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The Dystopian Near-Future in Contemporary British Drama

In Mike Bartlett's *13* (National Theatre 2011), a nightmarish rendering of contemporary London is peopled by an eclectic mix of characters including a plucky grandmother, a cynical lawyer, an atheist academic, a group of protesting students, an American political envoy and a female Tory prime minister, all of whom have had two things in common. They share the same recurring nightmare and they are in some way connected to a messianic preacher named John, who expounds an anti-capitalist message. In Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* (2013) – which premiered in the US but received a main stage production at the Royal Court in 2014 and a West End transfer of the Court production the following year – the internet has evolved into a vast network of virtual reality realms, where individuals are able to work, play and be educated but also act out heinous fantasies, including the rape and murder of children. Set in a near-future world described as “*nearly now*” debbie tucker green's *hang* (2015) sees a black woman who has been the victim of a heinous crime summoned to a government facility to decide the method by which her attacker will be executed (2). While substantially different in scale and theme, all three plays utilize the trope of the dystopian near-future. These are not isolated examples. The prevalence of dystopian motifs in recent British drama, and the focus on futurity which accompanies them, is both marked and unusual. In this essay, I argue that this group of plays serves as a revealing index to the anxieties of our time, and further that the dystopian turn in new writing highlights the inadequacies of realism as a mode for staging neo-liberal experience. Although mostly set in near future worlds, the plays are typically peopled with characters disabled by the terrors of precarious living, neoliberal (in)versions of personal freedom, environmental disaster, and the demeaning effects of corporate capitalism. Since my argument relies on establishing this trend in new writing as significant, I will begin by citing more examples.

In Alistair McDowall's *Brilliant Adventures* (Royal Exchange 2013), a teenager builds a time machine in a rundown flat on a dingy estate in Middlesbrough. Rory Mullarkey's *The Wolf From the Door* (Royal Court 2014), follows a middle-aged aristocrat, Lady Catherine, as she spearheads violent insurgency across middle-England in the company of a beautiful young homeless man named Leo, whom she has picked up in a train station. In Mullarkey's England, the revolutionary impulse is widely dispersed and located in unlikely places. All hobby groups, quaint societies and sports clubs are inexplicably primed for violent rebellion. Mullarkey employs a chorus to describe the catastrophe:

A woman's fencing association pulls down Nelson's Column.
Buckingham Palace is raided by an over-seventies golf team.
A life-drawing class sets fire to all the trees in Green park.
Westminster Abbey gets napalmed by a ceilidh group ...
Some theatres get firebombed by a lawn bowls association' (42-43).

As the play ends, Leo, "carrying a sceptre and wearing a monstrous crown" is installed on the throne of England (46). Philip Ridley's *Radiant Vermin* (Soho Theatre 2015), is another anarchic satire which tells of a young couple offered a foot on the housing ladder providing they are willing to commit murder. The commodification of housing that has been a key plank of the neoliberal project is brought into productive tension with neoliberal notions of individual responsibility in Ridley's play, as the couple weigh up the moral cost of escaping a precarious life.

Elsewhere, Keiran Hurley's *Heads Up* (Summerhall 2016) consists of four intersecting monologues in which an office worker, a school girl, a barista and a rock star deal with the imminent end of the world, and Mullarkey's most recent comedy, *Pity* (Royal Court 2018), follows young lovers Person and Daughter as they encounter lightning bolts, an assassination attempt on the Prime Minister and a couple of feuding war lords who stage a tank battle on a village green. *Pity* play ends with a super-bug wiping out most of the population, including Daughter. E.V. Crowe's *The Sewing Group* (Royal Court 2016) initially appears to be a play about a seventeenth-century puritan community but turns out to be about a highly-stressed female executive taking part in a role-played "employee journey experience" (63). Finally, the target of dystopian critique can be environmental as well as social and political. In Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (Royal Court 2016), three elderly scientists gather in a cottage near a nuclear power station that has suffered a devastating meltdown. The surrounding countryside is irradiated, all the cattle are dead, and the cottage only has electricity for a short time each day. Dawn King's *Foxfinder* (Finborough Theatre 2011), evokes an English countryside mired in crisis. Crops are failing, paranoia is widespread, both the plain aesthetic and also the apocalyptic rhetoric of puritanism have returned with force. The fox has become a symbol of both intolerance and dissent:

... this entire country is a battlefield between the forces of nature and the forces of civilization. If we lose, England will starve. Our towns and cities will crumble, and trees

will grow amongst the ruins using the bones of dead men as fertilizer. Do you see? They want nothing less than our complete annihilation. Without man the fox will rule (King 25).

Foxfinder is a profoundly unsettling play, haunted by what one reviewer described as feelings of “unsease” and “not-quite-rightness” (Tripney, 2011).

Each of these plays – and there are others not mentioned here – offers an affective encounter with, or experience of, the future, and taken together they evidence a significant shift in the temporal focus of new writing. Speculative futurity is, after all, not a mode generally associated with theatre, and certainly not with new writing which in the English tradition has long been concerned with topicality and, to borrow Simon Shepherd’s phrase, “images of the real world” (149). Adding to the sense that it is the mode of the moment, a number of classic dystopian texts have recently been adapted for the stage. In 2015 alone, Dawn King’s version of Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (1931) opened at the Royal & Dergate in Northampton, Nick Gill adapted Franz Kafka’s *The Trial* (1914) for the Young Vic, and Headlong’s hugely successful version of George Orwell’s *1984* (1949) – adapted and directed by Duncan McMillan and Robert Icke – transferred to the Playhouse Theatre in London’s West End. In September 2018, the Royal Lyceum in Edinburgh announced its artistic director David Greig would adapt Stanislaw Lem’s *Solaris* (1961) – about three scientists orbiting a giant sentient planet – for the theatre’s 2019 season.

In order to better understand their origins, we might want to begin by placing recent dystopian plays within a slightly longer genealogy. Edward Bond’s *War Plays* trilogy (1985) springs to mind as an example of earlier dystopian drama for instance, as does Philip Ridley’s evocation of urban dystopian in *The Pitchfork Disney* (1991), Caryl Churchill’s widely admired *Far Away* (2000), and Zinnie Harris’s *Midwinter* (2004). Yet, although we can certainly find echoes of these earlier plays in recent drama, none is representative of such a significant turn toward dystopian futurity in its own time. Similarly, although urban dystopia, or at least a ‘survivors after catastrophe’ motif, has recurred in the work of the performance company Forced Entertainment, from at least (*Let the Water Run its Course*) to *the Sea that Made the Promise* (1986), I want to suggest that what we are witnessing in playwriting is something different. If, as Sarah Gorman argues, Forced Entertainment’s work, “can be broadly characterized as being driven by questions about the viability of theatre as a representational medium in an age of simulation”, it also deliberately eschews the careful patterning of character and situation that continues to be a defining feature of British writing for the stage and which

can be seen in operation in all of the plays listed above (190). It seems clear that by employing an unequivocally and self-consciously fictive mode playwrights turning to dystopia are expressing dissatisfaction with ‘realism’, but not necessarily with the ‘play’ as a representational form. The problem of realism as a mode of dissent is related, I want to suggest, to the wider problem of late-capitalism and its appropriation of discourses of ‘reality’. As Jim McGuigan, among others, has reminded us, capitalism has never been “considered so legitimate and taken for-granted as a virtually natural state of being as it has been over the past 30 or so years” (xi). More particularly, and McGuigan’s study *Cool Capitalism* (2009) makes this case powerfully, capitalism has proved itself extraordinarily adept at absorbing and even weaponising opposition. Consequently, and in “the absence of dissent that is genuinely disconcerting”, McGuigan argues, “capitalism is allowed to get away with murder, and not only metaphorically speaking” (xi). Realism struggles in these conditions to voice dissent that, to borrow McGuigan’s phrase, is in any way “genuinely disconcerting”. In the dystopian plays that are the subject of this essay, however, the strange temporality inherent in the dramaturgy of unwelcome futures, and the schism that separates the audience from those futures, become the means by which we understand the horrors of the present.

Although my argument rests on asserting an identity between a number of dystopian plays, this essay is not an attempt to define a new genre. Dystopia, on any kind of examination, is not a simple mode. One cannot easily find middle ground between tucker green’s *hang* and Mullarkey’s *The Wolf From the Door*, for example. In what follows, my aim instead is to begin the work of fleshing out a basic taxonomy that might help us to meaningfully distinguish between the types of dystopia at play in contemporary drama. This endeavour seems important not least because in searching for a critical lens through which to view this work I have been struck by the absence of a substantial literature on theatre and dystopia, or on theatre and futurity. Dragan Klaić’s *The Plot of the Future* (1992) is the notable exception and is therefore worth considering in some detail. In this wide-ranging and authoritative study, Klaić lists more than seventy twentieth-century American and European plays in which predictive elements – ranging from the utopian to the dystopian – feature boldly. He discusses some thirty in significant detail. Featured dramatists include Artaud, Barker, Bely, Brenton, Bulgakov, Dürrenmatt, Hauptmann – there is a striking absence of women – Havel, Kaiser, Kopit, Mayakovsky, Müller, Shaw, Weiss and Wilder. Klaić’s interest is primarily in the ethical and political dimensions of plays, and he reads their predictive elements as suggesting extrapolation from a known present to a knowable future. This approach is understandable if one thinks, as Klaić does, of drama set in the future primarily as a projection of present conditions. His focus

on the socio-political is less successful, however, in accounting for the dream-like, experiential and wildly ambitious dramaturgy of a text like Artaud's *A Spurt of Blood* (1927), which is quite obviously fundamentally different in ambition to, say, Thornton Wilder's *The Skin of Our Teeth* (1942). *The Plot of the Future* is essentially an exercise in textual analysis in which little or no reference is made to plays in performance. Consequently, as insightful as they are, Klaić's arguments are of limited value in helping us understand the recent crop of plays in which affective impacts, achieved through staging, are at least as important as cognitive messaging.

There is a larger body of criticism that engages with futurity, most of which relates to the popular genre of science-fiction (SF). This too offers useful insights. It seems important if obvious to note, for instance, that like science fiction the plays described above, are explicitly speculative. They are what Darko Suvin in his influential book *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979) famously called fictions of "cognitive estrangement" (3). They do not reinscribe socio-political problems, or the status quo, by pretending to be objective records of the real world. Instead they create alternative near-future-worlds, that deliberately perform estranging critical interrogations of current social and political concerns. This basic insight, that SF "does not give us 'images' of the future ... but rather defamiliarize[s] and restructure[s] our experience of our own *present*" is taken up by Fredric Jameson in his 1982 essay, "Progress versus Utopia, or Can We Imagine the Future?", later reprinted in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005) (286).

In what remains of this essay, I want to discuss a number of dystopian dramas in slightly more detail, and I want to turn to Raymond Williams for assistance, because the emphasis that Suvin and Klaić – and to some extent Jameson – place on cognition, is not entirely helpful for my purpose. Williams tends not to see cognition and emotion as distinct categories. In fact, what we might call the affective turn in theatre and performance studies has led to renewed interest in Williams, particularly in his notion of 'structure of feeling', which he describes in a brief entry in his 1978 book *Marxism and Literature* (1977) as "a particular quality of social experience and relationship, historically distinct from other distinct qualities, which gives the sense of a generation or a period" (131). My contention is that the dystopian turn in contemporary drama is symptomatic of a particular structure of feeling, that it evidences a profound and dispersed anxiety about the neoliberal present and dissatisfaction with the limitations of realism as a mode for representing it.

In an attempt to make this argument more convincing I want to draw specifically on Williams' 1978 essay "Utopia and Science-Fiction", because it offers a framework for thinking

carefully about fictional narratives of the future. Like Klaić and Suvin, Williams sees the utopian and the dystopian as two sides of the same coin, as “modes of desire or warning in which a crucial emphasis is obtained by the element of discontinuity from ordinary ‘realism’” (97). Early in the essay, he identifies four types of dystopian narrative. He is careful to stress that these categories can and do overlap in specific artworks:

- (a) *the hell*, in which a more wretched kind of life is described as existing elsewhere;
- (b) *the externally altered world*, in which a new but less happy kind of life has been brought about by an unlooked for or uncontrollable natural event;
- (c) *the willed transformation*, in which a new but less happy kind of life has been brought about by social degeneration, by the emergence or re-emergence of harmful kinds of social order, or of the unforeseen but disastrous of an effort at social improvement;
- (d) *the technological transformation*, in which the conditions of life have been worsened by technical development (Williams 95).

In what follows, I consider some of the implications of Williams’ categories for our understanding of the current crop of dystopian plays. I pause on (a), touch briefly on (b), even more briefly on (d), and then return to (c) because the ‘willed transformation’ is the dystopian trope most widely utilised by playwrights in recent years. In the first three sections I analyse Alistair McDowall’s *Pomona* (Orange Tree 2014), Zinnie Harris’s *How to Hold Your Breath* (Royal Court 2015), Stef Smith’s *Human Animals* (Royal Court 2016) and *Girl in the Machine* (Traverse 2017), and Alistair McDowall’s *X* (Royal Court 2016). The final section involves a more detailed discussion of Caryl Churchill’s *Escaped Alone* (Royal Court 2016), a play that like much of Churchill’s work defies easy categorization, but which employs dystopian imagery, and is consequently worth considering here.

the hell

A woman goes missing in Manchester and her identical twin enlists help to find her. Although this description is accurate enough, the plot of Alistair McDowall’s *Pomona* (2014) is opaque and labyrinthine, combining Lovecraftian horror with virulent misogyny and a liberal sprinkling of pop culture references. Dan Rebellato’s attempt to describe it conveys its atmosphere and the confusion it deliberately provokes:

I think the missing woman has problems with drugs and debts and becomes a prostitute and then falls in with a gang who get her to film violent porn movies. I think she then disappears one day and her friend in the brothel discovers that their boss has their blood-type information on her computer. I think their boss then enlists two security guards to kill the friend, perhaps acting on the authority of The Girl, a mythical unnamed figure who controls everything and I mean everything. I think the guards kidnap the friend but bungle it and are forced to fake a violent attack. I think that inadvertently one of the guards dies from the wounds administered in the fake attack. I think the sister looking for her twin eventually stumbles upon an underground hospital where the disappeared are being kept, their organs harvested, their bodies used as baby farms. I think the twin escapes but her sister does not (Rebellato 2014).

If this sounds confusing, from an audience perspective it feels like the authentic confusion of individuals fatigued and confused about what is going on in the world outside the theatre. Moreover, if *Pomona*'s plot is unclear, the play world's status in relation to 'reality' is also uncertain and unstable. It might be an adult role-playing game, or a nightmare, or some kind of parallel, or near future reality. The play is filled with images of horrified nihilism and in it, possibilities of moral redemption are virtually non-existent. This displacement of agency is palpable, to the extent that it feels like one of McDowall's major themes, and this is perhaps what makes the experience of watching *Pomona* so unsettling and even frightening. It repeatedly sets limits on or annuls human achievement. There never seems to be anything anyone can do.

Pomona stages a dystopia that is particular to late capitalism. In it, catastrophe seems to have been normalized, and far from acting as a pretext for the emergence of a different way of living, the imagined world feels like an extension or an intensification of our own. It is very hard to see a way out. Without the capacity to map the social and political world they inhabit McDowall's characters have no means by which to gain agency in relation to those systems. The characters' powerlessness is emblematic of more widespread powerlessness in the face of capitalist realism and their experience is mirrored in the confusion of the audience. In this way *Pomona* evokes what Williams terms "a more wretched kind of life ... existing elsewhere", and yet uncomfortably close. It is no accident in this regard that *Pomona* is a real place, a deserted island in the centre of Manchester that is described more than once in the play as 'a hole in the middle of the city' (19, 44).

If we think of the absence of agency – of powerlessness – as the structure of feeling McDowall is dramatizing in *Pomona*, and as a kind of dystopian hell, we can also notice it in Zinnie Harris’s *How to Hold Your Breath* (Royal Court 2015). This play sees its heroine Dana, a stylish customs relations expert, suffer a loss of privilege after a seemingly straightforward sexual encounter with a man named Jarron, who mistakes her for a prostitute and offers her money. Dana’s rejection of his offer, and with it his neoliberal perspective – that all personal relationships can be reduced to financial transactions – leads to dire consequences. In a Faustian twist Jarron, who claims to be a demon who works for the United Nations, casts Dana into an economic doomsday scenario in which migrant routes are inverted. Dana – along with much of the population of Europe – is forced to travel south in search of sanctuary and promised employment in Alexandria, against the back drop of banks closing, hospitals demanding money, and North African countries closing their borders against the incoming flood of European refugees. Like much dystopian fiction *How to Hold Your Breath* can be read as a satire, in this case on white privilege and perhaps like *Pomona* on the more general and widespread feelings of powerlessness engendered by neoliberalism. As the action progresses, Dana is visited by a mysterious librarian who offers self-help books directed at each increasingly desperate situation she faces, including *How to Stay Alive during Prostitution* (she tries to raise money via that route to pay for her journey across Europe), and *How to Hold Your Breath for a Very Long Time* (as Dana and her sister Jasmine make a night crossing in an unsafe boat). These books serve as evidence, if evidence were needed, that suffering can be easily subsumed by the individualistic and narcissistic agenda of neoliberalism, which offers a never-ending supply of therapies for individual pain, but no possibility of collective action.

the externally altered world

Stef Smith’s *Human Animals* (Royal Court 2016) builds a disturbing vision of a London so plagued by foxes, mice and pigeons that roads are closed, parks burned and curfews imposed. Smith gives no indication of what is causing this plague, and in this sense her dramaturgy calls to mind Williams’s category of “*the externally altered world*, in which a new but less happy kind of life has been brought about by an unlooked for or uncontrollable natural event”. The action begins innocently enough with a pigeon crash-landing through an urban window and lying smeared across the living-room floor of a flat shared by a young couple, Jamie and Lisa. What follows is comprised of a series of short scenes between the lovers; between Nancy and John, a pair of neighbours/friends in late middle-age; between Nancy and her daughter Alex, who has just returned from a gap year; and less frequently involving a more shadowy figure

named Si who seems to be Lisa's boss and tries to pick John up in the local pub. The familiarity of the domestic set up is disrupted by the force of the external crisis under which the existing moral order is disintegrating. Things deteriorate rapidly and before long extermination squads are roaming the streets and phone lines are being cut. Some of the characters are alarmed by unfolding events. In time-honoured neoliberal fashion, some see them as an opportunity for financial gain, and some – including Lisa and Nancy, determinedly ignore them preferring to believe that the authorities have the situation under control and that things will imminently return to normal.

Human Animals is replete with images of the outside world bearing down inexorably on its mostly domestic interiors. Foxes drop dead but not before spreading disease, mice chew themselves to death, birds congregate in troubling numbers, lions escape from the zoo and wander the streets. Houses are burnt down because sparrows are found nesting in the roof. Smith's imagery is consistently grotesque. Again, what seems significant – as in *Pomona* and *How to Hold Your Breath* – is the displacement of agency and the focus on human limitation and powerlessness. Like *The Wolf From the Door*, scenes which form the mainstay of the play are interspersed with more abstracted passages which, the author's note to the text tells us, can "be spoken simultaneously by multiple performers" (5). In the final (choral) sequence surrounded by onlookers, a woman hangs herself from a tree in Sloane Square, (where the Royal Court is situated). Her body is soon covered in pigeons:

The noise of flesh tearing

The sound of bones being ripped from muscle ...

And as the body began to disappear

Their beaks turned into noses

And their wings into arms ...

And they grew teeth

And tumours

And toes ...

And they wiped the blood from their faces and topped up their Oyster cards

And took the District Line into town

And no one noticed (104-5).

Smith's play is a kind of grim satire, then, in which public space is abandoned and a very disturbing picture of the non-human world's reprisal against the continued pollution and

exploitation of the environment is constructed. Crucially, people continue to behave as if nothing has happened.

the technological transformation

Along with Jennifer Haley's *The Nether*, Stef Smith's more recent play, *Girl in the Machine* (Traverse 2017), is among a relatively small number of plays which fall under Williams' final category of "*the technological transformation*, in which the conditions of life have been worsened by technical development". These plays can more properly be thought of as SF in the classic sense, but they often contain elements of 'the hell' and 'the willed transformation', with its focus on social agency. *Girl in the Machine* explores what one reviewer described as "the dilemmas of digital dependency" through imagining a sinister new technology which, in blurring the boundary between fantasy and reality, encourages its user toward suicide by 'uploading' her consciousness to achieve eternal life (Fisher 2017). Although, according to the published text Smith's play is "set not too far into the future" formally it works as a piece of straightforward naturalism, opening with the characteristic gesture of a couple caught mid-conversation (4). Its themes resonate both with widespread anxiety about the power of social media to isolate individuals, and also with the intersection between rapidly advancing technology and mortality, that Steve Dixon has called the "quest to leave the frail and fallible mortal body behind" (306).

By contrast, Alistair McDowall's *X* (Royal Court 2016), is more formally audacious and experimental. Like Smith's play it begins like a piece of naturalism, but this is naturalism in an unusual setting. A group of astronauts is stranded in a research base on Pluto. They have not made radio contact with Earth for three weeks. Life in the station is banal, tedious and unexceptional, but odd things begin to happen. In the second scene, the letter X appears '*smearred across one of the walls in thick, faded brown strokes*' (10). Time becomes unstable. Three weeks becomes six months in the space of a moment. A shadowy figure is sighted in the darkness outside the porthole. The large digital clock in the centre of the set which displays the time on Earth glitches and skips when not being watched. Memories of real food, birdsong and trees are shared, and there is increasing evidence that something has gone badly wrong on the home planet.

The letter X functions as a complex metaphor in McDowall's play. It symbolizes time, in the equations the station's metrologist Cole uses to try to maintain a grip on reality. It stands for the chromosomal inheritance a mother passes to her daughter. It is a harbinger of doom in the vision of a little girl someone sees at the porthole. This sinister child has a scar-shaped X

for a mouth. In the hallucinatory second act, X represents the crossing out of neurons in a dying brain as it colonises language itself, erasing meaning as it goes:

- Everything
- X
- Hold onto X
- Hold onto /X in particu X she
- XXX (126).

McDowall's play meditates on a number of neoliberal themes. On labour and dehumanisation, on parenthood and inheritance, and on the feeling of crisis that has invaded everyday life.

the willed transformation

For Williams, "the willed transformation" is the characteristic dystopian mode because its focus is on questions of social agency. This is what distinguishes it from "the externally altered world" and "the technological transformation", in which agency is abstracted in some way, and from "the hell" in which human agency is taken out of the picture. The focus on agency is also what makes this mode the most explicitly political, and perhaps unsurprisingly, the most prevalent in the current crop of dystopian plays. Many of the plays mentioned earlier in this essay including *hang, 13, The Wolf From the Door, Radiant Vermin, Pity, The Sewing Group, The Children* and *Foxfinder* can be thought of productively in relation to this category. However, in what remains of this essay I want to turn to Caryl Churchill because she is arguably the greatest living English playwright, and because her ability to dramatize the horrors of capitalism as experienced at the level of the everyday is unparalleled. Her 2016 play *Escaped Alone* is infused, to borrow Elin Diamond's phrase "with the indirect atmospherics of terror [and] the way it leaches into the psyches of ordinary citizens and ordinary lives" (126).

Set largely in an English garden *Escaped Alone* features four elderly women caught in bright sunlight, trapped in a present that we learn via their various reminiscences began some time ago. The play begins with a visitor, Mrs Jarrett, addressing the audience directly. She is in front of a garden fence with its door ajar. Glancing inside she catches sight of three women she "has seen before" and decides to go in (5). As the afternoon wears on, the women chat about things they have done and might still want to do, and about family and love. Like many old friends their conversation meanders freely from topic to topic, from the changing face of

Britain's high streets, to quantum physics and the restorative power of a haircut. Despite the atmosphere of conviviality, an undercurrent of anxiety haunts the conversation and surfaces intermittently as the action freezes to allow each woman to speak of her innermost anxiety: an irrational fear of cats; agoraphobia; a crime that results in familial estrangement. Space time logic is further disrupted in Churchill's play as scenes of the women chatting in the garden are intercut with a series of monologues in which Mrs. Jarrett speaks directly to the audience. Comprised almost entirely of declarative sentences, these speeches foretell the disintegration of all good-life fantasies under the inexorable pressure of global capital. Often grotesque and occasionally comic, her assertions are made strangely familiar by references to popular culture. "The hunger began" she tells us "when eighty percent of food was diverted to TV programmes ... [and] the obese sold slices of themselves until hunger drove them to eat their own rashers" (Churchill 22). Images of environmental catastrophe and the exhaustion of the planet's resources abound. "Torrential rain leaked through cracks and flooded the tunnels" she states quite matter-of-factly, "survivors were now solitary and went insane at different rates" (Churchill 8). Discourses of politics, criminality, economics, religion and identity politics overlap, much as they do in the contemporary news media:

Fire broke out in ten places at once. Four cases of arson by children and politicians, three of spontaneous combustion of the markets, two of sunshine, one supposed by believers to be a punishment by God for gender dysphoria (Churchill 37).

Churchill employs a range of dramaturgical strategies in *Escaped Alone* that can be productively explored through Williams' thinking about dystopian fiction and also in relation to more recent theorising of the neoliberal present. We might be inclined to ask, for instance, what forms of social agency, or inaction, in the present have resulted in the cataclysmic future described by Mrs Jarrett? Toward the very beginning of her book *Ordinary Affects* (2007) Kathleen Stewart suggests the terms we used to describe our contemporary moment – neoliberalism, advanced capitalism, globalization – "do not in themselves begin to describe the situation we find ourselves in ... [because] the notion of a totalized system of which everything is already somehow a part, is not helpful ... in the effort to approach a weighted and reeling present" (1) This description of the present as "weighted and reeling present" could easily be applied to Churchill's garden. In her book, *Cruel Optimism* (2011), Lauren Berlant, like Stewart and Churchill, also trains her eye on the historical present and the ordinary. She understands 'optimism' not as an emotion, but as an affective structure of attachment that

enables people to survive amidst the ordinariness of neoliberal life-in-crisis. “Why” she asks “do people stay attached to good-life fantasies ... when the evidence of their instability, fragility and dear costs abounds?” (2). One of Berlant’s key arguments is that in order to comprehend the affective structures of neoliberalism we must think less in terms of grand notions of trauma, crisis and event, and more about the diffusion of trauma through the ordinary, a structure of feeling she calls ‘crisis-ordinariness’. For Berlant the “present is perceived, first, affectively” and the affective register most pertinent to her argument is that of the impasse: “a stretch of time in which one moves around with a sense that the world is at once intensely present and enigmatic” (4).

If we utilise Berlant’s notion of crisis-ordinariness as a way of thinking about *Escaped Alone*, we can see, I think, that while in Mrs Jarrett’s monologues Churchill gives us a vision of the future destroyed by neoliberalism, in the garden she provides us with an image of “the overwhelming ordinary that is *disorganized* by it” (Berlant 2011: 8). That the garden scenes are almost entirely static – the women remain seated throughout – seems significant, for instance. Also, while the action *appears* continuous, Churchill tells us it unfolds over a “*number of afternoons*” (4). The dramaturgy thus recalls Harootunian’s notion of the thick time of late-capitalism as “marked by a boundless present” (471). The sun is always shining. The women are always sitting in the garden and always at some deep level very frightened. Even Mrs Jarrett is not ‘otherly’. Although her monologues are prophetic, unlike the Skriker, with whom she has been compared, Mrs Jarrett is not representative of another realm. She is instead decidedly ordinary. As played by Angela Bassett in the original Royal Court production, she is friendly, slightly crumpled in appearance, slightly northern in accent, and speaks of the disastrous implications of the current course of human history without rancour and with absolute directness. Her apocalyptic monologues are presented less as an interruption than as interference – scene transitions are accompanied by what could be best described as the sound of an electronic device being tuned in – and an exploration of the relationship between the general and the specific is clearly at work. This dynamic is also apparent when the women become isolated in the garden. Worn out by the effort of maintaining good life fantasies, each is revealed in a kind of extended aside as trapped in her own nightmare. It’s better, one character tells us “to be in an empty room because then there’s fewer things to mean nothing at all” (32). In *Escaped Alone*, these moments of fear and anxiety are not linked explicitly with the operations of capitalism, or indeed to each other, but as Maddy Costa has observed they *feel* like a response to “the abusive power of men, whether presidents of countries or companies, leaders of armies or representatives of religion, to twist shared resources to

personal advantage” (540).

On the other hand – and there are typically multiple perspectives in Churchill’s drama – the women appear to find genuine solace in friendship. James McDonald’s production contained one particular sequence of uncomplicated pleasure when the women sing in harmony the 1963 Crystal’s hit *Da Doo Ron Ron*. “*They are singing*” Churchill tells us “*for themselves in the garden, not performing to the audience*” (28). By intercutting convivial and relatively banal scenes of female friendship with sequences of dystopian prophesy, Churchill points the way towards a renovated identity politics, lodged in the body’s affective connection with others, yet nonetheless rooted in political commitment and oppositional rage. A single moment of sentient resistance can be found in the most extraordinary of the garden speeches which is delivered by Mrs Jarrett near the end of the play. The speech consists in two words, “terrible rage”, repeated twenty-three times (42). Of all the tropes that appear in the play – the conversation, the interruption, the aside – this feels most politically charged.

Conclusion

In a recent essay on the retreat from graphically represented violence on the contemporary British stage, Dan Rebellato makes the link between realism and contemporary politics explicit by reminding us that “a key feature of contemporary neoliberal capitalism’ is ‘its totalizing absorption of realism” (2017). In making this connection Rebellato draws on the body of political theory which has sought to show that since the 1970s, and with increasing regularity and vehemence since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, we have been told that capitalism is ‘good’ because it is based on the ‘reality’ of ‘human nature’. This world view is perfectly expressed, as Mark Fisher notes in his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism*, in the phrase variously attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (2). Of course, public discourse in the UK has been marked since the 2008 economic crash by a growing awareness of the ravages that the neoliberal economic project has wrought domestically (if not always elsewhere). Nonetheless, UK politicians began almost immediately to figure ‘austerity’ as a realist imperative. In this way of thinking, only fantasists could deny that austerity inflicted necessary and cleansing pain. A growing awareness of these tensions is reflected and inflected, I would argue, in the dramaturgy of a sizeable number of new plays. The recent dystopian turn in playwriting is a product of widespread uncertainty and anxiety in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crash and the subsequent crisis in neo-liberalism. In particular, it is the decentralized and dispersed violence of the neoliberal state – which is often so difficult to see because neoliberalism works

so tirelessly to obscure it – that the plays seek to make palpable, often with recourse to tropes familiar to us from SF, fantasy and satire. In common with SF, these plays are linked in their presentation of ‘otherness’. Each stages its own particular disruption of theatrical realism and in so doing engages critically – and often satirically – both with its chosen subject matter, and with the British realist theatrical tradition. Each is also quite obviously an extended metaphor and needs to be considered carefully on its own merits and in relation to larger cultural discourses about truth, reality, fear and anxiety that haunt the contemporary neoliberal moment.

As Raewyn Connell reminds us, all “neoliberal regimes have been created by stitching together a coalition of social forces and finding a locally gripping ideological language” (35). These plays, are attempts at unravelling that stitching, or at least at making the stitching more visible. Their affective structures also guide us towards considering the many trajectories of feeling that can be aroused in the theatre, and that neoliberalism arouses. We might even wish to argue that despite their speculative narratives the plays constitute attempts at remembering. “Imposed amnesia”, as Henry Giroux noted in 2012, “is the modus operandi of the current moment” (113). For Giroux, under neoliberalism:

Not only is historical memory now sacrificed to the spectacle of consumerism, celebrity culture, hyped up violence and a market-driven obsession with the self, but the very formative culture that makes compassion, justice and an engaged citizenry foundational to democracy has been erased from the language of mainstream politics ... Politics is now defined through a language that divorces the ethical imagination from any sense of our ethical responsibilities (2012: 113).

“You can’t *be* a good person anymore”, a character remarks near the beginning of McDowall’s *Pomona*, “there’s no such thing. There’s just people who are *aware* of the pain they’re causing, and people who *aren’t* aware” (15).

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