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Crowns after 15 Years

Anna Morton

Anna Morton is Literary Manager at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, New Jersey. When McCarter first produced Crowns in 2002, Bruce Weber of the New York Times lauded the show as a ‘delightfully celebratory’ piece, describing, ‘you feel that you’ve been transported to someplace real and welcomed there. In the theatre, that’s heady stuff’. It feels, these days, that those of us working in the American regional theatre are endlessly in pursuit of the kind of transcendent, affecting, and joy-filled theatrical experience that Weber describes, hoping to provide our audiences a respite and reprieve from the relentless anger, hatred, and depressing rhetoric filling our daily news cycle. The McCarter Theatre Artistic Staff decided to remount Regina Taylor’s Crowns in the spring of 2018, feeling that the event of bringing this successful McCarter commission home after 15 years would add a sense of much-needed celebration to our 2017–18 season. While the world and the USA, specifically, have come a long way since 2002, we could see that the hunger for an emotionally charged, heart-warming, music-filled, coming of age story had only grown. We wanted to investigate what the Crowns for 2018 might look like, and from day one we envisioned the process to include a dramaturgical reinvestigation of the text and the music, updating it for the current moment.

The first seeds of this popular American musical were sewn in an unlikely location: a performance of McCarter’s Artistic Director and Resident Playwright Emily Mann’s play Greensboro: A Requiem in the titular city of Greensboro, North Carolina. There, Michael Cunningham, co-author of the book Crowns: Portraits of Black Women in Church Hats on which the musical Crowns is based, approached Emily with a proposition to turn his forthcoming book into a play. Upon reviewing the materials Cunningham had shared, Emily was stunned by the gorgeous photographs of black women in their church hats and the accompanying quotes and stories from interviews that Cunningham’s co-author, Craig Marberry, had conducted with the subjects. As Emily tells it, she readily agreed with Cunningham that the book should be theatricalized, and immediately thought of Regina as the right artist for the job.

Commissioned by and premiered at McCarter in the early 2000s, *Crowns* has been produced multiple times in almost every year since across this country and beyond, including at Ensemble Theatre in Texas, Actor’s Theatre of Charlotte, twice at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago – and no less than four times at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. Remounting *Crowns* at McCarter for its fifteenth anniversary gave Regina the chance to re-examine the play and bring it into the present tense as both the production’s playwright and director, in collaboration with Emily, who had shepherded development of the original script many years before.

In reopening up the script, Regina chose to shift her focus to the character of Yolanda, the young woman who, upon the tragic death of her brother, travels from Brooklyn to Darlington, South Carolina to live with and learn from her grandmother for a year. In earlier iterations of the script, the narrative centred most heavily on Yolanda’s grandmother (Mother Shaw) and her friends in Darlington, as they were the characters inspired by the women in Cunningham and Marberry’s book. Dramaturgically, however, the script called for deeper development of Yolanda’s character, and then a tighter weaving of her journey into the lives of the women she meets in South Carolina. Fed by work that Regina had begun in a production of *Crowns* at the Goodman Theatre, this is where we began our process at McCarter. After initial discussions with Regina, we created a development plan for the months prior to rehearsals that was much more comprehensive than what would be expected for a more conventional revival.

Regina directed a tenth anniversary production of *Crowns* at the Goodman in 2012, and while there she implemented a rewrite that moved Yolanda’s hometown from Brooklyn to Englewood, Chicago. When asked about the changes, she was making for that production, Regina shared that there was, among other things, a personal element to this decision:

> I recently moved to Chicago and I wanted Chicago to be a part of this story – there’s such a rich history here with the great migration of African American citizens with deep roots in the South. I really wanted to frame the piece around Yolanda, so in this incarnation she is from Englewood on the South Side… I wanted to root it in Englewood as she’s facing the devastation of her family with her brother being shot on the street.

Chicago has one of the highest murder rates in the country and Englewood has the highest murder rate of all the neighborhoods in the city. So, I thought that the story was very suited to start here. What happens when a family, a community is shattered?

This change was both reflective of the times – as Regina suggests, the devastating events that Yolanda leaves behind when she is sent, against her will, to Darlington, are very much a part of Englewood’s reality today – and of her desire to relocate the centre of the narrative around Yolanda, rather than around the women she meets in Darlington.

To strengthen and activate Yolanda’s storyline, Regina wanted to re-examine her musical sound as well as her narrative trajectory. Lauryn Hill had been a strong influence on the character in 2002, but this production required new music that could update Yolanda’s sound to resonate with contemporary audiences. Pooling the skills and resources of a composition team that included Chesney Snow, Jaret Landon (also the production’s Music Director), Diedre Murray, and David Pleasant, Regina guided a series of workshops and meetings in advance of their February rehearsals – a developmental process that ultimately behaved like that of an entirely new musical – to write a musical line for Yolanda that concentrated on her personal experiences and her reflection on those experiences in real time. Through the new music, the audience would see Darlington through her eyes. This reframing ensured that the play’s urgency, and its youthful energy and perspective, would capture the attentions of audiences of all ages.

In this new draft, Yolanda communicates her point of view on her new experiences directly to the audience through rap, spoken word, song, and technology. In staging, Regina chose to have Yolanda use her phone to record, write about, and film the events around her and her reactions to them. To keep Yolanda’s home-town present throughout, images and video of Englewood, Yolanda’s brother Teddy, her mother, and other faces and places from her memory were projected on a tripolina that made up the upstage surface of the set. These projections, designed by Rasean Davonte Johnson, helped to foreground Yolanda’s viewpoint for the audience, and underscored one of the largest sociological developments since the first production of *Crowns* in 2002:

the now widespread use of smartphones. With footage of L train stations, church interiors, Teddy dancing, and her mother praying, Englewood remained present in Yolanda’s Darlington so that the audience never forgot where she calls home. In this revised draft, Yolanda’s point of view is privileged as the audience’s way into the narrative. To convey that spirit to future directors of the piece, a note from Regina at the beginning of the script now details: ‘This is the journal that Yolanda makes about the year she spent with her grandma in Darlington South Carolina after her brother was shot on the streets of pop city Englewood’.  

Once Regina clarified Yolanda’s track, she then worked to integrate her journey into the stories of the Darlington women. Yolanda is ultimately transformed through the lessons taught by these women, but for our reframing to succeed, she needed to be central to, if not always at the centre of, every moment. The women teach her the rules of hat wearing, they pass down traditions that came with their hats, and, most crucially, they show her what it means to grieve. It is only once they share the stories of their own losses of husbands, fathers, grandmothers, and friends, that Yolanda finds a way to let go of the guilt and pain she has felt since Teddy’s murder. Mother Shaw tells her, ‘Lay your burden down| on death’s hallowed ground| To rise up in the morning| reborn’.  

With these words, and with the support of the women she has met in Darlington, Yolanda is finally able to confront Teddy’s death head on. It is the first step in the process of acceptance and transformation that eventually allows her to become a positive, contributing member of the Englewood community when she returns home. She experiences a healing that clearly mirrors what we hoped this production of Crowns would do for our community in and around Princeton.

This sense of healing extended into the rehearsal room, as well. Throughout the process, the company shared stories about how they recognized themselves and people they knew in their characters. The musical had personal meaning for each performer, whether it was due to its portrayal of Christianity, of the family dynamics between Yolanda and the older generations, of Yolanda’s anger and isolation from her community, or of the importance of family traditions. The opportunity to play contemporary black characters with whom they identified held great significance for these actors. We saw the significance and benefits of that representation reflected in the play’s audiences as well, particularly at our student matinee when a large group of young people from Trenton attended.

Because Crowns tells a story of community and of people coming together despite their seemingly different perspectives and opinions, we found there was a wealth of opportunity for community engagement surrounding this production. Through collaborations with the Arts Council of Princeton, the Princeton Public Library, and Philadelphia-based hat-making company American Hats LLC, McCarter’s Marketing and Engagement teams were able to connect with corners of our community that had been previously unreachable. In an interview about this production, Regina shared her thoughts on the project of Crowns: ‘I think that this piece speaks to us about the tenacity of the human spirit, how do we get through the dark times, how we can bond together, grow together, support each other’.  

Crowns models for us, as we work through our own dark times, the vitality and the necessity of community. In programming it, we were able to share this message with a wide audience, and more importantly, access younger community members who saw themselves reflected onstage in Yolanda for the first time.

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Brexit Shorts: Dramas from a Divided Nation

Chris Megson

Chris Megson is the Director of the Centre for Contemporary British Theatre at Royal Holloway, University of London.

One year on from the UK’s EU Referendum in June 2016, the Guardian newspaper, in partnership with Headlong theatre company, released Brexit Shorts on the Guardian website – a series of nine dramatic monologues reflecting on the causes and consequences of the vote. These short, sharp films, most of them around 5 min in length, were written by James Graham, Stacey Gregg, David Hare, Charlene James, AL Kennedy, Abi Morgan, Gary Owen, Maxine


Peake, and Meera Syal. They offer what Guardian reporter Chris Wiegand describes as ‘the first direct responses by playwrights to the referendum result’.7

Each film is set in a different part of the UK from Glasgow city centre to a train station in the northern town of Wigan and a sunlit garden in Winchester. The variations in language, dialect, and landscape establish a regional context for an encounter with different perspectives on Brexit and, cumulatively, the monologues shore up the image of a nation divided and polarised by the referendum. The aim of Brexit Shorts was not only to express a range of views but, perhaps more ambitiously, to nurture a national conversation between ‘Leavers’ and ‘Remainers’: as Amy Hodge – Headlong’s associate director and director of four of the monologues – put it: ‘It seemed to me that people in the UK, for a myriad of reasons, simply stopped listening to each other’.8

The use of the monologue form in each piece, with its intimate direct address, solicits the active and careful listening of the viewer.

Arguably, from my own perspective as a ‘Remain’ voter, the most interesting films are those that explore why some people voted ‘Leave’. Gary Owen’s The Pines, directed by Elen James, focuses on an exasperated Welsh dairy farmer played by Steffan Rhodri (the monologue is delivered in Welsh, with English subtitles). We see him sat in his office and then at work outside. He complains about the voluminous paperwork required to apply for the EU’s Single Farm Payment, which has forced some farmers to hire administrators. He tells us that supermarkets pay 24p for a litre of milk, which costs 32p to produce: farmers are, therefore, subsidising the supermarkets and ‘every person in this country who drinks milk’. The title of the monologue is the name of a trendy café down the road (formerly the home of the farmer’s grandmother) that was bought 5 years ago by an English woman using the proceeds from her profitable house sale in London. Despite her professed environmentalism, she refuses to buy ‘our premium, free-range, organic local produce’ because of the higher cost: ‘when you get people worrying one second about global warming, the next second getting milk in from Belgium rather than buying from the farm down the road...’. On the day after the referendum, he makes a delivery to ‘The Pines’ and sees her ‘staring at her iPad saying – it just doesn’t feel like my country any more. And I couldn’t help but think – now you know how we feel’.

Charlene James’s Go Home, directed by Amy Hodge, also explores the frustration with economic precarity that caused some people to vote Leave. The monologue is spoken by a young man called Reece, played by Dean Fagan, who is sat in the café of Wigan North Western railway station. Reece is from a northern working-class background but is studying in London. He talks about his relationship with his girlfriend, Hannah, and how the referendum put a distance between them. Hannah’s response to watching a clip of a man celebrating Brexit is to call him ‘scum’: ‘This man she doesn’t know. This man who could be my dad. She says he looks like he’s come from Idiot-town. In a place that could easily be my home town’. Reece insists that ‘52% [the percentage of voters in the referendum who voted “Leave”] of the country can’t all be scum. They can’t all be idiots, racists or xenophobes’. For Reece, the referendum gave a sense of agency to people and communities who have been completely neglected in the era of austerity. It transpires that Reece himself voted ‘Leave’ and, when she discovers this, Hannah immediately cuts him off. He decides to return home to Wigan to spend some time with his family, but he invites Hannah to join him: ‘Walk round my town with me. See that it’s not full of idiots but frustrated people who feel like they’ve been given up on’. The film ends with Reece on the station platform meeting his girlfriend off the train – a tentative image of reconciliation.

Stacey Gregg’s Your Ma’s a Hard Brexit and AL Kennedy’s Permanent Sunshine – both directed by Hodge – explore perspectives on Brexit from Northern Ireland and Scotland respectively; in so doing, they launch scathing attacks on Westminster and historic English hegemony. The former features a working-class Protestant woman in Belfast, played by Bronagh Gallagher. She is walking, with her young son, along the so-called ‘peace-line’ that separates Republican from Unionist neighbourhoods. She
reveals that her husband, Craig, has applied for an Irish passport to try and find skilled labour – the prospect of this fills her father, steeped in the history of the ‘Troubles’, with horror. She works for the Interface Project committed to the regeneration of the areas along the ‘peace-line’: all of the volunteers there voted ‘Remain’ – ‘we know what it means to be divided. We’re not too bad at that ourselves’. She fears for the future of Northern Ireland without EU funding and predicts that the issue of the Irish border will lead inevitably to a referendum on a united Ireland: and what of the unionist cause then? In the closing moments of the film, the camera lingers on the face of her son whose life opportunities, it is implied, will be severely restricted if Britain leaves the EU.

_Permanent Sunshine_ is an incendiary monologue spoken by a young Scottish lad called Chummy (played with terrific force by Scott Reid). The film tracks his nocturnal odyssey through Glasgow city centre to George Square – renowned for its historical association with public gatherings and protest. He leers into the camera and revels in the discomfort this causes as if determined to solicit a response from the (presumed-to-be-English) viewer. He talks about the death of his grandmother – who was moved from one care home to another to ‘reduce the demand for new beds’ – and also the death of his alcoholic father, a manufacturing worker who was unemployed: ‘If he’d been hit by a truck they’d’ve tied flowers tae the lamp-post. Hit by a bunch of bankers? Nae flowers. Where were you?’ He reminds us that one of the main reasons put forward for voting ‘No’ in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum was the benefits of membership of the EU. This argument has fallen to dust in the aftermath of the vote for Brexit compounded by the fact that most Scottish people voted ‘Remain’. He insists that, throughout history, the English have turned Scottish people into ‘survivors’ and ‘refugees’: ‘You made me a refugee where I was born. What else do you think poverty makes ye?’ _Permanent Sunshine_ begins as an accusatory indictment of England’s brutal austerity economics but ends as a celebration of Scottish resilience.

Most of the monologues are set in different parts of England and tend to attribute Brexit to a lethal combination of austerity, fear, and anger. David Hare’s _Time to Leave_, directed by Jeremy Herrin, is set in a leafy garden in Winchester. Kristin Scott Thomas plays a middle-class woman called Eleanor, from an army family; she sits in her garden, clutching a cup of tea. Eleanor voted ‘Leave’ but insists she did so without buying into the patriotic sloganeering of the ‘Leave’ campaign: ‘I’m not that stupid. I’m not an idiot. When they told me, I’d get my country back, I knew it wasn’t true’. She complains about cuts to local public services resulting in fewer rubbish collections, overflowing schools, and increasing hospital closures. She also feels that the EU has become too unwieldy: ‘The Common Market was alright when it was six countries with a northern culture – thrifty, hard-working – but it was bound to fail once the Mediterraneans flocked in’. This simmering racism conceals a profound sense of powerlessness and affronted entitlement. One year on from the vote, she acknowledges that voting ‘Leave’ has not made her happy: ‘We voted to leave Europe. But that’s not what we wanted. We wanted to leave England’.

James Graham’s _Burn_, directed by Hodge, attends to the real-world consequences of the Brexit-related rage and vitriol played out on social media. The speaker is an Internet troll called Carol, played by Joanna Scanlan, who lives in the ‘Leave’ stronghold of Mansfield. She spends her time baiting ‘Remainers’ on social media and proudly proclaims herself ‘the agent of chaos’. For her, ‘[c]haos is the point’ of Brexit: people who have nothing to lose voted ‘Leave’. _Burn_ presents contemporary politics as a confusing miasma in which leftists and far-right nationalists share common ground in their distrust of the EU. At the end of her speech, Carol’s face fills with horror as her computer starts pinging with notifications: a local man, a former British National Party member, has been arrested for assaulting a Polish woman – an action incited by Carol online earlier in the film.

Two of the monologues tackle the controversial subject at the heart of the referendum campaign: immigration. _Shattered_, written and directed by Maxine Peake, is set in Moss Side in Manchester. Dalir, played by Nasser Memarzia, is an immigration lawyer of more than 30 years’ experience. We see him at work at the Greater Manchester Law Centre and Memarzia’s performance conveys a tangible sense of exhaustion. He tells the story of a woman called Ayesha from Pakistan who is in a perilous situation because ‘the Home Office won’t believe the danger she is in’. Such cases are becoming more frequent because Whitehall immigration rules are ‘impossible’. He describes the panic and fear unleashed by Brexit: ‘People are petrified. EU nationals frightened
to death they are going to be thrown out of this country, their families ripped apart’. The film ends, however, on a more optimistic note with a scene featuring the real-life Women Asylum Seekers Together (WAST) choir: ‘If there is anything good to come out of Brexit, it’s that – the unity and solidarity. And in that, there’s hope, yeah’.

Meera Syal’s *Just a T-shirt*, which she also performs, is directed by Herrin. She plays a woman called Priti who is reporting a violent assault in a police incident room in the West Midlands city of Wolverhampton. She tells us that she voted Leave. She is proud that her family have never claimed state benefits: ‘So when you throw the doors open and anyone can just rock up with their handout – paid for by our taxes – how is that fair?’ She talks about her deprived local area, a high street turned into Poundshops, the difficulty of getting a job, the lengthy hospital waiting lists. From an immigrant family herself, she attacks so-called ‘bad immigrants’: ‘It’s just a lot of the others ... you know the Romanian gangs who keep mugging Asian women for their gold ... the criminals, the benefit scroungers ... the bad immigrants. Who give the good ones like us a bad name’. The racist stereotype of the ‘bad’ immigrant is contrasted with ‘good’ immigrants represented by her family and her Polish neighbour, Pavel, who voted ‘Remain’. The violent incident took place in the aftermath of the referendum when she was talking with Pavel outside her home: a man in a T-shirt spat at her and called her a ‘Paki bitch’. His t-shirt carried the slogan, ‘YES WE WON! NOW SEND THEM ALL BACK!’ This prompts Priti to recall the rising tide of racism in the 1970s and to reflect on how she voted in the referendum; Pavel, meanwhile, who attempted to defend Priti, was injured in the incident and is now in intensive care.

It is notable that virtually all the monologues are naturalistic and engage with the issue of Brexit directly. This is a response, perhaps, to the ongoing sense of urgency, disorientation, and dismay 1 year after the referendum. The one exception is Abi Morgan’s *The End*, directed by Herrin, which is the only film to have no designated locale. Like the others, this piece is naturalistic – it takes place in a recognisable domestic setting – but Morgan allegorises Britain’s relationship with the EU as a breakdown of a 43-year-old marriage. Penelope Wilton plays Helen, a woman fraught with shock at the end of her marriage and totally unprepared for what the future might bring. In the context of Brexit (which is never mentioned), her words capture the sense of disbelief and betrayal felt in EU member states: ‘We had one another. We were family. We gave each other confidence. We built a good life together’. In other words, the script transplants familiar slogans from the referendum campaign into the traumatic domestic context of a disintegrating marriage: ‘Once you’re out. You’re out’, ‘I thought together we were stronger. Who wants to be alone?’ And, tellingly, in a comment that encapsulates the dominant theme of *Brexit Shorts*, Helen quotes the words her husband said to her when he announced their marriage was over: ‘If you’d been listening then maybe this wouldn’t come as such a surprise’.

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**The Racist Case for Diversity?**

*Tom Cornford*

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The British theatre reacted in April 2018 to the latest in a series of periodic outbursts from its very own racist uncle, the *Daily Mail*’s Quentin Letts. In DATE, Letts dedicated a paragraph of his review of the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC)’s *The Fantastic Follies of Mrs Rich* to the subject of the actor Leo Wringer’s ethnicity. Seeing that Wringer was not playing the part of the older Clerimont as he expected it to be played, Letts decided that the actor had been mis-cast and blamed the RSC’s stated commitment to diversity:

> There is no way he is a honking Hooray of the sort that has infested the muddier reaches of England’s shires for centuries. ... Was Mr Wringer cast because he is black? If so, the RSC’s clunking approach to politically correct casting has again weakened its stage product.

As a result, and with the predictable exception of theatre’s racist nephew, Lloyd Evans, Letts was criticised from all sides both for his open prejudice and his inability to construct a logical argument. Unusually, even the RSC came out against Letts,

in a press release denouncing what it said seemed to be his ‘blatantly racist attitude’. (This is in marked contrast to the RSC’s woeful handling of the outrage sparked by its casting of *The Orphan of Zhao* in 2012, analysed in some detail in a special issue of this journal.)

The RSC statement went on to outline the company’s casting policy:

Our approach to casting is to seek the most exciting individual for each role and in doing so to create a repertoire of the highest quality. We are proud that this ensures our casts are also representative of the diversity of the United Kingdom, that the audiences which we serve are able to recognise themselves on stage and that our work is made and influenced by the most creative range of voices and approaches.

‘Diversity’, in this policy statement, plays second string to ‘quality’: the RSC casts the best and they happen to be diverse, which has the added benefit that audiences ‘are able to recognise themselves on stage’. You can see why the argument is framed in this way. To say anything else would risk undermining actors of colour who have overcome considerable barriers to reach the top of their profession. It would also play into the hands of those (like Letts and Evans) who will immediately respond to a non-white face that does not meet their expectations with shrieks decrying ‘positive discrimination’. But as I begin to think, in my research, about diversity initiatives, what I ‘recognise … on stage’ troubles me more and more, because I am not only seeing ‘the most exciting individual for each role’, I am also seeing all sorts of unwitting or disavowed narratives about identity that are glossed over by statements such as the RSC’s.

Readers of this journal will probably not need to be told, for example, that our major national stages, commonly feature female actors presented briefly and statically, as objects to be gazed upon, while, all around them, men are being active and articulate, driving the narrative forward on their terms. On the same stages, we repeatedly see black people associated with depravity and the perpetration of violence. Consider the RSC’s recent *Hamlet* starring Paapa Essiedu. In an interview about the production, director Simon Godwin said:

This not a play about experience, security and order; this is a play about chaos, fear and the way a young man learns how to kill.

This is not so much analysis as racial profiling. Godwin’s account of the production is predicated upon the need to contextualise the blackness of his cast to an implicitly white audience. Setting out to explain what the production is not, Godwin reaches for the rhetoric of white civilisation: ‘experience, security, and order’. These he opposes to ‘chaos, fear’ and learning ‘how to kill’, racist tropes of blackness all too familiar from the media. Godwin’s account of the play, then, is the literary equivalent of a racially motivated stop-and-search. Likewise, the last time I saw Olivier Award-winning actress Sheila Atim on stage, she was playing a silent, apparently tribal woman in Yael Farber’s staging of Lorraine Hansberry’s *Les Blancs* (1970) at the National Theatre, dragging a flaming cauldron threateningly around a building (the white people’s mission) that would go up in flames at the play’s end. In this production, Atim’s silenced black body was presented so that it first threatened and then seemed to unleash chaos, fear, and violence, chiming with Godwin’s description of Paapa Essiedu’s black Hamlet. In these examples, the old colonial role-reversal, in which the white perpetrators of violence project its image onto their non-white victims, continues to apply. Is this what our most highly funded theatres want their diverse audiences to be recognising on stage?

Diversity’s problematic narratives are not, of course, limited to diverse ethnicities. *Les Blancs* was succeeded in the Olivier Theatre’s repertory by Rufus Norris’s production of a new version by Simon Stephens of Brecht and Weill’s *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). This featured the actor Jamie Beddard, who uses a wheelchair, as Mathias. Beddard, who is a highly regarded performer and director, was making his National Theatre debut, but I will remember it most for a rather over-worked gag in which Mathias’s shock at a woman beginning to go down on


him was made visible by a smoke canister attached to his wheelchair going off. The joke depended upon the clear implication that the character's disability made him pitiable and neither active nor attractive sexually. The obvious problem with all these examples is that diversity initiatives do not necessarily enable diverse audiences to 'recognise themselves on stage'. They may, in fact, force diverse audiences, yet again, to encounter stereotyping and misrepresentation. Diverse casting often seems, in other words, to give with one hand, and slap with the other.

Part of the reason for this situation seems to be the desire for difference to be visible but not to have significance. The RSC's rebuttal of Letts's claims in his review is a case in point: it is careful not to ascribe meaning to the diversity of its casts. The same can be said of Shakespeare's Globe. Michelle Terry's announcement of her casting for 2018's Globe Ensemble productions of Hamlet and As You Like It represented a commitment both to diversity and to its invisibility. Terry makes a proud claim for her casting as 'gender blind, race blind and disability blind'.13 The details of her casting, however, undermined that assertion. Some male-gendered parts were given to women, and the gender of roles such as Hamlet and Ophelia and Rosalind and Orlando was swapped, but these changes do not seem to represent 'blindness' to gender. In Terry's Ensemble, a female Hamlet fights a female Laertes and woos a male Ophelia, just as a female Orlando is wooed by a male Rosalind. These changes remain squarely within the framework of gender and sexual normativity. The same can be said of the Globe Ensemble casting choices relating to ethnicity: they feature a non-white Ophelia and Guildenstern (parts that it has recently become almost traditional to cast as ethnically distinct from white Hamlets) and a non-white Amiens in As You Like It, the role in that play that has historically been most commonly cast with a performer of colour.14 These choices represent a blindness not to ethnicity or gender as such (as if such a thing were even possible), but to the narratives, and discourses that constitute what Stuart Hall called these 'social facts'. This approach to casting, therefore, makes gender and ethnicity visible on a committedly superficial level, while refusing to scrutinise their construction or meaning. The consequence is that the cultural dominance of middle-class, heteronormative whiteness is sustained by an approach to inclusion that seems to welcome people of colour and those living with disabilities, but in fact continues to keep them at arm's length. A quotation from an interview by Ayanna Thompson with the actor Maynard Eziashi, who was cast in Pericles at the RSC by director Dominic Cooke, illustrates the point:

It was only on the first day that I realised, 'Ooh, there are a lot of black actors'. And I thought, 'That is very interesting'. Having heard of Dominic Cooke but not really knowing him, I thought, 'Well, he is very egalitarian. Go, Dominic, go'. I was really pleased. Then after about the third day, he said, 'Right, the setting for Pericles is going to be in Africa'. And I was like, 'I see, Okay, I get it now. Alright, fine. Fair enough, fair enough…. I see what my role is. It is to be an African'.15

If Eziashi's role is 'to be an African', then his casting does nothing to alter the dominant discourses of whiteness. In fact, in this situation, Eziashi's presence reinforces the dominance of whiteness as he is converted into a visible and audible manifestation of otherness from its anticipated norms. Thus, diversity is pressed into the service of exactly those hierarchies it ought to expose and dismantle. In early June, Arts Council England announced its strategic priorities for the next two years in its new corporate plan. Arts Professional reported that, under the new plan, 'funded organisations will need to set themselves “increasingly demanding targets” [for improving their diversity] and those in receipt of the most funding will need to achieve a “strong” Creative Case for Diversity rating by 2021'.16 We are already seeing theatre-makers responding both to these official targets and to a climate of public debate in which

questions of diversity and inclusion are raised with increasing frequency. This can be illustrated by the anecdotal example of two shows that I saw in the summer of 2018: RashDash’s response to Chekhov’s Three Sisters and A Monster Calls, directed by Sally Cookson at Bristol Old Vic. The latter told the story of a woman’s death from cancer through the eyes of her pre-teen son. Its central family were all white, and the monster of the title was a yew tree – a (white) green man figure who told tales of the country’s distant past – that illuminated the central narrative. In both the main narrative and the accompanying tales, performers of colour were not only given supporting roles but commonly characterised by opposition to the white protagonists. One (John Leader) played a bully at the son’s school and an ‘evil’ prince in one of the tales, another (Hammed Animashaun) was the bully’s sidekick and a misguided apothecary, the enemy of a ‘good’ (white) parson, played by Felix Hayes who also played the central character’s father. Tactfully, therefore, blackness was used, here, subordinately, as a foil to the whiteness of the main characters. It was also notable that, in most cases, the performers of colour exhibited a multi-skilled virtuosity (particularly in movement, working as aerialists, and singing) that was mostly not demanded of their white counterparts.

Rashdash’s Three Sisters was more politically conscious, explicitly treating ‘the classics’ as another facet of patriarchal control and creating a space for the company’s core group of three white women (Helen Goalen, Abbi Greenland, and Becky Wilkie) to attack, satirise, and offer alternatives to the plays that continue to dominate our stages. They were joined, in this production, by two women of colour (Chloe Rianna and Yoon-ji Kim) who played percussion and violin and synth, respectively. Each was given a musical solo, both of which were notably bracketed out of the action by the other performers stopping and watching with apparently rapt attention. This was effective in foregrounding forms of performance (a jazz-influenced drum solo, a folk-inflected, virtuosic performance on the violin) that are commonly excluded by plays in which, in RashDash’s words ‘men … have all the lines’.17 However, it also emphasised the supporting role of these two women of colour who, once again, demonstrated a level of virtuosity that was not expected of their white peers. As Olga, Masha, and Irina, Goalen, Greenland, and Wilkie worried aloud about how to respond to the male-authored world of this play and voiced the contemporary concerns of the women whose lives parallel Chekhov’s characters. They did so with more self-awareness about their relative privilege than Chekhov’s characters demonstrate, but the decision not to further integrate Yoon-ji Kim and Rianna into the production’s response to Chekhov did little to address the cultural networks of white privilege in which productions of his plays have generally participated. Thus, although the sisters’ ironic self-awareness was not without value in exposing the troubling politics of the production’s situation, RashDash offered no other response than ironically to indicate the problem. The fundamental argument of black feminism has been that if white feminism simply seeks the same privileges for white women that are enjoyed by white men then it does nothing substantial to dismantle wider intersectional matrices of oppression. In their irony, RashDash seemed aware of this problem, but, like the other productions discussed here, the form of inclusion that they practiced did nothing substantial to change it or to develop an intersectional response to Chekhov’s play.

Some time ago, I might have made the argument that situations such as those I have critiqued here chime unfortunately with a society in which exclusions and oppressions based upon protected characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and disability prevail. This form of argument seems to me, however, to be increasingly untenable. The British theatre is apparently unified not only in its willingness to condemn Quentin Letts for his explicit prejudice, but in its willingness to perpetuate implicit forms of structural exclusion and prejudice. Often these exclusions seem not only to be concealed beneath a fig-leaf of diversity-rhetoric, but to be positively sustained by diversity initiatives that refuse to engage with diversity at the level of narrative and discourse. Such approaches to diversity, therefore, seem to provide platforms for the kinds of ‘racism without racists’ critiqued in the USA by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva.18 If the theatre’s leaders continue in this project to increase diversity while refusing to engage with its intellectual and political challenges to the status quo, then we should give this practice the title it deserves: the racist case for diversity.


Leave The Capital/Exit This Roman Shell: A conversation between Simon Stephens and Tim Etchells on the late singer/songwriter Mark E. Smith

Mark E Smith, the front man, sort-of singer, and lyricist for the Manchester art-rock indie band The Fall is one of the totemic cultural icons of the post-punk era. While only very briefly flirting with mainstream success (a couple of cover versions made it into the top 40 in the late 1980s), Mark E Smith produced a relentless series of extraordinary albums, where his starred, snarled, cryptic lyrics were spat venomously over powerfully juddering rhythmic guitar lines. Smith was a theatrical figure in concert, often wreathed in darkness at the back of the stage, mischievously goading his bandmates, sometimes being a joyous master of ceremonies, at others seeming furious that he had to perform at all. He was Jack Smith, Richard III, and Gene Vincent all in one. He made contributions to theatre more recognisably in his frequent collaborations with Michael Clark (particularly their remarkable pageant, I Am Curious, Orange (1988)) and in his own mystifying play about the death of Pope John Paul I, Hey! Luciani (1986). To care about art and theatre and writing and music in the 1980s, it was hard not to care about Mark E Smith and The Fall. To mark his death, we’ve brought together two remarkable British theatre artists, the co-founder of Forced Entertainment, Tim Etchells, and the playwright Simon Stephens, to discuss Mark E Smith – his performances, his legacy, and his influence on their work – through six of his most extraordinary recordings. Dan Rebellato.

‘No Xmas for John Quays’ [Live]
Totale’s Turns (Rough Trade, 1980)

Simon Stephens: I chose it mostly for the part when he turns on the band half way through the song. He says, ‘Will you fucking get it together instead of showing off?’ It’s absolutely amazing. Have you seen them live a lot?

Tim Etchells: Mostly in the late 1970s and 80s though after that I still checked in now and then. I love that bit in No Xmas too. The bassist is doing something just a little bit too frilly and Mark tells him off. You have the sense that, at this time, he had the capacity and confidence to do whatever he felt like: as a lyricist, as a performer. And he had the grace and the bloody-mindedness to wing it, to break the frame of the songs. There’s another great bit on the same album where he starts singing, ‘The promoter is a jerk’. He’s so at home, so sure that any drift-off or incidental detail, any switch of direction, the material will hold. As a performing artist, that’s an amazing strength.

SS: I was thinking about this version and trying to think if it would ever be possible for an analogous situation to be exciting in theatre. I don’t think it ever would! I know we make very different types of theatre. But I think the reason he can break that form is that (a) because he owns it completely, (b) because he’s defined it, and (c) because he expects the same levels of rigor and determination and total commitment from everyone else in the band. And if they interrupt it or sell it short, then there’s a rage. I’m trying to imagine something like that, in some of the plays that I’ve made. If, say, Andrew Scott turned to the cast of Birdland (2014) and said, ‘Are you fucking gonna do it, lying like that?’

TE: That’s funny. I did see the play Hey! Luciani that Mark and The Fall did in 1986 at Riverside Studios with Michael Clark. The night we saw it, Mark confronted another actor in the piece for staring at him! Like ‘why are you looking at me like that?” It was a tense moment. With the music you’ve always got the beat, the instrumentation, the drive of all that, so you can afford to wander. A break doesn’t really collapse it. Whereas in theatre that felt very weird.

SS: I came to them in the mid-80s. In 1983, I was 12 years old. I bought Howard Jones’s solo album, for example! By the end of 1984 though, I was listening to The Fall. That 18 months completely changed my sense of self, who I was, and what my culture was, and what one might do culturally. I think it was Muriel Grey playing ‘Kicker Conspiracy’, that did it. She was covering for John Peel one week, and I realised I’d never heard anything like it, nothing with that kind of savagery and wit. The reason I chose the live song though is thinking about the influence of their work on mine. I started going to gigs in the mid-1980s and saw The Fall at the International in Manchester, on the Bend Sinister Tour. The first song must have been ‘Cruiser’s Creek’. The band came out and played it in darkness. That extraordinary opening riff went on for about five minutes. And then, in the back of the stage, in darkness, he lit a cigarette. Something so truculently non-entertaining but massively theatrical. A thousand people in the International just went ape-shit. I always talk about the influence of live music on the theatre I make. It’s the art form I think is closest to theatre in many ways. Because I didn’t go to the theatre a lot, as a kid. But I did see bands. It was that theatricality and volatility. I always thought he’d probably be a bit of a fucker.
TE: For sure. The first time I saw them was at the Ajanta Cinema in Derby. It used to be Derby Playhouse, then transformed into an Asian cinema. Then somebody started promoting punk gigs there in 1978 or 1979, and we used to go. I think The Fall was quite early in the run of gigs there. The front rows of seating had been smashed up at a Stiff Little Fingers gig, some months before, so there was a kind of no man’s land in front of the stage, with no seating. Mark walked up and down a lot, talking between songs, prowling, and muttering. At a certain point he hopped off the stage and into the no man’s land – deciding that that zone at the front there was also part of the space for performance. What you’re saying chimes for me – I did see some theatre as a young person. But mostly, we went to gigs. That was the education, in terms of what relation to an audience can be – what the different ways of connecting, energising, or asking a question to an audience might be. I always liked that he didn’t assume that the audience were nice. The opposite of theatre somehow, which often assumes that the audience are lovely and all on the same page. He was very divisive.

SS: I’m thinking about Real Magic and thinking about the audience’s relationship with that. About your attitude towards your audience watching that show, when I saw it. You seem quite attentive to them. But I don’t know. I always think I really like my audience, which I know is the opposite of what you’re meant to.

TE: I enjoy that as an audience member you can be encouraged to doubt the people around you. So, you’re sitting there wondering, ‘Who are these people I’m sitting with? Do I trust them? Do I love them? Would I criticise them?’ Audience isn’t a homogenous mass. It’s full of difference.

‘Leave the Capitol’ Slates (Rough Trade, 1981)

TE: I chose this for his place as a writer, for me. He was just so good at describing a very particular version of England, especially the North. His attention to detail, the weaving together of images. And that sense of history and pastness in a lot of what he wrote. I find that really amazing, especially, because punk was always meant to be about contemporary reality.

SS: I remember reading an interview where he gets asked if he’s a poet. And he says, ‘I’m a writer. I’m not a poet’. He insists he’s not a poet. That’s important as well! I think often his lyrics in isolation don’t stand up. It’s so much about delivery, timing, attitude – you can’t really sit and read them. But his capturing England in this song – ‘The tables covered in beer/Showbizwhines, minute detail/It’s a hand on the shoulder in Leicester Square/It’s vaudeville pub back room dusty pictures of/White frocked girls and music teachers/The bed’s too clean/The waters poison for the system’ – is just exquisite.

TE: It’s a weird mix too – there’s an England you can drive past, walk through, and see out the window. But his England is always either haunted or hallucinated too. There’s goblins or ghosts, or other realities bleeding through. That was so valuable, I think. Because I always say reality’s too important to be left to the realists!

SS: Probably taking loads of cheap speed in the early 1980s gave him that kind of access to the landscape in a different way. A 2000-year-old country, seen from the motorway services. Choosing this song – ‘Leave the Capital’ – was that also about your relationship, between Sheffield and London?

TE: Yes, I do like how he championed an alternative perspective in England, the idea of the North. Living and working in Sheffield these thirty-four years, there’s something vital about that for me, that counter-cultural weight, away from London. There’s another voice, spirit, and energy that comes from the North. He was a champion of that. Whether he liked it or not.

SS: He was very cynical too though, especially about the worst of the Manchester scene. So, for all his counterbalance to the cultural force of London, he had a bracing skepticism about any sentimentality relating to the North.

‘Fortress/Deer Park’ Hex

Enduction Hour (Kamera, 1982)

SS: Probably my favourite Fall album, Hex Enduction Hour. Total masterpiece. So, just in counter-point to the observation that he’s a great writer: a lyricist, rather than a poet. One of the things I loved when I first heard his music – and still cherish now – is that it’s not immediately accessible, this writing. Before I found him, I discovered a lot of music really quickly. And a lot of other songwriters, Morrissey, Elvis Costello, Tom Waits, even, Billy Bragg, they were defined by their legibility, their articulacy, their audibility even. They were real lyricists! You followed the story, were moved by the story, the poetry. And with Smith, I can’t figure it out: shards and splinters of language that are as musical as they are literary. I’d never come across that before. I cherish it. And it’s interesting in theatre, in contrast between our different types of theatre. The conventional playwriting cultures overly celebrate articulacy and legibility of idea.
Whereas the moments in theatre that sometimes astonish me are moments that are left-field and jagged and that I couldn’t rationalise. And I think Smith’s lyrics operate in this way too.

TE: I totally agree. It’s something I’ve always admired about what Mark E. Smith was busy with: that sense of language that is very dense, very personal, quite unapproachable in some ways – but language that’s vivid and sharp enough that it comes flying out and connects anyway. On an album like Hex Enduction Hour, who knows what he’s on about half the time? But it’s felt! It communicates anyway. And those images burn bright. ‘A hospital discharge asked me where he could crash’. It’s one of the weird things, over the past days. I’ve been realising how much of his language I’ve been carrying around with me, since I was fifteen and first hearing Fall songs. It’s weird how many of these very intricate, cryptic shards stay with you.

‘Repetition’ Bingo Master’s Break-Out EP (Step-Forward, 1978)

TE: I wanted something from that earlier period when the sound is so lean and mean – not up to that level of orchestration and cacophony you get on something like Hex Enduction Hour. It’s so muscular, as a sound. As the song starts out, you think, okay, the lyrics are about music and formal constraint, but then as it goes on – ‘repetition in America, repetition in West Germany, repetition China’ – it’s more like he’s looking down on capitalism in the late 1970s. Suddenly you’re in another mode. I love that move from very local concerns – the music scene, what is music, what are we doing – to this glance at a broader landscape. The move it makes there is just amazing.

SS: Why’s repetition important in your work?

TE: I guess it creates a sort of real-time history. We’ve all been there when something happened the first time, and it’s happened again, and we’re all there again. The idea of the community of audience: What have we lived through together? Where are we going? It makes an event, I suppose. In theatre: that sense of narrative, where the piece is going, how it is unfolding. And, its communality, the ‘what is happening here’.

SS: In the room.

TE: Yes. How we’re feeling the event together? Repetition does something so direct and so electric with that.

SS: This is crude and unfair, but a clumsy script editor would really rage against somebody repeating themselves. I’ve been given the note several times! As if the ideas, or images, or lines have been clumsily repeated, without owning the repetition. I repeat myself in conversation all the fucking time. We cherish originality and uniqueness, often, in the playwriting culture. But maybe we’re missing a big point.

‘Lost in Music’ the Infotainment Scam (Permanent, 1993)

SS: ‘Le Money est sur la table’ must be among the great Smith lyrics. The reason I wanted to include a cover version is: when I first heard The Fall, that notion that I’ve never heard anything like it lived with me for quite a few years. Probably because I was a youngish teenager, and I hadn’t heard things like The Seeds or Suicide or Can at that time. But it felt like no one else has ever made me feel like this before. That was really thrilling. And what’s interesting to me about the cover versions is that they illuminate the source material, the things he was listening to. Sometimes I think he’s quite surprising. He’s covering Gene Vincent, and 1960s garage pop and rock, as well as referring to the noise artists. As much as I love the muscularity and the sparseness of the music there’s a lot of rock and roll in The Fall too! Kind of wanted to stick up for it.

TE: There’s that rather spiky meeting between the avant-garde sensibility he has with these popular forms from R&B, from Country and Western, from disco. The covers kind of do and don’t do what they originally did, but they always do something else in his hands.

SS: Thinking about the idea of influence on my work, what I like about the playwriting structures of the theatre that I’ve made is that you are absolutely in conversation with the art forms that come before. I think a lot of my most recent plays have been cover versions, not just the versions of A Doll’s House, or The Cherry Orchard, or something. But something like Birdland – which is like a cover version of Brecht’s Baal – and Carmen Disruption (2014) – which is a cover of the opera Carmen. I really value that type of meeting.

‘Paintwork’ This Nation’s Saving Grace (Beggars Banquet, 1985)

SS: Listening to this I’m thinking about how they communicate melancholy so exquisitely, without ever being sentimental. It’s gorgeous. Why’d you choose this one?

TE: For that reason. You get all those blistering attacking songs. And then you get this, like a Sunday afternoon riff, a different atmosphere. I love the mix
on this track: there’s just a little bit of radio sliding past what he’s doing. It’s very rough. That sense one has in a lot of their stuff, you see the bones of what he’s working with. It’s fragments. It’s things set next to each other. It’s tuning the TV or the radio right into the track. You get to see the building blocks. It’s not ashamed of the roughness of the construction. For me, that’s been hugely influential. Trying to make something where you can see what the moves are. It declares its hand, as the cover versions do. It makes it a game we can appreciate because we know what the objects in play are. I like that in theatre too.

SS: I share that completely. When I think about things I’ve worked on, things that appears to be from a different tradition, my favourite is the adaptation of Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night Time, which draws attention to its theatricality, the liveness of the thing.

TE: The song also seems so English to me. It’s strange, I was in Stuttgart a couple of days ago for work at a gallery. We were eating late at night and I was amazed that they didn’t know who I was talking about when I said I’d been thinking about Mark and The Fall. I had to explain! I was sitting with curators and so on, people who know their stuff in regards to art and movies and music – but The Fall didn’t ring bells for any them. Perhaps his view of England doesn’t travel so well out of context.

SS: He probably got out of England at a good time.

TE: It’s all going to shit now.

SS: The way he lacerates and celebrates England at the same time, we’ll really miss that.

Curated by Dan Rebellato. Transcribed by Emily Ezzo.

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