

«I THINK WE ALL NEED STORIES, WE MAKE UP STORIES SO THAT  
WE CAN GET BY»: NEW WRITING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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ON 2 OCTOBER 1996, the weather in London was bad. Bad enough for people to hurry in the street, to turn up their collars and to complain. In the West End, it was a special night for the Royal Court, which had temporarily relocated at The Ambassadors Theatre (turning this venue into two studio spaces) while its historic base in Sloane Square was being refurbished. A debut play by a young playwright was opening. His name was Mark Ravenhill and the play was *Shopping and Fucking* [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 24]. The show started at 9.15 pm so that its sound effects would not disturb the audience for Harold Pinter's *Ashes to Ashes*, which was playing at an earlier time in the adjacent, poorly sound-proofed, studio. Because of the late time and because the weather was so bad, an unkempt homeless guy had decided to shelter in the theatre, taking advantage of the cheap tickets for standing room. Unaware of theatre etiquette he sat down in one of the unnumbered seats. All around him theatre critics, theatre-makers and members of the public noticed his smell. Clearly he hadn't been able to wash for a while. When the play began, Ravenhill's story unfolded with its scenes of drug-taking, explicit sexual acts and threats of extreme violence. And the homeless man couldn't believe his eyes: why are these young people behaving so badly? He looked around the rest of audience for a clue, but everyone was quietly following the play. He was puzzled. He scratched his head. He looked around again. The dialogues were lost on him – he was more amazed at the set, and its large neon signs, that occasionally flashed words such as «Fuck». Maybe the loud music excited him. But none of this affected the nice, middle-class audience – they simply ignored the homeless guy [Sierz 2001: 125-34]. What they concentrated on was the play, an example of contemporary New Writing for the British stage.

New Writing is one of the glories of British theatre. These are plays written in the Great Tradition of British text-based theatre, which established itself in the brave new state-subsidized postwar world and in which the writer, and not the director or designer, is at the centre of the theatre-making process. Just as, from the 1950s onwards, adverts for every kind of consumer product constantly stressed newness, so too the arts put a premium on novelty. Hence New Writing. Gradually, the notion of New Writing – as opposed to the simple fact of a play being new – expanded its meaning until it embraced the sense of being contemporary, relevant, original and even somehow virtuous [Sierz 2011a: 15-45]. So the term New Writing came to mean an individually authored text that has immediacy and significance. These are usually distinguished from other plays – such as populist comedies, adaptations of novels or history plays – by their seriousness of purpose and occasionally by the difficulty of their writing. New Writing has a history, and this begins with a foundational production, John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court in 1956 [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: VII-XXIV; Edgar 1999: 3-34]. This historical heritage results in a series of expectations about the character of New Writing: it is work written in a singular and compelling original voice, with a particular idiosyncratic vision, and a political point of view. Playwrights seek to mirror society, and to change it. A distinctive voice is valued above the plain style favoured by television or film. So what is an original voice? One thought experiment, suggested by Graham Whybrow, the Royal Court’s literary manager at the time of Ravenhill’s debut, goes like this: Just imagine taking a single page of a writer’s work and throwing it on the floor in a mass of other pages, written by other writers. If you can identify that writer from one page then they have a distinctive voice [Sierz 2011a: 47-68].

If New Writing is a significant genre, some critics see the entire future of British theatre as depending on its playwrights and their ability to reflect the state of the nation [Billington 2007: 411]. So when, in the late 1980s, New Writing was seen as being in crisis – due to cuts in arts subsidy by the Thatcher governments –

it felt as if the survival of British theatre was at stake. Then a series of individual mavericks – artistic directors Ian Brown at the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh, Stephen Daldry at the Royal Court, Dominic Dromgoole at the Bush Theatre in West London, and Jenny Topper at the Hampstead Theatre in North London – changed this depressive condition by promoting a new wave of young playwrights. They introduced the work of Philip Ridley, Anthony Neilson, Sarah Kane, Jez Butterworth, Mark Ravenhill, Martin McDonagh, David Greig and David Harrower, as well as promoting highly influential 1970s playwrights such as Caryl Churchill and 1980s playwrights such as Martin Crimp [Sierz 2001: 36-40]. This new wave consisted of an exceptional number of writers, many of whom wrote in a style that can be identified as in-*yer-face* theatre, a direct, confrontational and provocative style which included raw emotional states, and scenes of explicit sex and violence [Sierz 2001: 3-35]. As well as moments of acute poetry and dazzling insight.

The story of in-*yer-face* theatre starts on 4 January 1991, when Dromgoole staged Philip Ridley's debut play, *The Pitchfork Disney*, at the small Bush Theatre [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 425-44]. It is set in a derelict room in the East End of London, where two 28-year-old twins, Presley and Hayley Stray live in agoraphobic isolation after the dramatic deaths of their parents ten years previously. The shock of this loss has arrested their development and they live in perpetual infancy, eating chocolate, consuming leftover medicines and neglecting their personal hygiene. At the same time, they tell stories to make sense of their situation, imagining that they are living in a post-apocalyptic landscape, supported by personal rituals and incantations. They fantasize that their home is «the only house standing», «Standing like a tower in the middle of a wasteland» (22) in a Beckettian world, with «No heaven visible. No stars, no moon, no sun. Nothing» (20). But their isolation is broken when Presley sees Cosmo Disney, an attractive young man, feeling sick in the street outside. He invites him in, and the beautiful Cosmo first vomits on the floor and then tells him about his lifestyle – he makes money by eating live insects in pubs, and has a great line in philosophy:

How easy it is to stop living. Not to die, but to stop being alive. There's nothing incredible apart from that. No mystery. No magic. No dreams. No miracles. Nothing. Just freak accidents and freaks. Darwin got it all wrong, you see. Fitness has got nothing to do with it. It's survival of the sickest. That's all. You know why the ghost train is so popular? Because there ain't any ghosts (67).

When the monstrous masked figure of the Pitchfork Cavalier, Cosmo's helper, arrives and Presley – in a five-page monologue – describes a dystopian dream of serial killers and nuclear devastation, it was clear that this play marked a dramatic change in playwriting from the accepted norms of British naturalistic and realistic theatre.

Ridley, single-handedly, had reintroduced a sense of excess and imagination into New Writing. He went on to write two more East End gothic in-yer-face thrillers – *The Fastest Clock in the Universe* (Hampstead, 1992) and *Ghost from a Perfect Place* (Hampstead, 1994) – which consolidated his place as the poet of darkness and prince of extremism. Each of these plays had shocking scenes – in the first a pregnant young woman is kicked in the stomach; in the second, a teen girl gang torture an aged gangster – which caused outrage in the press and among critics. But they also sparkled with finely-written poetic language, vivid verbal imagery and an afterglow of ancient Greek mythical resonances. At the same time as Ridley was gleefully smashing the barriers of what was acceptable on London stages, from Scotland came Anthony Neilson [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 343-62]. His first play, *Normal: The Düsseldorf Ripper*, opened at Edinburgh's Pleasance Theatre in 1991 and was a major fringe success. Telling the true story of Peter Kurten, a serial killer who terrorized Germany in 1929-30, it was presented with an Expressionistic staging, with, for example, ludicrously over-sized scissors used to cut the neck of a swan. While the play showed how the young Peter was abused by his father and then initiated into the killing of stray dogs, which gave him a taste for blood, its most famous scene is the ten-minute sequence in which Kurten kills a woman, an episode of unique horror. Then, after Kurten has been caught and condemned, Neilson points out the connection between the abnormal monster

and the monstrous Nazis: «In the years that followed Peter's execution I and a great many 'normal' men were to do things we had never thought ourselves capable of» (58).

In the next few years, Neilson, like Ridley, pioneered the genre of in-her-face theatre with two especially significant contributions, the fearsome *Penetrator*, staged at the Traverse, under Brown's artistic leadership, in 1993, and the typically provocative *The Censor* (Royal Court, 1997). Neilson's main innovation was to stage his plays before they were completely ready, which gave the actors an adrenaline rush on stage and contributed to the rawness of their emotions and the extremism of their actions. His writing was explicitly sexual and violent, and his decision to have a running time of 90 minutes with no interval did much to keep the audience gripped. *Penetrator* begins with a long voiceover which describes a sexual fantasy, «My cock was like a truncheon in my jeans. I saw her looking at it, licking her sluttish red lips» (61). It then explores the classic 1990s theme of the crisis of masculinity in a story about two flatmates, Max and Alan, who spend their time taking drugs, playing cards and fooling around [Edgar 1999: 26-32]. When Tadge, Max's childhood friend who is now a soldier gone AWOL, arrives, their peace is shattered by the young man's violent imaginings, acute jealousy and sexual ambiguity. By contrast, *The Censor* is a fantasy about a female film-maker who has made a sexually explicit film and tries to convince the male Censor that it is not pornographic, but full of real feeling and that it describes a relationship. Gradually she enters into the Censor's mind, analyzing him and his relations to his wife, before – in the play's most provocative scene – defecating on the floor in order to arouse him. Although the film-maker goes to New York and is, in the end, murdered, she does deliver her statement of liberation: «No more repression! No more witch-hunts – a world absolutely without guilt or shame!» (273).

Where Ridley and Neilson led, others rapidly followed. As the new artistic director of the Royal Court, the theatre that had always promoted innovative New Writing, Daldry introduced in the mid-1990s a series of young playwrights, chief among whom was Sarah Kane [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 304-22]. Her

debut, *Blasted* (1995), did more than any other British play in the 1990s to make the new genre of in-*yer*-face theatre both a public scandal and an exemplary method of playwriting. Reviled by the critics, and discussed in newspapers, magazines and on television, *Blasted* announced the arrival of a raw new sensibility and a willingness to experiment and take risks in terms of theatre form. The play's simple story of Ian, a fortysomething journalist, who takes a former girlfriend, the young and naïve Cate, to a hotel room in Leeds, is transformed in the middle of its 90 minutes of stage time by a mortar bomb blast which turns the naturalism of the first part into the symbolism of the second. Suddenly, this becomes a play about war, and a story about domestic sexual abuse becomes a visionary attack on the use of rape in war. The rather brutal vernacular of the first part – such as Ian's angry and sexist «You sleep with someone holding hands and kissing you wank me off then say we can't fuck get into bed but don't want me to touch you what's wrong with you Joey?» (32) – becomes the horror of the second part, when a nameless soldier graphically describes war atrocities: «They buggered her. Cut her throat. Hacked her ears and nose off, nailed them to the front door» (47). Although most reviewers revelled in the explicit onstage transgressions – urination, defecation, fellatio, anal rape and cannibalism – the truth of Kane's play lies in its emotional ferocity and criticism of national complacency.

What was most impressive about Kane's career is that although she only wrote five plays, and one short film, they are all stamped with her fiercely uncompromising voice, as well as each being an experiment in form. In her career, she gradually moved further and further away from the Great British tradition of naturalism, questioning its theatre conventions more and more radically [Saunders 2009: 1-36]. So, in *Phaedra's Love* (Gate, 1996), she inverted the accepted ancient Greek conventions that sex and violence must happen offstage, and brought them onstage in a story about a corrupt royal family. In *Cleansed* (Royal Court, 1998), she created a symbolic account of gender bending in a university which resembles a concentration camp, kissing goodbye to the usual British conventions of social realism. Then in

*Crave* (Paines Plough touring company, 1998) she abandoned the usual conventions of character and instead created a piece about identity for four voices. Finally, in her posthumously produced *4.48 Psychosis* (Royal Court, 2000), she abandoned all ideas of stable characters, concrete locations and realistic story in order to create a tone poem about mental disturbance which can be performed by one actor, three actors, or 30 actors. As regards her singular voice, this varies from the punkish «Fuck God. Fuck the monarchy» of *Phaedra's Love* (95) to the poetry of her last play, «at 4.48/ the happy hour / when clarity visits» (242). Her best work combines acute social and emotional observation – «A room of expressionless faces staring blankly at my pain, so devoid of meaning there must be evil intent,» she writes in *4.48 Psychosis* (209) – with a deep-black humour, such as the sadistic Tinker's line in *Cleansed*: «I may be a cunt but I'm not a twat» (139). If Kane was the most talented of the new playwrights that emerged from the mid-1990s, it was because she fearlessly explored her own emotional agonies and turned these into shows that were as much influenced by European theatre traditions as by British ones.

Among Kane's main influences were Pinter, Churchill and Martin Crimp. Of these, Pinter became a personal friend, and his *Ashes to Ashes* is clearly influenced by *Blasted*. Both plays challenge the complacency of British national consciousness as expressed in the phrase «It couldn't happen here». Both plays show that «it», meaning dictatorship, civil war and atrocity, could happen in this green and pleasant land. Like Pinter, and indeed Beckett, Churchill's work strongly influenced all the young writers of the 1990s because of her determination to write plays that were both politically resonant and severely anti-naturalistic. Like Beckett and Pinter, she was part of a leftfield tradition which valued a highly individual theatrical voice, one which was joined to a fascination with experimentation with form. The opening fantasy scene of *Top Girls* (Royal Court, 1982) or the energetic verse parody of *Serious Money* (Royal Court, 1987) are exemplary. The youngest of these three, Crimp, started his career at his local fringe venue, the Orange Tree Theatre in Richmond, where he began by writing absurdist plays clearly influenced by Beckett and Ionesco



[Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 82-102]. But when he discovered American playwright David Mamet the style of his dialogues became energized while his experiments in theatre form remained tied to a recognizably naturalistic world. By the time he became a Royal Court playwright, in 1990 with *No One Sees the Video*, Crimp was ready to stamp his particular mark on British New Writing. His influential *The Treatment* (Royal Court, 1993) was an in-your-face play, complete with explicit onstage sex and violence, allied to a strongly emotional story about the exploitation of a young woman's abuse by a couple of predatory film producers.

Crimp's masterpiece, and a powerful influence on Kane's 4.48 *Psychosis*, was *Attempts on Her Life* (Royal Court, 1997). This creatively innovative work, one of the most original pieces of postwar New Writing, is an open text, a piece of playwriting which gives the director and actors much more freedom than the standard kind of play. In an open text, and *Attempts on Her Life* is the supreme example, the playwright doesn't dictate character, location or who says what, but instead gives his director and cast absolute freedom about these decisions. This makes the creation of the open text the single most important theatrical innovation since Beckett's minimalism. *Attempts on Her Life* is written as a series of scenarios, or scenes, each of which illustrates a different aspect of a woman, Anne (also called Anya, Annie, Anny and Annushka), who is a complete enigma. But although Crimp provides all the dialogue needed for every scene, he doesn't specify how many characters are involved, nor who says which line. So, the choice of how many characters are talking in each scene (three or thirty?) is down to the director. Likewise, Crimp does not say where each scene is taking place, nor does he describe the backstory of the characters. Once again, these essential details are for the director and actors to discover for themselves. And Crimp's distinctive voice, with its characteristic stop-start iterations and ironic coolness, can be heard in all his dialogues. For example, in the scenario called «Untitled (100 words)», one of the speakers says: «It's theatre – that's right – for a world in which theatre itself has died. [...] She's offering us no less than the spectacle of her own existence, the radical



pornography – if I may use that overused word – of her own broken and abused – almost Christ-like – body» (254-5).

At the same time, the title *Attempts on Her Life* conceals the fact that the play is not about one woman, but about several women, in fact about women in general. Anne is an enigma with a fluid identity precisely because she can be anything that a man might imagine. The main theme is the way that men construct images of women, so the play's fragmentary form mirrors the fragmentary nature of this process, with form perfectly matching content. And the ultimate message of the play is that we can never know the true nature of another person. Thus, Anne is many things: the heroine of a film, a victim of civil war, a typical consumer, a megastar, a tourist guide, a physicist, an international terrorist, an American survivalist, an artist, a refugee's dead child, the girl next door, the object of a police investigation, a porn star, and the subject of a conversation. At one point, she is even a make of car. The people talking about her include Mum and Dad, art critics, official interrogators, border guards, advertisers, film makers, spin doctors, showbiz performers, abusive stalkers, lovers and friends. In geographic range, she skips across the globe, with the play text mentioning distant continents, as well as European capitals and north African countries. Her age fluctuates between teenage and 40; she's both single and a married mother. In one scene, the idea of her fluid identity reaches a hilarious climax when she is described as everything from «a cheap cigarette» to «a dyke with a femme» (263-4). Likewise, Crimp's other characteristic themes – the role of the media in creating images, the culture of fear and the pervasive nature of terrorism, the threat to children and the normalisation of pornography, the domination of consumer capitalism – remain absolutely relevant.

The same might be said about Jez Butterworth's *Mojo*, which the Royal Court staged in 1995, in the summer after Kane's debut [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 42-61]. Set in a Soho club during 1958, the play begins with the sound of drums, bass and guitar chords, and the image of Silver Johnny, a seventeen-year-old rock 'n' roll protégé and the talismanic magic charm of the title, dancing across the stage. Like Cosmo in *The Pitchfork Disney*, he wears a

glitter jacket. Then two twentysomething petty villains – Sweets and Potts – introduce us to this milieu. A story develops about a double-crossing group of smalltime criminals, including the sinister Baby, all told with Butterworth's characteristic verbal flair. Typically, he first sets up a situation in plain language, then repeats it using a striking metaphor. For example, Silver Johnny is described as a marketable commodity first because he makes girls «shit when he sings», and next because he «makes polite young ladies come their cocoa in public» (5). Another device is the constant use of verbal tags, such as «fish are jumping» (11-14), and visual puns, such as when Sweets asks Baby if he can ask him a question, Baby points a gun at him and says: «Fire away» (69). Most reviewers remembered lines of dialogue such as «when Silver Johnny sings the song my pussyhair stands up» (4) and «There's nothing like someone cutting your dad in two for clearing the mind» (59). In terms of character, the play is about the transformation of a lazy hedonistic joker into an avenging psychotic leader – Shakespeare's Prince Hal is surely a template – and Baby grows into his inheritance. Typically of the 1990s, it is a play about absent or abusive fathers.

Fathers and father figures are also missing, or abusive, in Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, which opened the year after *Mojo*. Because of its title, it enjoyed similar publicity to that which greeted *Blasted*, although by now critics were familiar with the in-yer-face style. Like *The Pitchfork Disney*, this flatshare drama about a group of polysexual youngsters – Robbie, Mark and Lulu, later joined by teenage rentboy Gary – begins with a character vomiting onstage, and the play shows how they make a living by working in McJobs, selling drugs and then selling sex. Full of powerful metaphors of consumption and sexuality, the piece offers a set of distorted thematic images: Mark's initial telling of the shopping story – a fantasy in which he buys Lulu and Robbie from a «fat man» in the supermarket (5) – is reprised at the end when he retells a mutated version of it; Mark is thrown out of the clinic because he has «Lick and Go» sex in a toilet (19), which is reflected in the gross toilet cubicle story about Princess Diana and Fergie; Lulu's problem with sharing individual ready meals is mirrored

by Gary's offer of pot noodles to Mark; Robbie gets sacked from his McJob after being attacked by a customer wielding a plastic fork, while Lulu witnesses an attack on a shop assistant with a real knife; Mark wants sex to be a simple transaction, but Gary wants it to hurt. In a telling irony, Mark offers Gary a choice between being loved and being bought: Gary prefers to be bought, another echo of the play's shopping story. *Shopping and Fucking's* strength is its density of metaphor. A typical «me and my mates» play [Sierz 2004], it has emotionally fraught scenes of sex and violence, but also moments of poetic exaltation, as Robbie's intoxicated sense of «looking down on this planet, spaceman over this earth» (39) when he's high on drugs, and his account of the postmodernism's incredulity towards meta-narratives: «I think we all need stories, we make up stories so that we can get by. And a long time ago there were big stories. Stories so big you could live your whole life in them» (66). The father-like drug baron Brian's statement that «Civilisation is money. Money is civilisation» (87) sums up the play's political satire.

British New Writing was never just London-based. From Druid Theatre in Galway, Ireland, in 1997, Daldry imported London-born Martin McDonagh's *Leenane Trilogy*, which announced another major talent [Sierz 2001: 219-25]. The three plays, *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* (1996), *A Skull in Connemara* (1997) and *The Lonesome West* (1997), were a highly distinctive and wry satire on the relationship between England and Ireland, with McDonagh using his own version of Hiberno-English language, which puts familiar English words into the sentence structures of Gaelic. A simple example is «the hot water too I do be scared of» (4). Set in the rural wilds of County Galway, the first and best of the trilogy – *The Beauty Queen of Leenane* – tells the story of the emotionally tempestuous relationship between 40-year-old Maureen and her 70-year-old mother, Mag. When Maureen falls in love with Pato, a local man, her mother does everything she can to end the relationship – with vicious results. The play's vision of rural Ireland, traditionally so familiar from the work of playwrights such as Synge, is scabrously funny and relates to the new globalization of the Celtic Tiger years of economic boom. In these and later works, McDonagh developed

his intensely distinctive style, with its use of the swear word «fleck» and repetitive reiterations, such as «That's awful spiteful, cutting the ears off a dog. It is awful spiteful» (22) to create a theatrical landscape unique in its black humour and brutality.

At the same time, from Scotland came David Greig and David Harrower [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 203-22, 243-62]. Greig, whose work was promoted by the Traverse, was a prolific, but consistently excellent, Scottish playwright who combined emotionally intense character study with political insights into not only his native country, but also of Europe and beyond. A friend of Kane, he took a cooler route through his material, often presenting large-scale state-of-the-nation plays which examined subjects such as globalization, migration and capitalist domination, often with highly imaginative theatrical imagery. In *Europe* (Traverse, 1994), he chose a kind of Augé-style «non-place» – in this case an abandoned railway station waiting room – in order to build up a picture of migration across the continent, and some of its violent results. The shadow of the civil war in the former Yugoslavia hangs, as it does in *Blasted*, over the story. Typical of Greig's wry matter-of-fact detachment is his artfully ambiguous and evocative text: at one point, a character describes the bleakness of contemporary experience: «Only I don't often meet foreigners. The trains are full of them, obviously, but they usually don't bother to get off. No one stops here. I just wanted to make friends» (45). In *The Architect* (Traverse, 1996), the architect Leo Black articulates his ambitions, «we dream these structures» (96), hoping to transform the devastated urban landscape which has «officially third world status. Which means vandalism, burglars, and Christ knows whatever else» (97). His failure is the central tragedy of the story. In *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union* (Paines Plough, 1999), the imagery of floating in space provides a striking metaphor for both contemporary alienation and the human desire for connection and exploration.

As regards Harrower, his fame rests mainly on two important plays: *Knives in Hens* (Traverse, 1995) is a deeply impressive and visionary story, set in an unspecified agrarian past, about

a ploughman, his wife and the local miller, in which the Young Woman gradually discovers her own identity, and her love of the natural world, through the use of language, and the discovery of writing. It is also a story of how you can use words to lie, to create false realities, to form fictions and fantasies. As Young Woman discovers a feeling for nature, and matures in front of us, she also learns how to tell untruths. The poetic almost incantatory quality of the text, especially in the mouth of the Young Woman, is deeply stirring: «After you left, I killed two hens and fed the rest. I gave away one for a bag of salt; the other I hung over a fire to dry. I pulled four carrots from the earth and washed them. I drew fresh water from the well. I poured a candle with the last of the tallow. I dropped a knife on the cottage floor» (23). Her eventual conclusion is that «All I must do is push names into what is there the same as when I push my knife into the stomach of a hen» (44). By contrast, *Blackbird* (Edinburgh Festival, 2005) tackles a typical theme that was also explored by other 1990s playwrights: sexual abuse of children. Focusing on the confrontation between 56-year-old Ray and 27-year-old Una about their relationship when she was twelve years old, this is a dangerous, provocative, disturbing and unpleasant account of what, judging by the way the characters remember their emotions and shower each other in recriminations, does resemble a love story. Like any love story, it radiates neediness, loneliness and fear, as well as obsession, infatuation and desire. And guilt, and regret and depression. The style is compellingly rhythmic, as in Una's loyal speech: «I protected you./ Defended you./ Stayed/ stayed true./ I told the police you hadn't touched me» (57). Harrower emphasizes that, when Ray was imprisoned, she lost more than he did: «I did the sentence./ I did your sentence./ For fifteen years./ I lost everything./ I lost more than you ever did» (28). It is one of New Writing's strongest plays about abuse.

At the National Theatre, Patrick Marber's *Closer* (1997), with its explicit discussions of male and female sexuality, proved to be a big hit, especially memorable for its cybersex scene in which a male character pretends to be a female in order to fool another man. Also characteristic was the play's emotionally powerful,

sometimes savage, lines about sex and love: one man says, «If you women could see one minute of our Home Movies – the shit that slops through our minds every day – you’d string us up by our balls, you really would» (72); a woman talks about her orgasms: «It’s not important, you don’t *make* me come. I come... you’re... ‘in the area’... providing valiant assistance» (78); then she delivers her judgment on men: «They spend a lifetime fucking and never know how to make love» (90).

At the same time, other in-yer-face plays also made an impact. They included Harry Gibson’s stage adaptation of Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* (Glasgow Citizens, 1994), about Scottish heroin addicts in Edinburgh, Joe Penhall’s *Some Voices* (Royal Court, 1994), about mental illness and social neglect, and Judy Upton’s *Bruises* (Royal Court, 1995), about masculinity and violence in a seaside town. Work such as this illustrated some of this genre’s typical themes and showed how widely it had developed.

In-yer-face theatre spread with enormous speed and impact in the late 1990s, but by the time that Kane committed suicide in 1999, there were signs that its initial cultural flash was fading [Lane 2010: 24-57; Howe Kritzer 2008: 27-66; Blandford 2007: 105-23]. When 9/11 happened a couple of years later, the New Writing environment changed as a reaction to the new climate of the War on Terror [Howe Kritzer 2008: 186-217]. New writers, who had almost abandoned explicit political statements in favour of metaphor and imagery, now returned to writing political plays. They were helped by increased government funding of the arts brought in by the Blair Labour governments, with the result that some 3000 new plays were written in the first decade of the new millennium and some 500 writers were actively making a living out of writing for theatre, radio and television. The result was a truly immense flourishing of talent, which has continued from about 2000 until the present day [Sierz 2011a]. As well as verbatim drama, which uses the real words spoken by actual people, and is edited to create a political theatre event, New Writing rediscovered the family play and the play of ideas, such as Charlotte Jones’s hugely popular *Humble Boy* (National Theatre, 2001), which mixed a contemporary story about Felix,



a Cambridge astro-physicist, and his relationship with his mother, with echoes of *Hamlet*, the life of bees and cosmology. Her characteristic style of gutsy realism laced with affectionate loopiness can be seen in Felix's lament: «It's like my mother was the big force – gently warping everything around her. And my father was the little force, fizzing away quietly on a microscopic level. But I can't bring them together» (44). A similar mixture of elements also appeared in Nick Payne's *Constellations* (Royal Court, 2012), a compellingly structured series of repeated scenes, influenced by Churchill, on the subject of illness, death and assisted dying, which used metaphors from quantum mechanics.

Black and Asian writers, led by Tanika Gupta and Roy Williams, became very important figures in the 2000s [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 223-242; 487-509; Lane 2010: 108-132]. Gupta's 2006 Royal Court play, *Sugar Mummies*, explores female sex tourism, showing how white women such as 38-year-old teacher Kitty and fiftysomething Maggie buy the services of young black men in Jamaica. The local boys refer to the women as «milk bottles», and in the final confrontation between Kitty and Sly, a «beach boy», he tells her: «You tink me a savage, a house slave. You look at me and you is jealous of my skin, but glad you is white. You tink you is superior» (119). Gupta argues that today's sex tourism is imperial oppression in a different guise, and the scene in which a privileged white woman whips an impoverished black man was a vicious image that made her point. But the play is also a comedy, and some of its best moments are funny, as when Yolanda, a mature American woman, tells Sly to try his luck with a younger girl, and he replies: «Me no wan' the kitten, me wan' the cat» (29). Williams's best work, such as *Sing Yer Heart Out for the Lads* (National Theatre, 2002), provided some of the decade's most powerful accounts of racism. Set in a pub during the 2000 soccer world cup qualifier between England and Germany (sport is an index of national identity), most of his characters are white. The two main black characters are brothers Mark and Barry. The key is contrast: Mark is an embittered ex-soldier while his brother Barry is the local amateur team's star player and has painted his face with the St George flag, as well as getting a bulldog tattoo.



He is quick to counter any idea that he's «not white enuff for England» (194). Support for the England team is xenophobic. As the thuggish white Lawrie says, «It was fuckin war on the streets. Argies, Krauts, coppers, didn't fuckin matter. We were England!» (164). The play's grim ending, however, shows the result of racial hatred. In the wider social and theatrical context, both Williams and Gupta moved from writing about their family roots – Bengali culture and the West Indies – to creating plays which had characters from a diverse range of ethnicities. This was their most innovative and liberatory contribution to New Writing.

But the most scandalous playwright from a Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic background was Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti. Her second play, *Behzti (Dishonour)* was controversially cancelled by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre after riotous protests by the local Sikh community. What had caused offence was that Bhatti, herself a Sikh, had set some of her play, which was about the abuse of a vulnerable young woman by an older community leader, in a gurdwara, a Sikh temple. The cancellation of this play after direct action by Sikh youths became a *cause célèbre* and provoked discussions about freedom of expression and its censorship by religious or ethnic groups in society. Other plays could be equally contentious. Ridley, for example, continued to write in an in-yer-face style. His *Mercury Fur* (Paines Plough, 2005), for example, is set in a post-apocalyptic London and imagines a country where a government has bombed its own population with a mixture of sand and butterfly cocoons. Once ingested, these butterflies allow the individual to vividly hallucinate fantasy scenarios, such as being part of Kennedy's assassination. Ridley's darkly beautiful language is deliberately in-yer-face: the boys' incantatory insults are variations on «ya nigger, Catholic, Yid, Christian, Paki, spic, wop, Muslim, shit, cunt» (86), while their horror stories are exceedingly gross. But his main theme is that we use narrative to make sense of our lives, and the play shows what happens when our ability to tell stories breaks down. At one point, a young character garbles a history of the second world war which mixes up Kennedy, Marilyn Monroe, Hitler and «a couple of atom bombs» which «turned all the Germans

into Chinkies» (114). *Mercury Fur* is one of the most vivid and troubling dystopias of the early 21st century.

Some of the new post-9/11 playwrights, such as Dennis Kelly and Debbie Tucker Green, displayed a ferocity in their writing that was reminiscent of Kane [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 183-202]. Kelly's provocatively titled *Osama the Hero* (Hampstead, 2005) is a perceptive study of the effects of the climate of fear encouraged by the War on Terror. Teenage Gary, says the play's opening line, is «not stupid» (51). But he is different: he once did a school project in which he playfully praised Osama bin Laden as a hero. So, when someone starts blowing up garages on Gary's estate, the finger of suspicion points at him. Local working-class youths Louise and Francis decide to make an example of him, and beat him up in an excruciating torture scene which echoes American military misbehaviour in Abu Ghraib. As they torture Gary, Francis and Louise demand his confession, despite the fact that, in her words, «You don't need evidence for terrorists» (100). As Gary observes, «People laugh a lot nowadays. I think that's fear» (59). The final sight of the yobbish characters – confused by media images of terrorism, and glumly thinking, «That's why everything's so shit» (119) – was bleak and devoid of hope. Kelly has an uncanny ability to grasp contentious issues, and to blow apart theatrical form in his search for the most provocative way of addressing a subject. In a later play, *Orphans* (Birmingham/Traverse, 2009), Kelly evokes the fear of crime: «You don't go out after dark anymore. You cross the street when you see a group of lads» (86). Once again, the best New Writing takes the pulse of the nation.

Green's 2005 Royal Court play, *Stoning Mary*, has three story strands: a couple arguing about a prescription for medication; the death of a boy soldier and a woman sentenced to death by stoning. Although we in the West associate these kinds of stories with some parts of Africa, Green specified in her stage directions that «The play is set in the country it is performed in. All characters are white» (2), thereby challenging – in the way that Kane did in *Blasted* – our complacent feeling that such horrors couldn't happen here. Her writing style in this early work is uniquely insistent, reiterative and powerfully, often poetically, repetitive.

In the final scene, when Mary, the condemned woman asks her sister how many other women protested in her favour, she gives a litany of female types which runs for two pages: «What happened to the mainstream bitches?/ The rebel bitches/ the underground bitches/ what about – how bout – the bitches that support other bitches? [...] The bitches that love their men/ the bitches that love other bitches men/ the bitches that just love bitches –/ what about alla them then?» (62). The best play of Green's more recent output is her 70-minute *Nut* (National Theatre, 2013), in which she uses a calmer, if still sharp and spiky, writing style to show a separated couple arguing about custody of their young daughter, and good friends on the verge of depression and suicidal thoughts. The result is powerfully emotional.

Other major talents who made an impact in the first decade of the new millennium include Simon Stephens and Richard Bean [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 445-65; 1-21; Lane 2010: 31-51]. Stephens rapidly produced a series of dramas in which he explored aspects of daily life, especially family life, with both naturalistic vigour and odd flights of poetic lyricism. The award-winning *On the Shore of the Wide World* (Manchester Royal Exchange, 2005), examines three generations of a Stockport family over nine months. As the title's allusion to Keats's sonnet 'When I Have Fears that I May Cease To Be' suggests, it's also a play about the fear of dying before you've experienced love. It is also critical of social institutions: as one young woman says, «Marriage is odd [...] sometimes I think it's a completely insane idea» (117). Stephens's controversially violent *Motortown* (Royal Court, 2006), about an Iraq War veteran, is a state-of-the-nation play: one character says: «You want to know the truth about the poor in this country? [...] They're not the salt of the fucking earth. They're thick. They're myopic. They're violent. [...] They would be better off staying in their little holes and fucking each other. And killing each other» (171-72). But Stephens's most experimental play of the 2000s was *Pornography* (Traverse, 2008), which was influenced, like Kane, by Crimp's innovations in theatre form. Set in London in July 2005, the play comprises dialogues and monologues against the background of the Live 8

concerts, the G8 Summit, winning the 2012 Olympics bid and the 7/7 terrorist bombings. The author's intention is clear: «This play can be performed by any number of actors. It can be performed in any order» (214). The seven scenes are numbered in descending order, beginning with scene seven and ending with scene one, like a countdown to 7/7. Each scene alludes to Shakespeare's *Seven Ages of Man*. Each also involves a transgression: betraying your boss; having incestuous sex; suicide bombing. The final scene is a list of fifty-two mini-biographies, each of which represents one of the real victims of 7/7. Although its account of the mindset of the terrorist is not convincing, the play's fragmented form, an open text that has no specified speakers, gives a vivid picture of the both the confusion and the stoicism of Londoners under attack.

Bean began his career as a stand-up comedian, and his best work combines provocative humour with recognisable insights into the British national character [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 1-21]. From his huge output, two good examples are *Harvest* (Royal Court, 2005) and *England People Very Nice* (National Theatre, 2009). *Harvest* is an epic tragi-comedy that covers one hundred years of the Harrison family, which owns Kilham Wold Farm in East Yorkshire. Amid the comedy of pig farming and giving shelter to a German pilot during the second world war, Bean catches the authentic resentments of British rural folk who have been put under pressure by both government regulations and European Union rules. As one of the characters says in a scene set in 1995, «I'm not working wage labour raising pigs for the bloody squire. Any pigs on this farm are gonna be Harrison pigs! I've never had a penny in grants from Europe and yet him up the road with forty thousand fucking acres gets two million quid a year he dunt need» (73). Ten years after this, the resentments articulated so well by Bean resulted in the vote in favour of Brexit. Likewise, in *England People Very Nice*, Bean looked at the hot issue of migration. Spanning the years from the 17th century until today, and covering Huguenots, Irish, Jewish and Bangladeshi arrivals in East London's Bethnal Green, the play was denounced as racist by some Asian activists, but proved popular with audiences. Once again, the authentic voice

of British popular feeling runs through the work. At one point, Barry the fascist says, «It won't be long before my party does have a black candidate. After 9/11, and today, skin colour is irrelevant. Culture. That's where the battle is. Take Rennie, he's black but he's as British as hot tea in a flask» (107). The punchline, and the eccentricity of the characters, is typical of this comic writer.

Another 1990s playwright, David Eldridge, explored the possibilities of emotionally truthful naturalism in two outstanding plays, *Under the Blue Sky* (Royal Court, 2000) and *In Basildon* (Royal Court, 2012) [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 144-62]. The first play is a beautiful story about the love lives of three teacher couples in a nation whose educational system is divided between the state sector and private provision. The play has three apparently unrelated Acts, each of which involves a different pair of teachers. Cleverly, the story of the first couple is then continued in the dialogues of the other two, and the disconnection of the scenes mirrors the emotional problems of two of the couples. The teachers come across as quiet heroes, spending their time in unrewarding attempts to make the lives of others better. At the same time, these teachers scorn the popular image of «being a noble profession» (189). And they have personal ambitions, as Nick argues, «I want to be challenged. Intellectually», and «I want a career. Not a slog» (195). Eldridge's dialogue is a masterclass in undercutting. Few writers use bathos to such critical effect: whenever a character gets too pretentious, another brings them down. By contrast, *In Basildon* is a family reunion play about working-class Essex characters who gather around the deathbed of the patriarch, Len. The atmosphere fizzes with tensions from old animosities, and good-natured jokes grate against the more serious issues. In Act Three, the day of Len's funeral and the reading of the will, all the barely suppressed family conflicts explode. Then, with a piece of elegant craftsmanship, Eldridge offers a final scene which fills in the gaps of the story. His recent *Beginning* (National Theatre, 2017), which explores the first meeting of a couple who will fall in love, shows the he has lost none of his emotional perceptiveness and naturalistic convincingsness.

Other 1990s playwrights went from strength to strength in the new millennium. Crimp, for example, wrote *The City* (Royal Court, 2008), a story of a suburban marriage in which images of the War on Terror keep intruding, such as when the couple's neighbour, a nurse, talks about her doctor husband's work in a war zone: the army is engaged in a «secret war», which involves «attacking a city – pulverising it, in fact – yes – turning this city – the squares, the shops, the parks, the leisure centres and the schools – turning the whole thing into a fine dust» (22). By the end, however, the narrative implodes under the emotional strain of its central relationship and Clair, the wife, reveals that the whole play was her fantasy, her unsuccessful desire to write: «I invented characters [...] But it was a struggle. They wouldn't come alive. They lived a little – but only the way a sick bird tortured by a cat lives in a shoebox» (62) [Grochala 2017: 176-83]. Similarly, Neilson staged his most ambitious play, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (Edinburgh Festival, 2004), which looked Lisa, a young woman, and her psychotic breakdown, with a form that mirrored the experience: at first subjectively (Act One) and then objectively (Act Two). Act One is vividly imaginative, with Lisa talking to weird and wonderful characters such as *insecurity* guards, a scapegoat, a do-gooding council employee and some argumentative individuals: all the colours are deliberately heightened, the language is lush and the incidents farcical. Puns abound, cars can fly. At the same time, there is a sense of danger: Goat threatens Lisa with sexual assault, and another woman is attacked. An hour of Lisa's life is lost. The air is paranoid. But some moments are deliciously pleasurable, as when a polar bear appears and sings a song – «Who'll hold your paw when you die?» (46) – a moment of perfect bliss. Act Two is a complete contrast: Lisa's hospital room; arctic sterility, sparse dialogue, depressed feeling.

Several 1990s playwrights made dramatic comebacks. Butterworth penned his verbally intoxicating masterpiece, *Jerusalem* (2009), which was a transatlantic hit [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 42-61]. It centres on the figure of Johnny Rooster Byron, a drug-dealing traveller and former stunt driver who lives in a woodland caravan, and provokes the local community with his



drunken outrages and his refusal to work. A classic outsider, he is a symbol of the contemporary freeborn Englishman, a roaring mix of skiving wastrel and Pied Piper, a hippie anarchist who is directly plugged into an old myth of Deep England, rural, pagan and dreamy. At one point, he describes his own fantasy virgin birth, due to a bullet – fired by a vengeful wife – passing through his philandering father’s gonads:

The bullet passes clean through his scrotum, bounces off the bedpost, zings out of the window, down the high street to the crossroads, where it hits the number 87 tram to Andover. The bullet passes through two inches of rusty metal, clean through an elderly lady’s packed lunch and lodges in my sweet mother’s sixteen-year-old womb (48).

Another 1990s playwright, Penhall, revamped the theme of mental illness with *Blue/Orange* (National Theatre, 2000), which examined race, schizophrenia and competing ideas about the causes and treatment of mental disease with his characteristically fast-paced and combative dialogue [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 363-82]. In one speech by a senior consultant, schizophrenia is analyzed: «Schizophrenia is the worst pariah./ One of the last great taboos./ People don’t understand it./ It scares them./ It depresses them. It is not treatable with glamorous and intriguing wonderdrugs [...]» (54). Finally, McDonagh made a triumphant return to the stage with *Hangmen* (Royal Court, 2015), which tells the story of Harry, one of Britain’s last executioners, and takes place on the day that capital punishment was abolished in 1965. Set in an Oldham pub, it brings together a group of northern eccentrics in a comedy whose laughs come from jokes aimed at northerners, at blacks, at women and at gays. The working class is mocked; so are the Germans. So are fat people. The prejudices that McDonagh articulates so clearly are exactly the same as those that led to the Brexit vote.

Women playwrights also made an increasingly important contribution [Sierz 2011b]. April De Angelis, who began her career in the 1980s when Max Stafford-Clark was artistic director of the Royal Court, continued to write hilarious feminist accounts of middle-class family life [Middeke, Schnierer & Sierz 2011: 123-



43]. Her 2011 Royal Court hit, *Jumpy*, is a family drama which features marital tensions, job insecurity, sexual desire, puppy love, teenage pregnancy, trial separation, female friendship, parental anxiety and ironic post-feminism. Although it was criticised for being too conventional a comedy, De Angelis does deal explicitly with underage sex, hardly a conventional subject. Fast-paced and febrile, the comedy shows how parents, and especially liberal middle-class parents, misjudge their offspring, and how, in their turn, children don't understand their parents. Although the playwright's sympathies lie slightly more with the mother than the daughter, the story ends on a warmhearted note. De Angelis was not alone: women playwrights wrote in a variety of genres and styles. Bola Agbaje, for example, made her debut with *Gone Too Far!* (Royal Court, 2007), which comically pictured two black brothers, one London-born and the other from Nigeria, crossing the metropolis. The play, written with outstanding energy and freshness, examines cultural identity and climaxes with one brother's cry of «We are all BLACK! WE ARE ALL BLACK AND YOU ARE ACTING LIKE WE ARE ALL DIVIDED! It needs to stop now» (79). Similarly vigorous, Polly Stenham's *That Face* (Royal Court, 2007) has a middle-class setting and focuses on a dysfunctional family. Her visceral punky spirit and writing style is exhilaratingly heady: images of addiction, abuse and aggravation pepper the text. Vivid stage images include the opening ritual in the boarding school dorm, with the initiation ceremony looking like a terrorist kidnap – highly contemporary.

In New Writing, timing is always very important. Lucy Prebble's *Enron* (Chichester Festival Theatre, 2009) is an era-defining play about the fall of the corrupt American energy corporation which resonated with audiences because it came so soon after the global financial crash of 2008. It successfully found visual and theatrical metaphors to explain the complexities of modern financial instruments. Laura Wade's *Posh* (Royal Court, 2010) was similarly timely, being staged during the General Election that saw the return of a Conservative-led government. Its picture of The Riot Club, an elite conservative university dining club which wrecks restaurants and has utter contempt for ordinary working-class people, evoked

the Oxford University Bullingdon Club, whose members included Prime Minister David Cameron, Chancellor George Osborne and London Mayor Boris Johnson. The sharpness of its stinging satire had enormous resonance. Likewise, Lucy Kirkwood's *Chimerica* (Almeida Theatre, 2013) was one of the first plays to examine the global dominance of China and America, using a story about an American photojournalist who tries to track down the lone Chinese protester who stopped the tanks in Tiananmen Square in 1989. It was a compelling study of power politics on a worldwide scale. On a more modest level, Phoebe Waller-Bridge's *Fleabag* (Edinburgh Festival, 2013), the mother of all freewheeling monologues, and Sam Holcroft's *Rules for Living* (National Theatre, 2015) both investigated contemporary female psychology, while Nina Raine's *Consent* (National Theatre, 2017), a play about class and rape, fed into the concerns of the emerging #MeToo movement.

Although much of this work by women playwrights was less adventurous in form than that of 1980s women writers, there were some exceptions [Sierz 2011b]. Alice Birch's *Anatomy of a Suicide* (Royal Court, 2017) illustrated episodes from the life of the women of one family – Carol, Anna and Bonnie – spread over three time periods: one starts in the 1970s, the next in the 1990s and the third in the future, the 2030s. All three storylines take place simultaneously on stage, which is divided into three spaces. The resulting complex stage picture means that the experiences of each of the women are intensified. What comes across most strongly, especially when the women echo each other's words, is the sense that each of them is a part of a web of emotions that invisibly links their life stories. The play presents powerful images of extreme feelings, amplified by the simultaneity of time, all taking place as the normal stream of daily life flows on. Another recent experiment in form, Ella Hickson's *The Writer* (Almeida Theatre, 2018), uses a meta-theatrical and highly inventive fragmented structure to show how a woman playwright confronts the prejudices of male directors, actors and critics. It asks urgent and timely questions: how much power do men have over female artists? Is all good art subject to commercial pressures? Is a utopian alternative possible?

Yet more new talents emerged in the creatively fertile late 2000s. One of the most prolific was Mike Bartlett, who wrote more than ten plays in little over a decade. Among his best was the dazzlingly imaginative *Earthquakes in London* (National Theatre, 2010), a finely tuned and observant, witty and playful, articulate and surreal and beguiling mix of social comedy, political discussion, family drama, sci-fi fantasy and energetic entertainment, which storms along at a cracking pace that constantly sets up contrasts and clashes. One of the play's chief delights is its kooky encounters, and its leaps of time: in one mind-bending moment, the play jumps forward by a decade and a half; at another it leaps into the 26th century! At one moment you are in the real world, at another inside the head of one of the characters. Similarly impressive is Bartlett's ability to assume different voices in his work. His *King Charles III* (Almeida Theatre, 2014), for example, is a «future history play» about the monarchy of Charles, the current Prince of Wales, which begins with the funeral of Queen Elizabeth II and then shows how the new king runs into conflict with the press and politicians. Borrowing the style and structure of a Shakespearean history play, it is written in blank verse: Charles, abdicating at the end, says, «So there, it's done, the King is at an end./ I will retreat to bed, and when I wake/ To a new dawn, I'll simply be an old/ Forgotten gardener, who potters round» (121). Mention should also be made of Bartlett's *Albion* (Almeida Theatre, 2017), a family drama and state-of-the-nation play set symbolically in an English garden, which articulates some of the anxieties of Brexit Britain, as when a writer attacks «the willfully ignorant people who seem to be full of hate, but whose voice seems to have grown increasingly loud»(66).

Recent British New Writing continues to discuss important social issues. Two good examples are Duncan Macmillan's compelling *People, Places and Things* (National Theatre, 2015), a drama about a young woman's addiction, and John Brittain's *Rotterdam* (Trafalgar Studios, 2016), a comedy about a transgender lesbian. But contemporary New Writing also has its flights of imagination: Alistair McDowall's startling original leftfield play, *Pomona* (Orange Tree, 2014), with its many allusions to video

games, graphic novels, film and pop culture, and then his sci-fi horror drama *X* (Royal Court, 2016), set on the planet Pluto, confirmed his genius for the highly imaginative, the quirky and the disturbing. Similarly, Rory Mullarkey's *Pity* (Royal Court, 2018) is a leftfield account of a surreal journey through a world that, just as in Caryl Churchill's *Far Away* (Royal Court, 2000), is disintegrating into more and more absurdist catastrophe. At its best, British New Writing stages the authentic and singular voices of playwrights who not only examine real social conditions, but also have a visionary understanding of what the future might bring. Long may their imaginations flourish.

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