Soyinka UK/Soyinka USA: Death and the King’s Horseman at the RNT and OSF

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Backpages 20.1

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New Writing 2009

Aleks Sierz

In October 2009, BBC television celebrated the fortieth anniversary of Monty Python’s Flying Circus, one of the iconic programmes of post-war British culture. Watching the Python antics now, what’s striking is their thrilling mix of satire about everyday life with surreal and absurd elements. And on mainstream television too! The show also poses the question: if a mass medium can be so adventurous, so un-naturalistic while remaining completely comprehensible, why is British theatre still tied to the straight road of social realism?

Certainly, 2009 has been a good year for theatre as social comment, with a distinct focus on the big three issues: economic collapse, religious segregation and racial disharmony. Without doubt, the biggest hit has been Lucy Prebble’s Enron (Chichester/Royal Court), in a highly imaginative production directed by Rupert Goold for the Headlong theatre company. With wonderful clarity, the play explains the complex fraudulent financial instruments developed by the company’s execs by using a variety of theatrical devices, from the straight lecture to visual metaphors involving three blind mice, baby dinosaurs and light sabres. Although this is a story about a Texan energy giant, its account of virtual capitalism spoke directly to audiences affected by the global credit crunch. It was a show that, for all its defects (the storytelling is not always clear and the ending lacks a showdown), seemed to soar.

By contrast, David Hare’s The Power of Yes (National) kept its feet firmly on the ground. Although its subject was the global financial collapse, Hare chose to dramatise this by putting himself on stage, and telling the story of his meetings with some key players. Sadly, he had little access to Americans such as Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson or Alan Greenspan, so the play exaggerates the importance of the City of London. If verbatim theatre populated by men in suits can be visually dreary, Angus Jackson’s production proved that if you move them around the stage fast enough, then a docu-drama can be cerebrally satisfying even if it looks dull.

Equally insular, if much more vivid as a piece of writing, was Jez Butterworth’s Jerusalem, which lit up the Royal Court stage with its state-of-the-
nation pastoral. Set on St George’s Day, it shows what happens when the local council tries to evict Johnny Rooster Byron from his woodland mobile home. The opening snapshot, a nocturnal bacchanalia of house music, gyrating girls and drug-added wildness, introduces this account of a green unpleasant land. Brilliantly embodied by Mark Rylance, Rooster is an absent father, an incompetent male, and has a suspicious liking for very young girls. At the same time, he’s a hippie anarchist who seems to be directly plugged into an olde myth of Deep England, rural, pagan and dreamy.

But the most controversial plays of 2009 were those which scratched at the issue of segregated communities. Richard Bean’s England People Very Nice, given a huge and hugely popular production by Nick Hytner at the National, looked at several hundred years of migration to London’s East End by fielding a squadron of racial and cultural stereotypes. Although this epic comedy was full of laughs, it’s hard to deny that it managed to be both offensive and something of a one-joke evening. At the same time, its picture of Muslims who refuse to assimilate did articulate an urgent social problem.

Belatedly, British theatre has started gathering plays about Muslims. These include Alia Bano’s Shades (Royal Court), Atiha Sen Gupta’s What Fatima Did... (Hampstead) and Cosh Omar’s The Great Extension (Stratford East). Equally controversial, although much shorter in length, was Caryl Churchill’s Seven Jewish Children, a ten-minute piece written in response to the Israeli attack on Gaza. This beautiful play provoked the defenders of the state of Israel into bilious paroxysms of hatred, and Churchill was regularly accused of every variety of anti-Semitism and racial hatred. Needless to say, these thought crimes were more in the minds of her accusers than in the text of the play.

An index of the confidence of the new writing scene is the number of big projects, with the Tricycle Theatre leading the way with two seasons, The Great Game: Afghanistan (thirteen short plays about the country’s history) and Not Black and White (three plays about race). Last year, there was Mark Ravenhill’s epic play cycle, Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat; this year saw several double bills, the best being Steve Waters’ The Contingency Plan, two plays about climate change. Such ambitious projects reflect the rise in state funding for new writing.

As far as theatres are concerned, the key word was continuity. So the Royal Court continued its exploration of American drama by staging a Wallace Shawn season, as well as a German season, and by promoting a small group of new writers such as Polly Stenham and Mike Bartlett. The Bush Theatre continued its exploration of different kinds of theatre space and different kinds of teen angst, but experienced problems with a leaky roof. The Soho Theatre continued its search for a defining political play but only found Steve Thompson’s Roaring Trade and Everything Must Go!, a review on the subject of the credit crunch. And the National continued to stage nostalgic history plays.

This was also the year in which the Hampstead Theatre celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, having originally been set up by James Roose-Evans in 1959 as a fringe theatre before fringe theatre was even invented. Although artistic director Tony Clark staged competent revivals ranging from plays by Noël Coward to work by Philip Ridley, his own taste in new plays inspired an exaggerated loathing among critics, who regularly dismissed each new offering as a dud. By the autumn, Clark had had enough, and resigned.

Outside London, it was business as usual at new writing venues such as Live Theatre, the Liverpool Everyman, Manchester Royal Exchange and Birmingham Rep. At the Edinburgh Festival, trend spotters zeroed in on the growth of what the Daily Telegraph’s Dominic Cavendish called the theatre of intimacy; for example, the Traverse’s Internal invited half a dozen spectators at a time to pair off with an actor for a round of mock speed-dating. Suicide was another theme, with, for example, Daniel Kitson’s The Interminable Suicide of Gregory Church (Traverse) and Kim Noble’s show Kim Noble Will Die. Other plays ranged from in-yer-face aggression to romantic comedy - that is, from Dennis Kelly’s Orphans to David Greig’s Midsummer. But despite such successes, there is a feeling that the good old Traverse has been partially eclipsed by the new kid on the block: the National Theatre of Scotland.

In Wales, the establishment in 2007 of a specialist venue dedicated to new writing, when Sgript Cymru joined forces with the Sherman Theatre in Cardiff, under director Chris Ricketts, has been followed in 2009 by the setting up of a National Theatre of Wales. Organised on the Scottish model, as a production company rather than a flagship building, it is led by artistic director John E McGrath, and will be staging one show per month starting from March 2010.

Elsewhere, the onward march of site-specific theatre resulted in a long life for shows such as Caravan, Look Left Look Right’s verbatim account of flooding, or Clare Bayley’s The Container, about migrants, where the audience shared tiny claustrophobic spaces with the actors. More
interesting were the bigger projects, such as Adam Brace’s Stovepipe, a Bush Theatre show about military contractors in Iraq that was staged as a promenade in an underground car park. As far as more self-reflexive work is concerned, Tim Crouch’s England and The Author prove that he is one of the most intelligent performers working in British theatre today, and his satire on the typical Royal Court in-yer-face play in the latter work was hilariously accurate.

The good news about strong new writing from established names such as Simon Stephens (Punk Rock) and Roy Williams (Category B), as well as newcomers such as In-Sook Chappell (This Isn’t Romance), Alexi Kaye Campbell (Apologia), Bola Agbaje (Detaining Justice), Lucy Kirkwood (It Felt Empty When the Heart Went at First but It Is Alright Now) and Nick Payne (If There Is I Haven’t Found It Yet), is offset by a general lack of energy and excitement. There’s also a feeling that although new writing responds to the great public events, it tends to do so in ways that are traditional and, with only a couple of notable exceptions, not very exciting theatrically. Compared with the glorious legacy of the Pythons, British new writing remains curiously timid in form, content and sensibility.

Soyinka UK/Soyinka USA: Death and The King’s Horseman at RNT and OSF

Sara Freeman

Both the National Theatre in the UK and the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in the United States opened productions of Wole Soyinka’s 1975 opus Death and The King’s Horseman this spring. I find myself most deeply fascinated by the significance of producing Soyinka on these stages, especially when the play didn’t receive its British premiere until 1990 (in Manchester) and was not widely explored in the United States outside colleges. Why simultaneous revivals at this juncture, in such marked venues, and what’s being circulated there?

Soyinka’s inscription of British history and British theatre history means there is every reason to place his body of work, and this play in particular, in conversation with concepts of Britain, Britishness, Commonwealth nationality, and national/racial identity, which is the move suggested, if not precisely mandated, by a staging at the NT. When the NT mounts a play, at the very least it signals that the writer and/or the work is being put into the public realm as worthy of the nation’s attention, either for achieving some of the highest possible potentials of theatre forms or in order to reflect a particularly timely or cogent way on the life of the nation, or both. As the National’s mission statement and website descriptions say, the company ‘aims constantly to re-energise the great traditions of the British stage and to expand the horizons of audiences and artists alike. [The National] aspires to reflect in its repertoire the diversity of the nation’s culture.’

Surely the National is interested in Death and the King’s Horseman for aesthetic reasons as well, but the production seems most strongly positioned as an effort at ‘reflecting the diversity of the nation’s culture’, a tactic increasingly frequent under the artistic directorship of Nicholas Hytner. This emerges clearly when watching some of the video clips of audience reactions by the National on its webpage; one video that has been posted on the webpage intersplices production stills and post-show audience reactions. Three white British women describe the play as ‘fantastic’, ‘awesome’, ‘spellbinding’, and then, setting up a theme, ‘really thought provoking’ (don’t say we didn’t warn you, says the marketing department). Next a young black male student with an accent suggesting an African background emotionally says, ‘I was proud to come in and see a beautiful play.’ Then a professional, London-ite black couple speak, the male partner saying, ‘It’s about giving a bit of history about particularly the Yoruba culture and about what traditions are and also how colonists at the time saw that sort of culture […]’

This interview is the fulcrum of the minute-and-a-half-long video. The man continues, crucially describing the impact of the production: ‘with the lighting and the music and the colours and everything it really brought it out and it made you sort of feel as if you were part of history being made and seeing it and living it again.’ Part of history being made and living it again: what phenomenological expressions about what the Olivier stage might offer an audience consciousness! And voiced through a black British man who may or may not resonate (to me? to himself?) with Olunde, the British-educated African man who returns to carry out his father’s ritual duty in Soyinka’s play. Whose history? Being part of it, again, where? To echo Debbie Tucker Green’s play Trade, also about commonwealth geography and identity, are we here or there?
The video continues with the student returning to situate Soyinka’s titanic literary reputation. Then a sombre-faced young white British woman comments on the ‘serious issues of the play’ - about ‘clashes of culture.’ The video ends with two white women broaching one of the production’s sharp artistic choices - that of having black actors play the white British roles wearing white face make-up. ‘I thought it was really great that the black actors wore white. I think it’s a really different perspective and I thought it was genius,’ says the woman in the pair who has an American accent.

Certainly, the National has presented a complex view of Britain-as-nation at many points in its history. In 1973, the company commissioned and premiered Soyinka’s own 

_The Bacchae of Euripides_, which also connects to the aim of revitalising the great traditions of the British stage, querying the form of tragedy and rewriting the genre by way of African ritual. But only now, more than thirty years after its publication, _Death and the King’s Horseman_, which doesn’t have the veil of Greek myth validating it, takes the National’s stage so explicitly, contrasting British and the African world views. Moreover, the production emerges from an entirely black acting company led by a rising white director, Rufus Norris, and with a Venezuelan choreographer. The combination of black performers/white director (echoed in the United States by the 2009 Broadway revival of August Wilson’s _Joe Turner’s Come and Gone_ directed by Bartlett Sher) points up questions about the exclusion of black directors, but the publicity video on the website testifies to the National’s positioning of the whole project as an accurate reflection of the nation’s current culture and as a composition.

There’s a prickly loading of terms when the video shows the young woman speaking about clashes of cultures, since Soyinka’s author’s notes at the top of _Death and the King’s Horseman_ sternly reprimand reducing the play’s themes and intent to an anatomy of culture clash. Soyinka says this is not a ‘clash of cultures’ play, yet in London can it help but be read that way, at least in part? (Clare Brennan in the _Guardian_ absolves Norris’s production from failing to heed Soyinka’s injunction, though.) Still, as I watch the video again, this young woman becomes a version of Soyinka’s Jane Pilkings who, in the play, conveys some awareness of the difficult subtleties of the colonial relationships but in a cowardly way accepts the codes in which she also must move. Without doubt, the production has also hit a nerve of debate in Britain, outraging some who would reject its provocations, and on the other side calling forth official support for the production and author. On the one front, Quentin Letts in the _Mail Online_ (http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/reviews/article-116853/Anti-British-rant-black-white.html, posted 9 April 2009) decries the production as an anti-British rant and concludes his review with the ‘verdict: all the white man’s fault again.’ On the other, the _Guardian_ carries an official editorial in praise of Soyinka.

But what about the American production? Soyinka’s monumental work arrives at a pivotal moment in the institutional history of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF), consciously chosen to reflect a new artistic policy, while sending additional messages not bounded by mission statements. Oregon Shakespeare Festival, founded in 1937, is among the United States’ longest continuous running and biggest repertory theatre companies; it is a financial and artistic powerhouse in a way that upends its comparative geographical isolation as both a non-urban and a west coast institution. It is not an exaggeration to say that when OSF chooses a direction, it will have implications for the work of theatres across the United States. OSF underwent a major transition of leadership two years ago. Artistic director Libby Appel stepped down after a twelve-year tenure and Bill Rauch of Cornerstone Theatre Company took the helm.

Rauch immediately and publicly committed to broadening the definition of classic theatre at the festival by putting on the agenda productions of American musicals and what he calls ‘world classics’. OSF already possessed a new play development programme, which Rauch continues, and OSF regularly presented classics like Chekhov or Molière or Miller alongside its regular progress through the Shakespeare canon. Despite the examples of the RSC and the NT in the previous thirty years, the interest in musicals surprised people when Rauch announced his plan: would the group be going the route of the fictional festival in the Canadian television programme _Slings and Arrows_? The ‘world classics’ excited less concern, perhaps out of uncertainty about what specific titles it meant. The 2009 season marks OSF’s first productions in these ‘expanded classic’ areas, with Rauch’s direction of _Music Man_ hailed as a triumph and Chuck Smith’s direction of _Death and the King’s Horseman_ making the case that an African writer like Soyinka can be ‘like’ Shakespeare in terms of scale, imagery, and language.

At least that’s what was immediately apparent to me while seeing OSF’s production of _Death and the King’s Horseman_; this play is being treated ‘like Shakespeare’. The approach works and there are
definite benefits to treating Soyinka, who studied in Leeds with Shakespeare scholar G. Wilson Knight and who has written about Shakespeare and the living dramatist, like Shakespeare. Chief among the benefits is the quality of vocal work and linguistic dexterity, that in the United States is almost solely reserved for ‘Shakespeare’ acting, being applied to Soyinka’s soaring marathon of speech and dance. Watching Derrick Lee Weeden, an eighteen-year veteran at OSF, deliver the ‘Not-I-Bird’ sequence in the opening marketplace scene revealed that poetry and its action in a way that can for me now be compared to sequences from Lear and Hamlet.

But there’s also the matching of the play’s monumentality to the monumentality of the indoor Angus Bowmer Theatre in Ashland. And the assembling of leading African-American director Smith (from Chicago), a mixed black and white cast of profound experience, African drummer guest artists, and an extraordinary dramaturgy staff has led to the formation of a level of institutional support found in few US theatres. True, OSF’s company didn’t get to travel to Nigeria like the NT company did, but the show’s incubation and development seems rich in ways both financial and metaphorical.

Perhaps the only immediate detraction of positioning Soyinka as like Shakespeare in this way has to do with allowing Soyinka to be delivered as ‘didactic’ or ‘good for you’, whether for multicultural educational purposes (part of what Letts reacts so strongly to in his screed) or simply as ‘important’ in a high cultural way that lifts it above critique (about the gender assumptions at stake in Horseman, for instance, though OSF’s production gets good laughs around reactions from both Iyaloja and Jane about things Elesin and Simon say). The night I attended, at least two large groups of middle school and high school students were there watching the Thursday evening show. The scene where Elesin and Iyaloja display the bloody post-coital sheet after Elesin deflowers the market girl convulsed the house in giggles. And restlessness overtook even the most rapt 14 year-olds through the long taunting and teasing between the praise-singer and Elesin.

It may be inevitable that if Soyinka is going to be revived in the United States regularly, it will be at Shakespeare festivals: they have the resources, they have the mandates about classics, and Soyinka, laureate, now holds that stature. Indeed, besides OSF’s production, the only production I can find of Horseman after the Chicago and New York premieres (in 1976 and 1987 respectively) not on a college campus occurred at Washington, DC’s Washington Shakespeare Company in 2006. The Shakespearean-ness of OSF’s production communicates more than its artistic policy about what defines a classic; it also communicates a readiness to apply the artistic work of bridging the national and the individual and the historical and the contemporary with an ever-wider range of material. OSF manifests an unusual interest in British plays that follow this track: it produced Brenton and Hare’s Pravda in 1995 and Edgar’s Pentecost in 1997, and shared the commission for Edgar’s Continental Divide dyad, which it staged in 2003. Soyinka turns OSF to Britain and Africa, but it’s also on the verge of turning towards the United States itself and perhaps playing a role in there like the one Hynter has aimed for at the NT. OSF recently began a new project called ‘American Revolutions: The United States History Cycle’ in order to commission up to 37 plays (the number of Shakespeare’s canon) about America’s past, its present, and, implicitly, its future.

The NT and OSF Soyinka productions, then, might be textbook examples of the ‘expanded canon’ on the ground, synchronising, and reaching a certain institutional momentum. Rauch, no less than Hynter, articulates a philosophy at least thirty years in the making that accepts a long series of revisions to what constitutes classical theatre and what constitutes a nation. Do I say ‘at last’? Or do I just enjoy the feats of programming still to come?

Letter to the Field: On The Birthday Party and Cross-Racial Casting Controversy

Julian Meyrick

A Research Fellow at La Trobe University, and until recently Associate Director and Literary Advisor at Melbourne Theatre Company, Julian Meyrick is involved in support for new drama at all levels, and is Deputy Chair of Play Writing Australia and a member of the federal government’s Creative Australia Advisory Group.

This production of The Birthday Party was a shotgun marriage. On the one hand a large-scale repertory, Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC), roughly the size of the Yorkshire Playhouse. On the other, a scratch cast of Indigenous actors. I had known the actors for a while, worked with most of them. But the much-tootled diversity of contemporary Australia does not extend to its mainstream theatre (have a look at Lee Lewis’s Cross-Racial
Casting [Currency Press, 2007]), so the mix of talents was unusual. The premise of the interpretation was also a fusion: an early comedy of menace with its vaudevillian humour, sporadic violence and endless cups of tea overlaid onto the world of Indigenous Australians, in all its fragility and oppressed decorum.

I wrote the letter below a week before the end of the run. I emailed it to fifty people. The MTC posted it on their website but you had to search hard to find it. A modest first appearance. A few days later it was being royally done over in the papers, the radio and the blogs with no abatement. As I knew it would be, the matter was out of my sight. A modest first appearance. A few people, including many I respect, felt I should not have said what I did. I didn’t lose sleep. We all have to answer to somebody. In lieu of a higher authority we answer to each other. I did not write in the heat of the moment. I waited before having my say, trying to let the issues emerge from the emotional fog. I wrote for the record. For anyone looking back on the production, my response to the critics stands along with the critics’ response.

But there is a cost to these things, however you construe them. By talking about the production, much less by justifying it, I reduced it. Race was integral to the show, but it was about so much more. There is defeat in my defence and many people, including many I respect, felt I should not have made it. All I can say is that it instigated the very debate I hoped the show would provoke. I don’t feel that as any kind of a vindication, though, certainly not a victory. It’s a flat, uneasy truce, the sort that comes after a blazing, unpleasant row.

Shortly before he died Pinter asked me to describe the approach I was taking to his play. He didn’t say ‘explain’, but I tried to give reasons for what I wanted to do. He was no stranger to a public scrap. In the belly of the beast, assailed by the slings and arrows of the vapid, the malignant and the inert, I thought of him and realised I would get no thanks for my trouble. Life, for an artist, is about standing by your art. In this case, that art was sutured to a political ganglion of considerable dimension. I kicked it hard. You take what comes your way. The show ran for six weeks in a 380-seat theatre, at the Victorian Arts Centre, in Melbourne. It was seen by about 10,000 people, mostly subscribers. The opening night was a success, as they sometimes are. It did all right with audiences too, who didn’t care who was in it, really, so long as the story ticked over and the lines were well-delivered. Which they were.

*
To be a director committed to simplicity and _sachlichkeit_ (literally ‘sobriety’) in an age of bling and high technique is to be out of step with the temper of the times. It is to go _under_ when the disposition is to go _over_, to want to clarify and reduce, when others are adding to the spectacle, ramping up the emotions, indulging in _more_ of everything, whatever that happens to be. The lack of purity of intent in contemporary Australian theatre always shocks me. There is a desperation I find deeply disturbing. And the assumption of a certain kind of deafness. If you’re not shouting, then you’re not being heard. Such is my default position as an artist, and having assumed it I have no right to complain when this is misunderstood, misrepresented or calumniated. Though, of course, it wears you down.

Cameron and Alison are, in their different ways, part of this fanfaronade, sometimes its supporters. It’s not fair to count them in the same breath, really. Cameron is a literary critic, if he’s anything, not a theatre person. His reviews show a startling aberrance in assessing live performance, a confusion regarding his own feelings and the feelings of his audience. Good critics _use_ their emotions as a means of framing (though not necessarily agreeing with) the public response to a show. Cameron is not typically aware of this duty. For him it’s about what he likes and what he doesn’t, and his reviews are often fractured, lacking an integrated and organising _core_. They are reactions rather than responses. Alison, by contrast, is one of the most intelligent people writing on theatre today. She’s got background in the art form in a way Cameron hasn’t, and does not hold herself aloof from the realities of producing and advocating stage work. But in one way she resembles her colleague: partisanship is the essence of her craft. It is possible to say ahead of time what Alison will think of any show because her view of theatre is schematic, adversarial and assured. The result is opinions which label themselves as such, yet lack range in feeling and taste. This has always been a problem for Australian critics of quality, who are bottled-up in a theatre scene not big enough even to be called a pond. It was said of the late Harry Kippax he spent so long looking for a new Australian theatre he didn’t recognise it when it arrived. A certain kind of diminishing power comes with being a critic – a petty power directors also court, so I recognise it – that is corrosive of disinterested thinking and the wider view.

When in the last days of rehearsing _The Birthday Party_ it became clear it would broadly work, I felt we were putting forward not merely ‘a nice, solid show’ (as one of the actors put it), but a new alliance of forces. You can get the impression from Cameron and Alison’s reviews that staging Pinter plays with Indigenous actors is an interesting but not remarkable event, the sort of thing which happens from time-to-time in a culture open to the profit of cross-cultural casting. That’s weird. As I know, and they know, it’s the first time it has _ever_ been done, so if the core of Pinter’s play is, in Cameron’s words ‘the vexed relationship between language and memory and identity’ then this could have done with a little unpacking. Alison’s response is even more truncated: ‘[the] cross-racial production gives the play a complex indigenous subtext that nevertheless resists obvious interpretation.’ Does it now? In _The Birthday Party_, two men, Goldberg and McCann, turn up at a seedy boarding house looking for a third man, Stanley, who is hiding from them. In this production, everyone is Aboriginal except for Goldberg. So the action goes: a white man hunts down a black man, charms his landlady, seduces his girlfriend, then terrorises, tortures and takes him away to a malignant fate. When Stanley appears at the end of the play, ready to go, he’s physically OK but can no longer talk. It seems hilarious now but when I was rehearsing, I thought the meaning of all this would be _too obvious_. I hadn’t factored in Australia’s completely aphasic attitude to race.

Both Cameron and Alison had a problem with one of the lead performances, Isaac Dandrich’s portrayal of Stanley. For Cameron it was a deal-breaker: ‘leaden and inert, Dandrich seems incapable of talking like a real person, with stolid inflections that retain the impression of an actor reciting lines in the earliest phases of rehearsal.’ He goes on to say – and this is an absolutely crucial give-away – ‘that by the end of the play we feel sorrier for Goldberg and McCann than we do for Stanley.’ Alison doesn’t single Isaac out in the _Australian_, but she does in her blog, _Theatre Notes_, where she calls him ‘emotionally blank’, his lack of affect ‘neutralis[ing] many of the exchanges in the play, as Stanley is always a passive victim.’ If you read more of the blog, you will see that not everyone felt that way. But it’s a devastating judgement which, if true, blunts the edge of Pinter’s play. Under such circumstances Alison would be right to claim that the comedy had overwhelmed the menace, reducing the drama.

Watching Isaac’s performance grow these past weeks I realise what a difficult job I asked him to do. He’s a capable, passionate actor with considerable stage presence, but the role of Stanley is...
tricky, ever-changing in tone and intent. Cameron’s review was a blow, too. When a reviewer expresses themselves in a lurid and personal way, and Cameron sometimes does, the result is a kink in the performance trajectory that needs to be battled through. There’s an element of truth in most criticism, however vitriolic, and you have to pick it out, action it, and grow stronger for having done so.

But comparing Isaac with the many young actors I have worked with over the years, I have also come to feel these critical judgements of his performance are harsh, unreasonable and perverse. Worse, they operate in such a way as to block traffic, fuddling the intended meaning of the show. His performance is used as an excuse not to look at the unsettling racial associations the action throws up. As a young, black, working-class man – and this description would apply both to Isaac and Stanley – empathy is withheld from him in an unnatural way. Isaac’s portrayal of Stanley didn’t lack feeling. He received countless letters and messages after Cameron’s review telling him so. If anything, feeling was all there was as he struggled, in the early stages of the run, to find the appropriate technique for his demanding role. I can’t prove it, but the evidence points in the other direction: to a critical absence where a critical response should be: to a marked unwillingness to connect with the victim of the play.

And here we get to heart of it: our culture’s bizarre, unreadable and depressing attitude to Aboriginality, including – the bit I know about – its representation on stage. Again I say you might get the impression from the reviews that cross-racial casting of canonical English plays went on all the time, instead of the reality, that it almost never happens. One contributor to the Theatre Notes blog suggested it might be a marketing strategy. But the implications are professionally and culturally profound. There are few more difficult playwrights than Pinter. If you can act Pinter, you can act anything. An indigenous cast nailing The Birthday Party is an indication that a new era in cross-cultural casting has arrived. It’s a shift from why (why cast Aboriginal actors) to why not (why not cast Aboriginal actors). If they can do the part, they can be in the play, regardless of colour or creed.

There’s a social justice issue here, then, but that is not the only implication of the casting. The Indigenous actors in The Birthday Party aren’t just ones who can do the roles; they are the right ones for them. It’s about energy, not just representation. It’s about renewal not only professional inclusion. In every way, these actors bring another dimension to a theatrical scene – and a repertoire – ever on the brink of turning inward. They bring something new. The work of today’s theatre artists is good, but, let’s be honest we’re a socially homogeneous bunch: middle-class, tertiary-educated, white middle-Australians. Even those who fall outside this profile get sucked into its values. The danger is theatre becomes a college club, socially exclusive, experientially arid. For all our talk about diversity, for all the diversity that exists in Australia as a whole, it doesn’t kick through to our theatre. More importantly, it doesn’t kick through to our theatrical imaginations. We remain trapped in a limited reality we don’t recognise as limited, in need of an alternate sensibility to open us up not only to different kinds of cultural portrayal but to other kinds of creative freedom.

The cast of The Birthday Party were the hardest working, most thoughtful, considerate and humorous bunch of actors I’ve worked with in a while. It was hard facing them after the reviews and having to explain why their achievement had been minimized, elided or traduced. They knew what they had done. And for me the most shameful thing was: they were not surprised.

To finish up, in Theatre Notes Alison says she was ‘very disappointed’ with this production of The Birthday Party. ‘There was all the architecture for something splendid, but nobody had switched on the lights.’ She’s right. But the connection was hers to make. The production, which is full of problems, I’m sure, is also full of invitations. As a white director, as an Anglo-Australian, I can’t stage a play about the experience of Indigenous people. I don’t have the knowledge, the insight or the right. But I’ve got eyes and ears, and I can read. Everything to do with the official approach to Aboriginality in this country stinks. Pinter’s play, which I do know because it’s an object from my own cultural background, is about truth, violence, humour, deference and power. By bringing the two together I am trying to communicate something about how race operates in the fragmented, demented, tortured, amnesiac consciousness of contemporary Australia. Pinter says covertly what is difficult to point to directly: that the bad thinking surrounding Indigenous identity in Australian society today warps our whole way of life.

So, Alison I am very disappointed with you, you in particular. There is an issue for me of whether it’s worth continuing as part of a culture that has revealed itself for what it is: closed-off, self-alienated, lost. The Birthday Party is a good show, I hope.
Good enough. More importantly it is an attempt to action a truth, and move forward through that action- ing. I don’t know what Australian theatre is supposed to be if it does not encompass this as a primary dynamic. Just a cycle of mild aesthetic experiment and self-promoting, un-attached commentary, I guess. An expensive reality avoidance strategy.

At a future point – and it may not be far away – Australian theatre will hit the wall. In line with other sectors of the economy, the finances of the performing arts are getting more complicated, as costs continue to rise and profits prove harder to generate. At this moment, the question of what lies at the heart of Australian theatre may not be so esoteric. The industry will need to expand its sense of self, to become more genuinely diverse, yet preserve what it thinks is of on-going importance. It’s a big call, but I think the critical responses to The Birthday Party suggest this moment, too, will be bungled. There is a rigidity, even a sterility to our current ideas of theatre that results in a weary confusion between the peripheral and the valuable, the look of something and its meaning, the faux-innovative and the genuinely new.

The Birthday Party is something genuinely new. I offer it up as such, in all its glory; for all its flaws. It breaks my heart that the invitation was, in and through these reviews, declined.

In Memoriam: Noel Greig (1944–2009)

Grae Cleugh

You should never meet your heroes, because they’ll always disappoint in person. So they say. Noel Greig confounded such expectations. I met Noel only once, on a writing course he ran with long-time friend and collaborator, Philip Osment. Noel was already quite ill, but despite this, he didn’t disappoint. Far from it. The terrific weekend programme I attended with Noel and Philip marked a turning point for me in my writing, and I count Noel’s wise advice and technical know-how, alongside his wonderfully practical Playwriting Guide (Routledge, 2005), as crucial elements in my development as a playwright. For me, a young would-be gay dramatist, Noel was a long-time hero who, along with Drew Griffiths, Gerald Chapman and Philip Osment, established Gay Sweatshop as the most significant gay theatre company in Britain’s theatrical history. I had finally got to meet the grand (alas not-so-) old man of gay theatre. I feel privileged I got the chance.

Noel was an actor, director, playwright, teacher, mentor and gay activist. Most importantly, Noel was the right man at the right time. Coming of age in the early-seventies era of gay liberation politics, Noel spurned London’s West End to pursue a more radical theatrical agenda that was truer to the openly gay man he would become. Noel’s first move into radical gay theatre came in 1973 when he joined touring Bradford-based socialist theatre collective ‘General Will.’ Here, he played a significant role in encouraging local gay men and women, some of whom had never heard of gay theatre, to come and play a part in the company’s groundbreaking new work.

Noel’s foundation at General Will would ultimately lead him to the most significant and creatively fruitful part of his career. In 1977, Noel joined Gay Sweatshop, where he would spend a decade as playwright, director and later administrative director. Sweatshop’s talent was in employing personal gay and lesbian narratives and reaching out to gay communities wherever they could be found to tell those stories. University, trade union and gay equality groups all over the country would watch Sweatshop plays.

As a playwright, Noel co-wrote the seminal As Time Goes By (1977) with Drew Griffiths, a play that provided the first dramatic portrayal of the forgotten story of the Nazi persecution of homosexuals. Later, Noel would write arguably his best play, The Dear Love of Comrades (1979), the story of England’s fin-de-sie`cle sexologist and gay rights advocate Edward Carpenter. Noel took on the role of Carpenter himself and there is a wonderful black-and-white photograph of Noel as a tall, dark and rather brooding Carpenter in Philip Osment’s Gay Sweatshop: Four Plays and a Company volume (Methuen 1989, p. lxxii). It would be Carpenter’s story that would ultimately establish Noel’s reputation as actor and playwright.

Noel grew up in Skegness in Lincolnshire, which he later left to take a history degree at King’s College London. After graduation, Noel spent time in rep in the north of England before his first encounter with radical theatre when he moved to Brighton in the late 1960s. Noel later worked at both the Royal Court Theatre and in the West End before moving north again to Bradford.

Noel’s later career involved another important new work, Plague of Innocence (1988), about the AIDS crisis, for Sheffield’s Crucible Theatre, as well as a new play for the RSC (He Is Ours, 1992). Noel
had also begun to teach playwriting, and taught students at the Royal Court, Birmingham Rep and the Theatre Centre in London before later establishing his own ‘Dealing with Writing’ programme on the Kent coast with Philip Osment.

Noel wrote over 50 plays, acted in more and taught thousands of students. He will be remembered most for his radical and groundbreaking work with Gay Sweatshop. Few of us in the theatre get the chance to make history after all, but in his work with ‘Sweatshop’ as actor, director and playwright Noel did so. Gay dramatists of the next generation such as myself stand on the shoulders of giants like Noel Greig. Without him and the path he blazed for gay theatre in Britain, we simply wouldn’t be here.

Noel Antony Miller Greig, playwright, actor, director, teacher and gay activist, born 25 December 1944, died 9 September 2009.

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