Girlfriend 'it's simply an object that they can both use', for the Writer it 'is a gendered object, it represents power and it represents dominance' and when she uses it 'she is seduced by the power' and 'damages the person that she most genuinely loves, with whom she has the most horizontal, hierarchy-free relationship, because she takes within her the patriarchal understanding of what it is to wield power'.[108]

[107] The two are conflated within the scene and in society more broadly. It is troubling how the lesbian couple so easily slip into heteronormative gender roles, feeding into stereotypes of one of the partners needing to be 'the man' in the relationship. The layer of metatheatricality makes it difficult to tell whether a heteronormative version of a lesbian relationship is being presented deliberately – because that might provide a layer of distancing irony, or whether the last scene is a 'straight' depiction of a heteronormative lesbian relationship. I found not knowing the intention behind the representation extremely disorienting and quite upsetting, both when I watched the production and afterwards trying to work out the politics of the last scene.
[108] McIntyre and Greenstreet interview.

McIntyre's interpretation of the Writer and her girlfriend's relationship seems an important clarification; it is not sex (or dildos) that are the problem, but the cultural context in which it takes place. Indeed, Hickson has reflected that the last scene:

> sort of makes the argument, via an elaborate double ended purple dildo, that power difference is the work of capitalism, it's less to do with gender per se. It doesn't really matter if it's a woman and a woman or a man and a woman. Oppression is a capitalist construction and that is how sex operates, often, and that is how money operates. And that's certainly how money wants sex to operate on screens and on stages.[109]

Hickson seems to be suggesting that sex under capitalism, particularly sex as staged in commercial theatre, necessarily involves power difference and therefore oppression; it cannot be mutually fulfilling. What Hickson's description of the political intention behind the final scene does not account for is the affective impact of the Writer's discovery of the capacity for oppression within herself. It made me recall the Director's admonishment to the young woman in the first scene: 'You can find something sexually attractive even when you find it politically offensive' (25). The Writer's desire to dominate her partner in this case shows up the limitations of her professed radical politics; where scene 3 showed that desire could be a catalyst for utopian politics, scene 5 emphasises the unruliness of desire in the way it attaches to bodies and sexual practices.

In performance, the choice of prop rather overshadowed the ending of the play. Something similar occurred in the critical reception of Katie Mitchell's production of *When We Have Sufficiently Tortured Each Other* (National Theatre, 2019) by Martin Crimp, a gender-bending adaptation of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* that concluded with Cate

[109] Deborah Frances-White and Susan Wokoma, 'Taking Control of the Narrative with special guests Ella Hickson, Samuel West and Lara Rossi', *The Guilty Feminist*, Ep. 117, 1 October 2018. <guiltyfeminist.libsyn.com/117-taking-control-of-the-narrative-with-susan-wokoma-and-special-guests-ella-hickson-samuel-west-and-lara-rossi> [accessed 12 September 2019].

Blanchett putting on a strap-on dildo and miming penetrating Stephen Dillane.[110] For both productions, reviewers sensationalised and fixated on the dildo, leading to some oversimplifying interpretations of what the plays were 'saying'. In a review of *The Writer* that takes issue with its purportedly feminist politics, Libby Purves describes the Writer and her Girlfriend as having sex with 'a huge vivid purple dildo', 'Which upsets them, because just as in the end of Animal Farm the power-game panting of the topmost one means that she has become one of the oppressive pigs. Dicks are evil, see?'[111] Coming to a similar conclusion, Patrick Marmion describes the last scene as follows:

> just when she [the Writer] thinks she has ascended into identitarian [sic] heaven, she finds herself guilty of patriarchal collusion after fucking her (smaller) female partner (Lara Rossi) with a double-ended dildo designed to pleasure both parties. This ought to be funny. Not here. The message: give a girl a phallus and she's no better than a bloke.[112]

Although that is one way of reading the ending of *The Writer* – the central character going from oppressed to oppressor as she accrues power – the structure of the play as a whole disrupts that teleology. It is further complicated by the notion that the Writer wrote the scene, implying some degree of wariness about her own capacity for domination. The crux

[110] See the breathless reports of an audience member fainting in previews of *When We Have Sufficiently Tortured Each Other*. Robert Dex, '"Sexually explicit and incredibly violent": Audience member faints during Cate Blanchett's return to the stage', *Evening Standard*, 18 January 2019. <www.standard.co.uk/go/london/theatre/cate-blanchett-national-theatre-play-audience-member-faints-a4042551.html> [accessed 31 July 2019]. In her review of *When We Have Sufficiently Tortured Each Other*, Helen Lewis complained that 'much of this play is "theatre shocking". OMG! An A-lister with a dildo!'. Helen Lewis, 'A-Lister with a dildo: Cate Blanchett at the National Theatre', *New Statesman*, 30 January 2019. <www.newstatesman.com/when-we-have-sufficiently-tortured-each-other-cate-blanchett-national-theatre-six-henry-viii-arts-theatre-review> [31 July 2019]. David Jays devoted a whole blogpost to the strap-on in his 'Propwatch' series, which traces props in theatrical productions. David Jays, 'Propwatch: The strap-on in When We Have Sufficiently Tortured Each Other', *Performance Monkey*, 12 February 2019. <www.artsjournal.com/performancemonkey/2019/02/propwatch-the-strap-on-in-when-we-have-sufficiently-tortured-each-other.html> [31 July 2019].

[111] Purves, 'The Writer', *TheatreCat*.

[112] Marmion, 'The #MeToo era needs some hippy spirit', *Sp!ked*.

of interpretation hinges upon whether or not a dildo onstage can be separated from its status as a phallic symbol: will a stage dildo always be read as an imitation dick?[113]

Indeed, this question of what the dildo represents takes us back to the framing of the scene and who is supposed to have directed it. If the scene seems to have been directed by the male Director character, it is inextricable from the male gaze and plays as a fetishized depiction of a heterosexist stereotype of lesbian sex, with the phallus as the ultimate signifier and legitimator of the sexual act as 'proper' sex. However, there is also queer potential in this scene and the dildo itself to disrupt heteropatriarchal hierarchies. Lynda Hart argues that although there is controversy around the use of dildos amongst lesbian feminists because of its association as a 'penis-substitute', strap-ons can be read as 'depicting a phallus that has no reference to the "real" of the penis'.[114] She continues, 'Lesbian dicks are the ultimate simulacra. They occupy the ontological status of the model, appropriate the privilege, and refuse to acknowledge an origin outside their own self-reflexivity'.[115]

Despite this, the queer potential of the dildo – and, arguably, the play more broadly – was not realised in the first production. In her review, Victoria Sadler argued that 'this section feels like a fully-fledged heteronormative take on queer lives and queer theatre and it just feels flawed', something she found particularly galling because an essay in the programme by Stephen Greer frames *The Writer* as a 'queer' play.[116] In many ways, the

[113] See Heather Findlay, 'Freud's Fetishism and the Lesbian Dildo Debates', *Feminist Studies* 18.3 (1992), 563-579, for an overview of lesbian-feminist debates around dildos in the 1980s, part of the 'Sex Wars'.
[114] Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 123.
[115] Ibid.
[116] Victoria Sadler, 'Theatre Review: The Writer, Almeida Theatre: "Raw, visceral feminist anger", *Victoria Sadler*, 6 May 2018. <www.victoriasadler.com/theatre-review-the-writer-almeida-theatre-raw-visceral-feminist-anger/> [accessed 28 February 2019].

scene reads as a violent contradiction of the utopian vision of queer sex between women in the third scene and the search for a queerer theatrical form. As the act of penetration occurs so near to the end of the play and is meant to shock, there is not enough time to process the dildo as anything other than sensational. Rather than resembling the jouissance Hart describes, the third sexual act in the last scene of *The Writer* seems a violent re-inscription of boundaries upon gender and sexuality; the ending seemed to close down many of the possibilities explored earlier in the play.

In the introduction to *Queer Dramaturgies* (2016), Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier distinguish between 'queer dramaturgies' and 'gay theatre', which, although it presents gay characters and stories, has been '"defanged" by fitting into mainstream expectations of what theatre is and, at the same time, what a (good) gay person is'.[117] They note that 'these representations tend to be offered in the normative Western dramaturgy of realism, requesting empathy (or sympathy) and offering narrative closure or consistency'.[118] Indeed, they suggest that queer theatre must disrupt the 'mimetic model', combining aesthetic form, stories and characters, 'the identity of the makers (self-identifying as queer), the making processes and the context in which they are seen'.[119] Similarly, in his programme essay, Greer does not limit queer theatre solely to the sexual identities of its characters and makers but rather defines it as theatre that 'manifests a critical relationship to the cultural mainstream'; 'as much about form as content: it describes an attempt to rework and reinvent the codes of our culture to allow for

[117] Alyson Campbell and Stephen Farrier ed., *Queer Dramaturgies: International Perspectives on Where Performance Leads Queer* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 16.
[118] Ibid., pp. 16-17.
[119] Ibid., pp. 16, 13. Campbell and Farrier's introduction reveals the continuing influence of the feminist critique of realism on the thinking about form and politics in contemporary theatre studies; assumptions about the conservatism of realism endure even as the critique itself has been challenged.

alternatives, often by appropriating established conventions'.[120] Therefore, scene 5 of *The Writer* could be said to present a 'gay' scene within the context of a queer play. The scene itself, effectively a rewrite of scene 2 with two women, reaffirms heteronormative assumptions and adopts the 'received idea of realism' that the rest of the play has inveighed against. Yet, in the context of the other scenes, particularly the clash between the utopian scene 3 and the 'reality' of scene 4 and 5, *The Writer* does 'manifest a critical relationship to the mainstream' and gives scope to the audience to do so. Indeed, anger or disappointment with the ending of the play seems to indicate that this critical perspective has been activated.

Nonetheless, due to its position as the final scene in the play, scene 5 does risk being given undue interpretive weight in attempting to work out what *The Writer* means, particularly combined with expectations of character development and closure. When I watched McIntyre's production, I found that the ending made me angry. A few weeks after I saw it, I reflected,

> In the last scene, she fucks her black female partner with a dildo on the sofa, caring only for her pleasure and getting off on power. It seemed to be saying, for women to become great artists, they have to get themselves penises and screw over the women around them, reproducing the canon homosocially. I think what upset me about that production […] was that I couldn't tell whether I was supposed to condemn the Writer or root for her. I couldn't work out its politics and where to situate my own in relation to them.[121]

Although I now accept that this interpretation of *The Writer* is an oversimplification, my response does capture the potency of the affective impact of the play on me. Having emotionally invested in the Writer's redemptive lesbian relationship in scene 3, I

[120] Stephen Greer, 'Queer Theatre', in *The Writer* [Programme] (London: Almeida Theatre), April 2018, pp. 7-9 (8).
[121] Hannah Greenstreet, 'Review: RashDash's Three Sisters at the Yard Theatre', *Exeunt Magazine*, 24 May 2018. <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-rashdashs-three-sisters-yard-theatre/> [29 July 2019].

experienced a powerful sense of disillusionment, almost a sense of betrayal, when this was damaged in scene 5. Queerness, the ending seems to suggest, is not inherently radical; a queer relationship under capitalism is subject to the same material conditions and leads to comparable oppression and abuse of power imbalances as heterosexual relationships.

What the final scene of *The Writer* definitely does not do is offer closure, either to the situation represented within the scene, or the play as a whole. With the Girlfriend's final speech on the creation of Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), the focus shifts from sexual politics to abstract art. She recounts,

> he was up this ladder and he was in the middle of painting and these two women that he was fucking at the same time were having a fight at the bottom of the ladder, they were wrestling, they drew blood. And he just keeps painting, the whole time – he's painting – the screaming mother, the dead – (*Takes bite of biscuit*.) and the horror and the – and he's just – (*Imitates. It's kid-like – it's cute*.) Dum di dum – […] (88)

The story hinges on the irony of Picasso, working on a painting recognised as a powerful anti-war work, ignoring the violence beneath his feet that he himself has caused. In the Girlfriend's ekphrasis, the description of the women fighting 'they were wrestling, they drew blood', merges with her impressions of the painting: 'the screaming mother, the dead'. The horror of both is juxtaposed with the Girlfriend's nonchalant delivery and the banality of her question to the Writer, 'Do you want a biscuit?' (88) In McIntyre's production, a reproduction of Picasso's *Guernica* was projected for a moment onto the stage and back wall and the Writer '*stares – horrified, haunted*' (88). Has she – who earlier in the play compared herself with Picasso – seen herself in the portrait of the artist? The choice of *Guernica*, which depicts the horrors of war in a non-realist, fractured style, seems to speak to the aesthetic debates in the play, particularly around how to represent the real and/or which forms of representation are perceived as realistic. Yet such an interpretation is

to limit the effect of *Guernica*, created in response to the fire-bombing of Guernica by the Nazis in 1937, to the aesthetic when it is a highly political work of art.[122] Indeed, the mural's fame, its complexity and the ideas it raises exceed the play and gesture beyond it, almost fracturing Hickson's play in their wake. Although the monologue appears structurally at a key moment of the play, in which it might be expected to explain what has gone before, the oblique shift to ekphrasis raises far more questions than it answers. The play deliberately denies the audience closure, leaving a tangle of unresolved ideas and conflicting feelings.

Facing reality: The politics of anti-climax

In *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (2007)*,* Heather Love reflects, 'as Elizabeth Grosz writes in relation to feminism, "any oppositional political movement…involves a disavowal of social reality so that change becomes conceivable and possible". But political change can happen not only through the disavowal of loss, but also through cleaving to it'.[123] The ambivalent affect evoked by the ending of *The Writer* is not only activated by its cleaving to loss, but also its cleaving to social reality and realism; the final scene of *The Writer* refuses to disavow social reality to imagine an alternative. Rather than viewing *The Writer's* return to a 'received idea of realism' in the final scene as a politically compromised expression of the ideology of the status quo, the formal shift could be interpreted as a clear-sighted acknowledgement of the material restrictions that impede societal change on a structural level. Although the final scene might seem to be a betrayal of

[122] See Melvyn Bragg, 'Picasso's Guernica', *In Our Time*, BBC Radio 4, 2 November 2017. <www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09bxkdm#:~:text=Melvyn%20Bragg%20and%20guests%20discuss%20the%20context%20and%20impact%20of,of%20Guernica%2C%20and%20its%20people.> [accessed 7 January 2021].
[123] Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 127. Love aims to recuperate queer works of literature written at the turn of the twentieth century that focus on loss and damage as an integral part of the queer experience, which she argues have been neglected in queer studies' emphasis on futurity and progress, leading to a kind of historical amnesia.

the utopian feminist project of scene 3, a utopian project can by definition never be realised; as Hickson notes, the projections of the new world in scene 3 are 'not a blueprint or anything that we can actually live by'.[124] As scenes four and five demonstrate, when one attempts to realise the ideal in the material world, painful compromises must be made in order for it to fit within existing structures. The version of the Writer we see at the start of the play, played by Rossi, is an idealist; she is absolute and does not brook compromise in her desire to 'Dismantle capitalism and overturn the patriarchy' (23). Yet the final scene shows the Writer living under and benefitting from a capitalist system, raising far knottier questions: can capitalism be squared with feminist politics and if so how; how much scope is there to reform structures from within; how can one make one's relationships as free from hierarchy as possible; how can someone live within that system and retain their ideals and desire for change? Hickson suggests that the final scene 'engage[s] with the inevitability of compromise', a process that is realist rather than idealist in terms of philosophical attitude to the world.[125]

The ending of *The Writer* is an anti-climax, both in terms of the lack of a neat resolution and the temporariness of its reshaping of the world. In a sense, the latter is both the political potential and the limit of theatre, as represented in *The Writer*; it can provide a temporary reshaping of the world, but this can make the return to social reality harder to bear. Yet, as Andrew Crocker-Harris says at the end of Terrence Rattigan's *The Browning Version* (1948), which itself ends with an anti-climax, 'I am of the opinion that occasionally an anti-climax can be surprisingly effective'.[126] As well as refusing to give false resolution to the complex, in many ways irreconcilable ideas explored in the play, the anticlimactic ending

[124] Hickson and Greenstreet interview.
[125] Ibid.
[126] Terence Rattigan, *The Browning Version* (London: Nick Hern, 1994), p. 45.

of *The Writer* has the effect of keeping desire alive. Although the world has not yet changed shape, the want endures, unresolved, set against the 'strange cage' (65) of the current shape of the world. In its deployment and testing of multiple realisms, the form of *The Writer* can hold together both materialist and the idealistic views of reality.

This thesis has revealed the diversity and vibrancy of experiments with realism in contemporary feminist theatre in Britain, from the dynamic interplay between gendered realities and representation in *Two Man Show* and *Three Sisters*, to *Ophelias Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide*'s excavation of the gender politics of naturalist character, to the metatheatrical ambushes of *The Writer* that carve out a space for female desire. These productions both expand ideas of the political and aesthetic capabilities of realism and, in Judith Butler's words, 'challenge the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality' by staging women's bodies and experiences in ways that call patriarchal norms into question.[127] Formal innovation for these theatremakers is integral to their exploration of ideas; as Ella Hickson says, form 'is the point at which all subversion operates'.[128] Reading these innovations as in conversation with realism, rather than as departures from it, illuminates the hybrid nature of theatrical forms and the endurance of realist mechanisms, such as psychologised character and linear plot, in experimental productions, not least as an interpretive framework for an audience. RashDash's deployment of a social realist play-within-a-play in *Two Man Show* to explore 'the crisis of masculinity' and parody of the hypernaturalistic production history of Chekhov in their *Three Sisters*, and Mitchell and Birch's deployment of haunted naturalism in *Ophelia's Zimmer* and *Anatomy of a Suicide*

[127] Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 29.
[128] Hickson and Greenstreet interview.

suggest that contemporary experiments with realism are in dialogue with the theatrical past.[129] Moreover, as seen in *The Writer*'s dramatic activation of key ideas from feminist theatre criticism, a dynamic relationship between feminist theatre and criticism persists in the twenty-first century, although this is more of an oblique cross-pollination than the direct lines of influence traceable in the 1980s.

While RashDash, Birch and Hickson all engage with contemporary reality in their work, asserting a direct relationship between theatre and the world it represents, they differ in the extent of their belief in the efficacy of theatre to accomplish social change. Alice Birch has reflected, 'I think there's an arrogance that suggests that theatre can change the world […] And I don't think that's what theatre is for'.[130] The centrepiece of Maria Aberg's production of Birch's play *[BLANK]* (2019) at the Donmar Warehouse was an extended dinner party scene in which middle class characters order drugs and peddle lazy stereotypes about women in prison; against the experimental form of the rest of the production, the social realism of the scene served as a distancing device, implicating the Donmar audience in issues that might otherwise seem remote from their lives.[131] Mitchell and Birch's collaborations 'show the effects on women inside patriarchal structures, their attempt to cope with them and fight them, but [do not] offer alternative structures', cleaving pessimistically to the realities of patriarchal oppression.[132] In contrast, RashDash pursue

[129] RashDash, 'Two Man Show: our feminist quest to smash the patriarchy', *The Guardian*, 20 February 2017. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2017/feb/20/two-man-show-feminist-patriarchy-rashdash-soho-theatre> [accessed 8 July 2020].
[130] Alice Jones, 'Alice Birch on her impossible new play, Succession and adapting Sally Rooney for TV: "I feel sick"', *INews*, 16 October 2019. <inews.co.uk/culture/arts/alice-birch-blank-donmar-warehouse-succession-story-editor-normal-people-351442> [accessed 19 January 2021].
[131] For more on the form of *[BLANK],* see Hannah Greenstreet, 'Review: [BLANK] at the Donmar Warehouse', *Exeunt Magazine*, 20 October 2019. <exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-blank-donmar-warehouse/> [accessed 8 December 2020].
[132] Maddy Costa, 'Alternative point of view: The Malady of Death', *Barbican Blog,* 4 December 2017. <http://blog.barbican.org.uk/2018/05/alternative-point-of-view-the-malady-of-death/> [accessed 16 May 2018].

heterotopia through hybrid forms that prioritise fantasy and fun, striving for more inclusive and radical working methods in their theatre-making – even if they do not always achieve them in practice. In its combination of idealism and pragmatism, formal convention and experimentation, *The Writer* falls somewhere in between these attitudes, embracing ambivalence. Analysing these plays closely has revealed their formal sophistication, which in the case of RashDash has been underestimated (perhaps, in part, due to their foregrounding of fun) and is only beginning to be accounted for in criticism of Birch and Mitchell. This thesis therefore lays the groundwork both for further research on these playwrights, particularly through the original insights afforded by the interviews with practitioners, and offers an approach for reckoning with the politics of form. In refusing to offer a false sense of resolution to complex problems, all the performances explored within the thesis have an affective and intellectual residue, sticking in my mind for months, even years afterwards, suggesting that their feminist concerns are unfinished business.

Coda

January 2021

> *Reality changes. In order to represent it, modes of representation must change.*
>
> Bertolt Brecht[1]

I had intended my conclusion to bring my thesis up to the present moment, situating the innovations of feminist theatre that I have traced amidst work that is happening now. However, in the last twelve months the theatre landscape and the wider world have been changed drastically by coronavirus. The overriding concern of the theatre industry is currently its own survival. The last play I saw in person was Lyndsey Turner's revival of *Far Away* at the Donmar Warehouse in March 2020. Having visited the theatre almost weekly for the past three years, I suddenly found myself at a loss and out of work as a freelance theatre critic. I found it very challenging to engage with the flurry of archival content that theatres were putting up online. I felt like I was in mourning for all the shows that had to be dismantled, including my own.[2] Some, like Winsome Pinnock's *Rockets and Blue Lights* at Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester, were cancelled the day before press night.[3] Others, like RashDash's planned show *Oh Mother*, a collaboration with the company's mothers that was to include circus and dance, were put on hold indefinitely.[4] Thousands of theatre workers were made redundant, including all of the National Theatre's Front of House casual

[1] Bertolt Brecht, 'Against Georg Lukacs', trans. by Stuart Hood, *New Left Review* I/84 (1974), 39-53 (p. 51). <newleftreview.org/I/84/bertolt-brecht-against-georg-lukacs> [accessed 1 December 2020].
[2] My play, *Andromeda*, had been programmed by Camden People's Theatre for May 2020.
[3] 'Rocket and Blue Lights Part of the New Lockdown Theatre Festival', *Royal Exchange Theatre*, 30 April 2020. <www.royalexchange.co.uk/rocket-and-blue-lights-part-of-the-new-lockdown-theatre-festival> [accessed 20 January 2021]. The production was later shared as a radio play as part of BBC Arts' Culture in Quarantine initiative.
[4] 'Just some thinking', *RashDash*, 18 May 2020. <www.rashdash.co.uk/just-some-thinking> [accessed 19 January 2021].

staff, and freelancers faced difficult decisions about whether they could afford to remain in the industry when many slipped through the net of the government's Self-Employment Income Support Scheme.[5] Despite the Cultural Recovery Fund from Arts Council England, many theatres faced financial crisis; Southampton's Nuffield Theatre went into administration in May 2020 due to loss of ticket sales and more theatres are predicted to follow.[6] The impact of COVID-19 on the arts sector will continue to be felt in years to come and will widen existing inequalities of access to the creative professions, disproportionately affecting people of colour, women (particularly those with caring responsibilities), people from working class backgrounds and disabled people.[7]

One of the challenges of researching contemporary theatre is not knowing when to stop. There is always another production that can be included, from Ella Hickson's *Swive: [Elizabeth]* (Shakespeare's Globe, 2019) to Katie Mitchell and Alice Birch's *Orlando* (Schaubühne, 2019), which was due to premiere in the UK at the Barbican in April 2020.[8] The closure of theatres in the UK in March 2020 marked a definitive full-stop.[9] My contemporary theatre PhD suddenly seemed to become a theatre history project, as traditional understandings of theatre as the gathering together of people in a room no

[5] Matthew Hemley, 'Coronavirus: 250 front-of-house staff at National Theatre made redundant', *The Stage*, 3 July 2020. <www.thestage.co.uk/news/coronavirus-250-front-of-house-staff-at-national-theatre-made-redundant> [accessed 22 January 2021].
[6] Mark Brown, 'UK theatres in "high jeopardy" as doors remain closed amid pandemic', *Guardian*, 15 May 2020. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/may/15/uk-theatres-in-high-jeopardy-as-doors-remain-closed-amid-pandemic> [accessed 18 January 2021]. Chris Wiegand, 'Nuffield Southampton Theatres goes into administration', *Guardian*, 6 May 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/may/06/nuffield-southampton-theatres-administration-coronavirus> [accessed 18 January 2021].
[7] See Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien, and Mark Taylor, *Culture Is Bad For You: Inequality in the Cultural and Creative Industries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2020), Preface.
[8] Birch and Mitchell's multimedia adaptation of Rachel Cusk's *Outline. Transit. Kudos.*, due to open at the National Theatre in October 2020, has also been indefinitely postponed. 'What's New: On Our Stages', *National Theatre.* <www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/blog/whats-new-2020-national-theatre> [accessed 28 January 2021].
[9] Lanre Bakare, 'Covid-19 prompts all major British theatres to close doors', *Guardian*, 16 March 2020. <www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/covid-19-prompts-more-cultural-institutions-to-shut-doors> [accessed 29 January 2021].

longer seemed tenable. In response to a global crisis, understandings of reality shift and lurch. TV drama filmed before the pandemic, in which characters hugged and gathered without masks, suddenly seemed jarring.

As seen throughout this thesis, theatre continues to display responsiveness to current events through form and subject matter. For some theatre companies, the coronavirus restrictions have catalysed experiments in digital theatre. Playwright Eve Leigh and director Rachel Bagshaw collaborated to produce *Invisible Summer* (2020), a multimedia play delivered to its audience through emails and combined written text, spoken English, BSL, captioning and audio description.[10] Irish theatre company Dead Centre asked audience members of *To Be a Machine* (Dublin Festival, 2020) to upload a brief video of themselves when they booked tickets. The show, which, appropriately, explored transhumanism, was performed in an empty theatre auditorium to a collection of iPads. Several digital performances made use of the medium to explore themes of connection and isolation, such as Coney's *Telephone* (2020), which used Zoom to tell the story of the invention of the telephone and asked audience members to share their memories of important calls.[11] The decision by a number of theatres, including the National Theatre, to stream previously recorded performances for free or 'pay what you can' has made shows accessible to a wider audience who might previously have been debarred from attending the theatre due to cost, geography, disability or caring commitments, though it also raises questions about the financial viability of digital theatre.

[10] 'New Multimedia Play, Invisible Summer, from Playwright Eve Leigh and Director Rachel Bagshaw Available via the Royal Court Newsletter Later This Month', *Royal Court*, 12 November 2020. <royalcourttheatre.com/new-multimedia-play-invisible-summer-from-playwright-eve-leigh-and-director-rachel-bagshaw-available-via-the-royal-court-newsletter-later-this-month/> [accessed 22 January 2021].
[11] See Hannah Greenstreet and Alice Saville, 'Review: Telephone by Coney (online)', *Exeunt Magazine*, 19 November 2020. <http://exeuntmagazine.com/reviews/review-telephone-coney-online/> [accessed 19 January 2021].

In the limited time theatre buildings in the UK were able to reopen between lockdowns, there have already been moves to use the medium as a means of enabling people to process the coronavirus crisis collectively in innovative ways. For *Don't Go Back to Sleep: The Lockdown Album* (2020), RashDash conducted interviews with people in China, India, UK, Italy, Greece, USA and Kenya about their experiences of lockdown and set verbatim samples to music.[12] They performed the show live at HOME, Manchester and also released it as an album. The Royal Court's *Living Newspaper: A Counter Narrative* (2020) commissioned sixty writers to write short plays responding to current events, which were performed script-in-hand by a company of actors in promenade around the Royal Court's building and available to watch in person and online.[13] Chris Bush and Rebecca Frecknall's *Nine Lessons and Carols: Stories for a Long Winter* (2020), which went from initial idea to performance in just over 5 weeks, combined monologues, songs and short scenes, which could be cut if a cast member fell ill or had to isolate.[14] Declaring in its marketing copy, 'This is not a Corona play', the show emphasised the importance of theatre's function as a place to gather people together and provide consolation and hope in dark times.[15] *Nine Lessons and Carols* ran for less than two weeks in December 2020 due to tightened coronavirus restrictions in London, although the Almeida did manage to make a recorded performance available. The forced cancellations and postponements of shows amidst changing

[12] 'Don't Go Back to Sleep: The Lockdown Album', *HOME*. <homemcr.org/production/dont-go-back-to-sleep-the-lockdown-album/> [accessed 19 January 2021].
[13] 'Living Newspaper', *Royal Court*. <royalcourttheatre.com/home/livingnewspaper/> [accessed 18 January 2021]. Editions 1 and 2 premiered in December 2020, with the remaining Editions 3-6 scheduled to resume later in 2021 after the end of lockdown.
[14] Andrew Dickson, '"Holding their nerve": Almeida reopens with play devised during lockdown', *Guardian*, 7 December 2020. <www.theguardian.com/stage/2020/dec/07/nine-lessons-and-carols-almeida-theatre-london-christmas-play> [accessed 20 January 2021].
[15] 'Nine Lessons and Carols', *Almeida Theatre*. <almeida.co.uk/whats-on/nine-lessons-and-carols/2-dec-2020-9-jan-2021> [accessed 20 January 2021].

regulations suggest the difficulty, financial uncertainty and sheer optimism of attempting to make in-person theatre at this time.

Beyond aesthetic and technological innovations, there have been calls by some to use the closure of theatres as an opportunity to make wider structural changes to the industry. In April 2020 Tarek Iskander, Artistic Director of Battersea Arts Centre, argued that the disruption caused by COVID-19 offered a 'once-in-a-generation opportunity' to create a more equitable and representative theatre industry, though he admitted in January 2021 that progress and confidence had stalled in the wake of a third lockdown and rising cases.[16] Since the killing of the George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020 and the rising public consciousness of Black Lives Matter in the UK, there has been a renewed emphasis on diversity in the theatre industry, with theatres like The Bush issuing statements of solidarity with Black Lives Matter and commissioning Black artists to respond to the events.[17] The pandemic has also put a greater emphasis on theatres' roles in their local communities. Slung Low set up a food bank at their base at the Holbeck in Leeds, considering this part of their mission to 'put the best cultural life we can into this community', while theatres such as the Yard and Battersea Arts Centre have continued their education and community engagement programmes throughout the pandemic.[18] Some companies adapted their

[16] Natasha Tripney, 'New horizons: has Covid helped to spark positive change in the industry?', *The Stage*, 21 January 2021. <www.thestage.co.uk/long-reads/new-horizons-has-covid-helped-to-spark-positive-change-in-the-industry> [accessed 22 January 2021].

[17] Several UK theatres issued statements expressing solidarity with the Black Lives Matter Movement. Giverny Masso, 'Theatres express solidarity with Black Lives Matter movement', *The Stage*, 1 June 2020. <www.thestage.co.uk/news/theatres-express-solidarity-with-black-lives-matter-movement> [accessed 20 January 2021]. The Bush Theatre commissioned six Black British artists to create short pieces in response to the killing of George Floyd. 'Bush Theatre releases The Protest: Black Lives Matter', *LondonTheatre.co.uk*, 16 June 2020. <www.londontheatre.co.uk/theatre-news/news/bush-theatre-releases-the-protest-black-lives-matter> [accessed 20 January 2021].

[18] 'Holbeck Wellbeing is in the right Hands: Why a theatre company is running a food bank', *A Leeds Revolution*, 16 October 2020. <www.aleedsrevolution.co.uk/holbeck-wellbeing-is-in-the-right-hands-why-a-theatre-company-is-running-a-foodbank> [accessed 18 January 2021]. See Lily Levinson, '"There is no recipe": Cooking up community projects at Battersea Arts Centre', *Exeunt Magazine*, 18 November 2020. <exeuntmagazine.com/features/no-recipe-cooking-community-engagement-battersea-arts-centre/> [accessed

working methods to become more collaborative, such as Out of Joint, which decided in Autumn 2020 to move away from commissioning individual writers and instead hire a writers' room to create new work for the company together.[19] As I have shown throughout this thesis, theatrical form encompasses not only aesthetics, but also working practices, relationships with audiences, structures of theatre organisations and funding. Making the theatre industry more inclusive, revisioning theatres' relationships with their communities, and supporting different methods of making theatre may well allow alternative forms of theatre to flourish.

Nonetheless, many have expressed concerns that, in the wake of the coronavirus crisis, theatres will resort to more conservative (and less diverse) programming due to financial concerns.[20] The intellectually demanding, formally experimental theatre that I have explored in this thesis seems particularly vulnerable. The theatres in which Alice Birch and Ella Hickson's plays have recently been performed – the Royal Court, the Almeida – depend upon government subsidy, which is vulnerable to cuts. If it becomes even harder to make a living from playwriting in the years to come, playwrights may turn to more film and television work in search of a more stable income. Emerging artists, who rely on festivals like the Edinburgh Fringe and Vaults (both cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19) to find an audience for their work, may struggle to enter the industry. Established companies are also having to adapt to a changing funding landscape. RashDash, who have depended on project grants to make their shows for the last ten years, were rejected for Arts Council Emergency

29 January 2021]; 'The Yard's response to COVID-19', *The Yard Theatre* <theyardtheatre.co.uk/response-to-covid-19/> [accessed 29 January 2021].

[19] 'Stockroom', *Out of Joint*. <www.outofjoint.co.uk/stockroom/> [accessed 19 January 2021].

[20] See, for example, Matthew Austin's response in Natasha Tripney et al, 'A Dialogue on Theatre and Communities', *Exeunt Magazine*, 26 June 2020. <exeuntmagazine.com/features/dialogue-theatre-community/> [accessed 18 January 2021].

Funding in May 2020. Hearing that Arts Council England's 2020-30 strategy, *Let's Create*, would prioritise community-led work, RashDash were prompted to wonder, in a soul-searching blog post, 'as the new ACE strategy is implemented and the world changes, if it really doesn't matter if we don't exist anymore?' [21] (After writing the blog, RashDash received donations from a Crowdfunder set up by their former producer, Charlotte Bennett, which allowed them to make *Don't Go Back to Sleep*, suggesting that the outlook might not be as bleak as they feared.)

As Matthew Austin, Co-Director of live-performance company MAYK writes, now more than ever it is vital to

> Celebrate the diversity of the art form. […] There's room for the work that MAYK does, and Middle Child, and for big buildings too. Our job as practitioners who work in formally diverse ways is to challenge the inherent conservatism of the big buildings. Persuade them that once they're through the firefighting phase of this crisis that being radical with their business models and imaginative with their programme will ultimately secure the future of the art form.[22]

While the art form of theatre will adapt and survive the coronavirus pandemic, not all theatre companies and theatres will. As well as re-encountering classic feminist theatre criticism in the light of contemporary feminist plays, this thesis has contributed to documenting a period of intense experimentation in new writing by women in Britain in the 2010s. While it is impossible to predict what will happen next, I hope the post-COVID-19 theatre landscape will continue to make space for such work and its legacies.

[21] RashDash, 'Just some thinking'. They were later reassured by someone from the Arts Council that work like theirs will still be supported under the new strategy.
[22] Quoted in Tripney et al.

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