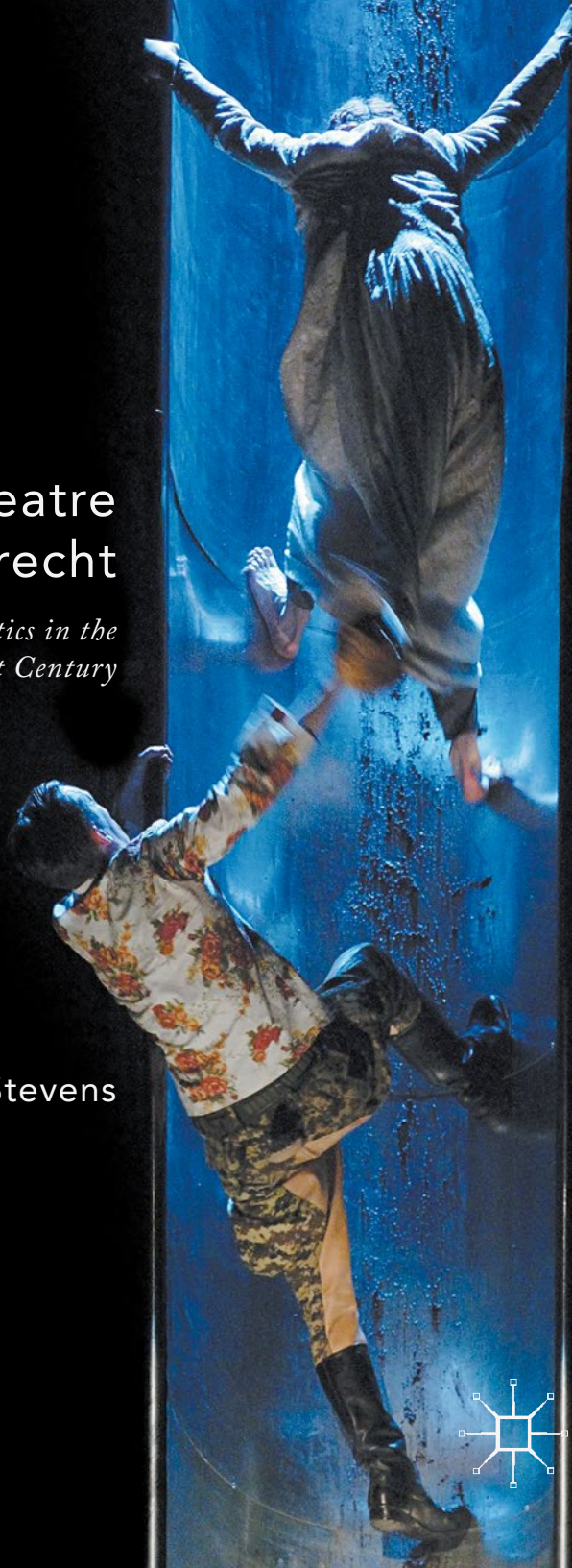
# Anti-War Theatre After Brecht

*Dialectical Aesthetics in the Twenty-First Century*

Lara Stevens



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## Dialectical Aesthetics in the Twenty-First Century

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*For my parents*

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# Contents

CHAPTER 1

# Introduction

This book attempts to map out how contemporary anti-war plays work to influence spectator responses to the violence of war after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The plays I examine are written and devised in precarious times – in times of violent conflict in the Middle East, what President George W. Bush called the 'War on Terror', as well as the escalating conditions of the Global Financial Crisis, new revolutionary landscapes in the Middle East and North Africa and the global Occupy Movement. In light of these historical processes of change, we require not only new political strategies and new dramatic aesthetics but also new ways to talk about them. The anti-war plays considered in this book are created by renowned playwrights and theatremakers from a range of Western nations. The plays include: Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* (2001) and *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall be Unhappy* (2003–4), Théâtre du Soleil's *Le Dernier Caravansérail* (2005), Elfriede Jelinek's *Bambiland* (2004) and Caryl Churchill's *Iraq.doc* (2003) and *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (2009).

This book developed out of wanting to know how, as a Western subject from an allied nation that signed onto Bush's 'Coalition of the Willing', I should or could respond to the violence of the wars being carried out in my name. I wanted to understand how deeply I was implicated in these conflicts and what alternative spaces were available beyond tacit complicity. The anti-war plays examined herein are engaged artists' responses to the injustices of invasion and its resulting brutality and perpetuation of



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'terror'. The artists' rejoinders to conflict range from anger, frustration, helplessness and cynicism to hope, determination and compassion. The selected playwrights and theatremakers share a common and self-conscious interest in how we as Western spectators respond to remote conflict as we watch it being played out on our television sets, in newspapers and online. By staging the real-life spectacle of the 'War on Terror' outside the normative and highly controlled frames of the mainstream media, these plays not only express dissatisfaction with the Western governments that wage war, they also imagine new and alternative possibilities to violent conflict.

In looking at drama that aims to politicize spectators, I turn to the modernist theoretician and theatremaker Bertolt Brecht for his insistence on the development of dramatic aesthetics that reveal social conditions as contingent and impermanent. Brecht has had such a pervasive influence on theatre that I wonder whether it is possible to make politically engaged theatre without his spectre haunting some aspects of the work, even for theatremakers who have never read or seen a play by Brecht or don't like or agree with his ideas for revolutionizing theatre. Brecht's plays and his dramaturgical innovations for making political theatre were equally influenced by important writers, philosophers and artists in the generations that preceded him. The ghosts that haunted Brecht were those identified by political economist Karl Marx, the possibility of imminent revolution and the spectre of Marx himself in his influential critiques of capitalism.

To understand how Brecht thought historical processes of transformation could be both represented on stage and transformed into real-life civic action, the influence of the writings of Marx – in particular his engagement with dialectics – cannot be underestimated. To conceive of Brecht's world view and theatrical techniques as dialectical means seeing the contradictions in mainstream ideology or the status quo as part of the dynamism and ever-changing nature of social relations. For theatrical representations of the world to be dialectical requires techniques that show how time progresses without a predetermined teleological motor or 'inevitable' outcomes. Rather, dialectical representations reveal the antagonistic conditions that make up reality, history and the future as unfixed and potentially alterable.

To apply the Marxist-Brechtian concept of dialectics to the so-called post-Marxist present – which turns its back on the hope of a future Communist utopia and takes into account forms of oppression other than class (such as race, gender, sexuality, etc.)—is fraught with difficulties. Yet, to limit Brecht to the time in which he lived is to miss what his theories

can offer to the present moment. In thinking through the legacy of Brecht, I suggest that contemporary plays don't have to look like one of Brecht's plays in order to share his desire to make spectators discerning towards the ubiquity of ideology. By engaging with Brecht's theoretical ideas, I shape new understandings of what Brechtian theatre is now. In this book I imagine the ways in which the dialectical strategies of Brecht's dramaturgy are adaptable to the economic, political and technological conditions of the twenty-first century and, in particular, what they can bring to better understanding how dramatists today approach the contradictions of the 'War on Terror'.

The second chapter of this book begins with the context of the 'War on Terror' and the ways in which this period of history has altered how we understand and read the relationship between politics and performance. I draw upon the ideas of philosopher Jacques Rancière to consider how politics and aesthetics intersect today and what it means to make 'political theatre' or 'engaged art' under post-Marxist conditions. I pay particular attention to Rancière's praise and critique of Brecht in order to emphasize their common concern with art's potential to change spectator perceptions and dislodge fixed attitudes. I argue that Rancière's desire for 'emancipated' spectatorship and non-dogmatic art owes a large debt to Brecht's dialectical thinking and theories for the theatre but also updates Brecht's ideas to speak to the circumstances of the 'War on Terror'.

Bringing the legacies of Marx and Brecht together, Chapter 3 turns to earlier models of polititicized or 'engaged' art by surveying the historical relation between Marxist dialectics and Brechtian dramatic aesthetics. I look at critical responses to the influence of historical materialist thought on Brecht's theory for the theatre. Taking into account the challenges of thinking about Brechtian dialectics in a so-called post-Marxist and post-political context, I establish a definition of a 'Brechtian dialectical aesthetic'. In the following chapters I will draw on this definition as a basis for considering how a Brechtian-style use of dialectics is present in contemporary dramatic texts and their performances. In Chapter 3 I ask: what aspects of the Brechtian interpretation of Marxist dialectics remain useful for understanding the complex relationship between politics and theatrical aesthetics in the economic, political, social, ideological and technological conditions of an age of 'terror' and what aspects need revision? I look at the problem of estrangement in the context of late capitalism and consider why dialectical thinking is pertinent to the political climate in the West following the coordinated terrorist attacks by al-Qaeda on key sites of American power on 11 September 2001. By drawing out the uses and limitations of Brechtian theories in a twenty-first-century

context, I suggest that Brechtian concepts continue to provide amenable and practical tools for future generations of anti-war playwrights and theatremakers.

Chapter 4 investigates the influence of Brechtian dialectical theatre theory on the work of American playwright Tony Kushner in the plays *Homebody/Kabul* (2001) and *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall be Unhappy* (*Only We*) (2003–4). This chapter investigates the ways in which the aesthetics of *Homebody/Kabul* and *Only We* critique Western imperialism and the West's culpability, ignorance or indifference towards the complex political and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and Iraq. I draw particular attention to the ways in which the Brechtian technique of historicization is developed by non-linear depictions of time in Kushner's plays. The chapter also takes into account the implications of the dissemination of *Only We* through an online news magazine, *The Nation*, and the play's performance within the context of anti-war and anti-Republican protests prior to the 2004 American Presidential elections.

Chapter 5 focuses on the play *Le Dernier Caravansérail* (2003) by French theatre company Théâtre du Soleil, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine with text by feminist philosopher playwright and dramaturg Hélène Cixous. *Le Dernier Caravansérail* was a theatrical response to the French and Australian governments' treatment of asylum seekers fleeing persecution, conflict and hardship during the 'War on Terror'. I investigate the play's politico-aesthetic practices, including self-reflexivity, episodic structure and *gestic* scenery. I argue that the play and its performance context use Brechtian dialectical techniques to estrange the notion of 'hospitality' as constructed in the national rhetoric of the liberal democratic nations of France and Australia. I demonstrate how the Théâtre du Soleil develop new ways to estrange habitual mainstream-media representations of refugees. The chapter documents how the company creates a theatrical environment that brings together politics, learning, community and imagination as a means to impel spectators to view the Australian and French governments' 'solutions' to asylum-seeker arrivals with scepticism and curiosity. Chapter 5 concludes that *Le Dernier Caravansérail* updates Brechtian dramaturgical self-consciousness in order to challenge Western attitudes of hostility and fear towards the refugee other.

Chapter 6 updates Brecht's strategies for present-day social realities dominated as they are by digital interfaces and social media. This chapter analyses two plays by British playwright Caryl Churchill, *Iraq. doc* (unpublished but first performed in 2003) and *Seven Jewish*

*Children: A Play for Gaza* (2009). Both plays are direct responses to military operations by Western powers. *Iraq.doc* reflects on the Iraq War and *Seven Jewish Children* responds to the Israeli Defence Force's attack on the Gaza Strip in December 2008. In considering the online chat-room aesthetic of *Iraq.doc* as well as *The Guardian* online and YouTube performances of *Seven Jewish Children*, this chapter explores the use of new media to critique nationalistic discourses or state-sanctioned views of the Iraq War and the Israel–Palestine conflict. In addressing the multiple performance contexts of *Seven Jewish Children* I argue that the mass dissemination of the work via the Internet and its free licensing enables theatre to intervene in and contribute to public debate on a contemporary human rights issue in a timely manner. I suggest that online performances and the public platforms that respond to artistic representations open up new avenues for dialectical debate and interactive possibilities for 'spectators' in ways that update Brechtian aesthetics for the digital age.

Finally, in Chapter 7 I advance the model of the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic through analysis of the play *Bambiland* (2004) by Nobel Prize-winning Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek. In this play, Jelinek critiques the 2003 invasion of Iraq by Western coalition forces through a dense and ironic layering of intertextual references to images, novels, films, product advertisements and ancient Greek plays associated with the violence, exploitation, commercialization and suffering of war. Jelinek selects the found texts and ironically positions them so as to defamiliarize the state-sanctioned rhetoric around the Iraq War in the mainstream media. Jelinek modifies Brecht's ironic techniques and *Verfremdungseffekte* through her insertion of a self-conscious and cynical authorial-narratorial voice that asserts itself among the familiar dominant male Western voices of war reporting. *Bambiland* invites spectators to critically reflect upon the 'self-evident' or 'inevitable' effects of war frequently employed in the language of the media and American political rhetoric. Unlike the work of Tony Kushner or the Théâtre du Soleil – plays that offer suggestions or practical models for real-life political engagement outside the theatre – *Bambiland* lays bare the mechanisms of power behind the everyday political rhetoric of the Iraq War media coverage without providing any closure or suggestions as to what shape resistance might take.

The plays examined in this book are brought together for the variety of ways in which they respond to the pervasive threat of 'terror' in the twenty-first century. I do not attempt to provide an exhaustive catalogue

of the overwhelming number of plays and playwrights that have engaged with the 'War on Terror' in their work. Instead, I focus on select canonical writers and theatremakers to provide in-depth analysis of pioneering plays that are representative of broader trends in the field of politically engaged theatre and performance post-9/11. My choice of playwrights and theatremakers is also influenced by a history of engagement with Brecht's plays or his aesthetic theory at some point during their long careers while developing their own politically committed artistic aesthetics.

The playwrights and theatremakers examined in this book differ vastly in their cultural contexts: Tony Kushner (America), Ariane Mnouchkine/Hélène Cixous/Théâtre du Soleil (France), Caryl Churchill (Britain), Elfriede Jelinek (Austria). Yet, they broadly share a historical moment in that they are politicized during the events of the 1960s and 1970s in Western Europe and America. They all have an established public history of socialist political engagement in their particular national contexts. This overt socialist commitment in a post-Marxist moment provides an ideal entry point for considering how this political agenda plays out in contemporary theatrical works as compared to Brecht's plays. Writing from privileged first-world positions, the selected playwrights and theatremakers share a common disaffection with the 'finality' of late capitalism, the institutionalization of the mainstream media and the ideology that underpins the invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan and Palestine.

The playwrights and theatremakers considered in the following chapters wrote and produced plays prolifically over the latter half of the twentieth century. Each has won numerous prestigious awards that have earned them national and international reputations. They are all public figures that today occupy positions of influence in the arts as well as in mainstream-media commentary and draw consistently large audiences to their plays. The case studies examined in the following chapters are a small part of much larger bodies of work. The shorter works by Churchill and Kushner in particular are considered minor works for these authors as compared to their longer and more famous plays. Yet, as the following chapters will demonstrate, these short plays and their online publication provided these playwrights with the means to respond quickly and pointedly to pressing political issues and events.

The examination of artists from a range of Western contexts is a deliberate response to the global flows of culture and capital in the twenty-first century. It reflects the complexity of power relations between

the West and its 'other' today. Given that the Iraq invasion was conducted with the military aid and/or complicit support of what the Bush administration labelled the 'Coalition of the Willing', we need to reconsider the interconnectedness of Western powers today that are positioned against the Arab 'other' in a history of racism, Orientalism and imperialism. This book interrogates these interconnections through the chosen plays and the responses they generate in the contexts in which they were written or performed which include: Britain, Austria, America, France, Israel and Australia.

Combat operations in Iraq formally ended in 2011 but the conflict and Western military presence in Afghanistan and its neighbouring states endures. Tensions and fighting between Israel and Palestine continue to fluctuate and Iraq and Afghanistan continue to be torn apart by internal conflict, most recently by insurgent militant groups such as the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS). The plays considered in the following chapters were written in response to conflicts and military missions that, in the eyes of the Western powers, were deemed 'accomplished'. Given the ongoing regional instability in the Middle East, these anti-war plays continue to provide important potential sites for cultural engagement and for opening up debate around the ethics of twenty-first-century Western military operations and their effects. They reject the logic of retribution that followed the attacks of 9/11 and resist Western governments' encouragement to remain passive and complicit spectators to the conflicts in the Middle East. Instead, they speak out against the injustices of wealthy and powerful nations invading impoverished and politically volatile ones and envisage alternatives to violence, revenge and the perpetuation of terror from all sides.

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CHAPTER 2

# Performing the 'War on Terror'

From 15 to 16 February 2003, an estimated 10 million people in over 800 cities worldwide marched to protest against the second Iraq War. The largest anti-war protests in history, these rallies clearly demonstrated a global lack of popular support for the Iraq War on an unprecedented scale. Yet, unlike the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the governments of the American-led 'Coalition of the Willing' ignored the performing bodies of the 2003 anti-war demonstrators. In the mainstream media and scholarly commentary, the resistance movements were described as impotent and atrophied. The performative strategies of 1960s-style peaceful protest proved ineffectual models for the twenty-first century. The failure of these protests prompts the question: what is the relationship between politics and performance today?

Sara Brady argues that since the events of 9/11, politics and performance are no longer meaningfully distinguishable. For Brady, 'political theatre' became redundant when the supreme acting skills of political figures such as President G. W. Bush and the public spectacle of 9/11 made all theatre and performance art seem lifeless and staged (2012, xii). Similarly Jeanne Colleran supports composer Karlheinz Stockhausen's claim that the terrorist attacks on 9/11 were 'the biggest work of art there has ever been' because their effects on their intended 'audience' were sublimely astonishing despite being devastating and criminal (2012, 1). The bleeding of the political into performance demands a deep rethinking of the function of theatre today. A better understanding of theatrical conven-



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tions, thanks to the self-conscious artifice of Brechtian style, might enable us to see the staging and costuming of President G. W. Bush as deliberate and strategic, the mise-en-scène of the wars in the Middle East as they are portrayed in the media as tightly framed and edited, as well as read the semiotics of the collapsing Twin Towers in New York.

Rustom Bharucha, in his book *Terror and Performance*, interrogates contemporary uses of the terms 'terror' and 'terrorism' to better understand the relationship between terror and performance today. For Bharucha, terrorism is not a performance in itself. Instead, the responses to terrorism and the replaying of terrorist acts in the media turn such events into spectacles or performances for consumption by spectator-witnesses (2014, 27). Bharucha, following Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, notes that terror is the name of an affect, an abstraction, a fragmented and non-coherent affective bodily state that is impossible to pin down (Bharucha 2014, 11). Since 9/11, the idea of a ubiquitous threat of terror has allowed many Western governments to suspend common laws and human rights claims and expand securitarian modes of governance. Bharucha adds that the 'War on Terror' is largely a war on words and their performative energy, a battle waged over a narrative of who is 'good' and who is 'evil', which side is 'right' and which is 'wrong', a narrative that has predominantly been controlled by America and its global agenda (2014, 5). If this is true, theatre, with its strong historical relationship to narrative and the performative energy of words, is particularly well suited to critiquing, intervening, parodying or changing the dominant language and depiction of invasion, conflict, terrorism and terror.

If older modes of resistance have lost their force in a global atmosphere of terror, it might suggest that writers and artists are increasingly valuable to democratic states for their ability to provide creative, alternative vehicles through which popular dissent might be debated, enacted and recognized. Yet, since the 1980s, postmodern theories have bemoaned the demise of the transformative potential of left-wing political movements alongside a loss of faith that art can mobilize spectators. Baz Kershaw writes that: 'Postmodernism and related theories have profoundly upset established notions of the "political" in theatre, which were usually defined in relation to left-wing or socialist/Marxist ideologies' (1999, 16). If we cannot effectively locate 'political theatre' today or it is, as Brady suggests, a redundant term in a time when performances by political figures outstrip

those by trained actors, how do we speak about dramatic aesthetics that respond to living global crises that demand complex ethical consideration?

Philosopher Jacques Rancière offers a productive rethinking of the relationship between politics and art in the twenty-first century. His writings draw upon Brechtian theory and are critical of what he sees as its shortcomings. In seeking to understand what constitutes 'engaged' art in a post-Marxist historical moment, he mocks what he calls the 'right-wing frenzy of post-critical critique' and 'left-wing melancholy' (2009a, 40). Noting the defeatism of contemporary Marxist political theory he writes:

> Today, it [Marxism] has become … a disenchanted knowledge of the reign of the commodity and the spectacle, of the equivalence between everything and everything else and between everything and its own image. This post-Marxist and post-Situationist wisdom is not content to furnish a phantasmagorical depiction of a humanity completely buried beneath the rubbish of its frenzied consumption. It also depicts the law of domination as a force seizing on anything that claims to challenge it. It makes any protest a spectacle and any spectacle a commodity. (2009a, 32–3)

Much contemporary Marxism offers no hope of escaping the 'hyperreality' that Jean Baudrillard describes, a world that presents as a copy of a copy without any identifiable original. Equally, it concedes to Francis Fukuyama's 'end of history' claim, which posits that, since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, capitalist ideology has defeated Communism and reached its telos. For Rancière, contemporary Marxism's greatest failure is its inability to address the commodification of political resistance, to stop the machinery of capitalism from co-opting dissent and turning it into consent.

Rancière objects to the assumption that only art deemed 'critical' or 'political' can compel its readers/viewers to oppose the system of domination. Such an assumption implies 'a specific form of relationship between cause and effect, intention and consequence' (Rancière 2010, 135), which is to say that art necessarily impels spectators to react in harmony with authorial intent. Rancière concedes that an artwork can identifiably address a political issue but it can never control how that politics is read, what it inspires or how it 'works' upon any spectator. Today, art rarely provokes direct and measurable social action.

Rancière notes that there is no criterion for establishing a correlation between the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetics of politics. He attempts to rethink what it means for art to be 'political' when he writes:

> An artist can be committed, but what does it mean to say that his art is committed? Commitment is not a category of art. This does not mean that art is apolitical. It means that aesthetics has its own politics, or its own metapolitics … There are politics of aesthetics, forms of community laid out by the very regime of identification in which we perceive art. (Rancière 2004, 60)

Each work of art has its own politics which are not determined by the artist and cannot be known in advance of each spectator's encounter with that work of art. Yet the breakdown of an indisputable correspondence between political and aesthetic virtue does not signal the end of political art. Instead, Rancière invites us to consider the aesthetics of an artwork in its individual circumstances and on the grounds of its interactions with its particular socio-political context and framing.

The problem of identifying a clear-cut politics of aesthetics cannot be resolved by didactic art. Mocking the possibility of politicizing the cynical postmodern Western spectator, Rancière claims that we can no longer believe in what he calls 'the *pedagogical* model of the efficacy of art' (original emphasis) (2010, 136). The pedagogical art that was so popular in the propaganda campaigns of Communist leaders Joseph Stalin and Mao Zedong is unthinkable in the postmodern era that dissolves all possibility of a spectator's emotional or ethical investment in an artwork's object of critique.

Rancière associates Brecht with this didactic model and is particularly critical of Brecht's claim that epic theatre can turn passive spectators into active thinkers. He notes that, at the heart of Brecht's political theatre, is the idea of shocking or estranging the spectator into intellectual awareness or political mobilization (2010, 143). Rancière describes Brechtian *Verfremdungs* as a process of dissociation that ruptures the relation between sense and sense. Of this he comments:

> There is no reason why the production of a shock produced by two heterogeneous forms of the sensible ought to yield an understanding of the state of the world, and none why understanding the latter ought to produce a decision to change it. (Rancière 2010, 143)

Rancière reads Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* as a historically political strategy for revealing the workings of ideology but one that Brecht should never have assumed to be capable of mobilizing spectators. Further, Rancière sees *Verfremdungseffekt* as having little effect in today's communities of 'consensus' – communities made to feel naturally united by ethical values – a phenomenon which he argues has become ubiquitous in the West since the events of 9/11 (Rancière 2009b, 94).

Rancière argues that Brecht's dramaturgy works upon the assumption that once an audience is made conscious of how the world works, the revelator, in this case Brecht, will disappear and the spectator will take over. He calls this: 'theatre [that] is presented as a mediation striving for its own abolition' (2009a, 8). This understanding of spectatorship presupposes that the playwright is in a privileged position to teach spectators, to release them from false consciousness by exposing the 'truth' behind the glossy veneer of ideology. Here a playwright and theatremaker such as Brecht takes on the role of a schoolmaster.

Rancière has written extensive critiques on pedagogy from Plato onwards, focusing on the relationship between the schoolmaster and the so-called ignorant student. In these he argues that when the schoolmaster attempts to pass on his knowledge to the student and make them equals in knowledge, the exchange fails to abolish the hierarchies already in place between them. Rather than turning the student into an equal, Rancière claims that the schoolmaster reasserts his position of mastery (through possession of knowledge) and reinforces the student's subservience, the very thing he is purportedly attempting to overcome.

Rancière suggests that the relationship between spectacle and spectator in Brecht's epic theatre functions in a similarly paradoxical manner. In order to circumvent this hierarchical structure, Rancière proposes the model of an 'emancipated spectator' which he describes as a 'theatre without spectators' or 'a theatre where the passive optical relationship implied by the very term is subject to a different relationship' (2009a, 3). Attempting to counteract social and intellectual hierarchies, he is critical of Brecht's belief in a refunctioned spectator – one who can be drawn out of a passive attitude to become an active participant (2009a, 45). For Rancière, 'emancipation' means 'the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look' (2009a, 19). An 'emancipated spectator' is one who moves back and forth between a Brechtian-style critical specular relation to the stage and a more Artaudian immersive, experiential connection to the performance.

Rancière believes that Brecht's dramaturgy upholds the problematic 'opposition between viewing and acting'. He goes on to write that:

> Emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting; when we understand that the self-evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. (2009a, 13)

In this idea of 'emancipation', Rancière never solves the problem of how it is possible for a spectator to 'understand' what belongs to a structure of domination without being placed in a position to compare the existing relations between saying, seeing and doing. I suggest that it is precisely the dialectical aspects of Brecht's theory (regardless of whether or not they are always realized in productions of his plays) that provide a vantage point from which to view the bigger picture of social relations. Brecht's ability to make the habitual into something strange is the first step in revealing the structures that shape what can be said, seen and acted upon. As we will see in the following chapter, it is the dynamic, dialectical core of Brecht's theory that holds the possibility for moving the spectator between the poles of viewing and acting and thus also has the potential to realize Rancièrian 'emancipation'.

The kinds of social structures that Brecht offers spectators the chance to scrutinize in his plays are invariably inflected by his leftist political sympathies. In advocating for a socialist alternative, Brecht does show some tendencies towards schoolmasterly pedagogy but never assumes a determinate outcome to the capitalist contradictions that he represents in many of his plays. The image of Brecht as belligerent pedagogue has been discredited by preeminent Brechtian scholars like David Barnett who refuses the characterization of Brecht as 'a crude propagandist' by noting that Brecht recognized that 'The theatre is not a pulpit' (2015, 5–6). Above all, Brecht's didacticism is tempered by his interest in and engagement with dialectics. The theatrical self-consciousness typically found in Brecht's plays and their productions reminds audiences of the processes that inform and shape our ways of seeing, saying and doing. In short, the dialectical aesthetic reveals broader systems of domination without relying on the cause-effect logic that Rancière sees in Brecht's thinking and pedagogical art more generally.

For Rancière, the politics of art takes on a life of its own that travels well beyond the intentions of its maker(s). He believes that an artwork gathers momentum when it is put before a spectator public. The maker of the art,

whom he labels 'the ignorant schoolmaster', sets off a chain reaction in the spectator 'pupil':

> From the schoolmaster the pupil learns something that the schoolmaster does not know himself. She learns it as an effect of the mastery that forces her to search and verifies this research. But she does not learn the schoolmaster's knowledge. (Rancière 2009a, 14)

This empowering view of an 'emancipated' spectator who learns beyond the knowledge of her teacher implicitly relies on a degree of open-endedness in the artwork. In thinking about theatre that aims to politicize audiences today, it is not the message that is important, but rather the play's potential to provoke audiences to challenge what they have witnessed on the stage.

Debates over the ability of art to deconstruct capitalism place an unreasonable burden on the capabilities of art and its relationship to the civic and political sphere. Furthermore, this burden instrumentalizes art and distorts its potential to contribute to projects that challenge the hegemony of ideological power. For Rancière:

> The arts only ever lend to projects of domination or emancipation what they are able to lend to them, that is to say, quite simply, what they have in common with them: bodily positions and movements, functions of speech, the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible. (2004, 19)

This emphasis on the need to upset the 'parcelling out of the visible and the invisible' suggests that for art to impact political life it needs to challenge habitual ways of seeing the world, a concept that was central to Brecht's thinking about theatre half a century earlier.

What is significant for Rancière, then, is art's potential to shift the coordinates of the visible and the invisible in the public sphere, coordinates that are largely controlled by the mainstream media. Art should reconfigure the everyday experience of consensus that dominates our current global order by altering the 'formatting of reality produced by state-controlled media, by undoing the relations between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable' (Rancière 2004, 65). Rancière is less concerned with the control and production of bodies in the civic sphere and more interested in how people come to be recognized as political subjects in the first place. Recognition as a political subject means being seen and heard and validated in the public sphere. This has the potential to be realized through

the positioning of bodies in space and the refunctioning of speech, two elements – body and language – that are fundamental to theatre.

Rancière offers a contemporary theorization of what I argue are the kind of political aesthetics that Brecht's interest in dialectics was already gesturing towards in the first half of the twentieth century. Theatre has always been a place of appearance but Brecht heightened this function in his emphasis on showing the apparatus within which that appearance occurs. Rancière's emphasis on the ways in which art can reconfigure visibility and sayability adds to the vocabulary that describes the shifting relation between politics and aesthetics, spectators and performance, and helps update Brechtian terms for our current post-Marxist, post-Brechtian, post-9/11 historical moment.

Today the term 'political' in art has lost its potency along with the millions of protesters who stood up to contest the legitimacy of the 'Coalition of the Willing' to wage a 'War on Terror'. If, after Rancière, we assume that 'Politics, before all else, is an intervention in the visible and the sayable' (2010, 37) this book suggests that today drama remains a privileged medium for challenging the dominant lines of communication and access to information that establish legitimacy according to who is seen and who is effaced, who is heard and who is silenced. The plays considered in the following chapters reveal what ideology polices as visible and sayable as well as that which it tries to keep invisible and mute. In order to understand how dramatic strategies might intervene in the visible and the sayable, however, I first turn to Brecht and Marx for their shared interest in what capitalist ideology conceals and how to unmask its hidden contradictions.

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CHAPTER 3

# From Epic to Dialectical Theatre

Not long before his death in 1956, Brecht expressed dissatisfaction with the terminology 'epic theatre' that had long described his dramaturgical aesthetic and advocated a shift to what he termed 'dialectical theatre' (1964, 281–2). Brecht's use of the term dialectics invokes a long philosophical history that can be traced to the pre-Socratic Greek thinkers such as Heraclitus, through to German idealists such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and nineteenth-century materialist philosophers like Karl Marx. The influence of historical materialist thought and dialectics on Brecht's theory for the theatre has long been acknowledged by Brechtian scholars including, most notably, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, Fredric Jameson, Peter Brooker, Antony Tatlow, David Barnett and Sean Carney. This book surveys this scholarship and builds upon it by offering a detailed reading of Brechtian dialectics in a late capitalist or post-Marxist context.

The so-called post-political or post-Marxist moment in which we live means that we can no longer assume that the antagonisms and injustices of our societies can be resolved by the totalizing, salvational narratives of religion, capitalism, the 'progress' of Enlightenment or, indeed, Marxism. Brecht lived in a time when the potential for socialist revolutionary change was both realized in the success of the 1917 Russian Revolution and the growing influence of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) led by Rosa Luxemburg. Today, however, the utopianism of revolution has been discredited by the failure of twentieth-century Marxist experiments, in



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particular the atrocities committed by Stalin in Russia and Mao in China. Equally, Communist or socialist art has been tainted by the propaganda campaigns of Soviet Realism and Mao's 'Cultural Revolution'. Brecht too was criticized for his purported artistic and political support for the Stalinist-controlled Socialist Unity Party (SED) of Germany in the last years of his life living in East Berlin.

Even in a 'post-Marxist' context, however, the Marxist concept of dialectics remains apposite due to its critical relationship to the past. Of key interest to early dialecticians including Heraclitus, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle as for later theorizations of dialectics by Hegel, Marx and Jean-Paul Sartre, is the way that previously held 'truths' are revised through the juxtapositioning of a thing against its opposite. Hegel uses dialectics to interrogate the smallest units of logical reasoning, 'being' and 'nothing', in order to show, through logic, that dialectics are the motor force that propels things into states of 'becoming'.

While I cannot cover the complexities of these early dialectical formations and their iterations throughout the history of both Western and Eastern philosophy, I will read dialectics through Marx's theory of historical materialism and its commentators. I focus on historical materialism and its critique of capitalism because, like Marx and Brecht, we continue to live under a powerful and ubiquitous capitalist system and struggle with its contradictions. Today capitalism acts on a global scale and its more highly developed form is often referred to as 'late capitalism', 'multinational capitalism', 'global capitalism' or 'post-industrial capitalism'. Given the persistence and growth of capitalism into the twenty-first century, Marx and Brecht's explorations of conflict and contradiction arising from social, political and economic inequalities remain pertinent to our contemporary context.

In *Late Marxism: Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* Fredric Jameson argues that thinking in contradictions and sensing dialectical tensions is exactly what late capitalism and its totalizing positivist ideology have suppressed from consciousness (1990, 5). Similarly, Bertell Ollman and Tony Smith describe contemporary society as predominantly undialectical:

> With its frequent upheavals of all kinds, no society requires dialectics as much, but it is also true that with its reified social forms and constantly expanding consciousness industry no society makes it so difficult for its inhabitants to think dialectically. (2008, 4)

Ollman claims that capitalism today is more complex, faster growing and more interactive than at any other period in history and its ability to keep people from seeing its ideological underpinnings and alternatives has never been so effective (2003, 11). Dialectics are useful today because they allow the study of a complex and increasingly interconnected world and market systems composed of mutually dependent processes in constant flux. Brecht's emphasis on dialectics in theatre as the basis for a revolution in consciousness or sceptical thinking, rather than a revolution of barricade building, is therefore amenable to the present 'post-political' epoch.

Ollman and Smith demonstrate how Marx's use of the term 'dialectics' can be read in a number of different ways. They offer four key categories by which to pinpoint its multilayered usage. Dialectics are: *(a) a way of thinking; (b) a means by which to characterize society; (c) a method for investigating reality; (d) a mode for conveying such a reality* (Ollman and Smith 2008, 4). Their classification takes into account the reflexive problem of the dialectic as both theory and practice: methodology and sociological phenomenon. Jameson explains the circular logic of a dialectical view of reality when he writes:

> Perhaps, if Marxism is to be identified as a unity of theory and practice, the same needs to be said about the dialectic, namely, that it will always be its own illustration or example; that any exercise of it will already be its own presentation; that, as Sartre put it, you do not think dialectically without saying so and calling it that: all of which is to say that you have to be grappling with a dialectical reality already in order to be able to show what the dialectic is. (2009, 50)

Since dialectics assume both theory and practice simultaneously, this book, in its invocation of dialectics, anticipates its case studies. Brecht and the playwrights and theatremakers considered in the following chapters grapple reflexively or performatively to represent a 'dialectical reality' using dialectical aesthetics. As the following chapters unfold, the circular logic of dialectics as its own illustration will become apparent as the dialectical aesthetics of the chosen contemporary anti-war plays represent what the playwrights and theatremakers see as dialectical lived realities. Before I can jump forward to these illustrations of the dialectic at work, however, it is necessary to examine the history of Marxist and Brechtian dialectics and their workings.

## Marx and Dialectics

Marx's early writings through to *Capital: Critique of Political Economy* seek to unmask the exploitative relations between the capitalist and labouring classes by revealing the contradictions of the seemingly 'natural' and 'fixed' capitalist social and economic order. Marx uses a dialectical method, which is to say, one that builds upon the prior rationalizations of capitalism and its influence on social structures by sociologists and economists such as Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Adam Smith, to denaturalize existing economic theories. In particular, he points out the flaws in the presuppositions of these thinkers and the logic of their argumentation. Marx's dialectical 'method for investigating reality' (to return to Ollman and Smith's categories) uses contradiction and irony to demonstrate the problematic assumptions of classical economics. He historicizes social and economic conditions to show that the unique relations of production under capitalism are part of an ever-changing set of processes.

One of Marx's tools for breaking down the presuppositions of classical economists is what he calls 'abstraction'. Abstraction is the breaking up of capitalism into its component parts to make its interrogation more manageable. Marx examines each part of the historical development of capitalism, beginning with the 'commodity', to examine how labour relations and ownership over the means of production alter with the historical development of industrial capitalism. The historical narrative that he constructs takes into account concurrent social, political, technological and cultural development such as colonial expansion or the increased speed of communication and travel. As a dialectical tool, abstraction requires critical thinking and scepticism towards the surface appearance of reality.

Marx uses abstraction as a means to reject universalizing or generalizing characterizations of society. Instead, he shows how banal, everyday behaviour and social attitudes can have broad-reaching economic, social and political effects. In linking the universal to the particular, Marx is particularly interested in the way in which the external appearance of a vast and expanding capitalist system disguises and naturalizes social inequalities on a day to day basis. He writes in *Capital: Volume III*:

> The finished configuration of economic relations, as these are visible on the surface, in their actual existence, and therefore also in the notions with which the bearers and agents of these relations seek to gain an understanding of them, is very different from the configuration of their inner core,

> which is essential but concealed, and the concept corresponding to it. It is in fact the very reverse and antithesis of this. (Marx 1991, 311)

The 'inner core' of capitalism conceals its reliance on and deliberate perpetuation of unequal access between different social classes to ownership over the means of production. Marx reveals a discrepancy between the surface appearance of nineteenth-century capitalism and its 'concealed' 'inner core' using a dialectical method which shows up the tension between inner essence and outer reality.

Marx sees contradiction everywhere. He writes: 'in capitalism everything seems and in fact is contradictory' (1863, np). While capitalist ideology attempts to hide these contradictions, dialectics, which by definition characterizes the world in contradictions, expose the ways in which such antinomies are concealed in everyday life under capitalism. For Marx, 'The Roman slave was held by chains; the wage-labourer is bound to his owner by invisible threads' (1990, 719). In order to reveal these 'invisible threads' or the imperceptible contradictions that exist within and between things, people and processes, Marx employs a dialectical methodology that compares existing economic relations to those in the past.

Marx revels in contradictions to such an extent that he draws them into his own language and the methodology of his argument. In the case of abstraction, he uses the term not only to describe his working method for breaking down the presuppositions of the classical economists, but also to describe the ways in which capitalism objectifies and alienates the worker from her work and the objects produced from that work. Marx uses the term abstraction to describe the negative effects of capitalism on the labouring classes. Yet he also turns abstraction into a dialectical instrument, using it to describe the sinister and hidden effects of capitalism and to dispel some of capitalism's mythologies. This kind of detournement of language is key to his dialectical methodology.

In celebrating contradiction, Marx is responding to the way in which capitalism makes relations *appear* uncontradictory and thus undialectical. The problem with an ideology that presents as undialectical is that it makes things seem 'intrinsic', 'natural' or 'fixed'. As such, it makes existing social relations seem immutable and frames capitalism as the end point of all human development. As György Lukács writes: 'we need the dialectical method to puncture the social illusion so produced and help us to glimpse the reality lying underneath it' (1971, 5–6). Returning to the circular logic of dialectics and Ollman and Smith's categories, dialectics is,

for Marx and Lukács, a 'method for investigating reality' that also shows that reality as part of a dialectical chain of events.

More than showing how social relations under capitalism are contradictory and antagonistic to the welfare of the working-class majority, in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital* Marx accounts for the structure and dynamics of the capitalist system using a dialectical reasoning. Through historicization and abstraction Marx shows that social processes not only conceal an immanent dialectical logic, but that dialectics can be the basis of a methodology for conveying this internal dynamic. Furthermore, by applying a dialectical reasoning and analysis to the capitalist system, Marx hopes to influence others, particularly the proletarian class, to view the system with a similarly critical eye, that is, to think dialectically.

In *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and *The Science of Logic* (1812–16) Hegel traces the development of human thought as a dialectical process (1977; 2015). Inspired by Hegel's methodology, Marx develops an historical model of mankind using a rational scientific logic. However, whereas Hegel focuses on human consciousness driven by contradiction, Marx demonstrates that human consciousness is anchored in history and shaped by the social and economic conditions into which people are born. Marx describes the premise of historical materialism in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* when he writes: 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness' (1975b, 425).

Lukács, one of Marx's most significant interpreters and a contemporary of Brecht, highlights the importance of consciousness for underpinning Marxist revolutionary praxis. In *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács explains that the fate of the Marxist revolution depends on 'ideological maturity', the class consciousness of the proletariat. Consciousness is the '*decisive step*' that can only be arrived at through dialectical thinking (original emphasis) (Lukács 1971, 70). Importantly for Marx, the dynamic nature of the dialectic enables humans to view themselves as both victims and potential agents of change, both objects and subjects simultaneously (Ollman 2003, 20). Thus, the dialectic brings material conditions and consciousness together. It becomes more than a model of human history by highlighting the 'way of thinking' required for workers to see themselves as exploited, a necessary precursor to the action of resisting the dehumanizing and exploitative working conditions under capitalism.

Following Hegel and Marx, dialectics form the basis of a *strategic* operation into how humans see and understand 'reality'. In the way that they

describe the *process* of arriving at ideological maturity, dialectics are not only a method for investigating reality but also the ideal way of thinking. They are both the *means* and tend towards a desirable *end* point that is without conclusion, an ongoing process of sceptical transformation through contradiction. It is this multiple practical and strategic element of Marxist dialectics that becomes vital for Brecht's use of dialectics as both characteristic of the social relations in which he lives and as a dramaturgical strategy for turning spectators into dialecticians.

Yet, more than a way of understanding exploitation or even thinking dialectically, Marxist dialectics offer a model for political agency and revolutionary action. In the postface to the second edition of *Capital: Volume I*, Marx describes the problems and advantages of Hegelian dialectics:

> In its mystified [Hegelian] form, the dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and glorify what exists. In its rational form it is a scandal and an abomination to the bourgeoisie and its doctrinaire spokesmen, because it includes in its positive understanding of what exists a simultaneous recognition of its negation, its inevitable destruction; because it regards every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well; and because it does not let itself be impressed by anything, being in its very essence critical and revolutionary. (1990, 103)

In Marx's description of the essence of dialectics as 'critical and revolutionary' he links the core of dialectics and critical thinking to *revolutionary praxis*. In so doing, Marx advances dialectics beyond their earlier abstract philosophical models and claims they can serve a real world function. Marx's enthusiasm for the applied possibilities of dialectics paves the way for practically minded thinkers like Brecht to take up the concept.

Despite his scepticism towards dialectics as reinforcing the status quo in its 'mystified' form, Marx thinks that the advantages of dialectics are strongest in their ability to depict historical time as fluid and transitory movement. He uses dialectics to restore a view of human historical development as processual by highlighting the relationship of the particular to the universal and the universal to the particular, a relationality that he claims is lost in the universalizing tendencies of capital (1973, 540). Lukács explains that the dialectic ensures that '*every phenomenon is recognized to be a process* … the facts are nothing but the parts, the *aspects* of the total process that have been broken off, artificially isolated and ossified' (original emphasis) (1971, 184). By viewing the particularity of these so-

called 'facts' in relation to the totality of the capitalist system, Marx shows how the present conditions that have developed over time to appear as natural and unchangeable circumstances, are in fact evolving phenomena in flux.

Given Marx's use of dialectics to characterize historical development, some Marxist scholars such as Eugene Lunn argue that dialectical thinking works towards its own redundancy in the less contradictory future of a Communist utopia (1982, 258). Others, however, contend that dialectics are *always* necessary to challenge the dominant ideology. As the Russian revolutionary leader Vladimir Ilyich Lenin points out: 'Antagonism and contradiction are not at all one and the same. Under socialism, the first will disappear, the second will remain' (in Mao 1967, 345). Lenin's distinction between antagonism and contradiction and the ongoing relevance of dialectical thinking in a post-capitalist world is useful for thinking about dialectics applied to anti-war theatre in a post-Marxist context.

## Brecht and Dialectics

Brecht's consideration of dialectics is evident in a project called 'On a dialectical drama' published in *Versuche I* in 1930. John Willett notes that it is not until 1956 that Brecht writes an essay called 'Dialectics in the Theatre', published posthumously in *Versuche 15* in 1959. In the essay he writes:

> An effort is now being made to move on from the epic theatre to the dialectical theatre. In our view and according to our intention the epic theatre's practice – and the whole idea – *were by no means undialectical.* Nor would a dialectical theatre succeed without the epic element. All the same we envisage a sizable transformation. (My emphasis) (Brecht 1964, 281)

It is clear that while Brecht does not want to abandon the foundations of epic theatre, he finds the connotations of the term 'epic' limiting and seeks a new terminology to better serve his 'intention', inviting a reconsideration of epic theatre's strategies as dialectical. In this and his appendix to 'Short Organum for the Theatre', Brecht stresses that the development of a 'dialectical theatre' should not stand in opposition to epic theatre, rather he describes the concept of epic theatre as 'too slight and too vague for the kind of theatre intended; it needs an exacter definition and must achieve more' (1964, 276). Brecht's desire for theatre to

'achieve more' suggests a hope of creating an aesthetic that encourages spectators to think critically and sceptically about their social, political and economic conditions.

Willett attributes Brecht's preference for 'dialectical' over 'epic' theatre to the former's emphasis on contradiction and the changeability of society through a chain of conflicts (1967, 195). He claims that contradiction is important to Brecht who sees imperfection and inconsistency as an essential part of a society in motion (1967, 196). While contradiction is certainly important to Brecht's understanding of dialectics, Willett's emphasis on Brecht's use of contradiction overlooks the variety of ways that dialectics are applied to Brecht's inquiry into his society and the dramaturgical aesthetic he develops for the theatre.

The appendix to 'Short Organum for the Theatre' suggests that, for Brecht, the dialectic is more than a synonym for contradiction. In the notebook of definitions Brecht describes the 'dialectic' as 'the study [*Wissenschaft*] of the general laws of motion and development applying to nature, human society and thought' (1964, 246). This definition suggests that Brecht views the dialectic as more than merely descriptive of contradictory social patterns. Rather, he also sees the dialectic as a tool for interrogating the historical development of social structures. As in the writings of Marx, the dialectic becomes a methodology for Brecht that, rather than being applied to social and economic relations, is applied to *representations* of socio-economic relations. Brecht's use of the dialectic for thinking about representation encompasses an added layer of mediation between 'reality' and appearance as compared to Marx's use of the dialectic.

Brecht remarks that dialectical movement is suitable for examining and realistically representing the scientific age. He notes its particular suitability for the theatre given its potential to be amusing and entertaining:

> The theatre of the scientific age is in a position to make dialectics into a source of enjoyment. The unexpectedness of logically progressive or zigzag development, the instability of every circumstance, the joke of contradiction and so forth: all these are ways of enjoying the liveliness of men, things and processes, and they heighten both our capacity for life and our pleasure in it. (1964, 277)

Brecht's association of humour with contradictory behaviour highlights the pleasurable disruption of linear processes with satire and irony as useful tools for critiquing capitalism. Brecht's appreciation for 'the joke of

contradiction' shows that his ideological views are filtered through his artistic sensibilities.

Brecht's reference to a 'zigzag development' suggests a dialectical view of historical progress as non-logical, non-linear and capable of backwards, lateral and forward movement. This view of historical movement has long been expounded by Marxists including Friedrich Engels who writes: 'History moves often in leaps and bounds and in a zigzag line' (1859, 50) and Lenin's description of progress as:

> A development that repeats, as it were, stages that have already been passed, but repeats them in a different way, on a higher basis ('the negation of the negation'), a development, so to speak, that proceeds in spirals, not in a straight line; a development by leaps, catastrophes, and revolutions; 'breaks in continuity'; the transformation of quantity into quality. (1976, 374–5)

Borrowing from a vocabulary reminiscent of Engels and Lenin, Brecht's zigzagging dialectic suggests he was searching for an alternative visual model to the normative dramatic arc of 'realist' drama and its causal, deterministic logic. The zigzag structure not only breaks with the dominant realist form but also foreshadows a postmodern or postdramatic narrative organization. Furthermore, the zigzag pre-empts Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's conceptualization of the cultural flows of late capitalism as criss-crossing interconnections between rhizomatic, decentred, heterogeneous, laterally moving, non-hierarchical plateaus, and the arborescent, which is to say, vertical and hierarchical systems of Western knowledge (1994, 5).

Significantly for Brecht, the image of the dialectic as a zigzag highlights the precarity and unpredictability of historical development and social interactions. Brecht argues that forms of drama need to adjust to reflect the changing world just as, 'Petroleum resists the five act form; today's catastrophes do not progress in a straight line but in cyclical crises' (1964, 30). Here Brecht pre-empts the significant role that petroleum plays in the economic, political and social relations of the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond. In suggesting that a play about petroleum would be non-linear, Brecht foreshadows his own updating. He presciently describes a form suitable to what we now know to be the complexities of petroleum-based power relations and cyclical wars fought after his lifetime and the challenges of representing such global crises. As early as the 1940s, Brecht recognizes that epic theatre will eventually require some revisions. The globally industrialized world in which we now find

ourselves needs theatrical forms that can show how conflict and power struggles over petroleum also fuel widespread class-based social, economic and political inequalities and injustices.

Throughout his working life, Brechtian aesthetics changed to suit the complex and developing social and political realities of his epoch. Brecht describes the need for experimentation with dramatic form when he writes: 'The formal difficulties are enormous; I have constantly to construct new models … I make these models because I wish to represent reality (in Adorno et al. 2007, 71). For Brecht, the traditional forms of theatre that dominated the German stages of his time, particularly the structures of Aristotelian drama based on mimesis, the unities of time, place and action, and its derivatives in 'naturalist' or 'realist' drama, did not capture most people's experience of reality.

Brecht is critical of traditional 'realism' because it reflects and reaffirms the dominant class system, portraying the normative elements of bourgeois life as 'natural' and 'inevitable' (1964, 151). He sees such theatre as discouraging critical or sceptical reflection and turning spectators into passive consumers. Brecht wants to redefine 'realism' as a political and ideological end whose formal means are variable according to the dictates of time and place. Yet, Brecht does not want to abandon mimetic forms altogether. He argues that realist art must be both concrete and abstract. In a diary entry from 1941 Brecht clearly sets out his intent to use the two forms relationally:

> It must never be forgotten that *non-Aristotelian theatre* is only *one* form of theatre; it furthers specific social aims and has no claims to monopoly as far as the theatre in general is concerned. I myself can use both *Aristotelian* and *non-Aristotelian* theatre in certain productions. (Original emphasis) (1964, 135)

Brecht is not adverse to empathy and self-identification, rather he objects to the way that mimetic theatrical forms use it indiscriminately. Meg Mumford explains that for Brecht the real material conditions or 'concrete reality' must be visible through the use of mimetic forms so that the process of abstraction can refer back to recognizable conditions (2001, 156). Consequently, Brecht's dramaturgy does not abandon naturalist acting styles or realist settings completely. Instead, he uses elements of the realist aesthetic to give his plays a point of reference for destabilizing the realities he depicts through a stylization and intensification of the 'natural'.

Mumford argues that the tension between the abstract and the concrete creates a 'dialectical relationship', where the epic elements are juxtaposed against the dramatic ones and the analytical against the emotional (2009, 105). This tension, embedded at the level of the formal structure and organization of Brecht's plays, provides a means by which to present society and historical development as dialectical and contradictory.

## Brecht and Marxism

Brecht's aesthetic is well understood to share the Marxist desire to expose capitalist ideology and the socio-economic conditions that it generates, using a dramaturgical form modelled on Hegelian-inflected Marxist dialectics (Willett 1967; Barthes 1977; Wekwerth 2011). However, Brecht's relationship to the Communist Parties and revolutionary actions of his time is contentious. Neither a KPD member, nor actively involved with the League of Proletarian Writers, Brecht was publicly criticized by Marxist thinkers and Party members such as Theodor W. Adorno and Friedrich Wolf. Brecht's interest in dialectics is traceable to his encounters with the works of Marx in the mid-1920s and Hegel in the 1930s (Willett 1984, 180–1; Selfe 2010).[1] Brecht studies *Capital* in 1926 and, according to Lunn, 'Brecht's own view of science was developed in terms of Marx's practice of a critical, dialectical, and historical method' (1982, 114). Brecht also develops an understanding of Marxist and Hegelian dialectics through attending reading groups in the 1920s and 1930s led by his 'Marxist Teacher' and KPD dissident Karl Korsch as well as through influential Marxist friends including Fritz Sternberg, Hanz Eisler, Ruth Berlau (Red Ruth), Margarete Steffin and Walter Benjamin.

After World War Two, Brecht openly declares his intention to transform theatre as part of the reconstruction of post-Nazi Germany (Brecht 1964, 240). This increased urgency to use theatre as a tool for political intervention and change in the post-war period can be explained by Brecht's life experiences of being forced to flee the Nazis, Stalin, McCarthy and the HUAC trials in America (where he was called upon to testify against Communists), as well as living in precarious East Berlin after World War Two. In 1954, Brecht writes that Chinese Communist Chairman Mao's essay 'On Contradiction' was the most important text he read that year. In it, Mao claims that materialist dialectics are 'the eradication of dogmatist thinking' and stresses the importance of the abstracted element's particularity and its relationship to the universal (1967, 312). He calls

the relation between absoluteness and relativity 'the quintessence of the problem of contradiction in things; failure to understand it is tantamount to abandoning dialectics' (1967, 331). Brecht's enthusiasm for Mao can be explained by the fact that he did not live long enough to learn about the atrocities committed during the Cultural Revolution and the hypocrisy of Mao's theoretical writings. Yet, Brecht's interest in the relationship between the essence and the universal as the 'quintessence of dialectics' explains why Mao's text appealed to and coincided with Brecht's rethinking of epic theatre as dialectical.

Although Brecht enjoyed support and generous funding from the KPD while living in East Berlin in the 1950s, he always maintained his Swiss bank account, his Austrian passport and a West German publisher in case he fell out of favour and needed to flee Germany again. Brecht's pragmatism has led Lunn to describe him as a Leninist due to his 'cunning practicality', and a 'critically-minded' Marxist who condemns Stalin in his private correspondence but never publicly (1982, 132–3), and Barnett notes that 'Brecht's Marxism was neither dogmatic nor orthodox' (2015, 19). Such descriptions point towards Brecht's aversion to being co-opted on Soviet terms. Taking this one step further it seems that Brecht's emphasis on rethinking epic theatre as a dialectical practice is linked to his heightened scepticism towards *all* political systems in the latter part of his life, including Stalinism, though with a more sanguine view of Mao's early leadership over the People's Republic of China. Brecht's emphasis on the dialectical element in epic theatre seemed to offer him the opportunity to critique dogma in all its ideological shapes without having to compromise his personal safety in East Berlin by being openly critical of the SED.

Brecht's response to the East Berlin workers' strikes on 17 June 1953 highlighted the contradiction between the generous Soviet funding Brecht received as a GDR playwright and director and the unsatisfactory realities of workers' conditions and wages in East Berlin. In response to the June strikes, Brecht wrote a letter to the SED that became controversial when one sentence expressing his allegiance to the Party (and implicit support for its military suppression of the strike) was taken out of context and used as Party propaganda. Brecht biographer John Fuegi criticizes Brecht's attendance at the strikes, calling Brecht a spectator rather than participator. Fuegi also describes a meeting at the Berliner Ensemble in which Brecht emphasized the need for discussions between the government and the workers (1994, 544). Yet Fuegi's criticism of Brecht stands in contradistinction to the poem 'The Solution', written not long after

the strikes, in which Brecht makes the ironic suggestion that in the face of protest and disagreement the government should 'dissolve the people / And elect another?' (1976, 440). Brecht's controversial involvement in the strikes highlights his belief in political activism through his role as an artist, in this case a poet, mocking the political processes that had proved so inadequate in his lifetime.

Although Brecht was publicly ambiguous in his attitudes towards the living Communist experiments and interpretations of Marxism of his day, his dramatic aesthetics drew from and responded to Marx's theoretical ideas of historical materialism. Since Marx's key subject matter was social relations, it is unsurprising that Brecht found historical materialism useful for thinking about theatrical aesthetics since theatre is a site of material 'doing' and drama is the representation of relations between individuals and their world.

Brecht's often quoted comment from his 1928 notebooks: 'When I read Marx's *Capital*, I understood my plays' (in Haug 2007, 145) indicates that Brecht wanted to portray himself as using Marx's writings to better understand art rather than using art as a vehicle for a Marxist political agenda. Director Manfred Wekwerth goes so far as to argue:

> So Brecht was not interested – contrary to all rumours – in making theatre more academic, or more political; rather, he wanted to make more theatre. More specifically, he wanted to return to great theatre – with the help of scholarship and politics. He wanted to return to enjoyment. (2011, 5)

While this emphasis on enjoyment and pleasurable learning was certainly very important to Brecht, Wekwerth's idea that Brecht only wanted to make 'great theatre' with little intellectual interest in politics and social change seems far less convincing given Brecht's writings from the 1930s onwards.

In an undated draft of an essay entitled the 'Special characteristics of the Berliner Ensemble', Brecht sets out how the theatre should incorporate and reflect a Marxist world view. In the essay Brecht claims that the theatre must be realistic and representative of the collective life of people, that human nature must be shown as changeable, that theatrical representations must be dialectical-materialist in character and that dialectical materialism be brought to consciousness in the realm of art and made pleasurable (Brooker 1988, 24). Brecht's desire to show the changeability of human consciousness through theatre suggests that he believes that

applying dialectics to drama might further the Marxist project by altering spectator consciousness and inciting a desire to act.

This is confirmed in correspondence between Korsch and Brecht in which Brecht describes dialectics as 'a coherent sequence of intelligible methods which allows the dissolution of certain rigid ideas and the assertion of praxis against prevailing ideologies' (in Haug 2007, 156). In this definition, it is clear that Brecht wants to use the dialectic as a tool for dissolving what is 'natural' in the existing capitalist system. Furthermore, his allusion to praxis points to his belief, shared with Marx, that dialectics could be a potential catalyst for consciousness-raising and practical revolutionary action. Brecht's interest in overcoming 'rigid ideas' also suggests that he believes that a change in spectator consciousness might have a bearing on creating a different kind of society, what Lukács would call the '*decisive step*'.

Dialectics prove useful to Brecht's view of reality, which he sees as processes of dynamic motion. This is clear when Brecht writes: 'Reality is not only everything which is, but everything which is becoming. It's a process. It proceeds in contradictions. If it is not perceived in its contradictory character it is not perceived at all' (in Haug 2007, 153). This description of contradiction as a process in flux through his choice of the word 'proceeds' suggests that, similar to Marx, Brecht thinks that conflict propels society to develop and change. The idea of reality as contradictory is precisely what conventional dramatic realism seeks to smooth over and disguise. Thus, Brecht finds dialectics a useful alternative form for representing his experience of reality because they highlight disharmony, inconsistency and flux.

For Jameson it is not only dialectics that influence Brecht, Brecht also offers practical models for how to think dialectically. Jameson claims that Brecht's greatest contribution to dialectical thinking is his focus on contradiction. He writes:

> the emphasis on contradiction as such, and we may honour Brecht for his insistence on this requirement, and for his lesson, in a great variety of contexts and forms, that dialectical thinking begins with the contradiction, that it means finding the inevitable contradiction at the heart of things and seeing and reconstructing them in terms of contradictions, or (if you prefer) that the various forms of non-dialectical thinking can always be identified as so many strategies for containing, repressing, or naturalizing contradictions as such. (2008, 120)

Jameson sees Brecht's depictions of contradictions as a Marxist 'lesson' that have the greatest potential of provoking dialectical thinking among spectators. By exposing contradiction in and through dramaturgical techniques, Brecht shows spectators that by thinking dialectically, one can resist identifying with the conditions that naturalize capitalism.

Brecht creates characters and acting techniques that encourage actors to self-consciously embody and perform contradictions. Most famously, he develops the strategy of 'fixing the Not-But', a technique in which actors show how a character behaves in one way and, equally, that she might have behaved in the opposite way (1964, 137). Fixing the Not-But shows spectators the range of possibilities available to a character and the influence of their social conditions on their choices. Just as Marx sees contradiction in everything, fixing the Not-But allows spectators to glimpse the negative in every positive action, theoretically making spectators better equipped to view the influence of ideology on decision-making.

In such contradictions we begin to glimpse what Lenin in his article fragment 'On the question of dialectics' describes as the dialectic's 'unity of opposites'. The fact that Brecht paraphrases this very significant fragment in his own writings shows his interest in the dialectic as a 'unity of opposites'. Some of the central characters in Brecht's plays embody such antinomy. For example, the character of Shen Te/Shui Ta from *The Good Person of Szechuan* chooses to hide her feminine traits of generosity and kindness in order to make a profit from her business under the guise of the ruthless, masculine Shui Ta. Similarly, the two-faced Puntila from *Mr Puntila and his Man Matti* is generous and loving when drunk and a ruthless businessman when sober. In *Life of Galileo*, Galileo is both a courageous scientific thinker and a coward. Likewise, Mother Courage from *Mother Courage and Her Children* is a union of opposites. Her name signifies her paradoxical behaviour since she earned it after running through gunfire to save the cart from which she sells her wares to enable herself and her family to survive during the Thirty Years War. Yet, it is this same 'courage' to trade in the midst of a war zone that eventually brings about the death of all of her children.

All these Brechtian characters are subjects-in-process or subjects-in-becoming because they embody ideological struggle within capitalist contexts. They show incompatible contradictions of generosity and self-interestedness. Although many of Brecht's characters appear ruthless, the occasional contradictions in their behaviour also show the possibility

of things being otherwise under what Marx and Brecht would see as the less antagonistic socio-economic conditions of a post-capitalist society. Today it is difficult to share Brecht's optimism with regards to the possibility of revolutionary action or even to envisage a world after capitalism. Yet, the value of provoking spectators to see how social conditions have arisen and how such conditions might be altered retains much subversive potential.

## *Verfremdungseffekt*, Historicization and Dialectics

The Marxist project of unveiling what lies beneath the surface appearance of reality is most evident in Brecht's dramaturgical technique of *Verfremdungseffekt*. *Verfremdungseffekt*, translated as estrangement or defamiliarization, is designed to make what is ordinary and familiar into something strange (Willett 1967, 177). Unlike traditional 'realism' which smooths over contradictions, *Verfremdungseffekt* reveals the jagged edges and inconsistencies of human interactions and psychology.

Brecht acknowledges that the technique of *Verfremdungseffekt* is developed out of the scientific method of historical materialism and taken from Marx when he writes in the 'Short Organum for the Theatre':

> This technique [*Veffekt*] allows the theatre to make use in its representations of the new social scientific method known as dialectical materialism. In order to unearth society's laws of motion this method treats social situations as processes, and traces out all their inconsistencies. It regards nothing as existing except in so far as it changes, in other words is in disharmony with itself. (1964, 193)

Brecht's description of *Verfremdungseffekt* suggests that he is not merely interpreting the world but looking for ways to change it by altering how it is ordinarily perceived. Just as Marx places socio-economic processes under the microscope such as the 'commodity' or 'money' in order to examine their history, pull them apart and expose their inconsistencies, *Verfremdungseffekt* reveals social relations or objects in a new and strange light. Similar to Marx, this is predominantly done by historicizing ideas, characters' behaviour and events.

Brecht's coining of the term *Verfremdungseffekt* is influenced by Marx's use of the terms '*Entäusserung*' and '*Entfremdung*', which are often translated into English as 'alienation' and 'estrangement' respectively.

In Marx's writings, these terms are used most frequently to describe the worker as separated from the means of capitalist production and forced to sell their labour power for the benefit of the capitalist. Marx uses these terms to explain how the structure of capitalism renders the worker dehumanized, reified and alienated from the world, their work and themselves. As Marx writes in the section on 'Estranged Labour' in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)*:

> the object that labour produces, its product, stands opposed to it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer. The product of labour is labour embodied and made material in an object, it is the *objectification* of labour. The realization of labour is its objectification. In the sphere of political economy this realization of labour appears as a *loss of reality* for the worker, objectification as *loss of and bondage to the object*, *and* appropriation as *estrangement*, *as alienation*. (Original emphases) (1975a, 324)

The descriptions of 'estrangement' and 'alienation' that Marx uses to describe the objectified wage-labouring subject within a capitalist society are further developed later in *Capital* when he writes:

> the worker always leaves the process in the same state as he entered it – a personal source of wealth, but deprived of any means of making that wealth a reality for himself. Since, before he enters the process, his own labour has already been alienated [*entfremdet*] from him, appropriated by the capitalist, and incorporated with capital, it now, in the course of the process, constantly objectifies itself so that it becomes a product alien to him [*fremder Produkt*]. (1990, 716)

In thinking about epic theatre, Brecht initially uses the Hegelian and Marxist term *Entfremdung* in an essay entitled 'Theatre for Pleasure or Theatre for Instruction' (of which the date is contested but thought to be around 1936) and in a short note called 'Episches, Theater, Entfremdung' in *Schriften zum Theater 3* (1964, 76). In the latter of these essays Brecht notes the need for any situation to be 'alienated' if it is to be seen within a given socio-historical context (1964, 76–7). As noted earlier, despite Marx's negative portrayal of the effects of capitalism's *Entfremdung*, he also suggests in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)* that *Entfremdung* is a useful byproduct of capitalist estrangement because it enables workers to view their exploited conditions with an objective eye. It might be said then that Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* is the means by which

to achieve this objective stance and restore human dignity in a dehumanizing capitalist environment.

German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch notes a similar link between the Marxist and Brechtian terms of alienation when he writes that, for Brecht, *Verfremdung* is used to overcome the Marxist idea of *Entfremdung* (in Lunn 1982, 115). Mumford also confirms this position when she writes: 'Far from wishing to plunge spectators into a state of alienation, Brecht sought to challenge a condition of alienation through a theatre of empowering observation' (2009, 62). This contradictory mode that uses estrangement in order to combat estrangement, or *Verfremdung* to counteract *Entfremdung*, shows the dialectical nature of these Hegelian, Marxist and Brechtian terms.

In epic theatre, *Verfremdungseffekte* are strategies that destabilize the fixity of the everyday and interrupt the habits that make images, words or concepts appear universal, obvious, inevitable and unchangeable. *Verfremdungseffekt* removes the mask that conceals bourgeois attitudes, values and power structures by showing them to be historical constructs rather than given and unalterable conditions. As such, *Verfremdungseffekt* makes the dialectical nature of reality more apparent. Brecht's self-conscious technique of *Verfremdungseffekt* shows the stage world as a constructed, signifying system. If the audience can recognize the stage as an artificial configuration then it is Brecht's (perhaps overly optimistic) hope that they can equally notice the ideologically constructed elements in the real-world systems outside the theatre. Rancière might describe the effect of this recognition as 'building new relationships between reality and appearance' (2010, 141).

In an *Arbeitsjournal* entry from late 1940, Brecht makes an even more explicit correlation between *Verfremdungseffekt* and dialectics. He writes:

> It is clear that a theatre of *Verfremdung* is a dialectical theatre. Yet I previously saw no possibility of explaining this theatre through the application of dialectical concepts: it would be easier for people to understand dialectics from a *Verfremdungs* theatre than a *Verfremdungs* theatre from dialectics … since without recognizing its dialectical nature reality is simply not open to control. The V-effect makes this dialectical nature apparent, that is its task. (In Brooker 1988, 212)

Thus Brecht, in wanting to make a dialectical world view more accessible and comprehensible to spectators, finds *Verfremdung* a useful tool with which to make the contradictory flows of reality most apparent.

Brecht develops strategies that defamiliarize the illusion of the stage world and the subjects it represents by creating discontinuities in the development of the narrative. Brechtian scholar David Barnett explains that Brecht's strategies for disrupting the flow of the play expose the means through which theatre engages with representation and reveal the ideological structures that inform the process of theatre-making itself (2006, 15). Drawing attention to the process of theatrical development is dialectical because it alludes to what is often concealed in a theatre production – the rehearsal time and the decisions made in this period. By reminding spectators of the contingent possibilities that might have created an alternative to the final product, Brecht estranges the events and subjects depicted in his plays and the artistic medium through which they are represented. This self-conscious mode of representation is developed and expanded in the heightened and often ironic reflexivity of postmodern or postdramatic theatre.

Jameson usefully explains that *Verfremdungseffekt* dissolves what history has solidified into 'fact', allowing for a process of reconstruction to take its place (1998, 47). As he describes it:

> To make something look strange, to make us look at it with new eyes, implies the antecedence of a general familiarity, of a habit which prevents us from really looking at a thing, a kind of perceptual numbness. (1998, 39)

The 'perceptual numbness' of habit can lead to political apathy. *Verfremdungseffekt*, by contrast, encourages spectators to take a dialectical approach to viewing reality, by seeing it 'with new eyes'. Through estranging what is habitual, *Verfremdungseffekt* holds together opposites in a deliberately uncomfortable tension without the neat or comforting resolution of realist or didactic drama. Furthering his view of Brecht's application of Marxist dialectics as flux and change, Jameson defines *Verfremdung* as the staging of what is natural and immutable revealed to be historical and an object of revolutionary change (in Adorno et al. 2007, 206). By pointing out the potential for revolutionary movement, Jameson suggests that *Verfremdungseffekte* cannot only release spectators from the myopia of habitual social conditioning but also have a practical Marxist application beyond the theatre. The rhetoric justifying the present-day invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine makes these incursions seem 'natural' and 'immutable' in a way that makes the need for revolutionary praxis all the more urgent.

## *Gestus* and Abstraction

Understanding Marx's use of dialectics as a methodology for sociological and economic inquiry, Brecht applies Marxist abstraction – the breaking down of the totalizing system into smaller components – to his dramaturgy in two key ways. Brecht's plays are comprised of short scenes or what he calls 'episodes'. These scenes are designed to deny spectators causal plot-driven narratives and the teleological movement of realist drama that suggests a predetermined or inevitable social outcome. Brecht describes each episode as its own independent play within a play (1964, 201), encouraging spectators to focus on the moment at hand and de-emphasizing the importance of plot progression. These independent scenes, abstracted from the whole of the play and geared towards creating *Verfremdungseffekte*, allow spectators to better recognize the contradictions that underpin society more broadly. They do this by highlighting the particular in the universal (each scene within the play's entirety) and the universal within the particular (the totality of the play's themes and tropes as they appear within the individual scenes).

Brecht develops the strategy of *gestus* to further abstract his episodic structure. In the essay 'In Dialectical Drama', he describes *gestus* as 'precisely the dialectical element that puts the theatrical in the dramatic' (in Brooker 1988, 43), by which he means the stylized form of acting that sets his aesthetic apart from the unbroken flows of realist drama. Brecht defines *gestus* as follows:

> The realm of attitudes adopted by the characters towards one another is what we call the realm of gest. Physical attitude, tone of voice and facial expression are all determined by a social gest: the characters are cursing, flattering, instructing one another, and so on. (1964, 198)

Building on the presentational acting Brecht saw in the work of Peking Opera star Mei Lanfang, Brecht explains that *gestus* can occur in words or actions that show the 'particular attitude adopted by the speaker towards other men' (1964, 104). He emphasizes the importance of the broader set of social circumstances that inform a *gest*, linking the particular to the historical. He offers the example of Nazi goose-stepping which, performed as an isolated movement, is comedic or carnivalesque. The goose-step only adopts its fascist significance when the actor goose-steps over corpses (1964, 105). The *gestus* of goose-stepping over dead bodies brings

the action of high-legged marching into tension with the victims of the concentration camps in the Holocaust. Hence, the seemingly innocuous, over-exaggerated style of marching is historicized and contextualized.

Yet, as Brecht explains, *gestus* is more than an isolated bodily gesture, rather, it can be expressed in any intersubjective behaviour, a flexibility in the device that makes it amenable to adaptation in contemporary theatre. *Gestic* language, for example, reveals an overall stance of a character's attitude. Brecht describes an actor's *gestic* speech patterns:

> He developed a manner of speaking and using language which was stylized and natural all at once. He achieved the combination by paying attention to the stances that underlay the sentences: only turning stances in sentences, only writing those sentences through which stances could show through. He called this a *gestisch* or gestural language, as it was simply an expression of human gestures. (In Jameson 1998, 100)

By speaking in a stylized mode that also has naturalistic moments, the actor points to the attitude or stance underlying and informing the content of what she is saying. As such, she not only conveys information but also reveals her attitude towards it. Significantly, Brecht does not dictate what the *gestus* should be for each character. Instead, he challenges actors and directors to arrive at their own representational ideas. As such, Brecht does not presuppose a 'truth' to a character's relationship to her environment, rather the theorization of *gestus* provides a tool for actors and directors to work and think dialectically for themselves. Thus the dialectical tension between appearance and essence that Brecht provokes through the technique of *gestus* can also be used to make the ideological inflexions of language more transparent. In *gestus*, Brecht encapsulates the dialectic of absoluteness and relativity in a dramaturgical strategy that provides both actor and spectator with a means to investigate reality through abstraction. The abstraction of a fundamental attitude, ideological stance or *Haltung*, can show the relational dynamic that informs a character's behaviour and their social position within a broader socio-economic framework.

A form of *Verfremdungseffekt*, *gestus* historicizes a character's action, stance or mode of expression. It shows how the ideological, social and economic conditions of the past can influence the *gest* in the present. As such, *gestus* shows spectators that human behaviour is learned rather than innate. As Roland Barthes writes: 'the gesture bears the weight of history: its pregnancy brings together the past … the present … The pregnant moment is just this presence of absences' (1977, 73). The notion

of a 'presence of absences' suggests that *gestus* is a strategy that brings forth the object and its negation all at once, linking the particular to the universal in a dialectical interplay. Mumford also emphasizes the processual and historical dynamic in her description of *gestus* as 'the aesthetic gestural presentation of the socio-economic and ideological construction of human identity and interaction' (2001, 144). Working from the premise that identity is culturally constructed, Mumford's description of *gestus* as the interaction between the individual and society makes clearer the ways in which *gestus* can challenge social, economic and ideological doxies using a dialectical logic.

German philosopher Walter Benjamin highlights the relationship between *gestus* and dialectics when he describes *gestus* as a 'dialectic at a standstill' (1973, 3). He notes that *gestus* is an action enclosed in a clearly defined frame with a clear beginning, middle and end which distils the process of living in flux and confines it to a single moment (1973, 3). Brechtian scholar Sean Carney points out that Benjamin's reading of dialectical activity as static challenges traditional understandings of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics as a process of progressive change (2005, 48). However, both Marx and Hegel acknowledge the problem of grasping a concept that is constantly in motion. Marx recognizes the need to hold a dynamic process still in order to understand it when he writes: 'The *fixed* suppositions themselves become fluid in the further course of development. But only by holding them fast at the beginning is their development possible without confounding everything' (1973, 817). Marx suggests that by holding given doxies still they can be cracked open to reveal an internal dynamic. While Marx develops abstraction as a means to overcome this paradox, for Brecht, it is the development of *gestus* or the 'dialectic at a standstill'.

Similar to Benjamin, Willett claims that Brecht learns from Marx that through a contradiction or clash, the 'mechanism of an event' can be revealed in 'slow motion' (1967, 121). Using dialectical tools to make the dynamism of life slow down or become momentarily static, *gestus* enables Brecht to show the 'natural' conditions of capitalism as causal and contingent. As we will see in the following chapters, the slowing down of key moments in the invasions of Afghanistan, Iraq and Palestine, and the unequal social relations revealed in these decelerations, offer strategic tools for contemporary plays to critique and parody the less visible ideological and economic motivations underlying the twenty-first-century invasions in the Middle East.

## Spectatorship, Dogma and Defamiliarization in the Age of Late Capitalism

We have now seen the ways that Brecht used dialectical aesthetics in the techniques of *Verfremdungseffekt* and *gestus*, strategies that reveal the contradictions of socio-economic relations under capitalism. Yet, these techniques do more than characterize the societies he depicts as dialectical; rather, they attempt to influence spectators to adopt dialectics as 'a way of thinking' about the theatre and the world outside it. Since Brecht encourages audiences to adopt what he terms 'complex seeing' (Brecht 1964, 44) – when spectators are aware of the hidden structures of ideology in everyday society – dialectics provide an ideal model to aid spectators to see ideology at work in social relations in and outside the theatre.

Brecht describes Aristotelian-based drama and its emphasis on identification and catharsis as having a hypnotic effect on audiences, claiming that: 'its effect (if not its object) is to put us in an uncritical frame of mind' (in Willett 1967, 166). In the 'Short Organum for the Theatre' he goes on to describe its numbing effect on spectators when he writes: 'True, their eyes are open, but they stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear. They look at the stage as if in a trance' (1964, 187). Lunn points out that Brecht is particularly suspicious of aesthetics that incite a frenzied emotional or cathartic response because he witnessed the Nazi use of theatricality for nationalistic purposes to great and dire effect (1982, 140).

To counteract such forms of theatricality both in the theatre and in the world of politics, Brecht aims to develop dramaturgical techniques that encourage active spectatorship. Brecht wants spectators to adopt an 'attitude of criticism' (1964, 227) by altering the classical passive specular relationship of the audience to the stage. For Brecht, critical spectatorship should compel spectators into revolutionary action. As he optimistically proclaims: 'Criticism of society is ultimately revolution; there you have criticism taken to its logical conclusion and playing an active part' (1964, 146). Yet, as I have noted previously, the kind of revolution Brecht seems to believe his theatre can achieve might not be the violent overthrow of the capitalist class but rather a revolution of *consciousness*, motivated by the contradictions and iniquities of material conditions.

Brecht's desire to shift spectator consciousness from passivity to activity requires the strategies of epic theatre to be dialectical rather than dogmatic. This means that he avoids telling spectators how to think in the manner of agit-prop theatre, and, instead, directs them towards a position

of decision-making. It implies a rejection of the cause-effect assumption between the desired authorial 'message' of the artwork and its effect upon spectators, a naïve and limiting supposition that Rancière accuses both Brecht and some contemporary artists of upholding (2009, 8, 14). Yet, Brecht's interest in dialectics applied to the theatre suggests that he would celebrate Rancière's idea that 'from the schoolmaster the pupil learns something that the schoolmaster does not know himself' (2009, 14). Supporting this anti-dogmatic view of Brecht, Brechtian scholar Anthony Tatlow notes that the techniques of epic theatre avoid the imposition of fixed meaning when he writes: 'Brecht's critical dialectics does not supply models for emulation, presupposing closed totalities, but stimulation for intervention' (1980, 26). The 'stimulation of intervention' signals a non-determinate or determinable shift in spectator consciousness. It suggests that Brecht's techniques aim to propel spectators into action that might manifest in a variety of unknowable and unmeasurable ways in the civic sphere.

Louis Althusser also highlights the anti-dogmatic nature of Brechtian theatre. In *For Marx*, Althusser highlights the dialectical tension between consciousness and social conditions that drives the action of Brecht's plays. He links Brecht's dialectical method to the real-world praxis of spectators when he writes:

> If, on the contrary, the theatre's object is to destroy this intangible image, to set in motion the immobile, the eternal sphere of the illusory consciousness's mythical world, then the play is really the development, the production of a new consciousness in the spectator – incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompletion itself. (Althusser 1969, 151)

The open-endedness that Althusser recognizes in Brecht's plays invites spectators to begin the process of its 'completion' outside the theatre. While it does not assume that this action will always and necessarily occur, it does suggest that the unfinished and processual nature of a dialectical dramatic form invites spectators to continue the process set in motion by the issues raised in the performance, inspired by what Brecht would call its 'laws of motion' (1964, 246).

Writing almost a century later than Marx, in the wake and midst of the totalitarian regimes of Nazism and Stalinism, Brecht's theory of epic theatre uses the dialectic in ways that avoid showing history as teleological or human action as determinate. Responding to Hegel's interest in the dialectic propelled by time and historical progress, Marx writes: '*History*

does *nothing*, it "possesses *no* immense wealth," it "wages *no* battles." It is *man*, real, living man who does all that … history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims' (1956, np). Brecht adopts Marx's materialist position by designing epic or 'dialectical theatre' to show spectators, through his characters, that it is human agency that drives mobility or regression. The contradictory elements of the dialectic are used by Brecht to help bring about awareness of injustice or exploitation. The dialectic cannot in and of itself drive social change but, rather, can only inspire or stimulate change.

Although the twenty-first century might be in need of dialectical strategies, Brecht's techniques of *Verfremdungseffekt* are not seamlessly transferable across historical contexts. Jameson identifies a number of problems with using defamiliarization techniques in a late capitalist context. He claims that a capitalist system has the power to co-opt and defuse political art by transforming it into cultural commodities (in Adorno et al. 2007, 209). He writes:

> when modernism and its accompanying techniques of 'estrangement' have become the dominant style whereby the consumer is reconciled with capitalism, the habit of fragmentation itself needs to be 'estranged' and corrected by a more totalizing way of viewing phenomena. (Jameson in Adorno et al. 2007, 211)

Jameson's objection that Brecht's techniques have been co-opted by capitalism and become a fetishized product in the commodity market is true of productions that attempt to reproduce Brecht plays *à la lettre*. Since irony and defamiliarization are today frequently used in advertising, theatremakers and playwrights face an even greater challenge to estrange the relationship between market interests, cultural products and global conflict.

The Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekte* of discontinuity such as songs, placards, third-person acting and direct address are no longer effective estranging devices. Today Western consumers are habituated to these techniques which have become part of the ubiquitous style, another symptom of the saturation of mass mediatized culture and the use of ironic humour in marketing. Consequently, new plays must work harder to develop creative and novel strategies if they are to successfully defamiliarize the established norms and break habits. Moreover, these devices must be culturally specific, attuned to the fact that what is strange in one context might be famil-

iar in another. If audiences are to be made into critical thinkers the idea of *Verfremdungseffekt* remains useful but the forms it takes will require constant remaking and experimentation.

## The Post-Brechtian

Barnett has made important contributions to thinking through the reading and staging of Brechtian plays and dramaturgical techniques in a contemporary context. Barnett argues that some current political theatre might usefully be described as 'post-Brechtian'. Barnett pinpoints five key features of post-Brechtian drama that differentiate it from the original Brechtian forms: epistemological uncertainty; dialectics preserved such that Brechtian stagecraft is modified and not rejected; Brechtian emphasis on showing is retained; criticism of Brecht is limited to a criticism of his interpretive system; the stage is no longer concerned with interpretation but association (2011, 337). Barnett lists some directors that he considers 'post-Brechtian' including but not limited to: Benno Besson, Ariane Mnouchkine, Heiner Müller, Manfred Karge, and Matthias Langhoff, Frank Castorf and Robert Wilson (2011, 353). Of these directors he writes:

> Each developed different modes of performing the post-Brechtian, but at the heart of these methods, lay principles that insisted on the persistence of the social as a means of combating a loss of historical consciousness at a period in history when capitalism threatened to turn all experience into a perpetual present. (2011, 353)

The shared interest of these directors in reinvigorating historical consciousness in late capitalist societies shows the ongoing relevance of Marxist theory for restoring historical thinking to the 'perpetual present' of postmodern lived experience and its artistic representations.

The differences that Barnett describes between the Brechtian and the post-Brechtian are very insightful for thinking through the legacy of Brecht in contemporary anti-war theatre. Barnett's claim that 'criticism of Brecht is limited to a criticism of his interpretive system' suggests that the post-Brechtian responds to the new historical conditions of the post-political and post-Marxist historical moment. The 'epistemological uncertainty' that Barnett describes highlights a central tenet of the post-Marxist age with its loss of faith in salvational narratives of historical progress and

destabilization of previous categories of 'truth'. This 'epistemological uncertainty' is a symptom of late capitalism's 'loss of the real' that informs all the plays examined in the following chapters. Such 'epistemological uncertainty', while not unrelated to the alienation of modernist artists such as Brecht, marks a fundamental historical and contextual break with Brecht's epoch and world view.

Barnett also makes a link between Brecht, Theodor W. Adorno's negative dialectics and the post-Brechtian. He describes Adorno's negative dialectic as 'an unwieldy beast alive with contradiction and not harmony' (2014, 52). In this simplified description of negative dialectics, Barnett goes on to explain its relationship to post-Brechtian theatre:

> This 'rich' or 'unfiltered' dialectic [negative dialectics] offered post-Brechtian theatre an openness in dealing with its material on stage which was no longer to be treated in knowing categories but to be left uninterpreted for the audience. (2014, 52)

Barnett views the Brechtian dialectic as overly interpretive in its imposition of ideological meaning upon its spectators unlike Adorno's negative dialectic that describes the unpredictable clash of accumulating contradictory elements that will not resolve into a neat synthesis. In its refusal to offer a singular interpretation, the negative dialectic is described by Barnett as an 'awkward dialectic' (2014, 52) that, by contrast, makes all didactic art appear apolitical. Yet, as Anthony Tatlow notes, Brecht's understanding of dialectics seems to imply much of what Adorno would later theorize as negative dialectics:

> His [Brecht's] work was ultimately not far removed from the position of Adorno's negative dialectics … The characteristic withholding of conclusions in Brecht's theatre distinguishes it immediately from what I want to call positive dialectics and suggests their opposite. (Tatlow 1980, 23–4)

Given the open-ended conclusions to many of Brecht's plays and his insistence that his dramaturgical theories were in need of constant revision and updating, my definition of Brechtian dialectical aesthetics accommodates the qualities that Barnett describes as 'post-Brechtian' and includes the attributes of Adorno's negative dialectics. The dialectical nature of Brecht's epic theatre techniques imply the redundancy of aspects of his theories in new contexts. Furthermore, Brecht, who only lived to see the

beginning of the breakdown of the application of Marxist dialectics to politics in the Communist experiments of Eastern Europe and China, pre-empts the postmodern 'epistemological uncertainty' in his refusal to join the Communist Party and his interest in dialectics as driving contradictory and fluid socio-historical processes.

I define Brechtian dialectical aesthetics then as dramaturgical techniques that represent socio-historical and economic processes as dialectical and, therefore, as transitory and changeable. The Brechtian dialectical aesthetic necessarily includes Barnett's five key elements of what he calls the 'post-Brechtian'. In thinking about future applications of the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic, the need for updated and flexible interpretations of Brechtian 'dialectical theatre' is necessary to avoid turning the Brecht model into dogma. To do so would be to betray the dialectical core and ongoing contradictions at the heart of Brecht's dramaturgy and world view as well as his desire for 'sizable transformations' to his theories for the theatre.

Brecht claims that transforming theatrical aesthetics cannot be arbitrary but must have a direct relation to the changed attitudes and circumstances of a new epoch. He writes: 'Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representations must also change' (Brecht in Adorno et al. 2007, 82). Brecht acknowledges that aesthetic innovation needs to match a society's scientific and social developments, just as Rancière notes that determining a relationship between politics and aesthetics depends on how the 'forms of community' and 'regime of identification in which we perceive art' are framed.

The following chapters examine a diversity of contemporary dramatic experiments and consider each play's particular written and performance context. I argue that the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic provides an opposite methodology through which to discuss and better understand the aesthetics of these anti-war plays. Despite their differences to Brecht's plays, the dialectical modes in which the chosen case studies in this book draw together their critiques of war, capitalism, propaganda and the precarity and inequalities of human lives make them Brechtian. As Barnett writes: 'it is this dialectical method, not the ways in which Brecht sought to realize it in the theatre, which defines Brechtian theatre' (2015, 31). The resonances of Brechtian dramaturgical forms and theories in contemporary anti-war plays progress in directions that Brecht never foresaw and he would likely be astonished and enjoy their jarring effects.

## Notes

1. For more about the influence of the Hegelian dialectic on Brecht see Melanie Selfe's article in the *Brecht Yearbook 35* (2010, 183–204).

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CHAPTER 4

# Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul* and *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall be Unhappy*

American playwright Tony Kushner is best known for his two-part Pulitzer Prize-winning play *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes* (1993).[1] *Angels in America* thematizes the Reagan administration's response to the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s as a literal and metaphoric exposition of the corruption within the American legal and political system. The work moves between long, didactic political arguments between characters on the state of the American legal and political system to fantastical scenes in which glittering angels come crashing through New York apartment and hospital ceilings to deliver messages to sick mortals. Kushner's dramatic style is flamboyant and playful as well as politically engaged and instructive. The Brechtian imperative that learning should be enjoyable is realized in Kushner's merging of complex political and philosophical ideas with the glamour and ironic humour of a drag performance.

In all his dramatic works, Kushner experiments with a range of aesthetic forms to address different political issues. *A Bright Room Called Day* (1985), for instance, depicts the lives of a group of young socialists living in Berlin during the Nazi rise to power in the 1930s and the life of a contemporary American woman with anarcho-punk tendencies. The play is accompanied by 'a brief historical note' in which Kushner explains the social and political factors that facilitated the Nazi rise to power. Yet the work's didacticism and realist dialogue is counterbalanced by Kushner's use of Biblical creatures – in this play it is the Devil and his



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dog with glowing red eyes who interrupt the domestic scene. Similarly engaged with historical political events, his play *Slavs! Thinking About the Longstanding Problems of Virtue and Happiness* (1995) is vaudeville-style political farce that portrays the death of Leninism in Russia. The musical *Caroline, or Change* (1998), for which Kushner wrote the libretto as well as the script, depicts the plight of an African slave performing domestic duties for a wealthy American household. Kushner's oeuvre also extends beyond drama and into a range of literary forms that include historical studies, art criticism, political essays, poetry and children's literature.

In his plays, Kushner does not adhere to a single dramatic style or form. Instead he invents a variety of ways to tackle complex ethical and political problems. Just as Brecht claims that 'Petroleum resists the five act form' (1964, 30), Kushner adapts and changes his formal and linguistic experimentation to suit different socio-political contexts. In this chapter I consider two plays by Kushner: *Homebody/Kabul* (2001) and *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall be Unhappy (Only We)* (2003–4). The plays explore past, present and future military and economic interventions into Afghanistan and Iraq by Britain and America. Through examination of the plays' estrangement devices I consider the dialectical effects of these works on American audiences in times of heightened political tension. I suggest that Kushner's plays can usefully be described as having a Brechtian dialectical aesthetic given the ways in which they situate the present-day conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq within the long history of Western economic and military involvement in the region.

Kushner unabashedly admits to a left-wing political bias in his writing. In 2003 he was quoted as saying:

> I'm partisan, I don't disguise that … I preach to the converted – I don't deny that. I am a person of the left. But I am uncertain about a great many things: what to do next; where change is coming from; what is the meaning of being left in a world like this? (Kushner in Abramovich 2003, 1)

Influenced by his personal experiences of social marginalization as homosexual and Jewish, Kushner's dramatic works share a common concern with social and political exclusion. His interest in the politics of war began as an undergraduate student at Columbia University where he first took part in anti-Vietnam War protests.

Kushner acknowledges the influence of Brecht on his work. He claims that reading Brecht introduced him to the possibility of bring-

ing art and politics together in the theatre (Kushner in Weber 2001, 106). He explains that *A Bright Room Called Day* was a direct response to Brecht's *Fear and Misery in the Third Reich* and his first attempt to both imitate a Brechtian play and simultaneously differentiate his own style as a playwright (Kushner in Weber 2001, 112). Furthermore, Kushner translated Brecht's *The Good Person of Szechwan* in 1997. Unlike his translations of other plays, which became radical adaptations, his translation of *The Good Person of Szechwan* was faithful to the original text (Fisher 2002, 151). This indicates not only Kushner's respect for Brecht's skill as a writer but also Brecht's ongoing relevance half a century after his death.

In 2006, Kushner decided to translate another play by Brecht – *Mother Courage and Her Children*, a work that critiques the relation between war and capitalism. As with his translation of *The Good Person of Szechwan*, Kushner's translation of *Mother Courage and Her Children* is faithful to Brecht's original. The performance of the adaptation was staged in 2006 in the open-air Delacorte Theatre in Manhattan's Central Park with Meryl Streep playing Mother Courage. Kushner did not alter the context of the original play which is set during the Thirty Years War that took place in central Europe in the seventeenth century. Instead, he described the play as 'shockingly relevant' to the recent news (Kushner in Kalb 2006, np), referring to the effects of the contemporary wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

As well as admitting to strong Brechtian influences in his work, Kushner makes a clear link between his admiration for Brechtian dramaturgy and his political interest in Marxism and socialism. In an interview with Carl Weber, Kushner remarks: 'The things that were exciting to me about Marx, specifically dialectics, I discovered in Brecht, in a wonderful witty and provocative form' (in Weber 2001, 106). Kushner's remaking of this 'witty and provocative form' and his interest in Marxist dialectics will be considered in the following analysis of the aesthetics of *Homebody/Kabul* and *Only We*.

## *Homebody/Kabul*

### *Part One:* Homebody*: Between the Particular and the Universal*

Kushner originally wrote *Homebody/Kabul* as a monologue for British actor Kika Markham, entitled *Homebody*.[2] As the extended title *Homebody/*

*Kabul* suggests, the play consists of two distinct parts. The first part is dominated by a 40-minute monologue delivered by a middle-aged, middle- to upper-class British woman who is never named throughout the play but who is described as 'The Homebody'. The monologue ends with the suggestion that The Homebody wants to escape her English life and travel to Afghanistan. By contrast, Part Two takes the form of a realist family drama in which The Homebody's husband and daughter, Milton and Priscilla Ceiling, are in Afghanistan searching for The Homebody.

The play begins with '*a woman sitting in a comfortable chair, in a pleasant room in her home in London*', a shopping bag is by her side and she reads from a small book:

> 'Our story begins at the very dawn of history, circa 3,000B.C…'
> *(Interrupting herself:)*
> I am reading from an outdated guidebook about the city of Kabul. In Afghanistan. In the valleys of the Hindu Kush mountains. A guidebook to a city which as we all know, has … undergone change. My reading, my research is moth-like. Impassioned, fluttery, doomed. A subject strikes my fancy: Kabul – you will see why, that's the tale I'm telling … (Kushner 2002, 9)

The woman, The Homebody, moves between reading from 'an outdated guidebook' and directly addressing the audience. In one such address she explains her fascination with Kabul, a city that once stood at the epicentre of culture, commerce and wealth. The historicization of Kabul contrasts with what spectators know as the war-torn, impoverished city and its people under the control of the repressive Taliban regime in The Homebody's present-day, 1998.

The Homebody explains that she finds the contradiction between historical and contemporary Kabul 'irresistible'. It is this tension between present-day Kabul and its forgotten colonial representations that motivates her research:

> I can't help myself, it's almost perverse, in libraries, in second hand bookshops, I invariably seek out not The Source but all that which was dropped by the wayside on the way to The Source, outdated guidebooks – this was published in 1965, and it is now 1998 … I find these irrelevant and irresistible, ghostly, dreamy, the knowing what *was* known before the more that has since become known overwhelms … As we are, many of us, overwhelmed, and succumbing to luxury … (Kushner 2002, 9–10)

The past is significant for The Homebody because the present is overwhelmed by an overabundant accumulation of knowledge and wealth that has her 'succumbing to luxury'. The Homebody's preference for unofficial historical accounts, all that has 'dropped by the wayside on the way to The Source', suggests that she rejects a teleological view of history as depicted in the grand narratives of modernity and, instead, wants to piece together history from discarded anecdotal or primary accounts. Analogous to Marx's dialectical moves, she makes official 'history' problematic by focusing on multiple and alternative histories.

The Homebody playfully inserts herself into the continuum of history by linking 'our story' – the guidebook's historical narrative – with 'the tale I'm telling' – The Homebody's personal narrative of her life in London. She contrasts the seemingly objective tone and linear chronology of traditional historiography with her subjective narrative, erratic interjections and tangential commentary:

> 'In exchange for the hand of the daughter of the Maurya emperor, Chandragupta, and for five hundred elephants, the Kabul Valley passed for the first time under Indian suzerainty'
>
> *(She puts the guidebook down)*
>
> A party needs hats. I had no hope that this would be a good party. My parties are never good parties. (Kushner 2002, 14)

The clash of heterogeneous elements – the elephant dowry of a Mauryan princess and modern-day party hats – estranges Afghanistan's complex history of invasion. It also highlights the trivial nature of her London dress-up parties, the tacky imitation of grander historical places and epochs.

Throughout the monologue, The Homebody repeatedly interrupts her reading of the guidebook to divulge details of her personal life: her relationships with her husband and daughter; her shopping preparations for the party; her experimentation with prescription drugs; her attitude to the world, history and language; and even her erotic fantasies. She fluctuates between sharing the intimacies of her banal daily struggles with the global concerns of war, famine, disease, exile, oppression or the effects of colonization:

> 'By the end of the third century the far-flung Mauryan empire had disappeared and a period of disorder, migration and tribal unrest follows, for which the records are clouded and confused.'
>
> *(She looks up from the guidebook)*

> My antidepressant is called … something, a made-up word, a portmanteau chemical cocktail word confected by punning psychopharmacologists … (Kushner 2002, 15)

In contrast to the guidebook's factual historical tone, the interweaving of The Homebody's fantastical imaginings and her disjointed speech patterns reject Western history's ideologically constructed claims to truth, linear progress and objectivity. More than this, The Homebody's shifts between the particular – the banal events in her everyday life – and the generalized Western historical account of Afgehanistan, indicate her dialectical thinking, her ability to locate her social position within the vast flows of history and, in turn, note the impact that these historical flows have had on her own privileged status in the world.

The shifts between the universal and the particular create a Brechtian estrangement informed by The Homebody's dialectical mode of viewing reality. As Brecht describes:

> There is the continual leap from the particular to the general, from the individual to the typical, from now to yesterday and tomorrow, the unity of what is incompatible, the discontinuity of what is ongoing. This is how the V-Effekt works. (Brecht in Brooker 1988, 82)

The Homebody's descriptions of party hats juxtaposed against her descriptions of conquest in the Hindu Kush create a 'unity of what is incompatible'. The monologue, a form that traditionally conveys the perspective of a single voice, is rendered strange through its multi-narrative account and temporal discontinuity. In Kushner's remaking of Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt*, he suggests that the problems of Afghanistan are not 'over there' in Kabul. On the contrary, The Homebody's historicizing narrative shows that the privilege and wealth of the West in the late twentieth century is connected to the ongoing poverty, war, religious fanaticism and instability of Afghanistan.

The Homebody's erratic jumps between the personal and the historical narrative demonstrate what she calls a 'moth-like' and what Brecht would call a 'zigzag' view of history as irregular and unpredictable progression, regression and uncertainty. The Homebody's shifts between Kabul's history and the present moment demonstrate the precariousness and unpredictability of historical development. Her descriptions of centuries of invasion into Kabul by Darius the Great, the Archaemenid dynasty

of Persia, Alexander the Macedonian, Seleucus Nicator, the Mauryan emperor, and Chinese tribes under the leadership of Yueh-Chih, suggests a Brechtian dialectical view of history and socio-political change where, 'catastrophes do not progress in a straight line but in cyclical crises' (Brecht 1964, 30). For The Homebody, such uncertainty is comforting and the potential for crisis at any moment offers her the hope of escape from her middle-class Western life and the prescription drugs that dull the boredom of privilege.

The Homebody's mode of recounting history reinforces the fractured, cyclical and chaotic social, cultural and political history of the encounters between Afghanistan and its invaders. Her rhetorical, elliptical, repetitious and fragmentary phrases draw attention to the structures of language by creating a mismatch between signifier and signified. As such, they allude to what is *not* said as much as what is said. Both The Homebody's monologue in Part One and Priscilla's dialogue in Part Two are littered with obscure vocabulary and even the occasional fabricated word: 'syncresis – is that a word?' (Kushner 2002, 12). The Homebody claims to involuntarily obfuscate meaning and struggles to accurately describe the foreign objects she encounters, to find the appropriate signifiers for the unfamiliar signified:

> In my mind's eye, yet from memory: I had seen these abbreviated fezlike pillboxy attenuated yarmulkite millinarisms, um, *hats*, I'm sorry I *will* try to stop, *hats*, yes, in a crowded shop on _____*(Gesture)* which I must have passed and mentally noted on my way towards God knows what, who cares, a dusty shop crowded with artefacts, relics, remnants, little … doodahs … (Kushner 2002, 16–17)

The Homebody's relationship to language as a mode of communication is fraught. She delights and savours these words but is also conscious that her use of language marks her Anglocentrism and her social isolation. Although she tries to find an appropriate word for the foreign objects, her efforts result in the ultimately patronizing and inadequate term 'doodahs'. The Homebody's elliptical and disjointed mode of narrating the history of Afghanistan encourages a view of the past in which events flow in and across one another, where cause and effect are dynamic. To return to Ollman and Smith's dialectical categories, The Homebody's mode of expression characterizes historical development as dialectical by using language in a way that captures the processual flows of history, conflict and change in Afghanistan and Britain.

*Performing the* Gestus *of the Other*

The Homebody follows in the Western tradition of narrating, and thereby controlling, the history of the other. Yet, different to the Orientalist colonial texts from which she reads, she does so with an ironic awareness of the dominant historical narratives about the Middle East. Attempting to view the world from the Afghani shopkeeper's perspective, The Homebody ponders his attitude towards living as a refugee in London by imaginatively performing his subject position:

> I am happy here in the U.K. I am terrified I will be made to leave the U.K. I cannot wait to leave the U.K. I despise the U.K. I voted for John Major. I voted for Tony Blair. I did not, I cannot vote, I do not believe in voting. The people who ruined my hand were right to do so, they were wrong to do so, my hand is most certainly ruined, *you will never understand*, why are you buying so many hats? (Kushner 2002, 23–4)

Although The Homebody's conversation with the Afghani only occurs in her head, her attempt to imagine his voice and subjectivity reveals more about her attitude towards him and her recognition that her privileged cultural position means that she '*will never understand*' him. The Homebody's imagined and conflicting accounts of the Afghani's attitude towards Britain foregrounds what is absent – the real voice of the Afghani, unmediated by the Western subject. In this contradictory monologue, The Homebody highlights the fact that Western understandings of the other are often subject to mediation, particularly in mainstream media or colonial history in which the other is not granted the agency or legitimacy to speak for herself. The Homebody stages the very non-visibility of the other, a gesture that Rancière would deem a political act for its potential to shift the coordinates of what is legitimized as visible and sayable.

The Homebody's organization of speech displays what theatre scholar Denise Varney, describing *gests*, calls 'socially-attitudinal markers' (Varney 2010, 113). The Homebody's sporadic, repetitive, elliptical syntax and vocabulary indicate a struggle to engage with and accommodate the other without reducing them to the same. Her language conveys the effort it takes her to avoid racist stereotyping. Such stereotyping appears later in the play in the language of her husband Milton who calls the Afghanis 'barbarians' (Kushner 2002, 78) and mocks their names when he says: 'Here's Mrs. Wargarwabaz Bizooli Waza' (2002, 79). As a woman, The Homebody experiences her own form of social marginalization that is reflected in language that shows her amenability to unfixed, fluid mean-

ings and identities. In The Homebody's *gestic* language she achieves what Willett describing Brechtian *gestus* calls showing the clash in 'slow motion' (1967, 121). By decelerating the Western encounter with the other, The Homebody reveals the deficiencies of the Western subject trying to accurately narrate a cross-cultural encounter.

In performing the other as heterogeneous, The Homebody avoids the temptation to essentialize him. Although her embodiment is somewhat constructed from Orientalist clichés of the dangerous, unreliable Arab that she has learned from the media and her collection of books published in a colonial era, it also demonstrates her willingness to accept a diversity of possibilities, to hold the thing and its negation in simultaneous suspension. The oppositional structure of her monologue shows her dialectical thinking and sets an example for spectators to engage in an equally complex approach to thinking about the Afghani refugee, Western consumer culture and the problems of Western mediation of the foreigner.

*Implicating the Audience*

Brecht's discussion of the desired *Verfremdungseffekt* of epic acting is concerned with showing the actor self-consciously performing. Writing on such presentational acting Brecht notes: 'If the actor turns to the audience it must be a whole-hearted turn rather than the asides and soliloquizing technique of the old-fashioned theatre' (1964, 139). The Homebody's monologue performs such a 'whole-hearted turn' to the audience less as an attempt to separate out character from actor, but, rather, to reveal the alternative possibilities to The Homebody's claims.

The monologic form of *Homebody* facilitates direct communication between actor/character and the audience. When The Homebody breaks the fourth wall by looking up from her guidebook to directly address the spectators, her use of the first- and second-person-plural pronouns makes her target of criticism overt:

> Awful times, as **I** have said, **our** individual degrees of culpability for said awfulness being entirely bound-up in **our** correspondent degrees of action, malevolent or not, or in **our** correspondent degrees of inertia, which can be taken as a form of malevolent action if **you**'ve a mind to see it that way. I do. (My emphasis) (Kushner 2002, 24)

It is clear that The Homebody seeks to provoke Western spectators by implicating them in her address. Her insistence on 'our' culpability

addresses the Western spectators of *Homebody/Kabul* whom she accuses of 'inertia' as a form of 'malevolent action'.

Yet, The Homebody acknowledges that her address to the audience is unfair in its one-sidedness. Kushner updates Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* in creating a mode of address that draws attention to the processes of the performance by addressing and describing the spectators. This is most evident when The Homebody says:

> And all conversation such as we are having, and though you've said nothing whatsoever we are still conversing, I think, since what I say is driven by fear of you, sitting there before me, by absolute terror of your censure and disdain, and so you need say nothing, you would only weaken your position, whatever it may be … (Kushner 2002, 24)

Although she includes each spectator in her mode of address, she simultaneously acknowledges the voicelessness of the spectator in this one-sided 'dialogue'. In recognizing the spectators' potential frustration, Kushner uses a metatheatrical technique that acknowledges and exposes the manipulative and persuasive devices of the monologue form on the audience.

In describing the spectators before her, The Homebody draws attention to spectator passivity in relation to her dominant, active and self-reflexive voice. In so doing, Kushner comments upon the contested role of theatre in bringing about political change. The Homebody's metatheatrical comment suggests that if the spectators answered back they would only make themselves vulnerable to critique. She claims that both those who do and do not take action are equally malevolent, a paradox that suggests that the provocation of a spectator in the theatre cannot assume parallel political action. Kushner thus implies that viewing political art does not implicitly lead to action. This accords with Rancière's critique of the cause-effect assumption of a lot of so-called 'engaged' contemporary art (2010, 135).

Extending the metatheatricality of the monologue, The Homebody describes the effect she would like to have on others. In particular she notes the rousing effect she would like her party to have on its bourgeois guests:

> I suppose one would like something combustible at a party, something catalytic, some fizz, each element triggering transformation in all the other elements till all elements, which is to say, *guests*, are … surprizing to themselves and return home feeling less … less certain of … those certainties which

> … *Because* of which, for example, powerful antidepressants are consumed. (Kushner 2002, 15)

It is this same effect of destabilizing ostensible certainties, where 'what is self-evident is smashed to show what is evident' (Carney 2005, 14), that Brecht seeks in his dialectical aesthetic. The Homebody's allusions to 'guests' who will 'return home' might be understood as another metatheatrical reference to the audience in the theatre. As such, Kushner suggests that he wants his audiences to leave the theatre 'feeling less … less certain of … those certainties'. The lack of detail as to what 'certainties' need to be disrupted avoids a didactic political critique. Instead, the vagueness of the language suggests Kushner's desire to destabilize apparent 'certainties' or 'facts' in the same way as a Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* undoes what Jameson describes as 'perceptual numbness' (1998, 39) to the comfortable reliability of habit.

The lack of specificity over what is transformed highlights Kushner's post-Brechtian 'epistemological uncertainty'. Yet, the 'something catalytic' suggests that the unspecified action that The Homebody/Kushner hopes for is a process of movement, flux and becoming that drives an unknowable transformation. Reading The Homebody's words as metatheatrical, they also describe theatre as having the potential to create 'something catalytic' and recall Jameson's description of *Verfremdung* as that which reveals what seems natural and immutable to be historical and 'an object of revolutionary change' (in Adorno et al. 2007, 206). In The Homebody's monologue the 'natural' and 'immutable' state of war-torn Afghanistan in the present day is shown to be historical and preventable. The Homebody's metatheatrical reflections then do not assure political praxis but Kushner's use of the monologue form does suggest that theatre can begin the work of identifying the contradictions of Western complicity in present-day Afghanistan by provoking deeper or dialectical thinking among spectators.

## *Part Two:* Kabul *and Realism*

Part One, *Homebody*, is a clear indictment of Western consumerism and colonialist exploitation of Afghanistan as The Homebody questions how the 'certainties' that uphold Western consumer culture at the expense of the non-Western other might be made 'less certain'. The Homebody's elliptical, *gestic* and estranged language, as well as her accusations of spectator complicity in the injustices she describes, not only reveal her dia-

lectical mode of viewing historical change, but encourage spectators to think dialectically and historically about Afghanistan and its relationship to Western political and economic hegemony.

Part Two, *Kabul*, depicts the unlikely transformations of three main characters, Milton, Priscilla, and a vibrant Afghani woman and former-librarian Mahala, using a traditional dramatic realist structure. After The Homebody's 40-minute monologue, the drama moves to a hotel room in Kabul where The Homebody's husband, Milton, is conversing with a religious Mullah, Aftar Ali Durranni, a medical doctor, Qari Shah, and an unofficial liaison for the British government in Kabul, Quango Twistleton. The Homebody's daughter, Priscilla, is seated behind a bed sheet which has been hung across one corner of the room. The dialogue indicates that The Homebody has been murdered in Kabul and her mutilated body lost by the officials. Thus The Homebody disappears in the shift between scenes, swallowed in the aporia between the safety of her London home and war-torn Kabul, symbolized by the '/' in the play's title.

Mirroring the actions of The Homebody in the first scene, Doctor Qari Shah consults a notebook from which he recites an extensive list of brutal injuries inflicted on the missing body of The Homebody:

> The conoid tubercle of the left clavicle was found to have been traumatically separated from the conacoid process of the left scapula following severe damage to the conoid ligament, and also the infra spinous fossa quite, ah, shattered by a heavy blow, most probably as the woman was dragged – your wife – by her upper limb, aim that is to say, up and down rubble-strewn streets over piles of Bomb debris. (Kushner 2002, 31)

During the ensuing discussion it becomes evident that Priscilla and Milton have travelled to Afghanistan in order to retrieve the body of The Homebody and bring it home to Britain.

A motivation behind The Homebody's ostensible murder is offered by the Mullah: 'Since President Clinton have bombed the people in Khost, many killed, the people are very angry against Western aggression-disregard-disrespect for Afghanistan' (Kushner 2002, 33). The Mullah suggests that The Homebody's attackers were not only seeking revenge for the Clinton administration bombing suspected terrorist compounds but, in mistaking The Homebody for an American, they were reacting against generations of Western imperialism that began with the expanding British Empire in the nineteenth century and continued with the Americans during the Cold War.

Confronted with The Homebody's mysterious disappearance, Milton refuses to leave the Kabul hotel room. He drowns his grief by experimenting with opium provided by the disillusioned and drug-addicted British liaison, Quango. Meanwhile, Priscilla navigates the streets of Kabul, investigating her suspicion that her mother is still alive but in hiding or imprisoned. Throughout her search she treats the Afghanis whom she meets with contempt or indifference and is careless in her refusal to adhere to the Taliban's law prohibiting music and mandating that women cover themselves in a burqa.

The indifference and disrespect shown by Milton and Priscilla towards the political and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan contrast with The Homebody's sympathetic discussion of Afghanistan and her attempt to empathize with its people in Part One. Priscilla behaves like an entitled, arrogant and spoilt Western child. She interrupts her local Afghani contacts and addresses them with an imperious lack of compassion:

> I'm SORRY we treated you so wickedly back in, when was it, 1879, but I'm not fucking AMERICAN, *we* didn't fire missile at wherever it was, YOU NASTY FUCKING PIG, WHERE IS MY MOTHER WHERE IS SHE? (Kushner 2002, 70)

Milton is equally scornful, culturally ignorant and insensitive, describing Afghanistan as 'a Himalayan bywater' which is technologically regressive. He calls the rituals of Islam 'hoodoo' and claims that every Afghani name 'sounds like a toilet backing up' (Kushner 2002, 78–9). His racist and colonialist language reflects Orientalist stereotypes of Afghanis as barbaric, savage, unsophisticated and uncivilized. Kushner uses Orientalist discourse self-consciously in order to critique Milton's racism, his colonial mentality and its cultural assumptions. Yet these are only estranged through their relationship to The Homebody's narrative in Part One. In contrast to The Homebody, Milton and Priscilla's cultural and historical amnesia towards Western accountability in Afghanistan in Part Two is unsettling.

In Part Two, Kushner further develops the play as a catalyst for pleasurable learning and dialectical debate. This is most evident when the Afghani characters express anti-American sentiments such as when Mahala points out the hypocrisy of American opposition to the Taliban by explaining that the CIA funded the Taliban during the Cold War in an effort to drive the Russians out of Afghanistan. While Kushner's strong criticisms of the Taliban would generally be met with sympathy from Americans, his

anti-American critiques were provocative for the American audiences to which the play was first performed. They invited spectators to be critical of America's role helping the Taliban consolidate its power base.

Theatre scholars Judith G. Miller and Peggy Phelan, who reviewed the New York production of *Homebody/Kabul*, were particularly critical of Part Two. Miller writes:

> In Part II, there is far too much of this painful information, too didactically dished up, or too melodramatically inserted. The lightness of touch of Part I, the incremental building of Afghanistan as [also] a country of vast promise and deep, sinuous, and fascinating history gives way to the Afghanistan of the contemporary news media: images of bloodshed, torture, fanaticism, and hate. The playfulness of Part I disappears and the obduracy of the images of Afghanistan as harbourer of 'evil' takes precedence. (2006, 215)

Miller's description of Part Two, *Kabul*, as creating an 'obduracy of the images of Afghanistan' suggests that the realist form and its melodramatic performance created a static image of Afghanistan and a stereotypical depiction of the Taliban as evil. Her criticism of the content as 'too didactically dished up' indicates that, for Miller, Part Two was limited in its portrayal of Afghanistan and its people. Similarly, Phelan's review criticizes the length of Part Two. She writes: 'Even more dismaying was the fall in quality between the mesmerizing *Homebody* and the meandering plot of *Kabul* … Kushner's comments about the Taliban's hold on the city seem already dated' (Phelan 2003, 166).

Yet Miller and Phelan's objections to the drawn-out, 'dated' and 'didactically' represented images of Kabul in Part Two fail to grasp the dialectical relationship of the play's binary structure. As the title *Homebody/Kabul* indicates, there is a deliberate formal break between the two sections with the '/' or caesura highlighting the split between past and present, West and East, historical events and imagined future adventures, democracy and fundamentalist rule, secularism and religious extremism. The contradiction between The Homebody's colourful narration of Afghanistan's history and the 'contemporary news media: images of bloodshed, torture, fanaticism, and hate' (Miller 2006, 215) is precisely the dialectical tension that makes the work's formal and thematic critique so effective. As such, the 'mesmerizing' Part One contrasted with the 'meandering' Part Two suggests that the play can be understood as a Brechtian dialectical 'unity of opposites'.

The oxymoronically named Homebody seeks a home in the most unhomely place that she can imagine, Afghanistan. Yet, it is through this search for a home that she manages to bring her family, Milton and Priscilla, closer together. While the transformation of The Homebody is abruptly cut short in Kabul, the change in her daughter begins in Afghanistan. In Kabul, the spoilt, apolitical and solipsistic Priscilla begins to empathize with the local Afghanis and risks her safety to help them. Priscilla's personal encounters with Afghanis awaken her dormant political consciousness and force her to see her complicity in Western imperialism. Priscilla begins to mimic her mother when she admits: 'We're people of terrible luxuries' (Kushner 2002, 139). The unfinished business of The Homebody's desired agency is realized by Priscilla in Part Two.

To a lesser extent than Priscilla, Kabul also makes Milton rethink his racist cultural assumptions about Afghanis when he falls in love with Mahala. Both he and Priscilla perform uncharacteristic acts of bravery as they help Mahala escape with them to Britain. The dialectical unity between The Homebody and Priscilla is even more pronounced in the similarities between The Homebody and Mahala. A kind of *Doppelgänger* of The Homebody, Mahala comes to live with the Ceiling family in London and it is hinted that she is Milton's lover. When Mahala is first introduced in the play she is a fiery feminist who challenges and defies the Taliban, risking her life for her passionate belief in literature. By the end of the play she transforms into a more docile homebody, dressed in English clothes and reading prolifically. Phelan describes The Homebody and Mahala – the bibliophile and the Librarian – as bookends of the play and its relationship to knowledge (2003, 168). The dialectical structure of the play indicates that such knowledge is not static for either The Homebody or Mahala, but exists in bursts of flux and stagnation.

In London, Mahala strikes an implausible balance between democratic freedoms and maintaining her traditional and spiritual roots:

> It has been difficult for me. But it is lovely here.
>
> (*The book in her hands*) I am reading the Quran again. For all those terrible years, I was too angry. I am myself becoming Muslim again. (Kushner 2002, 136)

While The Homebody looks at home in her environment, Mahala makes the West seem strange as she takes on the attributes of a foreign culture.

In the final line of the play Mahala says: 'In the garden outside, I have planted all my dead' (Kushner 2002, 139). While Mahala may have buried her personal ghosts, the real-life social, political and religious turmoil in Afghanistan and the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 by American forces belie the conclusiveness of her claim. Mahala's physical replacement of The Homebody recalls to mind the image of what is absent or missing. As a negation of The Homebody, Mahala too is likely to become disillusioned with the West and reject the Western lifestyle. The spectre of The Homebody suggests that the 'dead' Mahala has planted will rise up as ghosts, just as Afghanistan's brutal history and its relationship to Western imperialism returns in the violence of the attacks on the World Trade Center in 2001.

## *Bringing it Home:* Homebody/Kabul *in Production*

The performance of *Homebody/Kabul* directed by Declan Donnelan was due to premiere at the New York Theatre Workshop (NYTW) in late September 2001. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 occurred while *Homebody/Kabul* was in rehearsal. The premiere was delayed until December 2001, just three months after the attacks. The timing of the first performances led to Kushner being described as an 'eerily prescient' dramatist (Marks 2001, np) and drastically altered the reception and public interest in the work.

In order to boost American morale and foster American patriotism after the attacks of 9/11, President G. W. Bush's advice to the American people was to continue business as usual (G. W. Bush 2001, np). After 9/11, New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani made a similar connection between entertainment and economic confidence when he said that 'going to the theatre' was at the centre of New York's economic recovery, a patriotic duty and an important gathering of community (in Spencer 2012, 2).

*Homebody/Kabul* opened in preview on 5 December 2001 and by 16 December 2001 the Bush administration had declared that al-Qaeda was defeated in Afghanistan and that the Taliban had fallen (Juntunen 2006, 176). Bharucha notes that terror can enter the political unconscious of a production without it being consciously inscribed into the mise-en-scène (2014, 1). In the case of *Homebody/Kabul*, terror seeped into the political unconscious of the script and invariably rose to consciousness in the context of the production of the play.

The timing of the first performances of *Homebody/Kabul* challenged New York audiences to think more deeply about the broader historical context of 9/11 and the political, social, religious circumstances that motivated the actions of the terrorists. Although the play was not written as a response to the events of 9/11, its real-world context influenced the reception of the work. As the artistic director of the NYTW, Jim Nicola commented, 'It's almost impossible to not encounter [the play] through the lens of our common experience of the last three months' (in Juntunen 2006, 174). In Part One, The Homebody describes the geo-strategic importance of Afghanistan as motivating British imperialist interests in the nineteenth century. She lists the attempts to colonize Afghanistan as a power 'game' between British and Russian interests:

> And so the Great Game begins. The Russians seize Kazakhstan, the British seize India, Persia caves in to the Russians, the first Anglo-Afghan war is fought, the bazaar in Kabul is burnt and many people die, Russia seizes Bokhara, the second Anglo-Afghan war, the First World War, the October Revolution, the third Anglo-Afghan war, also known as the Afghanistan War of Independence. (Kushner 2002, 22)

By the time *Homebody/Kabul* was performed in New York in 2001, The Homebody's descriptions of centuries of invasion into the region now known as Afghanistan were unavoidably comparable to America and Britain's latest invasion, 'Operation Enduring Freedom'. For those who saw the first performances, 'Operation Enduring Freedom' must have seemed like a continuation of the 'Great Game' described by the Homebody, another moment in the zigzagging history of conflict over this land, its important geographic position in the Middle East and its valuable natural resources.

*Homebody/Kabul* was staged at a time when most entertainment that could be construed as unpatriotic was withheld or toned down. As Jacob Juntunen notes, Stephen Sondheim's musical *Assassins* was pulled from its Broadway season, major Hollywood blockbuster films, including two starring Tim Allen and Arnold Schwarzenegger were withheld due to 'terrorist connections', and the 2001 Clear Channel memorandum sent to 1200 radio stations strongly urged presenters to avoid playing an extensive list of songs which featured 'questionable lyrics' (2006, 174). In the theatre world Marvin Carlson notes that New York City theatre producers

carefully avoided any reference to the events of 9/11 for months after the attacks (in Spencer 2012, 3).

In this climate of caution and self-censorship, the content of *Homebody/Kabul* was confrontational to its New York audiences. Particularly troubling were lines such as:

> You love the Taliban so much, bring them to New York! Well, don't worry, they're coming to New York! Americans! (Kushner 2002, 83)

These declarations suggested that the events of 9/11 were a conceivable or even foreseeable outcome of the American support for the Taliban insurgency against the invading Soviet Union during the Cold War. At the time of its inaugural performance, *Homebody/Kabul* contrasted with the patriotic sentiments that dominated the mainstream American media and the arts in the immediate wake of the terrorist attacks. It also provided some possible answers to the ubiquitous expressions of bemusement from American citizens as to why the American values of liberty, prosperity and freedom were a target for resentful and desperate terrorist groups.

The NYTW production of *Homebody/Kabul* was frequently sold out and the season was extended through to 10 February 2002 (Juntunen 2006, 186). Juntunen claims that its popularity indicated that many New Yorkers were open to an alternative voice that differed from the 'cowboy rhetoric' and patriotic discourses that filled the media following the events of 9/11 (2006, 181). He claims that: 'Its success was not in spite of its opposition to the dominant ideology, but because of it' (2006, 188). Yet, its so-called 'success' can only be measured in terms of the range of responses it received from critics. Unusually for an off-Broadway show, the 2001 NYTW production of *Homebody/Kabul* was reported on in over 70 articles which ranged from lauding the play as the most 'important drama in the last decade' (Heilpern) to criticizing it as propaganda by a 'Taliban playwright' (Phillips) (in Juntunen 2006, 172). What is significant about the range of responses is that *Homebody/Kabul* became one of the few available sites for cultural renegotiation and open debate in post-9/11 America.

The legacy of the Brechtian application of Marxist dialectics to drama is strongly present in the aesthetic of *Homebody/Kabul* in its two-part dialectical structure. Kushner's historicization of centuries of invasion of Afghanistan and his unambiguous critique of the West's exploitation of the Middle East for consumer pleasures is reinforced through The

Homebody's dynamic and *gestic* language and the zigzagging structural configuration of her monologue. In the significant historical and political moment in which the play was staged in 2001, The Homebody's direct mode of address to New York audiences invited debate about the past and present relationship between the Western powers and the Middle East without mandating a singular ideological view.

This dialectical aesthetic shows the play's potential for 'changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective' (Rancière 2010, 141). In the self-censoring, patriotic and anti-dialectical climate in America in the immediate wake of 9/11, *Homebody/Kabul* became an important provocation. It provided not only an alternative view to those expressed in the political and media rhetoric, but its performances also provided a place for people to gather and discuss the history of Western engagement in Afghanistan at a time when many Americans (and New Yorkers in particular) were craving an opportunity for such a dialogue. The next section of the chapter will consider the very different aesthetic choices of *Only We* and Kushner's use of theatre to directly and critically engage in critiquing America's military incursion into Iraq.

## *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*

The writing of *Homebody/Kabul* prior to 9/11 suggested that evidence of a potential geopolitical threat such as al-Qaeda was readily available. Yet Kushner found the American government's response to 9/11 troubling in its refusal to attend to the possible reasons for the attacks on the Twin Towers. President G. W. Bush first mentioned what he described as a 'War on Terror' on 20 September 2001. By October 2001, what began as a conceptual war that aimed to combat the nebulous threat of 'terror' had escalated into 'Operation Enduring Freedom' – the American invasion of Afghanistan with a view to ousting the Taliban regime. By March 2003, another front of the war had been launched by the Bush administration, 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'. This insurgency focused on ousting Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein and disarming him of his alleged possession of 'weapons of mass destruction' (nicknamed WMDs by politicians and the mainstream media).

With Kabul and Baghdad now reported on daily in the mainstream news media, Kushner turned his attentions back home. *Only We* was declared

an 'unfinished' play or a 'work in progress' consisting of just one scene, to which another scene was subsequently added in August 2004. Scene One of *Only We* appeared in the 24 March 2003 edition of the New York-based weekly online and print magazine *The Nation*, just four days after the invasion of Iraq on 20 March 2003, but before the Iraqi insurgency began in May 2003. It was also printed in *The Guardian* newspaper in London. It opens with the directions:

> This scene is the first of a new play titled *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall Be Unhappy*. No performance or reading of this work may be given without express permission of the author, which will be happily granted to anyone wanting to use it at antiwar events. For permission please contact him at: MysteryGuardians@aol.com. (Kushner 2003, np)

Kushner offered the work free of charge and specified that its performances occur within the context of 'antiwar events', an offer that a number of theatre groups from different parts of America took up. He positioned the scene as drama that aimed to influence contemporary political events, specifically anti-war rallies and the 2003 Presidential elections.

The dissemination of the scene through an online publication enabled Kushner to reach a mass audience very quickly. This new digital platform allowed him to offer his critique of the imminent Iraq War to a global audience before public debate about the war was abandoned by the mainstream media. The reading demographic of left-wing news media publications such as *The Nation* and *The Guardian* limited the possibility of the work reaching as wide a readership as possible, that is to say, from all sides of the political spectrum. Nonetheless, the dissemination strategy of *Only We* signifies a shift in the potential of theatre to speak to contemporary issues at a speed and spatial distance unprecedented in the history of theatre.

It also demonstrates a willingness on the part of mainstream media outlets to share their already existing communities and networks with high-profile writers and validates forms of political critique other than journalism in participating in the debates around the ethical issues of war. Similar to Brecht's enthusiasm for the democratic potential of radio to reach mass audiences of mixed classes, Kushner's harnessing of the latest Internet technologies and online communities alters the accessibility of theatre and moves it away from its dominant position in the West as an elitist, bourgeois institution.

Kushner's decision to make the work free and publicly available renders the play a contribution to anti-war activism. Using his status as a high-

profile playwright and harnessing the latest technologies for dissemination, Kushner makes the unusual choice of creating agit-prop or activist art in a historical moment that is sceptical towards the possibility of an alternative to the current conditions of war and neoliberal economic policy. Unlike Brecht who often had to disguise his object of critique to avoid censorship and persecution by the Nazis, the House of Un-American Activities, Stalin or the leaders of the SED, Kushner was able to make a direct and biting critique of the ethical ambiguities of the 'War on Terror' and the moral dubiousness of the leaders who were waging that war. In the following analysis we will see how the ironic contradictions of a war waged on the grounds of faulty 'intelligence' enable Kushner to provoke dialectical debate among the play's spectators.

The first scene of *Only We* depicts a fictionalized version of the historical Laura Lane Welch Bush, the first lady to the 43rd President of the United States, G. W. Bush. In this scene, Kushner dramatizes Laura Bush's reaction to the then imminent American invasion of Iraq through a dialogue between 'Laura Bush' and an angel who guards the souls of dead Iraqi children in the afterlife. The purgatorial setting of the first scene of the play and its representation of angelic figures historicizes the Iraq War through an anachronistic reflection on an imminent future war. Its fantastical setting is positioned against the brutal reality of the 'War on Terror' as it is extended beyond Afghanistan and into Iraq between the period in which Kushner wrote the two scenes. *Only We* explores the innocent human suffering that is the unavoidable outcome of a Western invasion of Iraq and Laura's complex relationship to and complicity with this violence.

The play begins with three Iraqi children in pyjamas and bathrobes sitting in a row. Behind them stands an angel whom, the opening stage directions specify, '*remains throughout the play, unfailingly kind and polite*' (Kushner 2003, np). The angel as spectacular, otherworldly, camp or queer figure connects the personal to the political by evoking Walter Benjamin's 'angel of history' and the personal protections ostensibly provided by guardian angels in popular mythologies. Laura, true to her namesake's work on wide-access literacy programmes in America (particularly for disadvantaged and minority groups), has come to the purgatorial space to read to the dead children of the Iraq War from the classic Russian novel *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) by Fyodor Dostoyevsky. The angel asks the children to rise and welcome their distinguished guest – the standing First Lady of the United States, Mrs Laura Bush. As the children attempt to cheer and wave in welcome, their words have been replaced with the

music from Olivier Messiaen's opera *Saint François d'Asisse* (*Saint Francis of Assisi*) (1975–83).

This postmodern musical piece uses woodwind and stringed instruments to create a very realistic effect of a flock of birds tweeting. The bird noises are simultaneously frantic, ethereal, violent and haunting. The discordant music engulfs the children's voices and their ability to communicate, highlighting their voicelessness in the face of the important American visitor, theatricalizing their inferiority by symbolically associating them with animals. Messiaen devised the piece by recording bird noises in fields and developed the composition to accurately imitate these sounds. The tension between the real and the artistic recreation set up by this unusual composition sets up a dialectic in the play between the real historical Laura Bush and Kushner's fictional representation of her.

Kushner's stage directions designate that Laura speaks in a gentle Texas drawl, and wears a '*purple plaid ensemble*' as befits '*a very nice lady*' (Kushner 2003, np). These attributes mimic the historical Laura Bush who is Texan and wore a purple plaid suit when she paid the traditional formal visit to the outgoing first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2001 (Gormley 2003, 99). Dignified, polite, thoughtful and intelligent, Kushner's Laura exchanges pleasantries with the angel but expresses confusion about the children's informal attire. The angel explains that pyjamas provide a comfort to the children in death and a recompense for the terrible lives they've lived. Laura is kind to the children and compliments them saying: 'you look real sweet in your PJs' (Kushner 2003, np). She confesses that it is the first time she has read to dead children and the first time she has met a child from Iraq.

Although Kushner's fictional caricature cannot speak for the historical figure of Laura Bush, his evocation of a political figure in office at the time of writing the play demonstrates an attempt to have theatre speak directly to contemporary politics. Audiences viewing the work necessarily view the character as having a public persona, making *Only We* a work of political satire. The link between the real and fictional reimaginings of political figures is further highlighted in the preface to *Only We* which quotes from the *New York Times Book Review* 1 December 2002 edition:

> *At the close of George W. Bush's news conference after the Republican sweep of Congress last month, a reporter asked what the president had given his wife for their 25th anniversary, Nov. 5, which the couple celebrated at the White House. Mr. Bush, who was by then out of camera range, responded with a lascivious*

> *wink, prompting startled laughter from reporters who had no trouble figuring out what he meant – Elisabeth Bumiller.* (In Kushner 2003, np)

President G. W. Bush never appears in the play as a character but he is mentioned frequently by his wife and thus is an off-stage character. By linking the play to the incumbent President and his wife at the outset, Kushner associates the real Laura and G. W. Bush and their portrayal in the media with his fictional recreations. This dialectic facilitates Kushner's direct and polemical critique of Bush and his administration's policies, particularly the decision to invade Iraq in 2003.

### *Making Laura Strange*

After the attacks of 9/11, the press labelled Laura Bush the 'first mom' (Caroli 2010, 319) and the 'comforter-in-chief' (Kessler 2006, 136). By 17 November 2001, amid the escalating War on Terror, Laura Bush took over the Presidential weekly radio address in order to speak out against the Taliban's oppression of women and children in Afghanistan as part of the justification for the war (Marso 2007, 221). Then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice claimed that it was Laura's idea to inform the American public about how the Taliban treat Afghani women, a strategy which effectively broadened the American support base for the war (Kessler 2006, 141).

Despite Laura Bush's overt support of the war, it was also publicly reported that she reprimanded President G. W. Bush for his bellicose rhetoric regarding the attacks on Iraq and the capture of Osama bin Laden (Kessler 2006, 167–8). The contrast between Laura's social concerns for equal access to public education, equal opportunity, women's rights and her disapproval of her husband's *Star Wars* rhetoric, forms the basis of Kushner's dialectical parody in which he makes her character embody of the paradoxes of the Iraq War.

From the beginning of *Only We*, Laura behaves as a 'first mom' and 'comforter-in-chief' by expressing regret at the death of the Iraqi children and reading them a story: 'I'm sorry you're dead, but all children love books' (Kushner 2003, np).[3] The incongruity of this statement is matched by the real political statements issued by Laura Bush in the lead up to the war, including claims such as, 'prosperity cannot follow peace without educated women and children' (L. W. Bush 2002, np). The real Laura Bush incongruously evokes 'peace' in the context of an escalating war just as the fictional Laura treats death as a minor inconvenience.

The challenge Kushner sets up for directors of representing incorporeal figures on stage in the dead Iraqi children, creates a sense of what Jean Baudrillard, referring to the first Gulf War, calls a 'war that did not take place' (1995). Yet, where Baudrillard uses this phrase to describe the way in which the first Gulf War was portrayed in the mainstream media as a 'clean war' with few casualties, hiding its violence under euphemisms, *Only We*'s purgatorial setting confronts spectators with the war's innocent casualties and the brutality of their deaths. When the fictional Laura asks the angel how one of the children has died, the angel politely obliges with a graphic description of the child's painful death:

> ANGEL: In 1999, an American plane dropped a bomb filled with several tons of concrete on the power station near his village. He was already malnourished; he had been malnourished since birth, because of the sanctions. The power station that was crushed by the bomb was believed to be supplying power to a plant suspected of producing certain agents necessary for the development of biotoxins. We do not know if it did. We do know that it supplied power for the water purification system for his village. He already had gastroenteritis and nearly chronic diarrhoea, for which medicines were unavailable. Then the water purification system failed and he drank a glass of water his mother gave him infested by a large intestinal parasite. He died of dehydration, shitting water, then blood, then water again, so much! Then a trickle, everyone was sad, there was no food, he shook so hard the screws holding his bed together were loosened. It took three days to die.
>
> LAURA BUSH: That's really awful.
>
> ANGEL: Yes.
>
> LAURA BUSH: Saddam Hussein is a terrible man. (Kushner 2003, np)

The sympathy Laura expresses for the children's deaths caused by American bombings and sanctions is shown to be misplaced when she shifts the blame to Saddam Hussein. The *non sequitur* creates a *Verfremdungseffekt* as Laura's incongruous response highlights an inability or refusal to acknowledge American culpability for the suffering and deaths of Iraqi civilians. It suggests that Laura is convinced by or acts as a mouthpiece for the American Republican Party's justifications for the 'War on Terror' and the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. This stands in contrast to her genuine affection, compassion and warmth towards the pyjama-clad children.

The fictional Laura's inability to acknowledge American guilt mimics the defensive rhetoric used in the official political justifications for 'Operation Enduring Freedom' and 'Operation Iraqi Freedom'. Saddam's

tyranny is the only 'evil' acknowledged in the lead-up to the invasion while the long history of American intervention in the region is ignored. In *Only We*, the contradiction between the angel's explanation and Laura's response estranges the Bush administration's historical amnesia in a way that invites spectators to question where the blame lies for the brutal deaths of many innocent Iraqis. The incongruity of the angel's pointed critique of America and Laura's focus on Saddam as the sole cause for the suffering of Iraqis shows that Laura cannot make the dialectical leap to revise her understanding of the situation in Iraq.

The angel describes another child's death as attributable to 'a smart bomb [that] found its way down the ventilator shaft of the shelter' (Kushner 2003, np). The concept of a 'smart bomb' and its supposedly sophisticated technological system is parodied for the way in which it confuses civilians with nuclear weapons: 'the bomb was mistaken. 4000 people were incinerated at a temperature of 900 degrees Fahrenheit' (Kushner 2003, np). The 4000 brutal deaths attributable to one small 'mistake' shows that what is concealed beneath the euphemistic language of 'smart bombs' are the hidden casualties of war, a revelation that might provoke spectators to recall the undiscovered WMDs that were used to justify the invasion of Iraq.

In the face of the angel's descriptions of such careless destruction of civilian life, Laura feels compelled to try to explain to the children the reasons for their deaths: 'So, so it was um, *necessary* for you to die, sweetie, oh how *awful* to say that, but it was, precious' (Kushner 2003, np). The so-called 'necessity' of civilian deaths in war is shown to be contradictory in Laura's acknowledgement that it is an 'awful' thing to say. The terms of endearment she uses to address the children such as 'sweetie' and 'precious' are rendered strange by the brutality of her suggestion that the children's lives ultimately do not matter in the broader scheme of things. The actions of the American military in the first Gulf War suggest that the Iraqi children's lives are anything but 'precious', rather, they are entirely disposable. Kushner's scene shows the contradictions between the real-life Laura's care for American children and her flippant regard for the impending Iraqi child casualties. By staging a fictional Laura, Kushner upstages the important 'acting skills' of the real Laura Bush and thereby undermines the legitimacy of the White House's claims of a 'necessary' or 'just' war.

The idea that the death of innocent people is ever 'necessary' is incongruous, especially when the explanation is given face to face with the vic-

tims. In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler explains how war and its civilian casualties can be legitimized and made to appear 'necessary' by politicians. As Butler explains:

> when such lives are lost they are not grievable, since, in the twisted logic that rationalizes their death, the loss of such populations is deemed necessary to protect the lives of 'the living.' (Butler 2009, 31)

For Butler, the rationalization of civilian deaths creates a hierarchy between lives that matter (those of the Western victims and soldiers) and those that do not (the non-Westerners). In *Only We*, Laura's claim that the children's deaths were 'necessary' clearly demarcates the Iraqi lives as lives that don't matter. Butler describes the 9/11 victims as 'loudly mourned' and accurately and meticulously accounted for (2009, 24). When it comes to Western accountability for Iraqi civilian deaths, however, she notes: 'there are situations when counting clearly does not count' (2009, xx). Similarly, the angel in *Only We* tries to offer Laura an accurate calculation of child deaths in Iraq but concludes that: 'No one is counting' (Kushner 2003, np).

*Only We* draws on theatre's fantastical possibilities and the expectation of spectators' suspension of disbelief to stage what cannot be staged in the mainstream media – the incorporeal bodies that lack a voice, the innocent victims of the Iraq War who are both alive and figuratively already dead. In describing the violent death of an Iraqi child, *Only We* fills gaps in public discourses and debates in the mainstream media around the suffering of war. Representations of incorporeal beings such as angels and the ghosts of dead children invite reflection on what is omitted in the media about the 'War on Terror' and its sinister effects.

Despite the fictional Laura's suggestion of a war with 'necessary' civilian casualties, the character falters in her attempt to justify the invasion. She stutters: 'So, so it was um', creating a disjointed or discontinuous sentence that makes her explanation sound unconvincing. As language fails the highly articulate Laura, the word (or words) she is searching for are 'collateral damage', the unintended effects of war. The term 'collateral damage' was coined in the last two decades to describe military actions and is frequently used by journalists reporting on military operations, particularly those of the 1990 Gulf War. When Laura is face to face with the victim, she finds herself incapable of reducing the child to a dehumanizing euphemism. The space in between the word, the signifier, and its signi-

fication is the space of doubt, stutter, ellipses, a gap which opens up the dialectical possibilities of what is not said, the moment that Brecht calls 'fixing the Not-But'. Laura's hesitation shows the Not-But, a strategy that Kushner uses to draw attention to the way in which life and death are spoken about in the context of war and the possibility that there is an alternative to Laura's callous attitude.

The absurdity of Laura explaining to a dead child that he was 'caught in the crossfire' creates a *Verfremdungseffekt* through the contrast between a sterile objectifying description of death and the living-dead presence of the child on stage. This faltering speech makes what appears to be universal, obvious and inevitable into a contingent state of possibilities. As Butler writes about unmarked deaths in Iraq: 'Such a death vanishes, not into explicit discourse, but in the ellipses by which public discourse proceeds' (2006, 35). The living bodies of the dead Iraqi children as they appear on stage in *Only We* provide an antidote to their disappearance in the mainstream media and a riposte to the aporias in Laura's language.

## *The* Gestus *of the Incorporeal*

Laura's self-censored or unspeakable words, represented in the ellipses and her use of filler words such as 'um', are juxtaposed against the Iraqi children's voices whose words are replaced by birdsong. The birdsong symbolizes both the ineffability of the horror and the absurdity of war, highlighting and exaggerating the unequal social relations between an Iraqi child and a powerful Western subject with a close relationship and access to the highest political office in America.

Messiaen's composition of birdsong becomes a *gestus* when used to represent the voices of the dead Iraqi children. It highlights their dehumanized status in Laura's presence and exacerbates their position of vulnerability, powerlessness and deference in relation to their honoured guest. In Barthes's terms, the birdsong is pregnant with a 'presence of absences', filled with what is not said – indescribable pain and suffering. Moreover, the bird sounds stand in for a *gestic* language because they bear the weight of history and 'speak for' the nameless, faceless and voiceless Iraqi victims of 'collateral damage' in the Gulf War in 1990. Messiaen's opera spilling from the mouths of the dead Iraqi children highlights what Mumford describing Brechtian *gestus* calls the 'socio-economic and ideological construction of human identity and interaction' (2001, 144).

The birdsong is *gestic* because it hinders the children's ability to communicate clearly and effectively with Laura, marking their socio-economic and class inferiority. Furthermore, it parodies the racist binary of the Westerner and the other by highlighting the paradox of Laura's humanity through her 'civilized' Western status, her ability to use language to communicate, and simultaneously renders the Iraqis 'uncivilized' animals by comparison. Thus, the 'natural' state of Iraqi existence in the eyes of the West as voiceless subjects is denaturalized through the estrangement of these *gestic* voices of birdsong. The children's expressive musical outpouring heightens the brutal depictions of their deaths described by the angel, as well as the descriptions of civilian deaths in the journalistic reporting on the 'War on Terror' in the same editions of *The Nation* and *The Guardian* in which *Only We* was published.

The Iraqi children's *gestic* language is further heightened by the relationship between the bodies of Laura, the angel and the Iraqi children. When Laura asks the angel if she can hug the children to comfort them, the angel replies in the negative saying that the children are: 'incorporeal, they're like … shadows, or mirages, or dreams, it's hard to explain' (Kushner 2003, np). The angel describes more than their metaphysical state in the afterlife; rather, it draws attention to the way in which Iraqis (particularly the victims of 'collateral damage') are portrayed in the media and perceived in the West. Writing on how discourses of war justify violence, Butler explains:

> The derealization of the 'Other' means that it is neither alive nor dead, but interminably spectral … on the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized, that they fit no dominant frame for the human, and that their dehumanization occurs first, at this level, and that this level then gives rise to a physical violence that in some sense delivers the message of dehumanization that is already at work in the culture. (Butler 2006, 33–4)

The discourses that led to the Iraq invasion attempted to dehumanize Saddam Hussein and other Iraqis in a way that made it impossible to mourn the loss of their lives, since, as Butler explains, they had no 'life' in the first place (2006, 33). The spectrality of the dead Iraqi children in *Only We* updates the Brechtian examples of *gestus* by showing an unequal social relation between the living Laura and the ghostly children who are considered 'neither alive nor dead' in the Western cultural imaginary.

Moreover, the angels represented in the Torah and the New Testament are neither living nor dead, they are pure mediation, messengers between God and His people on earth. In *Only We*, Kushner's angel too is an incorporeal figure, a figure that mediates between the living Laura and the dead children, who, paradoxically, would likely take on a physical form in any performance of the play. Since the dialectic is a 'mode for conveying reality', the process of mediation between human consciousness and the material world, the angel in *Only We* gives form to this mediating function of the dialectic. As such, the angel figure (which appears frequently in Kushner's plays, most notably in *Angels in America*) updates Brecht's self-conscious metatheatrical strategies. The spectacular Biblical creature exemplifies the dialectical process and reminds spectators that information is always mediated both on and off the stage. The angel encourages spectators to adopt a distanced and sceptical approach to the action taking place on the stage and an equally critical attitude towards the issues of power and suffering raised within the play.

### *Historicizing the Future*

*Only We* was published before the insurgency in Iraq began but it preempted the effects of the conflict. Comparable to *Homebody/Kabul*, Kushner does not make any claims to prescience but, rather, he points to a tendency common to all modern warfare: civilian casualties. By writing the first scene of *Only We* prior to the commencement of the invasion of Iraq, Kushner remakes the Brechtian technique of historicization. The purgatorial space in which *Only We* is set does not encourage spectators to look back and reflect upon past events, but, rather, to look forward to the future consequences of actions and decisions being made in the present. The liminality or in-between nature of purgatory shows how history unfolds in the spaces between subjects and objects, reason and reality. In Laura, Kushner exposes the anti-dialectical thinking encouraged in patriotic discourses of war. While Laura is emotionally touched by meeting the dead children, she refuses to alter her position on the righteousness of this war and the concomitant injuries and deaths of innocent children.

The purgatorial space and Kushner's representation of the potential casualties of the Iraq War historicizes all warfare through an anachronistic retrospective on an imminent future war. Its temporal positioning looks 'back' at the effects of the war as a means to look forwards. This strategy further estranges Laura's claim that the destruction of the Iraqi children's lives are a 'necessary' evil of war, by showing that these violent outcomes

are not only calculated and contingent, but also preventable. The temporal displacement of the dead Iraqi children in *Only We* is significant to imagining the possibility of a future that chooses an alternative path to war.

Just as Brecht's application of Marxist dialectics invited historicization as a means to see alternative futures, Kushner historicizes the outcomes of war (through his rapid publishing of the play's first scene online) before the war had begun. The timing of the work aimed to provoke spectators to see that it was not too late to take action to prevent the American invasion of Iraq. The performances of the first scene of *Only We* coincided with the moment when the American public was in a position to decide whether or not the invasion was to proceed by voting for or against a second term of the Bush presidency.

While the rhetoric of the Bush administration leading up to the invasion demanded that the public accept that innocent lives would be sacrificed for the greater aims of the war, *Only We* confronts spectators with the victims in advance. As such it highlights the callousness of that presumption by humanizing the otherwise distant and anonymous 'enemy', despite their representation as voiceless, vulnerable children. In historicizing the effects of a war that had not yet occurred, Kushner updates the Brechtian dialectical strategy of historicization in a way that challenges spectators to be critical of the real and the fictional Laura's acceptance of the violence and bloodshed that accompanies war. Kushner's historicization of the outcomes of war and his hasty publishing of the play for a global online audience before the war began provoked spectators to see that it was not too late to take action to prevent the American invasion of Iraq.

## *Performing* Only We *Post-Invasion*

The opportunity for pre-war intervention and critique facilitated by the online publishing of *Scene One of Only We* was over by the time that Kushner wrote the second scene. Scene Two was added in August 2004, by which time the fighting between Western coalition forces and Iraqis was well underway. Scene Two took a different political focus that was more critically aimed at the Bush administration and the need to vote the Republican Party out of office in the 2004 election.

Kushner wrote the second scene for a fundraising benefit for MoveOn.org. MoveOn.org is an influential online American political advocacy group that aims to give average civilians a voice in a political process that the organization claims is currently controlled by lobbyists with financial power. Kushner claims that he wrote the new scene the same day as

the benefit for MoveOn.org as a 'venting exercise' (in Hofler 2004, np). Kushner's participation in this event connects the grass-roots activism of MoveOn.org and their highly visible and globally renowned political campaigns and lobbying to theatre that aims to politicize its audiences.

The 'venting exercise' that occurs in Scene Two of *Only We* is less a criticism of the war than a response to the public criticisms of Scene One. In the media, Scene One of *Only We* received vitriolic criticism including an article in *The Boston Globe* by columnist Alex Beam who called the play a 'wonderful work of hate' and implied that Kushner was an intellectual snob in his portrayal of what he called a 'vulgar pastiche of Laura Bush' (Beam 2004, np). Scene Two was a 'reply' to the public and media criticism in which Kushner inserted himself as author-character ('Tony Kushner' (TK)) into the dialogue, imagining Laura's reaction to the work and her riposte to Kushner's depiction of her in Scene One. Scene Two self-reflexively raises questions about the potential of art to intervene in and influence contemporary political issues.

In this scene the imagined characters of TK and Laura debate the political efficacy of mimetic and non-mimetic art. Laura expresses a preference for mimetic over didactic art and her desire for art to elicit the Aristotelian elements of empathy and catharsis from its spectators (Kushner 2004, np). In her criticism of *Only We*, Laura professes a preference for 'great literature' such as Shakespeare and quotes from *Much Ado About Nothing*.

Scene Two ends with a long monologue by the character TK in which he describes to Laura the dream he had the night after the war began. He explains that the dream came after watching her husband address the General Assembly of the United Nations. In TK's dream, President G. W. Bush pleads with the United Nations to help him rebuild Iraq. The long poetic monologue follows the logic of a dream that meanders and jumps from Bush's justifications for war in Iraq to the legacies of imperialism: poverty and unstable political, economic and social systems, to terrorism and the international trafficking of young girls. After a long description of Bush's appeal to the UN, TK describes the General Assembly becoming restless and rising up and seizing Bush in a flurry of anger and rebellion to which he concludes:

> And then I woke up.
>
> And then I went online to MoveOn.org and johnkerry.com and democrats.org and I signed up for poll watching and leafletting and I donated to the Kerry campaign and the DNC the hundreds of thousands of dollars I am making doing Shakespeare in the Park, or at least as much as is my legal limit. (Kushner 2004, np)

Kushner contrasts his grand poetic visions with the highly pragmatic actions of joining online advocacy and support groups for the Democrats and their nominated Presidential candidate. Kushner concedes that while making powerful art might stir emotions and raise important questions for confronting real-world political problems, the practical extension of this fervour is less romantic: helping raise money for the political party that most closely aligns with one's political convictions.

### *The Dialectic in the Public*

The fund-raising benefit for MoveOn.org that performed *Only We* took place at the American Airlines Theatre in Times Square, New York (Traister 2004, np). The performance was staged as an unrehearsed reading suggesting that it was organized urgently before the election. For Scene One, Hollywood celebrities Kristen Johnston read the stage directions, Patricia Clarkson played the angel and John Cameron Mitchell played Laura Bush. In Scene Two, Patricia Clarkson played Laura and John Cameron Mitchell played the role of TK. In the audience were celebrity actors Edie Falco, Philip Seymour Hoffman, comedian Reno and the electronica musician Moby (Traister 2004, np).

In Scene Two, Kushner explains what motivated him to write the original scene through the character of TK:

> I wrote it one night over a year ago during the build-up to the second Iraq war. I couldn't sleep, I was so angry, so I wrote this scene, which left me feeling sad by the time I'd finished it. Since then I've been thinking of writing a full-length play about Laura Bush and the Bush administration – Condoleezza Rice is also a big Dostoyevsky fan – but I haven't done that yet. I keep stalling. I guess I'm hoping that in four months the play's subject matter will have exceeded its expiration date and be on its way home to Crawford [Texas]. (Kushner 2004, np)

Kushner's self-reflexive form and reference to the in-built obsolescence of the play openly states the play's political biases as anti-Republican. TK's monologue openly declares the play as a piece of agit-prop theatre.

While the fictional Laura achieves no dialectical movement of consciousness, public responses to the reading suggested a more complex set of reactions. *New York Times* reviewer Randy Kennedy described the performance as 'the backdrop for a kind of joyous cultural pep rally for those who want to see Mr. Bush turned out of office' (2004, np). Salon.com

reviewer Rebecca Traister emphasized the anti-bourgeois nature of the performance:

> This was not a high-minded theatre production or a highfalutin charity do. Instead it was the latest fusion of art and grass-roots politics that has been reinvented in the wake of the Iraq war and in anticipation of the November presidential elections. (2004, np)

Her description of the event as a reinvented 'grass-roots politics' suggests a link between the arts and praxis that Brecht was searching for throughout his career.

Scene Two of *Only We* breaks all the mimetic illusions of the stage, not only in its performance as a reading but also by opening the show with the orchestra catcalling and chanting 'Bring it on! Bring it on!' (Traister 2004, np). From Traister's report of the evening, the audience also contributed to the atmosphere which resembled the kind of sports arena that Brecht envisaged, when she describes that 'the fervour created by Kushner's scene threatened to spiral slightly out of control' (2004, np). After the performance, Traister explains that 'The cast reclined on the set for what seemed likely to be an adoring – if not sycophantic – question session' (2004, np). Kennedy's description of the performance confirmed a certain consensus among the audience: 'mostly the night had the feel of preaching to the converted, or even of preaching to the preachers … It might not have swayed many swing voters' (2004, np).

Despite these descriptions of the work 'preaching to the preachers', Traister's detailed description of the post-performance discussion quoted at length below suggests a more critical and thoughtful response to the work:

> when someone asked what MoveOn had planned for the Republican National Convention, things got very tense very quickly. Dawn [the leader of MoveOn] explained that the grass-roots political organization – which had hit a 2.5 million membership just that day – was not planning demonstrations during the five-day Republican gathering in New York at the end of the month. 'They'd [the Republicans] love nothing more than to get a picture of one kid throwing a trash can through a Gap window', she was saying when a voice from the audience began to forcefully object.
>
> 'No, no!' shouted a woman, who turned out to be the comedian Reno, from the middle of the orchestra seats. She stood up and looked around, exhorting the crowd to protest anyway. 'We have to be out there! Be out on the streets on Sunday August 29! Get out there!' The actors on stage looked surprised, and a little uncomfortable.

> Dawn moved quickly to reassure Reno that she believed in protest, but was merely trying to explain why MoveOn had not planned anything. 'Yeah, that's cool, sure', said a calmer Reno, sitting down. But a few seats over, someone else piped up. 'I'm from San Francisco', the man said by way of explanation. 'And we need to do something to counterbalance that convention!'
>
> People began to cheer, and Kushner took over. He said that while he supports the United For Peace And Justice march on Aug. 29, he is keenly aware of how the media will spin things. 'Four more years of this guy is unthinkable', said Kushner, 'but we need to think about how this is gonna play'. The playwright suggested that Bush advisor Karl Rove chose to hold the RNC in a city 'that has hated George Bush and which George Bush hates' precisely *because* he anticipates heated protest, which the party can convert into an 'Elect John Kerry and madness and anarchy will follow' message.
>
> 'There's nothing to throw! We're on the West Side Highway for Christ's sake!' shouted Reno, in reference to the decision to relegate the march to a closed strip of highway.
>
> 'Maybe people could get naked', Clarkson suggested.
>
> Another question from the audience – 'What is the left doing about Ralph Nader?' – prompted both applause and vitriolic hissing from the crowd. 'We don't have the luxury of voting for a third party', responded Dawn, and someone in the crowd shouted, 'What third party? They wouldn't nominate him!' (2004, np)

Traister's detailed description of the post-performance discussion demonstrates that the responses to the work were anything but homogeneous, consensual or unanimous. The range of reactions demonstrates how a play can provoke dialectical thinking and debate among its spectators, actors and author and can resist the culture industry's tendency to become commodified experiences. Surprisingly for the author and the actors, the praxis came from the spectators, in particular Reno's insistence that everyone join the protest at the Republican National Convention. The discussions inspired by *Only We* not only considered strategies for replacing the incumbent Republican Party with a Democratic candidate, but also for considering options for supporting an independent candidate.

In Rancièrian terms, *Only We* showed how theatre can shift the coordinates of the visible and the invisible in the public sphere in ways that were not foreseen by the author. Furthermore it revealed how theatre can reorient the dominant perceptual space and disrupt consensual forms of belonging activated most powerfully by the Bush and Blair governments

and often upheld by the mainstream media. Kushner's depiction of the consequences of invading Iraq and Scene Two's reflection on the hegemony of normative Western modes of visibility and sayability offer new forums for debate that invite rather than foreclose contradiction. Just as Rancière denies a relationship between cause and effect in so-called 'politically committed' art, *Only We* did not provoke a clear and immediate form of collective praxis. What it did facilitate, however, among its American audiences, was a jumping-off point for dialectical debate.

The range of responses and their oppositional nature suggests that the play successfully estranged the Republican Party's justifications for the invasion of Iraq. The spectators' responses further suggest that the play's effects might be considered not only dialectical but post-Brechtian, an example of Rancière's desired 'dissensus'. *Only We* did not elicit a single ideological position but, rather, provided a physical and intellectual space for debate and disagreement. Although the spectator responses lacked a clear, unified and immediate outcome, what the play did facilitate was a platform for debate and for raising awareness about possible voting options that would resist and protest the American invasion of Iraq.

The vibrant dialogue that took place following the performance demonstrates how the dialectical form of *Only We* encouraged spectators to try to resolve the contradictions, what Althusser describing Brecht calls 'the production of a new consciousness in the spectator – incomplete, like any other consciousness, but moved by this incompletion itself' (1969, 151). It was the incompleteness or open-endedness of *Only We* – a work-in-progress, performed as a reading – which invited the diversity of responses and led to unmeasurable actions in real-world civic engagement outside the theatre.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, the executive director of MoveOn.org, Eli Pariser, also noted the dialectical nature of *Only We*. Pariser highlighted the importance of such works intervening in urgent political issues. Pariser noted the potential of political theatre to unite disparate parts of the community to discuss contemporary ethical issues when he said: 'I think cultural events can have the effect of bringing people together … if not in agreement, at least in conversation' (in Kennedy 2004, np). His emphasis on 'conversation' rather than consensus offers convincing evidence that despite Kushner's highly polemical stance and unambiguous critique of the Iraq War, *Only We* never tells the audience what to think, but instead encourages them to think critically and sceptically. Thus the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic of *Only We* can be understood as attempting to turn its spectators into dialecticians.

Unlike *Homebody/Kabul*, which was written prior to 9/11 and lacks an urgency in its long, 'meandering' passages, *Only We* has a faster pace that intended to influence the American spectator public's thinking about the invasion of Iraq and the re-election of the Bush administration to a second term in office. *Only We*'s two scenes offered a springboard for questioning the moral and ethical justifications for the second American invasion of Iraq as they appeared in the mainstream media. It is not only the work's content that borrows from real-life events and historical political figures, but the aesthetic itself offers a model for dialectical thinking. *Only We* demonstrates how theatre in the twenty-first century is radicalizing in form and reach while still retaining many of the traditional features of dramatic works such as characters and dialogue.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which the aesthetics of *Homebody/Kabul* and *Only We* critique Western imperialism and the West's culpability, ignorance or indifference towards the complex political and humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and Iraq. Through analysis of language, Kushner's playful organization of time and depiction of encounters between mystical and historical figures, these plays build upon Brechtian techniques in an attempt to provoke audiences to think dialectically. Brechtian dialectical techniques provide useful ways to invite spectators to contemplate the ethical challenges of a post-9/11 world, a time of heightened patriotism, securitarianism and 'terror'.

Both *Homebody/Kabul* and *Only We* develop innovative aesthetics that update the Brechtian techniques of *Verfremdungseffekt*, historicization and *gestus* in their attempts to politicize twenty-first-century spectators. While Kushner's political position is clearly anti-war and anti-Republican, *Homebody/Kabul* and *Only We*'s formal qualities do not invite simplistic answers. Instead they provoke more complex questions around the ethics of war and its civilian victims and, in so doing, they open up platforms for the creation of what Rancière calls communities of dissensus. *Homebody/Kabul* and *Only We* offer a dialectical rather than didactic view of Afghanistan–Western and Iraq–America relations using theatrical forms that borrow from and build upon Brecht's Marxist-inspired aesthetic.

## Notes

1. *Angels in America* was made into an HBO television miniseries by director Mike Nichols in 2003 starring Al Pacino, Meryl Streep, Emma Thompson, Jeffrey Wright and others.
2. The play is dedicated to 'my dear friend Kika Markham, who asked me for a monologue'.
3. Once Bush became President, Laura Bush started the National Book Festival (2001) with a free day of storytelling sessions and tours of the libraries of Congress and conversations with popular American authors (Caroli 2010, 319) as well as forming the Laura Bush Foundation for America's Libraries. Laura Bush is also believed to be the driving force behind the 'No Child Left Behind Act' which was passed by Congress in 2001 and ensured higher funding for state schools. Funds distributed to the Institute for Museum and Library Services also increased by 25 per cent in the first four years of the Bush administration (Kessler 2006, 154).

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CHAPTER 5

# The Théâtre du Soleil's *Le Dernier Caravansérail*

French theatre company the Théâtre du Soleil, led by Ariane Mnouchkine, have been making political theatre and staging political protests since the company's inception in 1964. Since then, the Théâtre du Soleil have collectively devised works that respond to national and international political issues by developing aesthetics that draw upon a range of European and Asian performance traditions. In the post-9/11 period, the company turned their focus to refugees from different parts of the globe and the contradictions they face when attempting to seek asylum in Western democratic nations.

This chapter focuses on *Le Dernier Caravansérail* (2003), created by the Théâtre du Soleil collective, directed by Ariane Mnouchkine with text by feminist, poet and philosopher Hélène Cixous. Examining the play's politico-aesthetic practices, including self-reflexivity, episodic structure and *gestic* scenery, I argue that the work estranges the notion of 'hospitality' as constructed in the national rhetoric of the liberal democratic nations of France and Australia. In *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, the Théâtre du Soleil develops a Brechtian dialectical aesthetic in its depiction of the contradictions of Western human rights protections. These contradictions are reinforced by the company's self-conscious problematization of its own Westernized reconstruction of refugee testimonials or what might be considered the company's post-Brechtian 'epistemological uncertainty'.

*Le Dernier Caravansérail* is a theatrical response to a number of Western governments' treatment of asylum seekers fleeing persecution and



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conflict. The work was performed following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, a historical moment when the global media was adopting much of President G. W. Bush's terminology on 'terror'. Consequently, it was a time when Western attitudes towards foreign others were hostile and suspicious, particularly in the case of refugees from the Middle East. The Théâtre du Soleil develop new ways to estrange habitual mainstream media representations of refugees and create an ethical model for theatre hospitality in a securitarian and paranoid post-9/11 context.

In 2015 the Théâtre du Soleil company was made up of 87 people, including the director, actors, technicians, costume designers, management, caretakers and administration. The troupe currently includes members representing 19 different nationalities with 17 different first languages. The company's multiculturalism and Mnouchkine's interest in non-Western theatrical forms has generated aesthetic innovation in each new performance the company produces. No single aesthetic tradition dominates or restricts the company's development; rather, both Western and Eastern performance traditions are frequently referenced in the mise-en-scène or acting styles of a single production.

Since Bharucha drew attention to the Western 'appropriation' of Asian aesthetic forms and problematic representations of the non-Western other (1993), the performances created by the Théâtre du Soleil are often criticized by Western theatre scholars. The company's work is frequently labelled Eurocentric, Orientalist and culturally imperialist by theatre theorists including Rustom Bharucha (1993), Marvin Carlson (1996), Carol Sorgenfrei (2002), Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo (2007). These criticisms often overshadow the significant ways in which the company's transcultural aesthetics contribute to public debates about important global issues such as war, ethnic cleansing, refugees and asylum seekers. Given the protean and fluid nature of cultural flows across national borders in a globalized world, this chapter considers the relationship between aesthetics and ethics by focusing on the company's interest in the urgent humanitarian dilemmas of refugee resettlement and mass migration.

## The Brechtian Legacy

The Théâtre du Soleil's artistic practice is overtly motivated by a 1960s idealism that art can intervene socially and politically and provide a catalyst for real-world change. As the company describes in the programme notes to the 1975 production of *l'Age d'Or*:

> We want to reinvent the rules of the game that unveil daily reality by showing it not as familiar and immutable, but as surprising and transformable. This will thus be a theatre directly taken from social reality, which is not mere observation, but rather encouragement to change the conditions in which we live.[1] (In Neuschäfer 2004)

The Théâtre du Soleil hybridizes dramatic aesthetics from foreign cultures because these diverse forms enable the company to better serve the political and ethical concerns that drive their work. Experimental forms enable the company to represent historical and contemporary socio-political relations as dynamic, contingent and potentially alterable, to show the dialectical flows of cultural exchange.

In interviews, Mnouchkine denies the influence of Brecht upon the aesthetic choices of the Théâtre du Soleil over the last 50 years. Yet, the notion of unveiling daily reality in order to reveal its transformability seems to owe a direct debt to Brechtian theatre theory. As Judith Miller writes:

> The utopian thrust of a fully egalitarian society, including the new activist spectator theorized by Louis Althusser's writings on Brecht's theatre, permeated the way in which the Soleil structured itself and imagined its public. Nevertheless, Mnouchkine, all the while positioning herself on the Left, never proclaimed herself as part of a specific political movement nor has she ever cited Bertolt Brecht as a primary inspiration for her work. (2007, 11)

Miller goes on to quote Mnouchkine as saying: 'we [the Théâtre du Soleil] were not Brechtian nor communist … We were not leftists, just "*de gauche*" [on the left], and we still are. We never obeyed any dogma' (in Miller 2007, 11). Despite Mnouchkine's disavowal of a Brechtian legacy, the company's approach to politics and dramatic aesthetics seem 'permeated' by Brechtian techniques.

The Théâtre du Soleil formed out of Mnouchkine's earlier theatre company the ATEP – l'Association Théâtral des Etudiants Parisiens – created in 1959 by a group of young idealistic students from the Sorbonne aiming to 'explore the contemporary rapport between theatre and society' (in Miller 2007, 5). Alongside its theatrical experimentations and interest in political issues, the ATEP organized and sponsored controversial lectures by Jean-Paul Sartre, making political activism and creative production inextricable aspects of their practice.

By 1964, Mnouchkine and nine actors from the ATEP formed the company Le Théâtre du Soleil. It was not, however, until the New Leftist movement of May 1968 that the Théâtre du Soleil began to reassess the structural formation of the company and their developing aesthetics. The May 1968 protests by students, anti-Vietnam War protesters, anti-Gaullists, and strikes by industrial workers and workers in the service and communication industries, disrupted and transformed France. Cultural institutions such as the Odéon theatre that housed the bourgeois theatre of 'high art' became symbols of political and social conservatism that encouraged artists to rethink the relationship between art and politics, performance and political activism. On 16 May 1968, militant protesters occupied the Odéon theatre, declaring it the symbolic centre of bourgeois culture (Bredeson 2008, 173). Many theatre companies, including the Théâtre du Soleil, were radicalized by these events. As theatre historian Bettina L. Knapp explains:

> Not until May 1968, when the political ferment reached its height in France, did the Théâtre du Soleil discover its real aim: to create a new theatrical language, a fresh aesthetic, and, perhaps most important, to become politically militant. No longer would the group merely work together as a cooperative or collective experimental theatre. The Théâtre du Soleil's goal was twofold: to trigger a revolutionary spirit in those associated with the troupe and to have a lasting influence on spectators. (1995, 71)

After the events of May 1968, the Théâtre du Soleil began to reconceptualize its art as a potential instrument of change, offering spectators an experience that was entertaining as well as instructive. This shift is in parallel with Brecht's efforts 'to develop the means of pleasure into an object of instruction, and to convert certain institutions from places of entertainment into organs of mass communication' (1964, 42).

Also in 1968, the Théâtre du Soleil decided to stage Brecht's play *Baal*. Although the project was abandoned, Laurence Labrouche points out that the questions Brecht explores in this work around the position of the artist and the function of art in society echo Mnouchkine's curiosities in the late 1960s (1999, 51). As we will see in this chapter, the role of art and the artist in the political sphere are still concerns for the company in the twenty-first century and these tensions are built into the architecture of the performances in the company's most recent productions.

The events of 1968 inspired the Théâtre du Soleil to reorganize itself according to the egalitarian principles of an artistic collective or socialist commune. Each member of the company received an equal salary, a model that persists to this day. The troupe defined its work as 'people's theatre'. In 1968 it performed the play *La Cuisine* [*The Kitchen*] – a performance about labour and socio-economic power relations – in factories full of striking workers. In these early years, the hierarchy of writer and director was theoretically broken down by the company's emphasis on '*création collective*' – collective creation – in which 'each actor was a creator in the show' (Neuschäfer 2004, np). The idea that Théâtre du Soleil was able to maintain egalitarianism and defy the cult of the director in the long term has been thrown into doubt by the publicly acrimonious departures of famous actors from the company and their comments regarding Mnouchkine's control over the company and its work. However, the maintenance of equal salaries in an increasingly commodified Western arts industry is a notable rarity.

In order to realize the egalitarian practices of this revolutionary period and escape the commercial pressures of an inner-city environment, the Théâtre du Soleil installed themselves in a working space that maintained distance from the distractions of Paris. In 1970 Mnouchkine leased the Cartoucherie, a former ammunitions factory with a number of hangers and warehouses in the Bois de Vincennes, on the outskirts of Paris. Having a fixed space with cheap rent enabled the company to spend more time experimenting away from the frenetic and competitive Parisian theatre scene.

Furthermore, the Cartoucherie facilitates a flexible spatial design that enables the company to maintain its anti-hierarchical principles in the relationship between performance and spectators. In particular, the organization of the factory space means no proscenium arch and no numbered seating. The Cartoucherie also enables the company to realize their founding goal of escaping the trappings of commercial theatre, which is often hindered by spacial configurations and time constraints. Today, the Cartoucherie continues to be a site of political activism as well as artistic creation. Internationally renowned as a welcome house to stateless actors, writers and refugee groups, the Cartoucherie dormitories and surrounding caravans still frequently shelter and protect individuals pushed to the margins of French society.

Throughout the theatre company's history, the Théâtre du Soleil have put into practice their socialist ethos by participating in and directing community activism. In 1973, the company created a short work for Michel Foucault's Groupe d'Informations sur les Prisons (GIP) which sought better prison conditions for inmates. Members of the troupe also signed a controversial petition for legalizing abortion that was sponsored by Simone de Beauvoir. Mnouchkine founded L'Association internationale de défense des artistes victimes de la répression dans le monde (AIDA), an organization dedicated to freeing artists who have been imprisoned for political reasons. AIDA has produced statements, sit-ins, public spectacles for artists who are suffering political discrimination or censorship such as Václav Havel, Algerian artists in the civil war, and the Argentinian *desaparecidos.*

In 1991, Mnouchkine led a 30-day hunger strike to protest against the French government's inaction over the genocide in Bosnia and in 1996 she offered the Cartoucherie as a refuge to 382 *sans papiers* who were expelled from their asylum at St Bernard Church in Paris (Miller 2007, 12). In 2005, the Théâtre du Soleil ran a three-week acting workshop in Kabul in collaboration with the Foundation for Culture and Civil Society. The French government pressured Mnouchkine to cancel the trip and refused to offer protection for the troupe on the basis that Kabul was too dangerous. The workshop went ahead due to the determination of a number of the company members, not least Mnouchkine. According to Helena Grehan, the history of the company's activism:

> adds depth to any reading of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* because it positions the work as one that is informed by a deep ethico-political commitment to the subjects and histories represented. (2009, 122)

The Théâtre du Soleil's political commitment takes the form of an ethical and compassionate attitude to subjects who are marginalized by the state. This is evident in such actions as housing the *sans papiers* at the Cartoucherie or in running theatre workshops in a war-torn city recently controlled by Taliban leaders who had punished anyone engaging in artistic practices with torture and death. The complexities of this ethical approach to political activism will be considered in this chapter in relation to the aesthetic of *Le Dernier Caravansérail.*

Just as Brecht wanted to create a theatre where intellectual curiosity becomes a form of amusement for spectators, what he called 'entertaining

learning' (1964, 80), the Cartoucherie provides an environment where learning and debate are fostered and made pleasurable. It is a site of community and education that welcomes difference in its organization of space and its celebration of multicultural diversity. The repurposing of the site – from munitions production for military industry to refugee shelter, rehearsal and performance space and bookshop – adds an ironic layer to the company's anti-war stance.

## *Le Dernier Caravansérail*

*Le Dernier Caravansérail* was first performed at the Cartoucherie in 2003 and subsequently toured major international festivals. *Le Dernier Caravansérail* was performed in Melbourne, Australia in 2005. The six-hour play was organized as an episodic patchwork of scenes that depict refugee experiences in French and Australian camps and detention centres, flashbacks to daily life in their home countries and the events that caused the refugees to flee or be sent into exile. The narratives were developed out of recorded interviews with refugees told from the camps or detention centres of Sangatte (near Calais, France),[2] Mataram (on the island of Lombok in Indonesia), Villawood (NSW, Australia) and Auckland (New Zealand). Some of the recorded refugee testimonials feature in the performance as voice-overs.

The genesis of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* took root when the Théâtre du Soleil toured their show *Tambours sur la Digue* to Australia in 2000. At the Sydney theatre where performances of *Tambours sur la Digue* were taking place, members of the company was approached by refugee advocacy group 'Free the Refugees' who informed them about the plight of refugees in detention centres in Australia. Prior to this, Mnouchkine had visited the Red Cross shelter in Sangatte, near Calais, France and was already thinking about refugee issues. According to Théâtre du Soleil actors Duccio Bellugi-Vannuccini and Shaghayegh Beheshti, the situation of refugees in Australia's detention centres provoked further research and the eventual creation of *Le Dernier Caravansérail*. Mnouchkine confirms the significance of the plight of refugees in Australian detention centres in the formulation of the play when she says in an interview:

> In May, I had gone to find Sarkaw [an actor in the Théâtre du Soleil] at Sangatte before having had the idea. Oh, perhaps unconsciously I was saying to myself: it should be around that theme. But I hadn't yet formulated

> it. The actors understood that it would be that theme in Australia. They saw me leave for Villawood [refugee detention centre] every day, they saw the state of anger and indignation in which I returned each day. (Mnouchkine in Lauwaert 2003, np)

While in Australia, the Théâtre du Soleil recorded hundreds of hours of interviews and began correspondence with detainees in Villawood detention centre, in Western Sydney. In response to the refugee testimonies and the musical scores devised by the company's composer, Jean-Jacques Lemêtre, the actors of Théâtre du Soleil workshopped these refugee narratives over a period of six months to create Part I and two months to create Part II. The final performance brought together the refugee testimonials and the artistic reconstructions derived from workshops and Hélène Cixous's writing.

The final version is divided into two parts, Part I *La Fleuve Cruel* (*The Cruel River*) and Part II *Origines et Destins* (*Origins and Destinies*). Thirty-six actors play 169 named characters and perform 62 short scenes. The verbatim voices of the actual refugees telling their stories are woven into the work. Each vignette depicts refugee experiences that range from persecution, traumatic escape attempts, torture and abduction, to the mundanity and boredom of life inside refugee camps and detention centres. They show covert meetings between lovers and the trafficking of women for prostitution, foiled and successful escape attempts; hope and hopelessness. The stories portray greed and corruption at all social levels, from the hierarchies of power within the camps and the people smugglers through to the hostility of an Australian judge processing an asylum seeker's claim for refugee status and human rights protection.

## Brechtian Episodes: From the Particular to the Universal

The action of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* follows no clear linear or teleological narrative. Fragmented stories cut across one another and move haphazardly through space and time in an episodic structure. The narratives rapidly shift location from Moscow, Tehran, Kabul, Chechnya, Kurdistan, Serbia, London, Calais, Australia, and unspecified locations in Africa and central Asia. The episodic structure of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* suggests an engagement with history and time as a dialectical process or zigzag

movement. Similar to Brecht's episodes, the performance abruptly shifts between these truncated vignettes. The audience is offered moments of intimate connection to the narratives of suffering, violence or hope, and yet is also denied a sustained engagement with these stories (some of the narratives are never resolved or revisited).

Brian Singleton describes the effect of the episodic structure as a technique that avoids the audience's close identification with the refugee other in a way that facilitates critical distance for spectators. He praises Mnouchkine's ability to avoid Orientalist depictions 'by not giving her subjects specific identities, by only representing them momentarily so there is no time for empathy and identification' (2007, 30). Singleton's enthusiasm for a dramatic form that creates subjects with non-specific identities and encourages a lack of spectator empathy attests to the ongoing influence of Brecht's critique of Aristotelian catharsis. However, the concept of having 'no time for empathy' is particularly paradoxical in *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, a work created in response to subjects who are too often represented anonymously or homogeneously in public discourse, who are what Rancière calls 'the uncounted, or part of those who have no part' (2010, 33), the invisible and the voiceless.

Singleton's comment does not take into account the dialectical effect of the play's episodic structure. The short scenes invite spectators into an intimate engagement with the characters and events. Simultaneously they minimize the possibility of this empathy turning into catharsis and thus an excuse for spectators not to act in the face of the injustices represented. Singleton's admiration for what he sees as Mnouchkine's attempt to create dis-identification sits at odds with the idea that refugee subjects are those that most need Western spectators' identification, humanization and compassion. In the performance context of the 'War on Terror' – a time when refugee or migrant others are often conflated with terrorists or fundamentalists, and thus frequently vilified or feared – a form that aims to provoke spectator empathy without catharsis is particularly apt.

Rather than the narrative structure distancing spectators from the refugee subjects, I suggest that the episodes complicate rational and teleological approaches to time and history. Temporal chronology is inverted in *Le Dernier Caravansérail* to show the contingency and precarity of human experience. Part I depicts traumatic journeys across oceans, rivers and land as well as life in the camps and detention centres. Part II shifts the focus back to the origins – the causes of geographic displacement, escape or exile. The episodic structure works, as in the Brechtian dialectic, not to make

spectators see characters as pure abstractions, but, rather, to historicize their behaviour and experiences. This historicization makes the individual refugee predicaments more understandable to spectators. The technique equally distances audiences from the possibility of passively consuming these compelling narratives. As such, the layering of stories in *Le Dernier Caravansérail* represents history as a series of complex and contradictory movements that emphasize the contingency of human behaviour.

Reviewer *E. Teresa* Choate observes that the lack of chronology in *Le Dernier Caravansérail* and its fast-paced movement from one scene to the next gives the audience a parallel experience of refugee migration, one of confusion, frustration and the disorientation of an itinerant existence (2006, 95). This is particularly true of the scenes repeated numerous times. These include foiled escape attempts from Sangatte that depict refugees cutting holes in fences and waiting to jump aboard a moving train, only to be discovered by the authorities and forced back into the camps. Such scenes become tedious in a way that parallels the experiences of refugees who are forced to wait long periods for their claims to be processed, living in a state of limbo and insecurity while the country in which they seek shelter and protection decides on the legitimacy of their claim to asylum.

Théâtre du Soleil actor Shaghayegh Beheshti describes the structure of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* as a montage of 'frescos of individual experiences' (Stevens 2012), a description that evokes Brechtian episodes. Beheshti explains that when the Théâtre du Soleil interviewed the asylum seekers, they asked them for concrete stories, such as their experience of fleeing their home or the smells they missed from their native country. Beheshti describes these narratives as 'the depths of a moment' (Stevens 2012). She explains that while many refugees wanted to tell the history of their country or vent their frustrations at the political conditions that had caused them suffering, persecution and loss, the Théâtre du Soleil interviewers tried to insist that the narratives be 'non-ideological', that is to say, non-partisan. Beheshti explains that the refugee stories chosen for re-enactment in the final performance were selected for their focus on the minutiae of personal experience. By contrast, narratives that wanted to 'educate' were not included in the performance. According to Beheshti, the Théâtre du Soleil worked with the refugees to develop 'a human scale, not a political scale'(Stevens 2012). The emphasis on the 'non-ideological' suggests that the company sought to avoid a singular or reductive 'message' in *Le Dernier Caravansérail.*

As we have seen, Rancière mocks the pedagogical model as an anachronistic mode for art to speak to contemporary political issues. In *Le Dernier Caravansérail* this model is explicitly avoided. Instead the chosen aesthetic aims to produce what Baheshti calls the 'profundity of a moment' (Stevens 2012), or what Rancière might call 'an intensity of feeling' (2009, 14). In *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, the Théâtre du Soleil depicts affective experiences that humanize the refugees rather than exploiting their narratives for a particular ideological end. Despite the non-ideological emphasis, the form of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* does not suggest a relativist view of human relations. On the contrary, the work is clearly sympathetic towards asylum seekers and critical of the Australian and French governments' treatment of refugees.

## From Invisibility to Hypervisibility

Théâtre du Soleil's mode of interviewing detained asylum seekers and editing the collected material raises ethical questions about the power relations in this exchange. The company's decision not only to re-enact the stories conveyed but also to play some of the audio recordings of the refugee testimonials in the performance allowed the refugees to speak for themselves. This seems to be an attempt to redress the power imbalance in the research process. Playing refugee testimonials in the show draws attention to their absent bodies. This dialectical tension between the authentic voices highlighted the glaring absence of asylum-seeker bodies in the performance and in Australia at large.

In the rhetoric of extreme right-wing xenophobic parties such as Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party (ONP) in Australia or Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front (FN) in France, refugees are commonly portrayed as a threat to the security of the nation state, people who must be managed and vigilantly controlled. In Australia, this punitive deterrent system for those seeking asylum works through offshore processing centres located in Pacific islands such as Christmas Island or Nauru, or in detention centres located in remote areas, exemplified in the Curtin Detention Centre in the remote Kimberleys in Western Australia. Australian political parties on both sides of the political spectrum have a history of hiding refugee bodies and suppressing refugee voices in the public sphere.

Jonathan Foye and Paul Ryder describe this treatment of asylum seekers as an 'out-of-sight, out-of-mind' approach to immigrants (2011, 4). They argue that it dates back to the eugenics programmes inflicted on

Indigenous people by white settlers and the White Australia Policy for immigration (1901–73) (Foye and Ryder 2011, 4), both of which aimed to conceal any physical signs of difference. Joanne Tompkins points out that the physical concealment of asylum-seeker bodies pushes these already vulnerable and marginalized subjects to the periphery of the nation's social imaginary (2006, 110).

The disembodied voices of refugees in *Le Dernier Caravansérail* highlight the predicament of refugee participation in democratic life and the success of Western nation states in policing who is recognized as a political subject and thus able to participate in democratic processes. In the play, the conspicuous absence of the bodies of the interviewed subjects highlighted the fact that their stories and bodies had been excluded from the national imaginary, particularly in the performance contexts of France and Australia. In the filmed version of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* the Théâtre du Soleil actors sit in silhouette as a means to embody the absent bodies that correspond to the voices, encouraging a more attentive listening to the refugee voices by having fewer visual distractions. This strategy allowed the 'profundity of a moment' or what Rancière calls the 'intensity of feeling' to be more readily accessible to spectators.

In their work on cosmopolitanism, Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo describe the refugee figure as: 'Others whose presence at the borders of the nation has been marked by both hypervisibility and invisibility and whose access to cross-cultural dialogue has been severely limited' (2007, 189). In Australia, refugee hypervisibility within the public sphere is notable in the frequent appearance of refugee and asylum-seeker issues in mainstream media debate where refugees are denied comment on the reported events. Asylum-seeker hypervisibility in the media uses rhetoric that often describes them as 'queue jumpers' and 'boat people', terms that refer to those who arrive by boat rather than by aeroplane. Such terms attempt to delegitimize these subjects and their right to asylum by implying that they have not come through the officially sanctioned modes of seeking asylum. In *Le Dernier Caravansérail* some refugees are offered new channels through which to have their stories heard, to be represented in Western cultural life through another highly mediated form, albeit a more sympathetic and partisan intermediary than much mainstream media.[3]

Rancière defines genuine political speech firstly as the right to be heard and, secondly, as the ability to express an alternative view to the consensus of the dominant order. Since asylum seekers exist in a liminal state of non-citizenship or belonging until their claims to asylum are approved,

their voices are not considered legitimate and thus they have no access to what Rancière would consider genuine political subjectivity and the associated freedoms of speech and fair representation. The asylum seekers in Australian detention centres who sew their lips shut in protest and go on hunger strikes offer the most visceral images of this denial of a legitimate voice. Such an act is a performance of precarity for the media and an attempt to gain public sympathy by drawing attention to refugee exclusion from cross-cultural discourse. Although *Le Dernier Caravansérail* does not re-enact this performative gesture (though Cixous mentions it in the programme notes), the work foregrounds similar ethical questions around what is rendered legitimately visible and sayable with regards to refugees in the climate of 'terror'. In its formal choices, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* stages the tension between access to representation and the recognition of legitimate speech acts within nations that claim universal freedom of speech and association as core democratic rights and freedoms.

## A Unity of Opposites: Verbatim and Stylization

Unlike the Théâtre du Soleil's previous work, *Tambours sur la Digue*, whose cross-cultural mode of presentation drew upon the influence of Noh, Kabuki, Chinese puppetry, Vietnamese water puppetry, Korean Samulnori and P'ansori, and Japanese Bunraku, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* references various Eastern aesthetics but lacks a dominant influence informing the work. Instead, it employs a mixture of naturalist and non-naturalistic acting, stylized movement, Oriental costuming and puppetry. Detailed realist sets and props such as the inside of a Red Cross medical caravan are contrasted with the depiction of the river that divides Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan made of billowing blue silk. In some cases, minimalist spaces under dim lighting require the audience to imagine absent scenery and props. It is a cross-cultural aesthetic that lacks roots, similar to the subjects represented in the play. In *Le Dernier Caravansérail*'s depiction of multiracial identities and cross-cultural flows, the representational form and style are so eclectic that the work's aesthetic resists straightforward categorization.

The use of refugee testimonials in the work might suggest that the play is better categorized as verbatim theatre or documentary theatre. According to Caroline Wake's definition, verbatim theatre is performance that uses live interviews as its basis of construction (2010, 2) and documentary theatre foregrounds its research practices and draws upon statistical analysis (2010, 7). Wake notes that verbatim theatre

aims to give a voice to people who are ordinarily denied a voice, to feed back into the communities from which the interviews are taken and to strongly emphasize the processes of constructing the work (2010, 3–5).

Wake argues that verbatim theatre coincides with the decline of journalism as a medium that can reliably report the 'truth' because it raises questions regarding authorship, authenticity, reality and ethics (2010, 19). David Lane ascribes similar reasons to the rise of documentary theatre in Britain when he writes that it develops out of:

> The failures of the media to faithfully report events without manipulating evidence, and the repeated failures of hallowed institutions – the police, the army and the government – to conduct themselves with integrity were a significant contributory factor. (2010, 61)

The significance of the use of verbatim or documentary dramaturgy to convey refugee stories suggests a desire to return to authentic voices, not for pedagogical reasons, but, rather, to better understand refugee experiences outside their normative or state-sanctioned portrayals in the mainstream media.

The erasure of refugee voices is both underscored and challenged in *Le Dernier Caravansérail* through its use of some primary research materials in performance. The traumas represented by the actors in the work sit in dialectical tension with the aural testimonies of refugee experiences that return the narratives to their point of origin. The contrast between the modes of these representations is deliberately stark, creating a *Verfremdungseffekt* in the delineation between authentic voices and dramatic re-enactments.

The Théâtre du Soleil's melange of detailed naturalism and extreme theatricality has been a feature of their work for decades. Kiernander describes the formal tension in an earlier work when he writes:

> This kind of apparent contradiction is common in any attempt, in the late twentieth century at least, to create theatre which is simultaneously serious and popular, and which seeks to avoid the dangers of rarefied elitism on the one hand, and of cynical and superficial sensationalism on the other … this apparent inconsistency is an attempt to find a synthesis of the problem. (1993, 28)

For Kiernander, the Théâtre du Soleil's deliberate clash of two contradictory forms that attempt to create a 'synthesis', a term commonly used to denote the temporary resolution of opposites in the Hegelian dialec-

tic, suggests an attempt to convey the seriousness of the subject matter without creating a sensationalized depiction of events. Yet, contrary to the 'synthesis' that Kiernander describes in an earlier play, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* seems to develop and proliferate rather than resolve contradictions. The stories of refugee persecution, struggles, voyages, hardships and homelessness, as they are represented in *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, are not rounded off with a neat solution to each complex set of problems.

## Exposing the Hypocrisies of Western Hospitality

The rhetorical binaries of 'us' and 'them' adopted by President G. W. Bush and his administration in relation to the 'War on Terror', and parroted by much of the mainstream Western media, are challenged in *Le Dernier Caravansérail* by the work's epic length as well as the number of characters and stories it represents. The length of the work places demands on the spectator's concentration through a depth of intimacy with its characters and the complexities of their plights that contrasts with the sound bites of infotainment journalism and its often superficial or monolithic representations of asylum seekers.

In France, the timing of the performances of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* coincided with political debates over the conditions of Sangatte refugee camp. The Sangatte camp was opened in 1999 to deal with increasing numbers of immigrants trying to reach Britain via the French side of the Channel Tunnel, but the camp's appalling living conditions and severe overcrowding led to its closure in 2003. In *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, Sangatte is represented in claustrophobic spaces, sterile interiors with rudimentary facilities and barbed-wire fences. It is a place of loneliness and fear, where women are forced to prostitute themselves in order to pay the bribes to aid their escape from the camp, and where refugees risk their lives by throwing themselves onto the roof of a moving train that passes by Sangatte and through the Channel Tunnel into England.

The play depicts the Red Cross trying to maintain order and safety in Sangatte, yet it also shows how the black market inside the camp operates outside the French legal system. In one episode set in Sangatte, a middle-aged refugee male is caught pimping a young female refugee. When he is discovered by the Red Cross workers and threatened with arrest he chuckles and yells in English: 'France! Human Rights! Democracy! What do you want of me?' The pimp highlights the contradiction between the French Republic's philosophical foundations in *La Declaration des droits de l'homme et de citoyen* – with its insistence on the principles of liberty,

equality and fraternity – and its application in Sangatte where such principles are suspended or withheld. What the pimp's predicament demonstrates is that human rights are not extended to those who are not already citizens of France, that it is not a 'universal' declaration at all. Furthermore, *Le Dernier Caravansérail*'s depiction of the exploitation and hardship suffered by refugee women in particular exposes France's promised rights and protections as even less accessible to those who fall outside the category of 'man'. In the episode set in Sangatte, the pimp's rhetorical 'what do you want of me?' highlights the contradiction at the very core of France's republican history, exposing the vulnerability and precarity of refugee subjects in camps that refuse to ensure that refugees have access to fundamental human rights.

The tour of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* to Australia in 2005 strongly resonated with political debates around the controversial immigration policies of the government of the day under the leadership of Prime Minister John Howard (1996–2007). Part II, *Origines et Destins*, focuses on the intimidation and cruelty of Australia's treatment of asylum seekers, despite Australia being a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The opening scene depicts a sinking boat of refugees on the verge of drowning in Australian waters. The refugees become ecstatic at the sight of a helicopter filled with Australian defence forces who they believe are there to rescue them and take them to safety. The defence forces, however, refuse to help the refugees. Instead they insist that the asylum seekers turn their boats around, shouting through megaphones 'You are not welcome in Australia.'

This depiction of inhospitality in the play refers to the real-life events that occurred just outside of Australian waters in 2001 when a Norwegian boat, the MV *Tampa*, rescued 438 refugees but was refused entry into Australian waters and was boarded by Australian Special Forces (ASF) when it attempted to bring the refugees to safe land. The opening scene of Part II reminds Australian audiences of the Australian government and ASF's treatment of asylum seekers. In the scenes that follow, this inhumane response to vulnerable people is made more abhorrent through the staging of the causes that compel refugees to reluctantly and desperately flee their homelands. This contradiction becomes clearer still in the performance context of the work in Australia in 2005. At this time, the Australian public was more aware of Australian troops' participation in the 'War on Terror' and thereby Australia's contribution to further destabilizing the fragile socio-economic and political conditions in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The critique of Australian attitudes towards the inhospitable treatment of refugees is further explored in a later scene in Part II, set in 2001. The scene depicts a tribunal's inquiry into the legitimacy of a claim made by an Iraqi refugee, Salahaddin Al Bassiri. The Australian judge, conducting the interview via teleconference from Melbourne, infers that Al Bassiri is making a false claim for refugee status given that his original testimony was not entirely consistent with his subsequent asylum plea. As Al Bassiri explains to the prosecutor in Farsi:

> During the first interview I was very tired. The boat had been adrift for 18 days. I was having a lot of difficulty speaking. The woman said: 'You can give a brief summary.' It's in the registration paper, you can verify it. She said to me 'You can leave out what you like or don't like.' I don't know anymore. The persecution of my family for example.[4] (*Le Dernier Caravansérail* (*Odyssées*) 2006)

The judge's insistence on Al Bassiri's initial account, her inability to pronounce his name, her inflexibility with regards to altering the names and dates recorded in the original report and her unwillingness to allow Al Bassiri to add pertinent details to his testimony, depicts the Australian legal system as bureaucratic, unsympathetic and unjust. It highlights a contradiction between the Australian justice system's contemptuous treatment of an Iraqi and the Australian government's large commitment of troops to aid in the overthrow of the dictator Saddam Hussein two years later, framed as a war to bring 'freedom' to Iraqis.

The episodes depicting life in Sangatte, the sinking boat in Australian waters and Al Bassiri's trial estrange the promised freedoms of liberal democratic nations, the hypocrisy in refusing human rights protections to the world's most vulnerable people and the brutal treatment endured by asylum seekers in the West. By highlighting these contradictions *Le Dernier Caravansérail* challenges spectators to approach the Western promise of 'universal' human rights with scepticism.

## The 'Unity of Opposites': Hosting the Other

Through its depiction of the hardship of migration, detention or resettlement, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* highlights a contradiction between the democratic and humanitarian values of hospitality and freedom upon which the West is constructed in the cultural imaginary. Cixous highlights

this contradiction in an essay that appeared in the French programme notes of *Le Dernier Caravansérail*. She notes that the term '*l'hospitalité*', or as French philosopher Jacques Derrida renamed it in 1996, *l'hostipitalité*, denotes two contradictory elements: welcome and hostility (Cixous 2016, 38). Cixous explains that when the noun '*l'hôte*' is used in conjunction with the masculine gender it describes the host, the welcomer, as in English. Accompanied by a feminine article, however, *l'hôte* refers to the invited guest to be hosted.

In French, the 'h' functions as a vowel which truncates the indefinite article and thus hides the gender of the word, and, with it, conceals the distinction between these two contrary meanings. The dialectical pull between the thing and its opposite, the host and the guest, is further complicated by the French term '*hostis*', which describes the foreign enemy of a nation. As Cixous points out, language can blur the distinction between those who give and those who receive, making it difficult to distinguish between the native host and the foreigner.

In another essay, 'Our Hosts', Cixous extends the metaphor of hospitality and refuge by drawing attention to the reciprocal relationship between actors hosting the narratives of the other and the generosity of the refugees who entrust these actors to 'host', embody and retell their stories. She poses the questions:

> Who are these refugees that our actors welcome into their soul and their body? Who stay for a fleeting moment in one caravanserai or another? Who are they that welcome our actors into their memory and their future? (Cixous 2016, 42)

These questions ask spectators to consider who is welcoming/hosting who in the performance of *Le Dernier Caravansérail*. Cixous's descriptions of the Théâtre du Soleil actors taking on the 'foreign' body of a partly fictional character suggest that character embodiment and the act of recounting the narrative of the foreign refugee subject is a form of hospitality. Furthermore, the ambiguity evoked by the term's resonance with both hospitality and hostility highlights Cixous's post-Brechtian 'epistemological uncertainty'.

Cixous's suggestion that the action of hosting the other occurs not only in the body of the actor but also in their soul, adds a further ethical dimension to the all-embracing act of 'welcome' through embodied performance. Cixous shows that this emptying out of the self works in two

directions. From one angle, the actor's embodiment of the other becomes an act of generosity and openness, an emptying out of the self and refilling with the soul of the other. From another angle, it might be viewed as a form of appropriation, a colonizing of the foreign body by the privileged Western subject that adds to a long history of French colonization.

Cixous asks whether it is the actors who find shelter by disguising themselves as other(s) or whether it is the other who takes refuge in the body and voices of the actor when they are denied that refuge in the nations in which they apply for asylum. Cixous's description of the refugee who welcomes actors 'into their memory and their future' suggests an act of generosity and precarity on the part of the asylum seekers. While this hospitality may not necessarily be reciprocated by the nation in which they seek asylum, the relationship of mutual trust and vulnerability that Cixous sets up in her semantic play suggests that this hospitality can be reciprocated and practised in the theatre.

Yet, the Théâtre du Soleil actors' hospitality extends beyond their hosting of the refugee stories. It is even more apparent in the egalitarian structure of the company as well as the performance space and its relationship to 'les hôtes', the invited spectators. Similar to Brecht who aimed to create a theatre environment that attracted the working classes: 'the sort of people who just come for fun and don't hesitate to keep their hats on in the theatre' (Brecht 1964, 14), the theatregoing experience at the Cartoucherie, and the construction of its touring performance spaces, are designed to foster community and political discussion. The Théâtre du Soleil embodies the networks of migration that it performs but also operates within such networks thanks to Mnouchkine's casting choices and the multicultural diversity of the company.

This hospitality towards outsiders is also evident in the Théâtre du Soleil's treatment of its spectator publics. At the performances of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* at the Cartoucherie and at the Royal Melbourne Exhibition Building in Melbourne, spectators were invited to sample exotic food, cooked by cast members or refugees living in Paris or Melbourne, listen to music being played on traditional Eastern instruments and study a large map on the wall marked with arrows showing the routes taken by the refugees represented in the work. For each performance, as for most of the Théâtre du Soleil shows, Mnouchkine stands at the door of the show, greeting spectators, handing out programmes and collecting tickets. In the foyer, the Théâtre du Soleil provided source materials and relevant

books on refugees for the audience's perusal as well as exhibiting refugee poetry taken from the walls of detention centres.

The hospitality extended to the spectators is demonstrated by everyone in the company, including the actors, who emerge at the interval in full costume and make-up to serve food and drink. Furthermore, the Théâtre du Soleil's use of the Cartoucherie as a shelter for people seeking refuge stands in contrast to the depiction of Australia and France's housing of refugees in *Le Dernier Caravansérail*. These actions of service and hospitality are integral to the company's ethos of community and bring out the dialectical relations between abstract theory and real-world political action.

In the essay 'Hospitality', first published in the programme notes to the performance of *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, Cixous reminds readers that in Kantian philosophy, hospitality should be universally available to all human beings, without exception. In spite of a desire for such unconditional hospitality, Cixous concedes, '*Hospitality* in reality, and every way we live it, is always and immediately *conditional*' (2016, 40). Cixous strives for a hospitality that offers both a roof and a self (two words that are homonyms in French, *le toit* et *le toi*) without expecting something in return or feeling smugly self-satisfied. She argues that theatre is a place for thinking about the limitations of hospitality when she writes:

> In this today, Theatre, like Philosophy, searches in order to understand what has happened to the hospitality that came from the Bible or from the Greeks, what is happening to it, what will happen to it, what we can want to elaborate on in new ethical attitudes and by new juridical and political devices. (Cixous 2016, 40)

Cixous's allusion to 'new ethical attitudes' suggests that theatre, in particular a work such as *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, can potentially redefine how we think about hosting asylum seekers and the legal and political practices that limit our capacity to enact a compassionate response. By revealing the contradictions in the principles of liberty, equality and fraternity upon which Western nation states are constructed in their national mythologies, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* strives to offer a praxis for realizing hospitality on a national scale.

In the essay 'Hospitality', Cixous claims that remaking the self can only occur through an encounter with 'l'étranger', a word that means either 'stranger', 'outsider' or 'foreigner'. Rather than trying to remake the other in the image of the self or self-same, Cixous challenges artists and specta-

tors alike to remake themselves *as* the stranger, to assert the right to be an other. Cixous's use of the term 'l'étranger' recalls Brecht's estrangement, a *Verfremdungseffekt* that occurs at the moment of encounter with the other, with the non-habitual. *Le Dernier Caravansérail*'s representation of the other in a new and strange light enables spectators to avoid collapsing that other into the self or turning it into the self-same, thereby dissolving that other's singularity. Instead it challenges spectators to remake the self with greater compassion, hospitality and openness to the possibility of the other within the self and recognize the self within the other.

## The *Gestus* of Unsteady Ground

The displacement of the refugee figure and their precarious relationship to space and time in countries where they experience war, persecution or seek asylum is evocatively represented in the staging of *Le Dernier Caravansérail*. The refugee camp, detention centre or court room are all liminal spaces of anxious waiting and uncertainty, as well as places where the social hierarchies of power are most visible. Brecht's notion of *gestus* is useful for thinking about the aesthetic representations of these spatial and social relations in *Le Dernier Caravansérail*. Remembering that Brecht explains *gestus* as the expression of a fundamental attitude in words or actions (1964, 42) and Meg Mumford calls *gestus* a 'socially encoded expression', where comportment demonstrates a socially conditioned relation to time, space and a thinking body (2009, 53–4), the positioning and movement of the represented refugee bodies in *Le Dernier Caravansérail* captures the socio-political precarity of refugee lives and their comportment as the twenty-first-century underclass.

The sense of uncertain political subjectivity and fraught social relations are accentuated through the use of moving scenery in the performance. Many characters in the play enter and exit the stage riding on top of dollies, *chariots* in French, that are wheeled and manipulated by other members of the cast. These *chariots* resemble ancient Greek theatre's *ekkyklema*, which were staging devices that were used to expose a catastrophic tableau of violence or death. As John Lahr points out, in *Le Dernier Caravansérail* the bodies riding the *chariots* look as though they are floating, phantasmagoric, giving the work a surreal and mythic quality that breaks through the naturalistic frame (2005, 88). To put this into Brechtian terms, the Théâtre du Soleil actors' attempts to find equilibrium

on the moving boards physicalizes *gestically* the psychological and literal rootlessness of the refugee figures they represent.

Patricia Krus describes the *chariots* as embodying a relationship to time and space that mirrors refugee dislocation from the past and their unsteady movement towards a future with limited opportunities (2007, 126). The actors riding the *chariots* adopt a stance that highlights their precarity as they attempt to maintain their balance atop the moving boards. The *gestus* of this balancing act emphasizes their social condition as stateless and denationalized bodies. The movement of the *chariot* abstracts the vast geographical cross-cultural flows of refugee migration into a smaller component part. Following a Benjaminian reading of *gestus*, the *chariots* are objects in movement that distil or slow down the flows of living in flux by confining them to a single moment. This *gestus* stages the precarity of refugees' lives as they travel in the unreliable transportation of flimsy boats on wild seas, in shipping containers or crammed among livestock in the backs of trucks.

Barnett describes Brecht's *gestus* as that which allows the body to be in constant dialogue with its environment and reveals things about its relationship to the larger scheme of things (2011, 339). Thinking about *gestus* in this way makes the *chariots* function as dual signifiers. Firstly, they provide a metaphorical image of the lack of control refugees have over their destinies. While the refugees are moving, always in flux, searching for what they hope will be the last caravanserai, the final place of welcome, they are never in control of where this movement will take them. The *chariots* are pushed across the large stage in each scene but the movement is always fleeting as the *chariots* are brought to a stop often in claustrophobic corners of the stage representing detention-centre cabins, photo booths, boat decks or tunnels. The *chariots* place the marginalized bodies in physical positions of disempowerment in which they are forced to negotiate dangerous or uncomfortable spaces.

Secondly, in their similarity to the Greek *ekkyklema* – which brought dead bodies or their ghosts on stage – the *chariots* create a metaphor for the way in which asylum seekers are often perceived as spectres in the Western cultural imaginary, haunting the security of the West. Performance theorist William McEvoy claims that the *chariots* could be read as representing migrant characters as pawns, moved around the political and media stage (2006, 223). The ways in which they are manipulated by other members of the Théâtre du Soleil, with the controller of the *chariots* switching between scenes, raises self-reflexive questions about the nature of power

and manipulation by the theatre company and the performance itself. They further highlight the tenuous position of the Théâtre du Soleil company members in devising, writing about and performing refugee stories.

## Showing the Means of Production and Aestheticizing Violence

The self-reflexivity of the *chariots* visibly pushed by actors is not the only metatheatrical element in *Le Dernier Caravansérail*. As in Brechtian theatre, where musicians were put on stage in full view of the audience rather than hidden in the orchestra pit, the Théâtre du Soleil actors and musicians are visible throughout the performance through a scrim at the side of the stage where they change costumes and work as stagehands. The metatheatrical element is a common feature of Théâtre du Soleil performances and a legacy of epic theatre's insistence on showing the footlights. It is a strategy that is central to breaking down hierarchies between spectators and performers by openly exposing what Rancière calls 'the structure of domination and subjection' (2009, 13) that exists in realist proscenium-arch theatre. The Théâtre du Soleil's use of metatheatricality reminds spectators of the ideological influences that shape ways of seeing and behaving on and off stage and implicates the spectators in the events represented.

Yet, in *Le Dernier Caravansérail* the metatheatrical elements do more than challenge audiences to consider their complicity in the current plight of asylum seekers. These self-reflexive devices also create a *Verfremdungseffekt* that minimizes the possibility of aestheticizing the violence relayed in the refugee testimonials for voyeuristic or entertainment purposes. In *Le Dernier Caravansérail* the graphic scenes of female abduction into sex slavery or the Taliban's severing of the head of an Afghani woman's lover is attenuated by the deliberately artificial, stylized or hypertheatrical elements that remind spectators of the constructed framings that surround these retold narratives.

In one episode set in Serbia, a newly-wed couple ride a motorbike to their honeymoon destination with their bridesmaid in the sidecar. While the motorbike is stationary, the combination of lighting, loud, realistic sound effects of an engine revving and a video projection behind showing cars moving along a highway, gives the impression of the motorbike advancing at high speed. Another actor, dressed in black, stands behind the bike rippling the bride's veil. This enhances the illusion of movement

and creates the effect of the motorcyclists encountering a strong headwind. After a few minutes of laughing and riding, the happy couple are cut off by a truck full of men who shoot the bridesmaid dead and force the bride into their truck to be sold for prostitution. The violence enacted on the women's bodies is estranged by the anti-naturalistic qualities of the scene. Having actors manipulate the props in full view of the audience, juxtaposed against realistic sound effects and naturalistic dialogue, reminds audiences of the constructed nature of the performance and offers spectators a critical distance without irony or relativism.

Julie Salverson warns that performing testimony 'caught in an aesthetic of injury' risks reproducing hierarchies of power where the refugee becomes both victim and object of the spectacle (1999, 37, 41). The tension between the ethical imperative to represent the untold narratives of asylum seekers and the danger of embodying the other and turning their stories into a spectacle is a problem that the Théâtre du Soleil confronts in the production of *Le Dernier Caravansérail*. Although *Le Dernier Caravansérail* is a response to Western governments' unethical treatment towards refugees, it does not present its criticism without interrogating its own ethical dilemma in representing these stories in a Westernized context. In order to emphasize this contradiction, Cixous and Mnouchkine chose to represent not only the outcome but also the process of the writing and research as a part of the performance. *Le Dernier Caravansérail* self-reflexively questions the ethics of aestheticizing the refugee stories by problematizing its own attempts to communicate them. Referring to another Théâtre du Soleil play, Cixous claims that:

> spectacle first strikes, seduces, carries away, charms us, in such a way that we can forget that it's the golden and magnificent costume clothing terrible massacres. It's a paradox, but it's made to be one. (in Franke and Chazal, 1999, 161)

This comment points to Cixous's dialectical thinking through highlighting the contradiction between the aestheticized violence of art and the brutality of lived realities as well as the role theatre can play in emphasizing this paradox and being critical of its representational apparatus.

Cixous's role as company writer since 1984 has been to construct texts based on the company's research and improvisations. For *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, however, Cixous's encounter with the research material made her aware of the limitations of a conventional script. Cixous describes the confronting experience of listening to intimate and private

refugee stories and her fear that she will 'exploit the anguish of others in making theatre' (Cixous 2016, 28). Describing her attempts to create a play script out of the refugee stories she explains:

> It is here that the magical accessory enters onto the stage, whose power and future role we had not counted on: the tape-recorder. We believed we were listening to the present and for several hours sharing the bread of exodus offered by these sudden friends. But the tape-recorder will have gathered together more than just the story. The tremulous music of voices, chants, messages from timbres and sighs, the story with all its breaths, its tears, its silences, its gusts of wind, its roaring waves, the story with its own actor and poet.
>
> The story, both alive in the present moment and instantaneously eternal. (Cixous 2016, 44)

In attempting to write the stories into a script, Cixous recognized that it was not just the stories themselves that were potentially moving but also the affective qualities that emerge in the act of telling, qualities that cannot be translated into a script.

Cixous explains that the refugee stories come alive through the timbres and sighs of the voices that imbue them with authenticity and a sense of being in the present moment. In his work on verbatim theatre, Paul Brown calls the properties of speech that are unique and un-reproducible 'voiceprints' (in Wake 2010, 3). In acknowledging the value of such 'voiceprints', Cixous recognizes that the honesty and vulnerability shared in the testimonials and her privileged access to the personal histories of these 'sudden friends' made her unable to respond using the conventional theatrical medium of scriptwriting.

Unable to recode these spontaneous emotions and stories into a script, Cixous instead returned to the form of the reflective essay in order to confess to the difficulty of devising a play out of refugee testimonies. Just as her 'sudden friends' are invisible, she erases her role as playwright in order pose a series of questions. These questions frame the dialectical contradictions in the work and reflect upon and interrogate the problems of staging the traumatic stories of vulnerable people and turning them into theatre for entertainment. Some of the questions that appear in *Le Dernier Caravansérail*'s programme notes include:

> How do we not replace the speech from your mouth with my well intentioned speech?
>
> How do we not replace your foreign language with our French language?

> How do we keep your foreign language without being remiss in our politeness and hospitality towards the spectator public, our guest in the theatre?
>
> How, without understanding in words, can we still understand in our heart? (Cixous 2016, 28)

Cixous highlights the epistemological uncertainty that underpins her attempt to strike a balance between the need to represent the stories of those who are often denied a voice and the fact that, in this very act, some authenticity is inevitably lost. The questions remind French audiences of France's colonial history and the dangers of attempting to embody the foreign other or represent her in a way that is Orientalizing and patronizing, even if the intentions are good. By printing these questions in the programme, these considerations encourage spectators to adopt a critical stance in their approach, not only to the subject matter of the work, but also to the framing of the performance itself.

In these questions the act of writing takes on a performative quality. Cixous's words appear in the programme notes handwritten in fountain pen on graph paper, replete with mistakes, smudges, crossed-out words and Cixous's signature. The effect is as if the spectators have been given access to her notebook as she sat down to write the play and made privy to her thought processes. By not typing out her questions, Cixous foregrounds the *gestus* of writing by showing her privileged status as French citizen through the idiosyncratic style of handwriting taught in French schools. The self-reflexivity of the handwriting shows the dialectical tension in Cixous's work, her recoiling from the act of scriptwriting which propels her writing in different directions.

Yet, the self-reflexive programme notes also shift the traditional or colonial hierarchies of power away from the Western subject and towards the other. The same programme also published graffiti copied from the walls of Sangatte refugee camp. The graffiti is reproduced in its native language and alphabet and is handwritten and signed by its authors. Below each reflection is a translation into French written in pencil. In spite of Cixous's status as a renowned philosopher, feminist and cultural commentator of significant public influence, her markings are presented alongside those of unknown and unnamed refugees. This creates what Rancière would call a 'paratactic' arrangement, that is to say, a non-hierarchical organization of ideas (2007, 46). The text inverts traditional hierarchies of knowledge and meaning by having the translation appear in a less dominant form,

while the original text and language are privileged through the bolder representational markings. These texts highlight the tensions between this class and racial divide and invert the hierarchy of voices that are ordinarily undervalued or excluded altogether from the Western public sphere.

Cixous's performative writing becomes its own character within the story, one that sits at the margins of *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, ghosting her authorship but never able to represent the figures she wants to write about in an authentic and non-exploitative manner. In this sense, Cixous embodies or 'hosts' the other to become a self-exiled refugee, recognizing the limitations on her ability to contribute to altering what is visible and sayable in the public sphere. Her role as 'author' becomes redundant in her admission that she cannot capture the affective qualities of the 'voice-prints'. She finds herself unable to speak for the refugee without betraying the raw, direct honesty with which the refugee experience has already been communicated. It is a paradox that recognizes an ethical obligation to speak for the marginalized other and simultaneously denies her ability to further dominate these already stifled voices.

By collapsing what is traditionally considered high and low culture – by placing the words of a pre-eminent French philosopher alongside graffiti scrawled on the walls of an internment camp – as well as the inclusion of Cixous's errors and revisions, creates a sense of doubt and unease that permeates the play. It highlights the difficulty of a Western theatre company making documentary or verbatim-style theatre about persecuted individuals. *Le Dernier Caravansérail* grapples with the challenge of representing stories, and Cixous's unanswered questions in the programme notes suggest that the Théâtre du Soleil's recreations of refugee narratives can never wholly escape their imperialist origins.

This self-reflexive performance of the process of creating the work is not limited to the programme notes, but also permeates the performance. In one scene, the director, Mnouchkine, appears on stage in her role as researcher. She sits in the driver's seat of a stationary four-wheel drive with a young man. A golden voice recorder in her hand glints between the two silhouettes. The spectators are told that they are on the outskirts of Sangatte refugee camp and the year is 2001. While the young man opposite her tells his story of leaving his family and fleeing war-torn Afghanistan in order to get an education in the West, Mnouchkine listens passively, nodding her head sympathetically. When he has finished his story she maintains her silence, switches off the recording device and places it on the dashboard. Throughout this scene Mnouchkine does not pose ques-

tions or interrupt the young man's story with her own voice. Instead, she sits in a posture that suggests she is listening attentively.

Compared to Cixous, who problematizes the staging of the refugee narratives, Mnouchkine presents herself in her role of director as playing the part of passive listener. This scene seems to be a response to Cixous's question: How do we not replace the speech from your mouth with my well-intentioned speech? Yet, unlike Cixous's concerns about what is lost in the translation of these refugee stories into a performance, this scene is problematic in the way it represents the refugee story as unmediated. By depicting the story as coming directly 'from the mouth' of the refugee (played by a Théâtre du Soleil actor), it gives the work a false sense of authenticity. Mnouchkine's positioning as a seemingly impartial ear that simply relays the original story directly to the stage, masks the way in which the work was devised and shaped by the kinds of questions asked in the research phase as well as Mnouchkine's role as director of the performance. Thus there is a friction between the authenticity of what is represented on stage and the self-awareness of Cixous's programme notes that is lacking in other metatheatrical moments in the performance.

Yet, as Cixous has already made apparent, the tape-recorder also draws attention to the difficulty of retelling refugee stories in any truly 'authentic' or honest way. The episode with Mnouchkine and the young man in the car attempts to show a refugee narrative unmediated by the artistic reworking of the stories in the fabric of the performance. It provides another example of how the work invites the audience to consider the research processes that underpin the work. In this way it creates a *Verfremdungseffekt* as the spectators are driven by the incompleteness of the encounter to consider the ideological biases that might underpin Mnouchkine's unspoken questions and the hidden editing choices of the research materials for the final production.

In drawing attention to its representational processes through the content and materiality of the programme notes, the arrangement of the theatre and foyer and the performance itself, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* exposes its own vulnerability in attempting to accurately represent the absent body and silenced voice of the other. It develops what can usefully be described as a Brechtian dialectical aesthetic in its interrogation of its own right to retell the refugee narratives and its ethical obligation to do so. By exposing its own deficits, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* reinforces the company's ethical manifesto of not organizing complex and heteroge-

neous stories into fixed or closed narratives for easy consumption. Thus, despite its own hesitation, the play nevertheless attempts to represent the refugee narratives within what is a necessarily flawed or incomplete ethical gesture.

## Dialecticians or the Pleasures of Spectacle

Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo argue that Australian critics interpreted the Australian performances of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* in cultural relativist terms. They describe how Australian reviewers read the play's representations of the Australian government's violence towards refugees as non-localized and ahistorical. They note that theatre critics tended to 'position the antipodean gulag as interchangeable with refugee camps at Sangatte and other places' (2007, 205) and that 'reviews did not register the play as speaking to local asylum practices but rather as staging the ubiquity of human suffering in our times' (2007, 205). Such reactions suggest that the play was very confronting for Australian critics who felt the need to deny the specificity of the play's critique of the Australian government's response to refugees.

Gilbert and Lo's analysis posits that the Théâtre du Soleil's attempt to convey violence without aestheticization in *Le Dernier Caravansérail* fails. They describe the work's aesthetic as the 'voyeurism' of brutality:

> The show's visual appeal, much lauded by critics, turns on a collocation of images that infuse the harrowing traumas communicated by the refugee stories with the aesthetic pleasure of orientalism. Particularly resonant in this respect are the snapshots of Afghanistan elusive women in full, pale-blue burqas; a starkly beautiful burnt-out hut; the cruel Taliban, both mysterious and immediately recognizable beneath black beards and turbans. (2007, 205)

In a critique common to Théâtre du Soleil plays, Gilbert and Lo claim that *Le Dernier Caravansérail* is guilty of creating Orientalist images through the work's 'visual appeal' with its lavish costumes and make-up subsuming the company's attempts to represent the violent consequences of global conflicts. For them, the effect of the so-called Orientalist staging meant that spectators were overcome by the passive pleasures of viewing at the expense of developing an ethical response. Their claim that the work subordinates 'ethical responsiveness' is based on reviews of the show by Australian critics whose comments focused primarily on Australia's ability to attract a 'masterpiece' in the global arts market rather than on

the Australian government's treatment of refugees or Australian attitudes towards refugees arriving by boat (2007, 205). In particular, they cite theatre critic Martin Ball who claimed that the epic spectacle of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* had the effect of making 'the politics irrelevant' (in Gilbert and Lo 2007, 16). Gilbert and Lo add that the particularity of the work's critique of the Australian treatment of refugees is lost in 'the ubiquity of human suffering in our times' (2007, 205).

By contrast, Grehan addresses the potential danger that Australian audiences of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* might have felt exonerated from any need to take political action after watching a work that reinforced their own insecurities at the treatment of refugees. She argues that any Australian viewing this work could not help but be implicated in the shameful representation of Australia's inhospitable treatment towards asylum seekers (2009, 134). Grehan sees *Le Dernier Caravansérail* as a work designed to impel spectators to take action against the inhospitable actions being committed in their names (2009, 134). She argues that *Le Dernier Caravansérail* forces spectators to look to their own complicity when viewing the Western treatment of refugees when she writes:

> In a cultural context in which blame is so easily ascribed to the other (whoever that other might be), and rarely owned, this work manages not only to highlight the culpability of the West as an abstract governing body, but to locate that culpability within the body of the audience. (Grehan 2009, 117)

Grehan claims that *Le Dernier Caravansérail* generated empathy in its spectators and 'empathy is necessary in the context of a world where the refugee and the camp are often isolated, excluded or vilified' (2009, 126).

The tendency of the Australian theatre critics to disregard the potentially politicizing aspects of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* suggests their refusal to make the dialectical leap when confronted with the contradictions that the play presents. While some critics chose to focus on the spectacular and beautiful images in the performance and ignore its ethical demands, the dialectical formal qualities of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* make it difficult to deny the 'empathy' Grehan describes and its critique of spectator complicity in the Australian government's treatment of refugees. This is particularly evident when taking into account the production as a whole that includes Cixous's programme notes and reflections on the processes of researching and devising the work.

## Hosting the Inhospitable

*Le Dernier Caravansérail* explores the plight of refugees in the twenty-first century in ways that self-consciously address the problem of Eurocentrism and of aestheticizing violent and painful refugee experiences. The dialectical devices employed in the play both critique the treatment of refugees by Western nations and question the legitimacy of a Western theatre company to accurately convey the experiences of suffering and persecution. In *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, the humanity of the refugee is restored through the play's inclusion of real refugee voices.

Thematically, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* explores controversial issues of refugee displacement and Western inhospitality. Yet it is its mode of representation that encourages the kind of critical spectatorship designed to provoke spectators to hold Western governments accountable for their treatment of asylum seekers. Mnouchkine's productions often encourage spectators to situate themselves in historical processes and to restore the dialectic between the universal and the particular. Mnouchkine claims that 'if spectators can see themselves as part of a system, then they will also be able to see that history can be changed and acted upon' (in Miller 2007, 29). In this comment she suggests that if spectators can make this dialectical leap between the universal and the particular they are on the way to developing political consciousness. In *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, the Théâtre du Soleil's critique of Western hospitality is contrasted with the welcome shown to spectators of the performance at the ticket office and in the sharing of food and reading materials. *Le Dernier Caravansérail* is a work that unequivocally advocates for Western nations to treat refugees with generosity and hospitality and does so by setting an example at the theatre.

For Mnouchkine and the Théâtre du Soleil, theatre is not a place of escapism or a medium for a singular ideological agenda. Rather, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* shows how theatre can belie the dominant representations of asylum seekers as dangerous and unknowable outsiders who want to exploit the prosperity of the West. *Le Dernier Caravansérail* uses an episodic structure and *gestic* imagery to estrange the dominant discourses about the effects of war, conflict and refugee experiences, showing instances of humanity in the mundane – in the stolen kisses of two lovers interrupted by the Taliban, in the passion for films clandestinely shared between an Afghani father and his daughter before he is dragged away by

the Taliban, and in the excited phone call of children to their parents back home.

Developing a form that incorporates realism, hypertheatricality and direct testimony updates Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekte* by distancing and unsettling spectator viewing experiences. This multi-modal approach suggests that, given the complexity of social, economic and political relations today, a single representational form is an inadequate means to inspire critical thought on global issues. Instead, the form of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* develops antinomy, multiplicity and variation in an attempt to challenge spectators to question their assumptions about what is seemingly 'natural' or 'fixed' and to consider what is potentially alterable in socio-political relations both on and off the stage. The *gestus* and *Verfremdungseffekte* of Théâtre du Soleil productions continue to be remade and re-energized in *Le Dernier Caravansérail*.

By using an aesthetic that resists normalizing practices through the alienating effect of bringing the refugee voice – ordinarily at the margins of experience – to the centre, from the isolated camps and detention centres to the main stages of international arts festivals, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* sets an example for an alternative to the existing treatment of asylum seekers by Western nations. *Le Dernier Caravansérail* works against the general anonymity of refugees and highlights the humanitarian consequences of invasion and war.

The Brechtian dialectical aesthetic of *Le Dernier Caravansérail* provides a means by which to challenge a passive, voyeuristic relation between audience and performance. In drawing attention to its representational processes, through the content and materiality of the programme notes and the performance itself, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* embraces its own inevitable failure in its attempts to accurately represent the absent bodies and silenced voices of refugees in a globalized world. By exposing its own deficits in the act of telling, it reinforces the company's desire not to organize these complex and heterogeneous stories into fixed or closed narratives for easy or voyeuristic consumption but to open them out into multiple dialectical possibilities.

## Notes

All French translations are mine.

1. Sangatte was opened in 1999 by the French Red Cross as a sanctuary for refugees, mainly those from Kosovo, but it expanded beyond capacity in a way that made its conditions prison-like (Singleton 2007, 33).

2. Two significant documentary works performed in Australia around the same time as *Le Dernier Caravansérail* were also based on refugee testimony and verbatim text – Version 1.0's *A Certain Maritime Incident* (2004) and Ros Horin's *Through the Wire* (2004).
3. My translation from the French translation of the Farsi.

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CHAPTER 6

# Caryl Churchill's *Iraq.doc* and *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza*

British playwright Caryl Churchill is best known as a socialist feminist playwright who engages with philosophical and theoretical ideas in her plays. Churchill began her career writing radio plays in the 1960s, in the political climate of the Cold War. She was particularly interested in capturing the ambiance of fear and paranoia that was indicative of the Cold War historical moment in the West. With the revival of widespread anxiety during the 'War on Terror', Churchill has more recently returned to creating plays that represent globalized conflict and the pervasive threat of terror that such conflicts respond to and breed.

This chapter considers two recent plays by Churchill, *Iraq.doc* (currently unpublished but first performed in 2003) and *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (2009). Both plays are direct responses to military operations by Western powers. *Iraq.doc* responds to the Iraq War and *Seven Jewish Children* responds to the Israel Defense Forces' attack on the Gaza Strip in December 2008. I argue that these anti-war works historicize the invasions of Iraq and Palestine and invert the idea of America and Israel as the victims of terrorist acts using a post-Brechtian form that is 'no longer concerned with interpretation but association' (Barnett 2011, 337).

In these two plays, Churchill deliberately confuses the idea of victimhood through a depiction of American Republican Party members in *Iraq.doc* and Jewish adults in *Seven Jewish Children* as simultaneously occupying the roles of both victim and aggressor. I consider how Churchill makes



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what Rancière calls the 'unthinkable' and 'unsayable' idea that Western powers might be somewhat to blame for the violence inflicted on their civilian populations by terrorist others, thinkable and sayable. In so doing, I explore Churchill's use of new media to critique nationalistic discourses or state-sanctioned views of the Iraq War and the Israel–Palestine conflict and demonstrate how Churchill updates the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic for the digital age.

Churchill's plays have always dealt with political issues, particularly the politics of identity and the feminist insight that the personal is political. From the 1990s onwards, however, Churchill offers a more direct response to public political crises. Her play *Mad Forest* (1990), for example, deals with the overthrow of Romanian Communist dictator Nicolae Ceauşescu. In this work Churchill combines testimonial documentary material with folkloric characterizations of vampires and talking dogs. These othered figures function as allegories for the political bloodsucking of the nation or the fervour of violent revolutions. The mixture of realism and folklore encourages spectators to engage with the work's historicized mythopoetic form and language in order to consider the political vacuum in the post-Ceauşescu days in Romania in the early 1990s.

Likewise, the play *Far Away* (2000) responds to the civil war and genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda in the 1990s. In contrast to the testimonial research used in *Mad Forest*, *Far Away* returns to the Pinteresque dialogue that Churchill employs in her early radio plays. The absurdist form, its gaps and ellipses, unspoken implications and hidden double-meanings evoke the growing state of paranoia in the late twentieth century. The pared-back language parodies the effects of the mainstream media's representations of civil war in the 1990s and the resulting paranoia is sinister, humorous and incongruent. As theatre scholar Elin Diamond notes, the language of paranoia used in *Far Away* pre-empts the elusive threat of 'terror' evoked by the post-9/11 Western media and the rhetoric of the Bush administration in the 'War on Terror' (2009, 125, 140):

> Todd: But we're not exactly on the other side from the French. It's not as if they're the Moroccans and the ants.
>
> Harper: It's not as if they're the Canadians, the Venezuelans and the mosquitoes.
>
> Todd: It's not as if they're the engineers, the chefs, the children under five, the musicians.
>
> Harper: The car salesmen. (Churchill 2000, 36)

Churchill employs language that increasingly departs from the rational and descends into the abstract, absurd and fantastical in order to depict a society in the process of its own self-destruction. The play shows a world in which it is not only the humans at war with one another but all the creatures and biosystems are in conflict, an idea that seems less incongruous today when extreme weather, natural disasters and species extinction are more frequent occurrences.

Churchill's ability to respond, in terms of both aesthetics and thematics, to the scientific, cultural, environmental, political, economic, social and technological innovations of Western society over the latter half of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, have made her internationally renowned as a pioneer of radical theatre and innovative form. While she does not abandon realism completely, Churchill's plays challenge normative ways of seeing and understanding the crises she depicts.

Churchill's plays will often pose problems or questions that are left unanswered. Despite the strong ethical and moral stance that motivates all her writing, her aesthetics are more concerned with challenging spectators to think than telling audiences what to think. In the essay 'Not Ordinary, Not Safe', Churchill explains why she frequently reinvents the formal aesthetics of her dramas:

> Subjects change not because the problems are solved but because they become irrelevant … Whenever conventions of subject and form outlast the impetus that formed them they are felt to be inadequate to expressing life. (Churchill in Aston and Diamond 2009, 151)

The idea of a form that becomes redundant and no longer capable of 'expressing life' mirrors Brecht's claim that depending on new social conditions 'I have constantly to construct new models' (in Adorno et al. 2007, 71). The new conditions of twenty-first-century global capitalism are dominated by the rise of new digital technologies for communication. *Iraq.doc* thematically and formally explores what this altered spatio-temporality does to traditional democratic and political participation in the context of debates around the legitimacy of the 'War on Terror'.

## *Iraq.doc*

In response to the invasion of Iraq, the Royal Court Theatre in London organized a series of events under the heading 'War Correspondence' that ran from 7 to 12 April 2003. These forums reflected on the conflict in Iraq

by staging readings of short plays including Churchill's *Iraq.doc* alongside works from other prominent and vocal anti-war writers including Martin Crimp's *Advice to Iraqi Women, Delirium* by Rebecca Prichard and *Voices from Within* by April De Angelis, Elyse Dodgson and Indhu Rubasingham. 'War Correspondence' also included poems by Tony Harrison, and a panel of journalists and academics who discussed and debated the invasion with the audience (Billington 2003, np).

Part of these events included a lecture by *The Guardian* columnist George Monbiot who explained the domestic, regional and global motives behind the invasion, emphasizing America's 'unsustainable' budget deficit and the shock to the American economy when Saddam Hussein started selling oil in euros rather than dollars (in Billington 2003, np). Churchill's play *Iraq.doc* was presented as a reading within an anti-war and anti-American public event that included a mixture of lectures, open public discussions and creative responses to the war.

*Iraq.doc* was restaged as a reading on 19 November 2003 at the Royal Court in another series of anti-war plays and talks called 'A Royal Welcome', a reference to the coinciding state visit by President G. W. Bush that month. This time the play was read alongside *Advice to Iraqi Women* and Tony Kushner's *Only We Who Guard the Mystery Shall be Unhappy*, starring high-profile actress and anti-war activist Vanessa Redgrave. *Iraq.doc* was read by Michelle Fairley, Jason Isaacs, Kananu Kirimi, Justin Salinger and Jason Watkins. The readings were performed over several days, were free to the public and played to full houses. The Royal Court Theatre used drama to speak directly to topical political issues and generate debate and conversation about the invasion of Iraq. The readings achieved an immediacy that was vital to broadening public debate and awareness about the war and its effects as well as the diplomatic relations and war coalitions between America and Britain.

Churchill constructed *Iraq.doc* using quotes from a report created by an American neoconservative think tank, Project for the New American Century, founded in 1997 by Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld and Richard Perle, as well as adapted transcripts from online chat rooms and catch phrases from the news media relating to the Iraq War. The report was written in 2001 and entitled 'Rebuilding America's Defenses: Strategy, Forces and Resources for a New Century'. The Royal Court Theatre website describes *Iraq.doc* as 'documentary material compiled by Caryl Churchill' ('Royal Court Theatre Website' 2003). There are no desig-

nated characters in the play, although the pseudonyms that appear in the 'Iraq Chat' section might suggest characters. The text of *Iraq.doc* has not yet been published, in part because it is a verbatim work.

### *Seeing Iraq Through Cold War Eyes*

*Iraq.doc* is structured in a way that suggests five distinct parts, of which only the largest central section of the work is demarcated by a title, 'Iraq Chat'. Churchill stated that if she were to stage or publish the play she wouldn't include the opening section from 'Rebuilding America's Defenses' that made up the original play text; rather, she would focus on the 'Iraq Chat' section alone (Stevens 2014). The first section, which I am calling 'Threat blank', echoes the bureaucratic language of American foreign policy objectives after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War:

> Threat blank.
>
> After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the 295 billion dollar 1990 defense budget contained a threat blank.
>
> The pentagon's basic assessment of the overall threat to the national security has been rooted in the past. The world has changed and yet the development of a new military strategy that responds to the changes in the threat has not yet occurred. Without that response we cannot justify this budget.
>
> Threat blank.
>
> We have to put a shingle outside the door saying, 'Superpower lives here,' no matter what the Soviets do.
>
> First objective – prevent the emergence of a new rival. (Churchill 2003, np)

Churchill's quotations suggest that the concept of 'Threat blank' laid the foundations for the escalation of American-led wars in the Middle East after the end of the Soviet threat with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Churchill quotes the term from a report by Georgia Democrat Sam Nunn, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who implied that the American defence budget should be cut to match the reduced need to defend America against Russia (Armstrong 2002, np). The short sharp assertions in the first section of *Iraq.doc* present the 2003 invasion of Iraq as ironically 'inevitable' from as early as 1990.

In the opening section Churchill also quotes verbatim the response to the 'Threat blank' by Republican officials appointed by the Reagan administration during the Cold War – Colin Powell and Paul Wolfowitz:

> I want sufficient power to deter any challenger from ever dreaming of challenging us on the world stage. I want to be the bully on the block. (That's Powell in 1992.)
>
> Shall we sit idly by with our passive containment strategy and our inept cover operations and wait till a tyrant possessing large quantities of weapons of mass destruction and sophisticated delivery systems strikes at us? (That's Wolfowitz in 96.) (Churchill 2003, np)

The use of quotes from Powell and Wolfowitz could be described as Brechtian *gestic* language, which is to say, language that exposes 'the socio-economic and ideological construction of human identity and interaction' (Mumford 2001, 144). Powell can behave as the 'bully on the block' because his socio-economically superior position underpins his ideological belief in the 'right' and 'good' of American supremacy. By contrast, Wolfowitz performs the role of victim of terrorist hostility but his paranoid belief in a justifiable American intervention is evident in his use of a rhetorical question. The *gest* of the paranoid, rhetorical question reveals that Wolfowitz presupposes his authority will not be questioned and leaves no room for response or counterargument.

Churchill's use of American politicians' official documents and statements justifying war requires no exaggeration, embellishment or commentary in order to create irony. Rather, they mobilize the postmodern practice of parodying political leaders by simply quoting them verbatim. In *Iraq.doc* the dogmatic language of school-yard bullies undermines Wolfowitz and Powell's attempts to shore up their own authority, serving the inverse of its intended function by revealing their fear of a possible end to American global hegemony. As such, Churchill creates an ironic *Verfremdungseffekt* using Wolfowitz's *gestic* language of victimhood.

Just as Walter Benjamin describes Brechtian *gestus* as 'the dialectic at a standstill', these *gestic* quotes momentarily distil the ideology that informs the attributed speech acts of these powerful political figures. While in a Brecht play *gestic* language reveals the attitude of one individual to another based on their socio-economic conditions, in the globalized world in which *Iraq.doc* is set, Powell's desire to be 'the bully on the block' reveals the superior and insecure attitude of American leaders towards non-Western leaders in the battle for dominance between nation states.

The opening section of *Iraq.doc* quotes from American foreign policy in the 1990s. It lists American foreign and domestic policy objectives that will help to maintain America's position as a global superpower:

> act to maintain access to vital raw materials, primarily Persian Gulf oil
> prevent proliferation of weapons of mass destructions
> or threats to US citizens from terrorism
> complete unfinished business of the 91 Gulf war and get rid of Saddam.
> (Churchill 2003, np)

Churchill historicizes post-Cold War American military and foreign policy objectives using imperatives that sound even more sinister in the context of the work's performance in 2003. Military actions that 'deter' or 'prevent' conflict, rhetoric frequently used by the Bush and Blair administrations to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq, are shown to be disingenuous given the premeditation of the Iraq invasion a decade prior. As such, Churchill estranges the contemporary political rhetoric and what it conceals by historicizing the 2003 Iraq War.

The historicization of the 2003 invasion shows that events do not progress in a straight line, but, rather, in what Brecht would describe as 'cyclical crises' (1964, 30). By contextualizing the 2003 invasion as the 'unfinished business of the 91 Gulf war' Churchill reveals the most recent invasion of Iraq as more than just a response to 9/11 or the global threat of 'terror'. She demonstrates the historical progression of conflict as repetition or re-emergence of old rivalries in a new guise. This historicizing technique makes the present military operations in Iraq appear anchored in history and shaped by the ideological and economic interests of the aggressors. Although the bureaucratic language in this section presents the 2003 invasion of Iraq as predetermined or 'inevitable' in its allusion to 'unfinished business', the timing and context of Churchill's reproduction of these quotes invites spectators to see that the second Iraq War might have been preventable. Thus, Churchill uses a Brechtian strategy of historicization to show the present-day invasion through the lens of Cold War rivalries between American, Russian and Middle Eastern nation states.

### *Beneath the Smooth Surface of Reality*

The second section of *Iraq.doc* that used selected quotations from the 'Rebuilding America's Defenses' report responded to the notion of a

'threat blank' during the Clinton administration, when its Republican authors were not part of the administration. Churchill quotes sections of this document, placing ellipses in between selected parts and offering no further comment or embellishment to its dry military and bureaucratic tone. Once again, the chosen sections of the document historicize the Iraq conflict through the Cold War:

> America's strategic goal used to be the containment of the Soviet Union. Today the task is to preserve an international security environment conducive to America's interests and ideals. The military's job was to deter Soviet expansionism. Today its task is to secure and expand the zones of democratic peace, to deter the rise of a great new power competitor, defend key regions of europe, east asia [sic] and the middle east, and to preserve American pre-eminence through the coming transformation of war made possible by new technologies.
>
> …
>
> If an American peace is to be maintained and expanded it must have a secure foundation on unquestioned US military pre-eminence, a worldwide command and control system. (Churchill 2003, np)

The report portrays American diplomacy as a strategic operation using a discursive and rational tone that describes 'American peace' in the context of a 'worldwide command and control system'. This contradiction highlights the euphemistic language used to describe the 'containment' of the Soviet Union. Although the language itself is undialectical, the ellipses between the sections and Churchill's editorial choices create an ironic contrast that hint at a more tumultuous interior bubbling beneath the harmonious surface appearance of managed and contained American foreign policy. Churchill makes the ironic contradiction of 'American peace' through 'unquestioned US military pre-eminence' difficult to ignore.

The contradictions repeated in the quoted texts of *Iraq.doc* characterize global political realities outside the theatre as dialectical. Churchill shows that America's seemingly benevolent claim to 'preserve an international security environment' is self-interested by quoting American leaders' desire to control the petroleum reserves in the Middle East, maintain American dominance in the global economy and spread democracy, by force if necessary. The language of neoconservative policy as it appears in the play presents complex American military strategy as neatly comprehensible and closed to the possibility of an alternative view. While the quoted documents present an un-dialectical view of reality, these statements become ironic and revealing in the 2003 Iraq War context in which *Iraq.doc* is performed.

While *Iraq.doc* contains no stage directions, Churchill's voice does emerge in the occasional parenthetical aside. This serves the dual function of contextualizing the quotations and pointing to the constructed nature of the work by reminding readers of the author as collagist. The intrusion of the authorial voice in *Iraq.doc* offers no direct commentary on the appropriated texts. Churchill allows the quotes to speak for themselves, letting the schoolyard rhetoric of Powell's posturing create its own parodic effect. The quotes have the effect of what Brecht describes as: 'Showing up the dominant viewpoint as the viewpoint of the dominators' (1964, 109) or what Rancière would call showing that what 'structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection' (2009, 13). As such, it updates the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic by using a form that is 'no longer concerned with interpretation but association' (Barnett 2011, 337). Churchill relies on spectators recognizing the links between the language of the post-Cold War think-tank documents and the 2003 rhetoric justifying the Iraq invasion.

Paradoxically, it is Churchill's reiteration of pro-war arguments by key members of the Bush administration that makes the play a critique of American war rhetoric. Churchill inverts the pro-war argument using a dialectical strategy, which is to say, one that develops the antinomies of the justifications for the invasion by quoting of politicians and their foreign policy. By quoting American foreign policy that contradicts the official 2003 Iraq War justifications as they appear in the mainstream news media of the day, the play invites spectators to approach Western governments' claims and official discourses with scepticism. This strategy of historicized quotation enables Churchill to convey the inconsistencies of the American government's Iraq War justifications without resorting to didacticism or what Barnett would call a Brechtian mode of 'interpretation' (2011, 337). Churchill's organization and selection of quotations from American political leaders and bureaucrats advance Brechtian strategies of irony and intertextuality, updating the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic for the global present, replacing the Brechtian fable with the mediated reality of the contemporary era.

### *The New 'International Commons'*

The 'Rebuilding America's Defenses' report, as quoted by Churchill, flags a significant change in the way that global power and domination will be

exercised after 1990. While military and technological prestige and the conquering of territories in space were signifiers of dominance during the Cold War, the report emphasizes new and contested sites in the struggle for global domination:

> Much as control of the high seas defined global powers in the past, so will control of the new 'international commons' of space and cyberspace be a key to world power in the future. An America incapable of protecting its interests and that of its allies in space or the infosphere will find it difficult to exert global political leadership … Unrestricted use of space has become a major strategic interest of the United States.
>
> …
>
> … combat likely will take place in new dimensions, in space, cyberspace and perhaps the world of microbes … Advanced systems of biological warfare that can target specific genotypes may transform biological warfare from the realm of terror to a politically useful tool. (Churchill 2003, np)

While a battleground of power in the late twentieth century was outer space, the report suggests that in the post-Cold War world 'cyberspace' is the newly contested space. As Nick Dyer-Witheford writes: 'the information age, far from transcending the historic conflict between capital and its labouring subjects, constitutes the latest battleground in their encounter' (1999, 2). This struggle over controlling the online sphere foreshadows the American government's condemnation of Wikileaks, Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden following the leaking of American diplomatic cables and classified military information relating to the most recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

Brecht was interested in the material conditions of war in plays such as *Mother Courage and Her Children*, in the placement of bodies in war zones and the daily challenges of feeding those bodies and keeping them healthy and safe in the midst of conflict. Differently, Churchill shows that contemporary 'combat' takes place in 'cyberspace', a non-material location, a site that circulates ideas and, theoretically, the 'free' flow of information. The nature of cyberspace radically alters social relations when the material positioning of bodies in space is less important than the flows and speed of communication.

The World Wide Web was originally designed for and used by the American military. By the late 1980s, the Internet became available to the general public for those who could afford it. In the 1990s, there was both apocalyptic fear and utopian optimism regarding the potential of the Internet as a democratic space that could break down the hierarchies

of who could be heard and seen through its unregulated flow of content. Digital media theorist Andrew Keen describes those who championed the freedoms of this new medium as 'the Silicon Valley utopians' (2011, 36). The most notable statement of utopianism is John Perry Barlow's 'A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace' (1996) which addresses the 'Governments of the Industrial World' to claim:

> We must declare our virtual selves immune to your sovereignty, even as we continue to consent to your rule over our bodies. We will spread ourselves across the Planet so that no one can arrest our thoughts.
>
> We will create a civilization of the Mind in Cyberspace. May it be more humane and fair than the world your governments have made before. (1996, np)

The optimism of Barlow's claims seems dated in the twenty-first century but the manifesto captures the sentiments of many early cyberpunks and Internet enthusiasts in the 1980s to the mid-1990s who believed that 'cyberspace' could revolutionize the relationship between power, capital, knowledge and information in a way that would make existing class structures and hierarchies more liquid and porous. As Patrick Lichty explains:

> The de-territorialization of the Infostate creates an asymmetrical power relation that, due to its amorphous nature, is highly problematic for conventional nation-states to engage, let alone control. Conventional power requires a hierarchical control structure; it needs centralized faces, such as Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden, upon which to focus fear or hatred. Infopower resides in digital cloud-culture and is mercuric and morphogenic. (2011, 227)

In Lichty's terms, the morphogenic flows of Infopower provide Churchill with new ways to organize her dramatic structure according to the global flows of 'digital cloud-culture'. This digital updating of the Brechtian zigzag into amorphous networks takes into account the new virtual realities that occupy increasing amounts of twenty-first-century 'reality'. As Brecht would say: 'New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change' (in Adorno et al. 2007, 82). *Iraq.doc* develops new dramatic methods to represent the conditions of the digital culture and the new kinds of social relations it generates.

In *Iraq.doc*, the quoted report's reference to 'cyberspace' as the new 'international commons' suggests that the online sphere is a potential site of democratic exchange. The report's insistence on America's need to

control the info-sphere in order to 'exert global political leadership' and 'protect … its interests' takes on great significance from the reader/spectators' retrospective position in 2003. The emphasis on control over information encourages spectators to question how information is distributed or withheld. It highlights the pertinence of dialectical and sceptical thinking in a society where managing information flows equates to power. The immaterial nature of these flows, however, changes the nature of how dialectical thought might be exercised. As a consequence, Churchill updates the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic by employing an innovative dramatic form to represent the virtual dialectic among new kinds of communities and their exchanges of information.

## *'Iraq Chat'*

The third part of *Iraq.doc* is called 'Iraq Chat'. In this section Churchill quotes verbatim from a website chat room of the same name. She takes up the idea that 'combat likely will take place in new dimensions, in space, cyberspace' to consider whether the Internet in 2003 remains autonomous from 'unquestioned US military pre-eminence'. In 'Iraq Chat', Churchill explores the extent to which the American government achieves its goal of controlling the new 'international commons' by 2003 or, alternately, how the new dimension of 'cyberspace' provides a platform for the creation of new communities constructed along different distributions of power that alter the normative logics of what can be said and shown about the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

'Iraq Chat' explores the relation between power and online communication networks. Just as Brecht was inspired by the new mechanical modes of production in film and radio, in *Iraq.doc* Churchill considers the potential of new media forms to disseminate ideas and provide new platforms for discussion. Taking real debates that occurred in Internet chat rooms discussing the Iraq War, Churchill reproduces and edits quotes from the chat room forums replete with typos, spelling mistakes, idioms, capitalization, liberal use of punctuation and colloquial abbreviations common to new media communication such as text messaging, tweeting or other online communications. In the post 'America & innocent ppl of Iraq! We Love you & GOD BLESS!!!!!!!' (Churchill 2003, np), for example, the tone of the speaker is written into the work by the capitalization of 'GOD BLESS' and the multiple exclamation marks.

The recontextualization of cyber communication into a play text renders these familiar idioms strange. However, the textures of this cyber

lexicon are lost in the play once the words are spoken, as they were in the readings at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 2003. This raises the question as to whether the play should be read rather than 'performed' through the written word since the materiality of the word on the screen conveys a key component of the work's parody and performativity. This non-material dramatic form creates a paradox that matches its critique of the contradictions of the Iraq War. Baudrillard's essay 'The Gulf War Did Not Take Place' argues that the Western media's view of the first Gulf War gave the sense that no suffering really occurred on the ground and that its remote forms of combat incurred few Western casualties (and an indeterminate number of Iraqi casualties) (1995, 28). Similarly, *Iraq.doc*'s replication of mediated perspectives of the 2003 Iraq War and its immaterial 'cyber' setting draws attention to absent bodies or what Baudrillard would call the 'simulacra' of conflict (1995, 68).

The voices portrayed in the chat room range from angry, violent, naïve, confused and vengeful to compassionate, peaceful, supplicating and well informed. Some lines include: 'KNOCK KNOCK SADDAM! LET US IN! IF YOU DO NOT LET US IN, WE'LL KICK DOWN THE DOR [sic] OPEN OURSELVES', 'You should go tell the FREED Iraqi [sic] who cheered US and British forces for freeing them how upset you are' and 'It is my understanding as of last night, many of the US Soldiers are refusing to advance, refusing to fight' (Churchill 2003, np). Each of the chat room users or avatars have a pseudonym that often encapsulates their attitude (sometimes ironically) to the Iraq War, including 'us killer', 'American Pride', 'Proud American Woman' and 'Kill the Republicans'. Common Western and non-Western names such as 'Rachael', 'Richard' or 'saif' are also used. The pseudonyms and the online context allow for anonymity and performative personae that make it impossible to authenticate the truth of the expressed opinions or information that they present as factual.

Similar to the posturing of Powell in the first section of the play: 'I want to be the bully on the block', the performativity of the online personae is evident in the aggressive tone of the first posting. If we read the chat room names as 'characters' in the context of the play, then the character who begins the exchange – 'us killer' – ignites a highly performative exchange:

> I don't hide behind my computer. If you want to confront me you american wimps, call me and we'll meet up. Let us see who has the mark of a true warrior. I piss on your souls.
>
> us killer [sic] (Churchill 2003, np)

'Us killer' begins an antagonistic exchange that invites a violent response. In the play text the name 'us killer' does not appear as an acronym due to the lack of full stops or capitalization of the letters. As such the name becomes an ironic allusion to the killer of 'us', that is to say, the play's Western audiences. It reminds readers/spectators of the binaries of 'us' and 'them', and the 'Either you're with us or you're with the terrorists' (G. W. Bush 2001) employed by Bush in the lead-up to the invasion.

The performativity of the written word creates its own dialectical paradox because its multilayered textual meaning would be lost in any performance that chose only to read the dialogue aloud and not include the visual elements of the written word. Indeed, the materiality of the word creates a necessary contrast with the immateriality of 'cyberspace'. The tone of the words is suggested through online shorthand conventions and creative use of punctuation, replacing the highly symbolic bodies so integral to Brechtian theatre. We might say that Helena Weigel's bent posture pulling the cart behind her in *Mother Courage and Her Children* is, in *Iraq.doc*, replaced by words that convey class and power relations through their vocabulary, use of grammar and punctuation.

The binary thinking evident in the opening polemic of 'Iraq Chat' is challenged by the diversity of views and political opinions expressed in the ensuing discussion. The conversation develops between 'us killer', 'Rachael' and other chat room users. It proceeds as follows:

> I could never hurt a fly let alone any innocent person on the planet. But when you have some insane person like saddam in the process of making or hiding disasterous weapoms [sic], it makes me scared and I would gladly point a gun right at him and take his life.
>
> Rachael
>
> And what are all you americans [sic] doing here anyway. This is an Iraqi website. Couldn't you find any of your own websites instead of flooding this one.
>
> us killer
>
> yes i am here at my computer saying how I feel. Not that i am a whimp [sic] but i don't want some insane individual shooting my head in hahaha. If you are so strong to face people tell where you live.
>
> American (and I am proud of it)
>
> DO WE (WORLD) NEED TO REMOVE SADDAM AND HIS REGIME
>
> YES OR NOT [sic]
>
> *Os*
>
> (Churchill 2003, np)

In her research on virtual reality, Beth Coleman explains that avatars (online forms or 'virtual faces' that can be either text or image-based) can be serious, playful or subversive in their re-establishment of real-time co-presence (2011, 117). The pseudonyms in *Iraq.doc* are not only self-descriptive but also draw attention to identity as a cultural and ideological construct. They often reveal the political biases of the chat room user or avatar, what Brecht would call their *Haltung* or stance, such as 'American (and I am proud of it)'.

Yet, because there are no bodies, many people use the Internet to live out their fantasies, such as men pretending to be women and vice versa, enacting real-world taboos for the thrill of subversive behaviour (Coleman 2011, 13). Consequently the avatars and *Haltungen* expressed in *Iraq.doc* could be misrepresentative of their subject, an unresolvable dialectical paradox that accounts for two simultaneously existing representations of identity and political viewpoints – a complexity of 'character' that shows identity as fluid and ideas or beliefs as always under revision, a constant process of becoming.

The avatars in *Iraq.doc* perform emotions using a range of written formats such as capitalization for emphasis and colloquial descriptors of affective bodily states such as 'hahaha' to indicate laughter. As Coleman explains: 'one of the effects of avatar mediation is that we externalize and objectify our utterances, expressions and gestures' (2011, 118). The 'objectivity' of the utterances, expressions and gestures that Coleman describes suggests that avatars already perform *gestus* through a distanced, self-aware externalization of what is hidden in the mediated form. Coleman uses similar language to Brecht when she describes avatars as: 'the *gestalt* of images, text, multimedia that make up our identities as networked subjects' (my emphasis) (2011, 4). 'Iraq Chat' is thus a doubly mediated form with an in-built *gestus* that Churchill uses to accommodate the plurality and malleability of the avatars in ways that expose identity as performative, fluid and playful. Churchill updates the Brechtian characterization as a 'unity of opposites' and proliferates these multifaceted and liquid social and class-based attitudes for the post-Brechtian digital age.

In the ensuing polylogue, the avatars' postings cut haphazardly across each other. Sometimes they respond directly to one another, at other times they respond to a post that might have appeared many posts before. Others assert their opinion with little concern for the logical flow of the discussion. The chat room form provides Churchill with a precarious and unpredictable public sphere that shows the ideas, attitudes and opinions

expressed to be heterogeneous and contingent. To return to Ollman and Smith's categories, the chat room form characterizes society as dialectical using the *gestic* language of the online lexicon.

The chat room is portrayed as a medium through which Western and non-Western individuals can express their identification with or rejection of state-sanctioned representations of the Iraq invasion. The Internet allows its users to present ideas and attitudes with little if any editorial censorship or hierarchy. Avatars can represent themselves as both subject and object simultaneously, as participants in and complicit with the flows of global social processes, as well as unique voices and opinions within a diverse community. The avatars perform paradoxical subject positions in lines diverse as: 'Yada Yada Yada – all I hear is a bunch of SandNigger lovers', posted by 'Freedom' to 'Kill the Republicans' who writes: 'Our present "democracy" has done Nothing for the common people, the rich gets [sic] richer and so on.' The online forum is depicted as a space where ideas and attitudes are expressed without exclusion. As such, it brings out both the best and the worst of human social behaviour, highlighting what Willett describing Brecht calls the 'jagged' edges of human interactions (1967, 155).

Churchill captures these jagged edges of social relations in *Iraq.doc* through the pleasurable development of contradiction. Avatars who denounce the American values of freedom and justice and criticize the justifications for the invasion of Iraq appear alongside those who support the economic and cultural imperialism of America. As 'Big Big Big American' posts:

> Next month I'll have my Big Big Big
> MacDonalds built in Baghdad.
> I think I'll have all the bodies buried in
> on big big field [sic]
> Their Bodies will make great
> fertilizer. (Churchill 2003, np)

'Big Big Big American's use of alliteration underlines American power, xenophobia and bravado. He/she celebrates American economic dominance and describes Iraqis as little more than fertilizer for American exploitation. Yet, the sincerity of the exaggerated boast is ambiguous and its placement suggests a satire of a previous post by 'Big … American' which ends 'REAL AMERICANS BUY REAL AMERICAN PRODUCTS' (Churchill 2003, np). The extreme racial hatred expressed by 'Big Big Big

American' is later disavowed, confirming his/her post as an ironic parody of American economic imperialism and greed.

In between avatars who express such polemical opinions about America–Iraq relations, there are others who highlight the complexity of international affairs. Avatar 'More-than-meets-the-eye', for example, points out the problem of responding to 'os's question: 'DO WE (WORLD) NEED TO REMOVE SADDAM AND HIS REGIME, YES OR NOT' by retaliating:

> you are wasting space. I will not give an uneqivacle yes or no
> because there is no easy answer. Sodamn insane needs to be out of there. but we do not have the right to invade and topple another countries government.
> consider this. the international community is
> really, really pissed at america.
> some of ppl in america believe bush should be removed (via impeachment) [sic] (Churchill 2003, np)

'More-than-meets-the-eye' refuses to choose between the limited binaries of 'yes' or 'no', 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'evil' upon which the waging of the Iraq War was predicated.

In contrast to the report and the quotations from parts one and two of *Iraq.doc*, 'More-than-meets-the-eye' exhibits a dialectical way of thinking that accounts for heterogeneous possibilities in a complex set of global relations that cannot transcend contradiction – the need to depose Saddam Hussein and the right of America to interfere in Iraq's domestic politics. The lack of an 'easy answer' is mirrored by the play's refusal to provide a simplistic solution. Instead, the work develops contradictions by presenting a diversity of ideas that circulate in the media and online as a provocation for spectators to consider the broader ethical questions raised by the invasion of Iraq without a reductive or didactic resolution.

The variety of responses that appear in 'Iraq Chat' highlight the changes in cultural interaction and communication that have arisen since the digital revolution. For Andrew Keen, the Internet with its social networking, unqualified editing, sharing of information and user-generated content has led to a 'flattening of culture' that is 'blurring the lines between traditional audience and author, creator and consumer, expert and amateur … creating an endless digital forest of mediocrity' (2011, 26). Such mediocrity is evident in 'Iraq Chat' in lines such as

'BEND OVER SADDAM!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!', 'What you wrote appeared to me as BALH BLAH BLAH!!!' [sic] and 'I'm gay! no im just kidding' (Churchill 2003, np). 'Iraq Chat' points to the undesirable effects of a deregulated sphere of information, not only as a site of free-market capitalism and commodity culture, but also as a space where the Western values of freedom and individualism can be taken to their extreme and most banal.

Despite Keen's pessimism, the online form employed by Churchill in *Iraq.doc* also shows how the Internet alters the parameters of visibility and sayability in the 'public sphere'. The development of faster and more accessible Internet access altered how and to whom information about the 'War on Terror' was distributed and engaged with. As Richard Hil explains in the context of the 2003 Iraq War:

> the practice of 'blogging' – that is, expressing and exchanging thoughts and ideas on personalized websites – created opportunities for the projection of once privately-held views and opinions into the public domain. These cyberspace communication practices have in effect created spaces that override the boundaries of the nation state while simultaneously speaking to concerns (local, regional and global) within and between countries. (2008, 33)

Online communication and information exchanges open up platforms for the critique and defiance of the kind of consensus that Rancière argues dominates public life in liberal democratic states today. The Internet enables a political subjectivization that is not necessarily bound to the usual dominant voices – those who hold positions of public office and have greatest access to visibility and sayability via the mainstream media. The non-hierarchical, decentralized or horizontal distribution of power in the Internet (particularly in its early days) is evident in the range of voices and opinions expressed in the 'Iraq Chat' section of *Iraq.doc*. This does not, however, necessitate a relativist view of the war or what Keen refers to as a 'flattening out of culture'. On the contrary, *Iraq.doc* is fervently anti-war in its parody of pro-war arguments.

Since online chat rooms are ever-changing, ephemeral spaces, Churchill uses the form in her drama to reveal the ideological opinions expressed therein as equally transient and unpredictable. The diversity of ideas put forward in 'Iraq Chat', particularly when compared to the dogmatic, bureaucratic and inflexible language quoted in the other sections of the play, seem to suggest that Churchill still imagines that if a space for dialectical thinking exists, it might be located online. It is through formal

experimentation with the fluid forms of online spaces and communication exchanges that Churchill reveals both the Internet's shortcomings and its utopian potential for new kinds of social relations and the building of communities of dissensus.

*Iraq.doc* might be said to have an aesthetic in which the medium is the message (McLuhan 1964). Churchill's formal choices for this anti-war play ensure that the seeming 'fixed-ness' of the attitudes of Powell and Wolfowitz, and of the American Defense Strategy report, are destabilized by the mercuric flows of the chat room polylogue. In Marxist terms, the chat room form employed in *Iraq.doc* is dialectical because it shows an environment where all that is solid melts into air, where new-formed opinions are swept away and 'become antiquated before they can ossify' (Marx and Engels 1952, 46).

The contradictions of 'Iraq Chat' never promise social or political resolution, nor do they resolve the ideological differences between the avatars. Instead, the polylogue pursues and develops the inadequacy of individual opinions and reflects on the endless frustrations of hope. It ends with a comment from 'saif' who writes:

> good night juan, and u guys come on stop calling each other names and stuff, be peaceful for once will you, come on im sure u can argue peacefully
> saif (Churchill 2003, np)

'Saif's plea to argue peacefully seems futile given the vitriolic and vengeful conversation to which he responds. Yet, it is the unresolved quality of such comments that highlight the inadequacy of undialectical thought to solve complex ethical problems.

Always at the vanguard of formal dramatic innovation, in *Iraq.doc* Churchill once again modernizes dramatic structure and language, bringing it up to date with social and cultural innovations in digital technology and online communication. Through the contradictions inherent within the pro-war rhetoric, *Iraq.doc* historicizes and estranges the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The justifications for the invasion of Iraq in the mainstream media are inverted in this play. *Iraq.doc* updates the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic for the digital age, turning Brecht's zigzag into mercuric flows by depicting political subjectivization as fluid, malleable, changeable and always in a contingent process of becoming.

Coleman argues that the seeming incommensurability between real and virtual worlds requires new ways of thinking about the hybrid flows of

networked relations in the twenty-first century (2011). For Coleman, the complex crossings-over of the rapidly redundant distinction between the 'virtual' and 'real' take ideas of self and agency beyond physical boundaries (2011, 161). The dialectical tension between the real and the virtual in *Iraq.doc* also invites thinking about Brecht's active spectator as a networked individual with a new kind of agency that allows her to move across geographic boundaries with unprecedented speed and ease.

## *Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza*

*Seven Jewish Children: A Play for Gaza* (2009) is a six-page playlet written in the form of what appears on the page as a poem, with short lines made up of repetitive motifs that create seven short stanzas or episodes. The published text states that the play is 'Caryl Churchill's response to the situation in Gaza in January 2009'. The 'situation' it refers to is the three-week military offensive in the Gaza Strip – Operation Cast Lead – by the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) beginning on 27 December 2008. Israel claimed the assault was a self-defensive response to the Hamas rocket attacks from Gaza that broke the 2008 ceasefire agreement (Sterio 2010, 238). Operation Cast Lead included 2360 air strikes and a ground invasion on 3 January 2009 that killed approximately 1300 Palestinians with over 5000 wounded (Sterio 2010, 229). Of the Palestinian casualties, more than 400 were children. By contrast, Israeli forces suffered 13 casualties, four from 'friendly fire' (Katz 2010, np).

The conflict incited accusations of war crimes by both Palestinian forces and the IDF that culminated in an investigation by the UN Security Council. The outcome was the controversial Goldstone Report, which appeared in September 2009, six months after *Seven Jewish Children* was first performed. The report concluded that both the Israeli government and Hamas had committed international law violations by indiscriminately targeting civilians, including children (Sterio 2010, 231).

*Seven Jewish Children* was first performed on 6 February 2009 with six actors at the Royal Court Theatre. It was directed by Dominic Cooke and ran for two weeks. Tickets to the Royal Court Theatre show were free and available to download from *The Guardian* newspaper website. Similar to *Only We*, Churchill made *Seven Jewish Children* available for production free from licensing or royalty payments with the stipulation:

> The play can be read or performed anywhere by any number of people. Anyone who wishes to do it should contact the author's agent (details

> below), who will license performances free of charge provided that no admission fee is charged and that a collection is taken at each performance for Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP). (Churchill 2009, np)

The stipulated fundraising for MAP reinforces the play's aim to be overtly supportive of the Palestinian victims of Operation Cast Lead. In contrast to the slower United Nations Human Rights Council response to the crisis, *Seven Jewish Children* was an immediate reply to Operation Cast Lead that had a practical outcome of using proceeds from the performance to fund the non-governmental organization, MAP.

In the media Churchill was frank about the political nature of the work. Explaining her motivation for writing the play she stated:

> It came out of feeling strongly about what's happening in Gaza – it's a way of helping the people there. Everyone knows about Gaza, everyone is upset about it, and this play is something they could come to. It's a political event, not just a theatre event. (Churchill in Brown 2009, np)

Churchill's intention to create a 'political event' not just a 'theatre event' brings us back to the question of how theatre can intervene in political realities by creating new logics of visibility and sayability. This part of the chapter will consider not only the dialectical form of the text of the play but also its mode of performance, and public responses to performances of *Seven Jewish Children* as a political event in a range of different nations.

### *Fixing the Not-But: The Formation of Jewish Identity*

*Seven Jewish Children* is divided into seven sections that cover 70 years of Jewish history from the persecution of the Jews in World War Two through to the IDF 2008–9 military offensive in the Gaza Strip. Despite being 'a play for Gaza', the work focuses solely on the perspective of the Jewish family, and, specifically, on how the girl-child learns about her cultural and national heritage. The education of the female child and her relationship to patriarchal society is a trope that reappears throughout Churchill's dramas including *Vinegar Tom*, *The Skriker*, *Far Away* and others.

*Seven Jewish Children* is dedicated to Gaza, a Palestinian territory ruled since 2006 by the democratically elected 'Islamic Resistance Movement' Hamas which seeks to govern by Sharia law. The dedication is the only clear indication that the work is a response to Operation Cast Lead. In fact, *Seven Jewish Children* never expressly identifies its object of sympa-

thy, but relies on the context of the work and a single description of the 'Bedouin' other for the reader/spectator to be able to infer its sympathy for the plight of the Palestinian people.

Despite the title's reference to children, Churchill's brief dramatic notes create a further paradox by specifying that '*No children appear in the play*' (Churchill 2009, np). Similar to *Iraq.doc*, *Seven Jewish Children* does not designate characters and is a polylogue that stipulates only that the lines be spoken by adult actors and '*can be shared out in any way you like among those characters*' (Churchill 2009, np). As such, the Jewish children and Palestinian subjects haunt the thoughts of the Jewish adults despite their absence.

The play hinges on the struggle of Jewish adults to explain the history of Jewish persecution, exodus and homecoming to their children. The adults debate the construction of their children's knowledge using the dialectical imperative: 'Tell her …/Don't Tell her …', a motif that is repeated in the text. As the adults vacillate between disclosure and self-censorship they highlight a tension between what is sayable and what is unsayable in the public sphere. This motif has the effect of fixing the Not-But by showing the possibility of two contrary behaviours. Fixing of the Not-But shows spectators the range of possibilities available to a character and encourages spectators to consider the influence of ideology on the choices of the Jewish adults. In contrast to Brechtian plays where a decision is ultimately reached by characters such as Mr. Puntila, Grusha or Shen Te, Churchill's mode of expression never definitively resolves the dialectical tension. Her use of punctuation, rhythm and metre does occasionally indicate the direction in which the choice might tend. In this sense, Churchill creates a post-Brechtian sensibility of 'epistemological uncertainty' (Barnett 2011, 337) or a negative dialectic that will not resolve or interpret the contradictions it presents.

### *The Dialectic of Poetic Metre and Rhythm*

The first fragment of *Seven Jewish Children* begins with a discussion of how, during a Nazi raid, the Jewish child should be kept quiet in hiding. The dialogue introduces the contradiction that sets the tone and form of the rest of the play:

Tell her it's a game
    Tell her it's serious

> But don't frighten her
> Don't tell her they'll kill her (Churchill 2009, np)

The play begins as a trochaic trimeter poem, mimicking the familiar rhythms and metre of the nursery rhyme 'Hickory Dickory Dock'.[1] The nursery rhyme metre – which reappears as the dominant form throughout the play, most notably in the recurring motif of 'Tell her …' – is a fitting mode of adult–child communication. Yet, this formal poetic rhythm that evokes the whimsy and innocence of a nursery rhyme creates a jarring effect with the gravity of the message being conveyed: 'Don't tell her they'll kill her.' The *Verfremdungseffekt* of the contrasting form and its expressed ideas gives the spectator an early indication of social relations that are out of joint or under strain.

The second episode is set in the aftermath of World War Two. In this section the adults discuss how the child should be taught about the Holocaust. The speakers proclaim:

> Tell her her uncles died
> Don't tell her they were killed
> Tell her they were killed
> Don't frighten her (Churchill 2009, np)

The speakers try to strike a balance between alarm and caution, knowledge and innocence, but the contradictions persist. They demonstrate the impossibility of preserving childhood innocence while also teaching the child about the genocide inflicted on European Jews during World War Two.

The form influences the tone of the debate with the first and third lines of the quoted passage above having a far more emphatic quality and clear rhythmic drive that dominates over the awkward and fearful interjections of the offbeat negations of 'Don't …'. The tempo and rhythm of the debate subtly begin to favour more dogmatic and dominant voice(s) that insist the girl-child know the details of Jewish persecution and extermination at the hands of the Nazis.

Where Brecht showed the contradictions of living under capitalism or fascism, the paradoxes in *Seven Jewish Children* reveal the difficulties of living under threat of racial and religious persecution. Its erratic poetic form mirrors the unstable circumstances and uncertain future of Jewish children. In Marxist dialectical terms, Churchill shows how the Jewish adults in *Seven Jewish Children* make their own history 'under circum-

stances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past' (Marx 1852, np). Anti-Semitism dates back millennia and has thus influenced the migratory patterns, cultural practices and values of Jewish people. Although *Seven Jewish Children* begins in the mid-twentieth century, the play shows how the ever-present spectre of anti-Semitism impacts upon each generation in a form that shifts abruptly in tone and temper through changes in rhythm and metre.

### Gestic *Language: Constructing the Jewish Child's Identity*

Each episode in *Seven Jewish Children* explores the adult's shifts between what the girl-child should be told and what 'truths' should be concealed until she is older. The pared-back and child-friendly vocabulary reveals how the adults can use language to shape a child's identity along ideological lines. The Jewish adult's language is *gestic* because it shows how the weight of the past hangs heavily over each episode, silently informing the debate over the child's education and which information should be offered and which obscured. The lack of psychological characters allows Churchill to more clearly demonstrate how historical, ideological and social forces can shape the flow of information from one generation to the next.

In the first few episodes the Jewish adults debate whether the child should understand herself and her people as victims. By the later episodes, however, there is greater consensus amongst the adult speakers wanting to represent the Jewish people as strong and powerful. The fifth fragment, for example, references the Six-Day War of 1967 in its formal construction of six lines. In this brief conflict, Israel won a rapid victory over neighbouring Arab states, culminating in the annexing of the Gaza Strip and the Sinai Peninsula from Egypt, the West Bank and East Jerusalem from Jordan, and the Golan Heights from Syria. The speakers celebrate the victory:

> Tell her we won
> Tell her her brother's a hero
> Tell her how big their armies are
> Tell her we turned them back
> Tell her we're fighters
> Tell her we've got new land (Churchill 2009, np)

The victimhood described in the initial episodes is replaced by the three-beat militarization of the Jewish state and the euphoria of victory. The

language mirrors the growing self-confidence of the people in its united affirmatives 'Tell her …' and its emphatic and consistent rhythm lacks the offbeats of the previous interjections of 'Don't'. In this contrast Churchill shows the dialectical thinking of the speakers giving way to a more dogmatic language characterized by nationalistic imperatives. In this Churchill shows the paradox of Jews occupying a dual position of both victim and aggressor.

By collapsing the past 70 years of Jewish history into seven short episodes, Churchill telescopes the past and the present. She shows how social processes shape current attitudes, identities and behaviours in the present-day Israel–Palestine conflict. The Holocaust, the Six-Day War and, in the later episodes, the bulldozing of Palestinian houses, necessarily inform the absent Jewish child's identity. The *gestic* language draws a century of complex historical processes to an abstracted and sometimes oversimplified Benjaminian standstill.

By slowing down the movement of living in flux, the *gestic* debate between the adults puts spectators in a position from which they can more readily see how the present is pregnant with the experiences of the past and thus how twenty-first-century Israel–Palestine relations are embedded within complex historical preconditions. Moreover, as the language becomes increasingly dogmatic with each episode, Churchill shows the immovability of Israel–Palestine relations and the decades of failed peace agreements that are undermined by such rigid rhetoric and one-sided attitudes.

### *Hiding the Negation: Discrediting Palestinian Identity*

The adult speakers in *Seven Jewish Children* are fixated with the problem of how to represent Jewish history to their daughter(s). Yet, in formulating this version of history, they deny the history or identity of the Palestinian other, against which the Jewish self (particularly in the later episodes) defines itself. The speakers in *Seven Jewish Children* never name the Palestinians, suggesting their refusal to acknowledge either the existence of Palestinians in Israel or their claim to rightfully occupy the land. In the stanza that describes the Six-Day War, there is no mention of the bloodshed required for the acquisition of 'new land' or of the American funding and military support that were integral to the IDF's victory.

The defeated subjects – Arabs from a range of neighbouring nation states, as well as the Palestinians – are glaringly absent from the adult's

celebratory remarks. As such, the enjambments of the poetic form create a momentary pause, a space that invites spectators to reflect upon the unspoken words and absent bodies. In the fourth fragment, the Jewish adults, now settled in Israel, begin to show unease at Israel's volatile relations with the local Arab populations and neighbouring Arab states. The adults move from concealing facts from the child about the Jewish past to concealing facts about the past and identity of the Palestinians:

> Don't tell her who they are
> Tell her something
> Tell her they're Bedouin, they travel about
> Tell her about the camel in the desert and dates
> Tell her they live in tents
> Tell her this wasn't their home
> Don't tell her home, not home, tell her they're going away (Churchill 2009, np)

The repetitive rhythms of the text are akin to a religious chant, dogmatically instructing the girl-child about the 'Bedouin' threat to the safety and stability of her home. By portraying the Palestinians as nomads living in tents, without a fixed home, the speaker undermines the Palestinian's legitimacy to call Israel–Palestine their homeland and creates an exoticized image of primitive peoples.

Exoticizing the other was a tactic used by Western governments to describe Afghani or Iraqi civilians in order to elicit public sympathy and support for the Iraq–Afghanistan wars (Butler 2009, 125). As Butler writes:

> If the Islamic populations destroyed in recent and current wars are considered less than human, or 'outside' the cultural conditions for the emergence of the human, then they belong either to a time of cultural infancy or to a time that is outside time as we know it. (2009, 125)

By portraying the Palestinians as nomadic people, the speakers in *Seven Jewish Children* depict the Palestinians as outside the enlightened culture that makes their 'humanity' more recognizable. What the child is told about camels and dates conceals the fact that the customs, traditions, a history and humanity of the 'Bedouin' other are already established on the land claimed as the State of Israel. Thus, the negation in the 'Don't...' draws attention to the missing information and the complex interplay between self and other that shapes the Jewish identity.

The attempt to discredit the legitimacy of the Palestinian's claim to land rights is contradicted by the abrupt conclusion to fragment four:

> Tell her maybe we can share
> Don't tell her that (Churchill 2009, np)

The Jewish voice that acknowledges that Israel might be the Holy Land to more people than just the Jews undoes the previous speaker's attempt to naturalize the idea of Palestinian nomadism. This small admission alludes to a more dangerous undercurrent simmering beneath the smooth construction of reality as it appears in the previous lines. It concedes to a controversial idea among some Zionists – the possibility of a two-state solution. The dialectical form of the play text enables such a radical idea to be put forward for consideration and, just as quickly, cut down. Churchill acknowledges that the possibility of a two-state solution exists in Israel's national debate but the play shows how Operation Cast Lead and other IDF military interventions stifle this potential compromise.

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958) philosopher Hannah Arendt condemns nation states that create refugees in their nation-building project (including Israel). Arendt argues for a bi-national state of Israel and claims that even Jews can learn lessons about social justice from Nazism, without conflating the actions of Zionists with those of Nazis (1958, 290). Butler, who draws upon Arendt in her consideration of what anti-Semitism means and how accusations of anti-Semitism are used today, argues that plurality is not a given condition but, rather, 'always a potential one, then it has to be understood as a process, and we will need to shift from a static to a dynamic conception' (2011, 85).

The conception of ethnic plurality as process is the core of the dialectical tension in *Seven Jewish Children*. Whether it is the German state in the 1930s or the Israeli state in the twenty-first century, *Seven Jewish Children* shows the potential for understanding the other in ways that accommodate difference. Throughout *Seven Jewish Children*, there is always the possibility of the adults embracing plurality, particularly in lines such as: 'Tell her maybe we can share.' The voices that express this position demonstrate Butler's 'dynamic conception' of the two-state solution of Israel–Palestine. The arguments and counterarguments that make up *Seven Jewish Children* estrange the immovable nationalistic and Zionist rhetoric. In its place they offer an image of Zionism that exhibits both the roots of totalitarianism and its opposite of compassion and empathy in a cohabitation of the Israeli and Palestinian peoples.

### *From Victim to Perpetrator*

As *Seven Jewish Children* progresses, the information available to the girl-child becomes increasingly limited. By episode six, the adults refer to the Palestinian resistance to Israeli border-shifting in 1948 and the spread of Israeli settlements in occupied territories in the first Intifada (1987–93). The speakers allude to the conflict over Palestinian access to water in the West Bank:

> Don't tell her the trouble about the swimming pool
> Tell her it's our water, we have the right (Churchill 2009, np)

This is followed by descriptions of Israeli settlers knocking down dwellings with Palestinian inhabitants:

> Don't tell her not to look at the bulldozer
> Don't tell her it was knocking the house down …
> Don't tell her anything she doesn't ask
> Don't tell her the boy was shot
> Don't tell her anything. (Churchill 2009, np)

The escalating violence of the conflict is mirrored in the *gestic* language that changes from a 'unity of opposites' in the beginning, to militaristic imperatives and, finally, to a total withholding or censorship of information. The line length and their rhythmic beats are increasingly truncated throughout the episode as more and more information is withheld from the child. The audience is left to assume that these gaps or unfinished ideas shape the child's identity and beliefs through what information is left out. The episode concludes with a complete sealing up of knowledge: 'Don't tell her anything.'

In contrast to the earlier episodes, Churchill shows the difficult and problematic position of Jewish adults caught between an experience and identification with victimhood due to the Nazi genocide and widespread Israeli complicity with the IDF aggression towards local Palestinian populations. Significantly, their victim status does not absolve their responsibility towards the actions of the IDF, nor is it a denial of the suffering endured during the Holocaust and its effects upon the generations that follow. Rather, it is the simultaneity of this dialectical tension in the play that makes Churchill both critical of the actions of the IDF and sympathetic towards the traumas endured by the Jewish people before, during and after the Holocaust. This awareness of both past and present injus-

tices acknowledges the complexity of the Israeli–Palestinian ethnic and religious tension.

By the seventh episode, the poetic language of *Seven Jewish Children* breaks down almost completely. It closes with a cascading monologue of violent imagery, strung together in long sentences, uncomfortably connected through repetitions and rhetorical questions:

> Tell her the whole world knows why shouldn't she know? tell her there's dead babies, did she see babies? Tell her she's got nothing to be ashamed of. Tell her they did it to themselves. Tell her they want their children killed to make people sorry for them, tell her I'm not sorry for them, tell her not to be sorry for them, tell her we're the ones to be sorry for, tell her they can't talk suffering to us. (Churchill 2009, np)

The total collapse of the ordered and measured poetic layout of the play text furthers the *gestic* language, signalling an escalating desperation and confusion towards the increasingly violent socio-political situation. The self-consciousness of the Jewish adults in the previous episodes is replaced by a callous disregard for Palestinian life:

> Tell her I laughed when I saw the dead policeman, tell her they're animals living in rubble now, tell her I wouldn't care if we wiped them out (Churchill 2009, np)

In this final episode Churchill uses dogmatic rhetoric that forecloses the prior possibilities of resolving the conflict. By the end of the play, the Jews have moved from victims to perpetrators. This shift has a jarring effect that brings out Churchill's unequivocal critique of the Israeli attitudes towards Palestinians and their manifestation in the IDF's attack on the Gaza Strip in 2008–9.

The final episode portrays the Israeli Jewish adults as lacking empathy for the plight of the Palestinians, but the final lines of the play are as poignant as they are violent:

> Tell her I look at one of their children, covered in blood and what do I feel?
> Tell her all I feel is happy it's not her.
> Don't tell her that.
> Tell her we love her
> Don't frighten her. (Churchill 2009, np)

The first line suggests a growing and overwhelming sensation of fear and horror in the adult. This terror culminates in an enjambment that leaves the speaker at a loss for words. The inability to articulate her emotions is relieved by the revelation that 'it's not her' child. The increased punctuation and return to the tight opening poetic form in these lines suggests a restoration of the speaker's control over their emotions.

The overall form of the play suggests that the traumas endured by the Jewish adults in the Holocaust lead to a terror of the other in the generations that follow. The dialectical contradiction remains unresolved as the play's motif 'Tell/Don't Tell' persists and its erratic poetic metres signify a society under strain. The poetic form of *Seven Jewish Children* works to show a one-sidedness to Israel–Palestine relations, in the hope that spectators might be moved to notice that which is hidden from view – the Jewish child and the Palestinian other.

### *The Girl-Child in Gaza*

In *Seven Jewish Children*, Churchill does not depict the IDF assault on Gaza. Instead, she depicts the prejudice, violence and fear that filter through to everyday domestic conversations. It is only by the final episodes of the play that the private expressions of violence begin to resonate with the public violence and ongoing conflict in Israel–Palestine. This is evident in the speaker's references to tanks and bulldozers. This portrayal of the political infiltrating the psychology of the personal shows Churchill's dialectical thinking about the problems of Israel–Palestine relations.

The relations between the individual and the broader socio-economic sphere frequently recur in Churchill's dramas. As Diamond notes: 'Ordinary lives are always dialectical for Churchill, individually marked yet ensnared, obscurely or directly, in political and historical force fields' (2009, 126). *Seven Jewish Children*'s reference to key historical displays of state power, such as the Holocaust or the Six-Day War, become the 'historical force fields' that infiltrate and inform the everyday decision-making and identity formation taking place in the domestic sphere. The 'ordinary lives' that are caught within historical processes in *Seven Jewish Children* have their own particularity in Churchill's specific reference to a female child.

Aston explains that one of Churchill's most enduring political concerns revolves around the girl-child and how to keep her safe within an unsafe world (2003, 22–3). According to Aston: 'the organization of mother–child relations in a social and cultural economy that continues to privilege production over reproduction, remains a focus of her feminist critique'

(2003, 20). In her earlier plays, Churchill explores the impact of capitalism on the domestic sphere. In *Seven Jewish Children*, Churchill returns to focus on mother–child relations, not as a socialist feminist critique, but, rather, to depict the impact of broader Israel–Palestinian relations on the increasing militarization of culture over generations. The girl-child is portrayed as an object to be kept safe in the unstable political and social environment of Israel. Weighed down by a history of persecution and violence, the adults in *Seven Jewish Children* become overprotective, paranoid parents in a climate of terror, anxious about the uncertain futures of their children.

In *Seven Jewish Children*, the girl-child is the focus upon which the domestic dramas are played out. She becomes a symbolic battleground for broader geopolitical conflicts. The power struggles over water and land appropriation and their justifiability are played out in the mind and body of the absent child. They are all the more troubling for the child's inability to answer back and question the contradictory logic with which she is presented. The child functions as the mediation point between these political, social, national and domestic anxieties, the subject through which habitual assumptions are challenged and potentially redefined. As a dialectical vessel, a catalyst for challenging fixed and rigid 'facts' about the history of Israel and the Jewish people, the girl-child is the symbol of hope. Though she is noticeably absent, it is her *interpretation* of the information offered to her that will influence how the Israel–Palestine conflict will be understood and what iterations it will take in the generations that follow her.

### *Estrangement and Writing Within Terror*

Although the domestic setting provides an allegory for broader political issues, *Seven Jewish Children* also shows how the universal manifests in the particular. Diamond argues that Churchill's work creates an 'atmospherics of terror', where terror leaches into the psyches of ordinary people (2009, 126). Diamond describes Churchill's aesthetic of terror in her body of work up to *Far Away* (2000) as:

> terror in the mundane, the swings from there to here, the proximal yet noncausal relation of desire and violence, linguistic interruption and disjunctive form, comprise Churchill's method for invoking the affect of terror. (Diamond, Elin 2009, 135)

In *Seven Jewish Children*, paranoia and terror are normalized. The adult speakers attempt to shape the child's world view in ways that reveal how

domestic attitudes can encourage nationalism and racism. The way in which Churchill joins the domestic to the historical, the particular to the universal, demonstrates her dialectical thinking in her portrayal of the complex ethnic and religious divides that underpin military actions such as Operation Cast Lead.

Diamond points out that Bush's 'War on Terror' employs a paradoxical rhetoric because war *causes* terror (2009, 125). As Spivak points out, while 'terrorism' could be a tangible target in war, 'terror' describes an affective emotional state (in Bharucha 2014, 11). Similarly, Butler describes the ambiguity of 'terror' as:

> Various terror alerts that go out over the media authorize and heighten racial hysteria in which fear is directed anywhere and nowhere, in which individuals are asked to be on guard but not told what to be on guard against; so everyone is free to imagine and identify the source of terror. (2006, 39)

*Seven Jewish Children* demonstrates a metonymic relationship between paranoid and overprotective parenting and the climate of paranoia arguably perpetuated during the Bush administration's 'War on Terror'.[2] The repetitious form of *Seven Jewish Children* gives the impression of an affective state of terror where fear is 'anywhere and nowhere', where children are asked to be on guard but unsure of what they are on guard against, where the 'source of terror' is the mysterious 'Bedouin' with her 'camels and dates' (Churchill 2009, np).

The repetitious motif of 'Tell her' and 'Don't tell her' suggests that fear has entered the psyche of the speakers who convey it to the next generation. It is not only the subject matter of the play that critiques the threat of terror, but also the mode in which it is expressed. Diamond claims that Churchill's early formal experiences of writing for radio provided her with the tools for writing an aesthetic of terror. Diamond writes:

> I would argue that the spatial expansiveness of radio had a lasting effect on her formal choices when rendering states of terror. In writing for radio she could define and redefine social space, create a situation and just as quickly dissolve it. (2009, 127)

Taking Diamond's argument one step further, I suggest that the spatial and temporal plasticity of radio plays is also applicable to Churchill's writing to capture the virtual or online sphere in *Iraq.doc* and *Seven Jewish Children*. Diamond argues that 'she [Churchill] is never writing *on* ter-

ror, as though it were a far away unchanging object, but rather within it' (2009, 140). Considering what it means to write within terror, I now turn to the online dissemination of *Seven Jewish Children*, its performances and public responses.

### *Publishing, Performance and Propaganda*

*Seven Jewish Children* was published by Nick Hern Books in 2009 and was made available free of charge online from the Royal Court theatre website and the Nick Hern Books website. Similar to *Only We*, the mass dissemination of the work via the Internet and its free licensing suggest an attempt to create theatre that contributes to public debate on a contemporary human rights issue. In using the Internet to disseminate the play, Churchill adds her professional creative voice to the public debate in the online media. Her use of new communication platforms to disseminate her work seems to suggest that there are limitations to traditional print media and its ability to respond in a timely manner to urgent political and humanitarian issues. In a historical moment when Julian Assange can be labelled a 'terrorist' by the American government for using the Internet to access and distribute state secrets, digital modes of disseminating theatre are liable to be viewed as threatening to state security for the ways in which they place critiques of the 'War on Terror' alongside 'the news' of the war.

On *The Guardian* theatre blog, critic Michael Billington noted the significance of disseminating *Seven Jewish Children* while Operation Cast Lead was still underway. According to Billington, Churchill's play: 'confirms theatre's ability to react more rapidly than any other art form to global politics' (Billington 2009a, np). Billington sees the celerity of Churchill's response as necessary for the survival of theatre itself if it is to remain relevant in a world saturated by new media forms. In another online post from *The Guardian* he writes:

> If theatre fails to react rapidly to current events, whether it be the Middle East crisis or the global financial meltdown, it will be reduced to the role of an impotent bystander. What theatre can also do is delve behind the headlines. We've all been shocked by TV footage of the Israeli assault on Gaza. But Churchill's play reminds us that, in any conflict, children are always prime victims. (Billington 2009b, np)

Despite writing for one of the most widely read newspapers in the Western world, Billington's comments suggest that the media can no longer reli-

ably offer a complete picture of world events. His claim that effective political theatre should 'delve behind the headlines' suggests that there is something hidden behind news reporting that theatre should expose and open up to debate. It also points to the capacity of theatre to generate affective responses in readers and viewers that is lacking from the streamlined reporting of the 'facts' in the media. In this case, to write 'within terror' suggests writing within a public sphere where the mainstream media headlines conceal or downplay the complexity and brutality of conflicts, particularly the suffering and violence inflicted on the innocent victims of war.

In Britain, BBC Radio 4 refused to broadcast *Seven Jewish Children* as a radio play on the grounds that it could compromise editorial impartiality (Martin 2012, np). In response, *The Guardian* hired theatre director Elliot Smith to create a performance of the work with actor Jennie Stoller. Stoller's performance was uploaded to *The Guardian* online on 25 April 2009. The opening credits of Stoller's video performance state that the play has been reproduced in this form in order to reach as wide an audience as possible, indicating Smith's strategic use of the digital medium to generate widespread public attention and discussion.

Stoller performs *Seven Jewish Children* as a monologue, with each of the seven episodes punctuated by photographs. The photographs situate each episode historically for the viewer. They include images of the bodies of murdered Jews in concentration camps during World War Two, a family sitting around the table for Shabbat and boarding a ship, a group of Palestinian women dressed in black hooded dresses transporting crops along a desert road, Israeli tanks in the Six-Day War, the Palestinian boy, Faris Odeh, who threw stones at Israeli tanks in the Gaza Strip in 2000 before he was shot dead, and an inhabited Palestinian apartment block with its fourth wall blown out, the outcome of an Israeli settlement.

The images used in *The Guardian* online performance are *gestic* because they distil the ebb and flow of historical movement, capturing static moments of historic transition. These *gestic* images expose the class status of Palestinians. They show Palestinians on foot which provides a striking contrast to the Israeli military tanks. Furthermore, the performance of the work as a monologue accentuates the contradictions of Tell/Don't Tell. When these contradictory ideas are spoken by a single person it suggests an anxious mind in distress. As such, Stoller's performance emphasizes the dialectical nature of the play.

The video of Stoller performing *Seven Jewish Children* in *The Guardian* online is framed by a news page that offers options for public interaction with its content. Readers are able to 'share' the link of Stoller's performance with friends, link it to their Facebook pages, email it to a friend, Google+ or 'tweet' about it on Twitter. The function of sharing, commenting and 'like'-ing has opened up new avenues for dialectical debate. These new modes of communication update Brechtian strategies for turning audiences into dialecticians by provoking them into interactive discussion and debate with broad-reach accessibility and new spectator-interactive possibilities. Whether the reader/viewer is inclined to act beyond tweeting their opinion or offering a cursory 'thumbs-up' or 'like'-ing of the work is, however, dubious and ultimately unknowable.

*The Guardian* online version of *Seven Jewish Children* was the first of a range of international performances of the work that were recorded and disseminated through the video-sharing website YouTube. Owned by Google since 2008, YouTube allows individuals to 'broadcast themselves' globally via videos or sound recordings. It enables cross-cultural communication and the formation of new communities with unprecedented speed and diversity. Most interesting of the variety of YouTube performances of *Seven Jewish Children* was a translated performance of the work into Hebrew and staged on the street in Tel Aviv's Rabin Square by the Coalition of Women for Peace on 11 June 2009. The performance was part of a wider campaign organized by a coalition of left-wing groups protesting against the two-year blockade of the Gaza Strip. Political dissident Samieh Jabbarin directed the work via another Internet communication phenomenon, Skype. Jabbarin was unable to physically attend rehearsals because he was under house arrest after protesting against the far right in the Arab-Israeli town of Umm al-Fahm in February 2009. The cast included Sara Von Schwarze, Gabi Aldor, Layla Batterman and Ramie Hoyberger, with music by Dirar Kalash.

The performance of *Seven Jewish Children* in Rabin Square featured a woman with a pram who constructs a makeshift fortress around her and her baby. Around her, other adults yell the lines of the play in Hebrew. Responses to the performance in Israel were varied. *The Guardian* reporter Rachel Shabi reported some positive responses towards the play, including Danielle Shworts, 27, from Tel Aviv who said: 'Political plays can be really superficial, but this one was serious and very significant', and George Borestein, 58, who agreed: 'I am really shocked. It was a fascinating performance and, to my great sorrow, there is a lot of truth

to this play' (in Shabi 2009, np). The comments section of the YouTube webpage, however, suggest different reactions to the work. For example, the avatar 'Sabraguy' called it 'anti-Semitic filth' and 'rachelgolem' mimicked Churchill's form when he/she posted: 'Tell her an Arab will kill his daughter for kissing a boy in the street!!!!!' ('Seven Jewish Children – A Play for Gaza' 2009).

The diversity of responses to this performance highlights its success in provoking real-world dialectical debate. The creation of works and forums for such debate is particularly important within increasingly securitarian societies experiencing a heightened state of 'terror' such as Israel or America. The online performances and the polemical responses they generated demonstrate Churchill's ability to write 'within terror' all the while updating the Brechtian zigzag to show more mercuric and performative dialectical tensions in the digital age.

### *Anti-Semitism and Closing Down the Dialectic*

The methods of dissemination that Churchill used for *Seven Jewish Children* meant that it attracted widespread international media attention. In Britain and Australia the play generated heated public debate over the question of whether the work was anti-Semitic. In Britain a number of public figures openly censured *Seven Jewish Children*. Writer Howard Jacobson described *Seven Jewish Children* as: 'a new hate-fuelled little chamber-piece by Caryl Churchill' and 'an audacious 10-minute encapsulation of Israel's moral collapse' (2009, np). A spokesman for the Board of Deputies of British Jews told *The Jerusalem Post* that the play went 'beyond the boundaries of reasonable political discourse' (in Surasky 2009, np). In a letter to *The Daily Telegraph* some British Jews condemned the play for portraying Israeli parents as 'inhuman triumphalists who care little about anything except their children's feelings and who teach them that Arabs are sub-human and must be hated' (in Jonny 2012, np).[3] The play was viewed by many as a critique of Israel and Israeli Jews rather than a criticism of the IDF and a chance to critically debate the 2009–10 attack on Gaza.

In Melbourne, Australia, the public responses to *Seven Jewish Children* were similarly polarized. The play was performed as a reading at the State Library of Victoria in Australia on 18 May 2009, despite efforts by Jewish and Zionist lobby groups to ban the performance. As in Britain, the timing of the work in Australia fed into broader public debates around the

plight of refugees in detention centres and the political asylum controversy under the governments of John Howard and Kevin Rudd in Australia. Prior to the Melbourne performance, *Seven Jewish Children* was criticized by some Melbourne Jewish groups as being anti-Semitic (Quinn 2009, 5). Others accused the performance of political bias because it was sponsored and organized by a Palestinian educational lobbying group, 'Australians for Palestine', and was timed, according to some members of the public, to commemorate 'al-Nakba' or what some Arab people call the 'catastrophe' of the creation of the State of Israel in 1948 (Weinberg 2009, 14).

The Melbourne performance was a 'rehearsed reading' with a cast of five that included high-profile actor Miriam Margolyes (who has Jewish-Anglo origins). The reading included a debate that took place after the show with a panel that included Robert Richter QC and lawyer Randa Abdel-Fattah. According to the Palestinian organizers, they were unable to find a Jewish representative willing to sit on the panel and argue in favour of the Israeli government's policies (in Jackson 2009, 3). Writing in *The Age* newspaper, Rabbi Jonathan Keren-Black praised the play and said he had participated in a reading of it elsewhere. He revealed that he was approached to be the Jewish representative in the panel discussion but declined because of the context of its performance. He excused himself by saying: 'Jews and Israel are not synonymous and I am not a spokesman for Israel' (2009, 15). The range of responses to Churchill's work attests to the complexity of Israel–Palestine relations and what can and can't publicly be stated or shown about these fraught relations in the play's performance context in Melbourne.

On the night of the Melbourne reading, debate raged between Zionist and pro-Palestinian protest groups milling outside the State Library of Victoria. Left-wing groups allied themselves with the Palestinian protesters and handed out flyers on an upcoming forum discussing the topic: 'Imperialism and Resistance in the Middle-East: The Marxist Attitude to Hamas and Hezbollah'. Meanwhile, the Students for Palestine handed out flyers for a lecture by MK Haneen Zoabi, the first woman elected to the Israeli Knesset from an Arab party on the topic: 'Is Israel a racist country?' Also protesting outside the performance venue, the Australasian Union of Jewish Students advocated that the reading should be cancelled and handed out flyers printed with '5 Reasons why *Seven Jewish Children* is racist'.

Margolyes was also labelled anti-Semitic for her involvement in the reading of *Seven Jewish Children*. Margolyes called the anti-Semitism accusation 'bollocks' in *The Age* newspaper, adding that Jewish people who

sympathize with Palestine should speak out and say: 'Look, we're Jews, and we want Israel to survive, but not like this, not by killing other people' (in Quinn 2009, 5). She defended the rights of Jews and non-Jews to critique the military actions of the IDF. Margolyes acknowledged that *Seven Jewish Children* is critical of Israel saying: 'Yes it is, very critical of Israel. That doesn't mean its anti-Semitic' (2009, 19). Margolyes' response suggests that there is no monolithic 'Jew' with a single and fixed identity but a heterogeneity of views which are subject to growth regarding what it means to be Jewish and what role Israel should play in defining and protecting 'Jewishness' throughout the Diaspora.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler considers the potential for public speech acts in the West that are critical of Israel. She argues that the speaker's fear of being accused of anti-Semitism can sometimes cause people to self-censor their criticism of the Israeli government and military actions. She writes:

> The public sphere is constituted in part by what cannot be said and what cannot be shown. The limits of the sayable, the limits of what can appear, circumscribe the domain in which political speech operates and certain kinds of subjects appear as viable actors. In this instance [speech acts accused of being anti-Semitic], the identification of speech that is critical of Israel with anti-Semitism seeks to render it unsayable. (Butler 2006, xvii)

The censorship that Butler views as rife in the public sphere, in Israel in particular, limits the possibilities of what is 'sayable'. As we have seen, Rancière characterizes this very sayability as central to democracy and the conditions for the possibility of realizing political subjectivity. *Seven Jewish Children* pushed the boundaries of what was sayable in the public sphere regarding Israel–Palestine relations.

The multiplicity of responses to the play mirrors the complex public debate around the Israel–Palestine conflict. As Billington noted in *The Guardian* theatre blog:

> Avoiding overt didacticism, her [Churchill's] play becomes a heartfelt lamentation for the future generations who will themselves become victims of the attempted military suppression of Hamas … The play solves nothing, but shows theatre's power to heighten consciousness and articulate moral outrage. (Billington 2009a, np)

Although Churchill wrote *Seven Jewish Children* to express her outrage at the IDF's Operation Cast Lead offensive, she does not provide simplistic

solutions or imagine a peaceful resolution to the conflict. As in *Iraq.doc*, she maintains the contradictions without neat denouement. The range of responses to *Seven Jewish Children* and public debate surrounding its performances demonstrate Churchill's ability to open up further questions and discussion about the difficult political dilemmas she addresses in her plays.

In contrast to the open-endedness of *Seven Jewish Children*, Churchill's real-world political protest is less dialectical. At the beginning of 2012, Churchill was a signatory to a human rights petition alongside other prominent actors, Emma Thompson, David Calder, Harriet Walter and Miriam Margolyes, as well as writers and directors, including Mark Rylance, founding artistic director of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. The petition called for the cancellation of a scheduled performance in the World Shakespeare Festival at the Globe Theatre London by Israeli theatre company Habima. Churchill's decision to publicly advocate for the removal of an Israeli theatre company's performance from the programme contradicts the dialectical nature of her plays and suggests a certain hypocrisy in her own desire for free artistic expression.

As the adults in *Seven Jewish Children* struggle with the national, religious and historical realities of building a more liveable world for their children, Churchill captures the paranoia that pervades the post-9/11 world. Although at times the play comes close to repeating anti-Semitic tropes, the historicization of Jewish persecution means that ultimately Churchill never makes a racist critique of Jewishness. Instead she challenges spectators to compare the relation between the recreation of the nation state of Israel after World War Two and the history of Jewish persecution. Churchill generates sympathy for the Jewish adults depicted in the play as living within the contradictory and precarious conditions of Israel, vacillating between who will occupy the position of victim and perpetrator.

Given the proliferation of new media technologies and its increasingly accessible pricing, today global or national issues can easily penetrate familial spaces and contribute to a state of paranoia, anxiety and fear. Equally, however, such spaces also provide a potential platform through which to critique dominant ideological positions, particularly in the 'comments' section on YouTube where public debate frequently occurs under avatar pseudonyms. *Seven Jewish Children* shows how theatre that harnesses new technological and media developments can provoke debate and scepticism about the dominant political discourses and voices reporting on the IDF's attack on Gaza in 2008–9.

### *The Brechtian Dialectical Aesthetic for the Digital Age*

In both *Iraq.doc* and *Seven Jewish Children*, Churchill engages with the political commentary and representations of the Iraq War and the actions of the IDF without offering simplistic or didactic solutions to either conflict. Instead, she explores their complex historical roots in order to challenge their dehumanizing effects. *Iraq.doc* resists the mainstream aestheticization of war as spectacle by appropriating existing political speeches, reports and online discussions of the war and estranging the pro-Iraq War rhetorical justifications. The chat room form of *Iraq.doc* and the new media networks used to distribute *Seven Jewish Children* update the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic for the post-Brechtian epoch. The forms of these two plays show the significance of digital culture and new communication systems in redefining social communities, their interactions and political engagements and the structures of power.

Although these plays are strongly anti-Iraq War and anti the IDF's treatment of Palestinians, they do not attempt to provide answers to the problems they pose and the questions they raise. Instead they revel in contradiction, eschewing a dogmatic view of these complex global relations. Their post-Brechtian negative dialectics continue to rely on each spectator's imagination and curiosity to actively participate in public life and energetic debate. Like all the playwrights and artists considered in this book, Churchill refuses to reduce complex global conflicts into neat dichotomies or unrealistically utopian outcomes. For Churchill, the need for formal dramatic innovations that match the complexities of the issues raised in the plays is vital to keeping audiences active and critical. As Churchill writes:

> Playwrights don't give answers; they ask questions. We need to find new questions, which may help us to answer old ones or to make them unimportant, and this means new subjects and new form. (Churchill in Luckhurst 2009, 63)

Churchill employs Brechtian strategies of dis-identification through her structural organization of quotation in *Iraq.doc* and *Seven Jewish Children* to 'ask questions' about the American government's justifications for waging war on Iraq and how Israeli–Jewish cultural and religious identity can have the potential to either compound or resist fear-based vilification and persecution of the Palestinian other. Churchill's post-Brechtian aesthetic

sensibilities draw upon new media and online morphogenic structures in order to characterize contemporary conflict as negatively dialectical and invigorate real-world debate.

## Notes

1. The opening of the play and its child-friendly form also reminds spectators of Anne-Frank's diaries in which the Jewish child in hiding in Nazi-occupied Holland during World War Two is forced to make sense of incomprehensible violence and persecution.
2. Martin Crimp's play *Advice to Iraqi Women* (2003) employs a similar focus on the rhetoric of parenting to critique the Iraq War.
3. Churchill's play also prompted a creative response by non-Jewish actor Richard Stirling entitled *Seven Other Children*: *A Theatrical Response to* '*Seven Jewish Children*' (2009) that played for two weeks at the New End Theatre in Hampstead in north-west London. In this work Stirling mimics the form and structure of Churchill's work but inverts the content by portraying the perspective of Palestinian adults militarizing a male Palestinian child.

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CHAPTER 7

# Elfriede Jelinek's *Bambiland*

Since the late 1960s Austrian writer Elfriede Jelinek has created work across a range of different artistic forms. Her oeuvre includes: radio plays, poetry, theatre texts, polemical essays, anthologies, novels, translations, screenplays, musical compositions, libretti and ballets, film and video art; a large body of work that continues to expand at a rapid rate. A child musical prodigy, Jelinek studied theatre arts and art history at the University of Vienna and classical music and piano performance at the prestigious Vienna Conservatory of Music (Sieg 1994, 149). In 2004 she was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for what the committee described as: 'her musical flow of voices and counter-voices in novels and plays that with extraordinary linguistic zeal reveal the absurdity of society's clichés and their subjugating power'.

Throughout her vast body of work, Jelinek develops new methods by which to unsettle the habits of her readers and spectators through language that shifts awkwardly between advertising slogans, lewd puns, pornography, sadomasochism, kitsch clichés, idiomatic expressions, philosophical terminology, classical music and canonical literature. The blending of such a range of what traditionally might be categorized as 'high' and 'low' texts may suggest that Jelinek's formal experimentation leads to cultural relativism. Yet, by reading Jelinek's play *Bambiland* using the tools of the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic, I suggest that this mismatched collection of texts sits together in an ironic juxtaposition, culminating in an uncompromising critique of the Iraq War and its representations in the mainstream media.



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From early on in her playwriting career, Jelinek's style has been resistant to the conventions of 'dramatic theatre'. In the essay 'Ich möchte seicht sein' ('I want to be shallow') from 1983. Jelinek declares:

> I don't want to play, and I don't want to see others play, either. I also don't want to get others to play. People shouldn't say things, and pretend they are living. I don't want to see that false unity reflected in the faces of actors: the unity of life. I don't want to see that play of forces of this 'well-greased muscle' (Roland Barthes) – the play of language and movement, the so-called 'expression' of a well-trained actor. I don't want voice and movement to fit together. In Theatre today something is being revealed – invisibly, for all the stage strings are pulled behind the scene. The machinery, in other words, is hidden; the actor is surrounded by contraptions, is well-lit, and he walks about … I don't want theatre. (1997, np)

Jelinek explicitly rejects the elements of naturalist and realist theatre: the synchronization of voice and action, the pretence of the fourth wall and the false unity of representation. As we have seen, Brecht's dialectical aesthetic sought to avoid the psychological characterization of realist theatre through self-consciously showing the jagged edges of human relations. Taking anti-realism a leap further than Brecht, Jelinek's recent play texts avoid psychological characterization and write the 'stage strings' into her work. Her dislike for the hidden machinery of bourgeois realist theatre leads her to develop plays that are filled with voices and movement that don't 'fit together', a deliberately jarring mismatch.

Where her earlier work focuses on a Marxist feminist view of Western women's lives in contemporary society, her twenty-first-century plays respond more directly to political and social crises where men are the principal agents. The play *Das Lebewohl (Les Adieux)* (*The Farewell* (*The Goodbyes*)) (2000) is a response to the brief political coalition in 2000 between the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and the extreme right-wing Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) led by Jörg Haider. The work caricatures Haider's neo-Nazi, xenophobic political platform and his charismatic ability to manipulate the media. The text is composed of clichés, advertising slogans and media sound bites and avoids psychological characterization. Other more recent plays include *Kein Licht* (*No Light*) (2011) and *Fukushima – Epilog?* (*Fukushima – Epilogue?*) (2012). Jelinek describes *Fukushima – Epilog?* as 'a grieving' following the tsunami and consequent meltdown of the nuclear power plant in Fukushima Daiichi in Japan in 2011 (2012, np).

These pieces are responses to man-made catastrophes with global political, economic, environmental and humanitarian implications. Her commentary on these events is conveyed using a mode of writing that she classifies as 'theatre' on her website. Yet, all these plays radicalize what we understand as theatre in their abandonment of the fundamental conventions of traditional drama, in particular their lack of clearly defined characters, linear plot, dialogue or catharsis. This differs somewhat from her first play, *What Happened after Nora Left Her Husband; or Pillars of Society* (1979), a sequel to Henrik Ibsen's canonical play *A Doll's House* (1879) and fusion with Ibsen's *Pillars of Society* (1877). In this early work, Jelinek uses versions of Ibsen's historical characters and naturalistic dialogue but largely eschews psychological character development. She depicts violence against women, sadomasochism and prostitution as a means to critique the exploitation of women as commodified and fetishized objects in capitalist societies. Karen Jürs-Munby describes *What Happened after Nora Left Her Husband* as an example of Jelinek's 'post-drama' that uses a post-Brechtian defamiliarization of Ibsen's original characters and invariably results in postdramatic performances (2014, 212).

Jelinek is better known for her novels, particularly the novel *The Piano Teacher*, first published in 1983 and made into a film of the same name in 2001 by Austrian director Michael Haneke. Jelinek's 'theatre' pieces are not significantly formally distinguishable from her novels and later in the chapter I will consider what makes *Bambiland* (and Jelinek's other works of 'theatre') theatrical. Among Jelinek's many works of theatre, *Bambiland* has received less critical attention, however, and has rarely been staged. It gained more public and critical attention after it was staged by German director and political activist Christoph Schlingensief at the Burgtheater in 2004. The unusual form of *Bambiland* and the challenge it presents to any director wanting to stage it might account for the work receiving less scholarly attention. Yet, within the context of Jelinek's later plays, *Bambiland* is representative of Jelinek's style and her turn to global political issues.

## *Bambiland*: Contradictory Composition

*Bambiland* is Jelinek's response to the 2003 invasion of Iraq by American-led international coalition forces. *Bambiland* was first published online on Jelinek's website where it appeared as a 'work-in-progress' and was revised between 2003 and 2004. In this chapter I refer to the English translation by Angelika Peaston-Startinig and Jennie Wright (2004). In *Bambiland* Jelinek critiques and parodies the mainstream Western media's portrayal

of the Iraq War by showing the unequal weighting of the two sides of the conflict. In Rancière's terms, the work might be described as a commentary on 'the parcelling out of the visible and the invisible' (2004, 19) in mainstream media war coverage.

*Bambiland* is constructed from pre-existing texts, 'ready-made' phrases and a series of media sound bites, particularly CNN news broadcasts, that are manipulated by Jelinek. In *Das Lebewohl (Les Adieux)*, Jelinek credits the 'news' and Aeschylus' *The Oresteia* as research sources, conflating ancient Greek and present-day media representations of war. Similarly, *Bambiland* is prefaced by self-reflexive, authorial acknowledgements that foreground the work's intertextuality:

> My thanks to Aeschylus and the 'Persians,' translated by Oskar Werner (and Philip Vellacott). As far as I'm concerned, you can add a pinch of Nietzsche. The rest is not by me either. It's lousy. It's by the media. (Jelinek 2004, np)

Jelinek inserts herself as author into the dense polyphonic structure of *Bambiland* in her use of 'my' and 'me' in the acknowledgements. First-person pronoun and possessives are also woven throughout the rest of the play. This intrusion of the author's voice beyond the acknowledgements upsets the traditional dramatic effacement of the author behind a play's characters. In *Bambiland*, the authorial voice puts the play's formal operations up front and renders Jelinek's denial of authorship playfully disingenuous. The cynical and self-deprecating voice in the acknowledgements distances Jelinek's role as creator of the text, by claiming: 'It's lousy' and 'It is by the media,' while simultaneously bringing her voice as author/narrator to the fore. The opening insertion of an authorial voice in *Bambiland* foregrounds Jelinek's self-conscious commentary on the subject matter throughout the rest of the play.

*Bambiland* is formatted as an unparagraphed block of text without stage directions or designated characters. The work rapidly switches perspectives between what seem to be primarily Western voices, including the authorial or narratorial voice. In the online version, the only breaks that divide the text into segments are images that include sketches of dissected missiles, photographs published in 'the media' (as cited by Jelinek) from Abu Ghraib prison in Baghdad depicting Iraqi prisoners being humiliated and tortured by American soldiers, as well as ancient stone tablets depicting scenes of war and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. These images have few direct references in the play itself but often sit in ironic contradistinction to the ideas expressed in the text. The merging of classical Greek tragedies

and advertising slogans estranges received representations of the war and destabilizes seemingly fixed categories of knowledge. 'The media' that Jelinek cites in the acknowledgements will be referred to as it appears in the play, framed by inverted commas, as a means to highlight its performative construction and estrange its linguistic and institutional authority.

*Bambiland* has a number of themes and topics that Jelinek repeats and develops in a random and cyclical fashion. The topics include: gods, the televisual war, advancing armies, lies, violence, suffering, death, starvation, oil, superior American weapon technologies, Iraqi weapon inferiority, key American political generals of the war including 'Lord Bush', Dick Cheney and Donald Rumsfeld as well as religious differences between Muslims, Jews and Christians. *Bambiland* lacks a developmental or causal narrative logic and the multiplicity of unidentified voices invites reading the play through its dialectical interplay of contradictory elements. This unusual theatrical form positions Jelinek as the most radical of all the playwrights in this book in her development of new ways of estranging the Iraq War and the American leaders who advocate for it.

## *Sprachflächen*

Jelinek has described her writing as '*Sprachflächen*' (language surfaces) (or '*Textflächen*' (text surfaces)), a form that she employs in her novels, essays and play texts. Karen Jürs-Munby defines *Sprachflächen* as consisting of:

> montages of playfully and deconstructively manipulated quotes from a wide variety of different spheres and genres, including popular culture, the media, philosophy, poetry as well as classical dramatic literature, intermixed with what reads like the author's own 'voice.' (2009, 46)

*Bambiland* deconstructs and manipulates a range of uncited, pre-existing texts that include (but are not limited to) a classical ancient Greek play (*The Persians*), nineteenth-century philosophy and twenty-first-century news media sound bites interspersed with voices expressing divergent perspectives about war. The intertextual form of *Bambiland* not only confounds the unities of time, place and action that were essential to classical drama, but also replaces character and dialogue with multiple overlapping voices. The polylogue sits awkwardly within the defining parameters of Hans-Thies Lehmann's 'postdramatic' theatre which claims that postdramatic works de-emphasize text and language in favour of the body and its improvisational capacities (2006, 5). The uniqueness of the

*Sprachflächen* leads Jürs-Munby to describe Jelinek's plays as 'resistant text' (2009, 46). According to Jürs-Munby, resistant text can: 'play a driving role in bringing about the political as a disruption of business (politics) as usual' (2014, 210).

Brecht was interested in dramatic forms that shook up the habits that were becoming entrenched in the dominant theatrical form of realism. In 1929 Brecht noted that: 'today's catastrophes do not progress in a straight line but in cyclical crises … Even to dramatize a simple newspaper report one needs something much more than the dramatic technique of a Hebbel or an Ibsen' (1964, 30). By 2003, Jelinek shows that to represent a war waged over access to petroleum and to dramatize newspaper (and television) reports on that war, requires not only the total dismantling of the five-act form and causal narrative structure but also the complete eradication of the apparatus of realism with its individuated characters and dialogue. Just as Brecht overturns the forms established by Christian Friedrich Hebbel or Ibsen, Jelinek pushes Brecht's dialectical theatre beyond its limits to create a representational aesthetic that depicts the 'cyclical crises' of war through abstracted repetition. Jelinek not only makes 'heroes' interchangeable, but denies them any delineation whatsoever as characters with psychological depth.

Western experiences of today's catastrophes such as the Iraq War are depicted as confused, frantic, haphazard and estranged through the mediation of news reporting and the distractions of the consumer commodities that permeate the media. The mode that Jelinek uses to depict the Iraq War in *Bambiland* evokes this sense of chaos, repetition, mediation, commodification and an escalating and overloading of information that are taken to a further extreme in Schlingensief's staging of *Bambiland* in 2004. Jelinek's text is not only resistant to the conventions of the dominant dramatic form but also repels readers/spectators from drawing out straightforward meaning from the work. In its often inaccessible aesthetic, Jelinek's resistant text has significant consequences for the play's potential to politicize its audiences. I will return to this problem at the end of the chapter, but first I will offer one possible reading of the play and consider how the *Sprachflächen* in *Bambiland* develop a critique of the Iraq War.

## Intertextual Historicization: Estranging the Iraq War

The diversity of 'ready-made' sources that Jelinek draws upon gives *Bambiland* an intertextual form. Western politicians' justifications for the war in Iraq are historicized and estranged through Jelinek's intertextual

references to canonical literary texts and contemporary media images and sound bites. Julia Kristeva's work on semiotics describes intertextuality when she writes: 'any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations: any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (1980, 66). Kristeva argues that poetic language replaces the intersubjective relation of meaning transfer between writer and reader with an intertextual relation that forms at least two points of connection between texts and creates meaning through these intersecting networks of words, texts and codes (1980, 66). Over the latter half of the twentieth century, postmodern fiction has frequently employed a self-conscious or metafictional intertextuality through the use of plagiarism, quotation, pastiche or parody.

To consider how this intertexuality works in *Bambiland*, I will begin with the title of the play and its intersubjective relations of meaning transfer. *Bambiland* references a range of twentieth-century texts that are themselves loaded with allegorical meanings. Firstly, the title *Bambiland* evokes the 1923 Austrian novel *Bambi: Eine Lebensgeschichte aus dem Walde* (*Bambi: A Life in the Woods*) by Felix Salten. *Bambi* is a coming-of-age story of a male deer who must learn to survive in the forest. The novel emphasizes Bambi's peaceful forest existence and the threat posed by human hunters. Despite the novel's popularity in Europe, it was banned by the Nazis in 1936 after being cited as a political allegory for the treatment of Jews in Europe. After the *Anschluss*, Salten was forced to flee Nazi-occupied Austria and live in exile in Switzerland, where he wrote the sequel. Jelinek's allusion to Salten's novel reminds readers/spectators of the power of literature to unsettle totalitarian regimes. It also links the Nazi persecution of the Jews to the plight of Iraqis. In this comparison Iraq becomes Austria and the Nazis represent the American or 'Coalition of the Willing' forces.[1]

The censorship that Salten suffered at the hands of the Nazis recurs thematically in *Bambiland* in the depiction of the Western media's collusion with the Western armies. The narrator remarks:

> Let's go somewhere else, let's dodge round it, it is part of our culture that a certain force be exercised, unapproachable our army at war. And it doesn't need approaching, the army, the media travel with it, nicely cushioned and their sentiments can rise together with ours, why not. On site as the sons loot the city. (Jelinek 2004, np)

While the Western media is supposed to offer objective, impartial reporting of events, this passage portrays the media as 'embedded' and highly

selective in what images and voices it reproduces for Western spectators. Rather than interrogating the questionable actions of the Western armies, the media 'travel with it [the army]' and is 'nicely cushioned'. The intertextual narrative of Salten's *Bambi* and its historical context, combined with the ironic tone in which Jelinek describes biased media reporting, make fun of 'the media's' objectivity by inviting readers/spectators into the joke of such a contradiction.

Critical of more than just media censorship, however, *Bambiland*'s allusion to Salten's novel suggests that the Iraq War has other latent proto-fascist elements. Elisabeth Kargl notes that Jelinek parodies the kitsch and bucolic discourses associated with Nazi nationalism by co-opting its language of repetition, perversion and explosion (2008, 17). In *Bambiland* such an explosive language of accumulation and repetitious imagery is evident in passages such as:

> From the darkness of his glance glares a gory dragons eye, blood on their soles, blood in their eyes, blood on their trousers, see ten thousand missiles fly, see his thousand tanks advance, each people chasing ahead, after the Führer, each one of them after their Führer, hopefully they won't confuse them, each to their own Führer, who has a deep sympathy for each one amongst his people. (Jelinek 2004, np)

In the description 'each to their own Führer', Jelinek makes the Nazi leader, Adolf Hitler, an allegory for both Saddam Hussein and President G. W. Bush. She aligns the violent atrocities of Hitler in World War Two with a ruthless dictator and, more surprisingly, with the actions of a democratically elected American President. The intertextual narrative of Salten's *Bambi* and its cultural context, combined with the ironic tone in which Jelinek describes biased media reporting, ridicule 'the media's' claim to objectivity.

Whereas Brecht depicts Chicago gangsters posing as cauliflower sellers in order to create an allegory for the Nazis in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, Jelinek draws parallels between the treatment of Iraqi civilians in the Iraq War and the atrocities of the Holocaust. The play suggests that the other of the Coalition forces, the Iraqis, occupy a comparable position of vulnerability and persecution as the Jews at the hands of the Nazis. The Bambi intertext situates the Iraq invasion in a broader historical context of war, violence, persecution and propaganda. The intertexts provide Jelinek with a dialectical method of investigation that sweeps across historical and cultural contexts. The ways in which the texts relate to one another through what Kristeva would call their 'absorption and transfor-

mation' of each other suggest a dialectical dynamism that historicizes the Iraq War and represents it as an event in flux. Jelinek playfully destabilizes and estranges the dominant received representations of the war, updating the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt* for the twenty-first century using intertexual strategies.

## The *Gestus* of Bambi: Disney Meets Abu Ghraib

More familiar to non-Austrian readers/spectators in the title *Bambiland* is its reference to the famous Walt Disney adaptation of Salten's novel. The animated feature film *Bambi* was released in America in 1942. The Disney adaptation waters down the grim aspects of the novel in an effort to make it more appealing to a young audience. Jelinek references the Disney adaptation by including an image of a Bambi merchandising figurine alongside the title of the play. Jelinek staged and took a photograph of the figurine using one of her childhood toys. The result is a child-like diorama, reminiscent of those made for primary school projects. The Disney figurine of Bambi, with his legs splayed out to one side, appears to be running towards two fir-trees representing the iconic Austrian woods. Bambi's head is turned around almost 180 degrees suggesting that his attention is drawn to someone or something behind which might be pursuing him. His stance constitutes a *gestus*, showing an alert, fearful subject on the run from a predator, hunter or invading army.

The Bambi figurine has the look of a hunted animal that foregrounds the broader social context of the Iraq War. As Andrea Bandhauer notes, Jelinek's toy is positioned on top of sand rather than the soft vegetation of the Black Forest that is Bambi's original home (2010, 3). His position is made unhomely and strange as Jelinek transplants him from the Austrian woods to the desert terrain of what we might imagine as Iraq. His position, as it was 'staged' by Jelinek, further highlights the managerialism and manipulation of a staged war in 'the media'. This intertext constitutes a visual, physicalized *gestus* that might be read as a metaphor for the politics of the play as a whole.

The unhomely positioning and *gestus* of the alert Bambi is made clearer by Jelinek's explanation of how she arranged the objects for the photograph used in the title image. She writes:

> The little deer was a present from my aunt for my sixth birthday, the dunes are made of the Maggi soup-flavouring with added parsley, the broken legs are the result of decades of cleaning activity by a conscientious cleaning

> woman … The fir-trees are from the toy shop, they're used to decorate toy railways. (Jelinek in Hirschmann-Altzinger 2003, np)

As Bandhauer points out, Bambi stands on wobbly legs caused by accidental cleanings of the toy and its surrounds and the railways she refers to recall the Nazi use of transportation of Jews to extermination and concentration camps as acts of ethnic cleansing. The *gestus* of Bambi's unstable posture might be read as an 'accidental' parody the Bush administration's faulty 'intelligence' in pursuing Saddam's WMDs and the 'collateral damage' that was the 'accident' of the Iraq War.

Linking the particular *gestus* of the hunted animal to the broader context of the conflict in Iraq highlights its function as a 'social gest'. The play text of *Bambiland* further links the *gestus* of the image of Bambi to the socio-economic position of oppressed peoples globally as well as Saddam's ethnic cleansing of the Kurds and Shiite Muslims of Iraq. As the narrator explains: 'Bambi is always the poor, the small, the dear, the pestered. The one that has put itself in danger and perishes in it. People as toys pass from one hand to another' (Jelinek 2004, np). The first line of the play describes the Iraqi people under siege from Saddam's army and then by Western forces as 'baked to an army of clay' (Jelinek 2004, np). This metaphor mirrors the visual *gestus* of the Bambi figurine frozen in a static form, also evoking what Benjamin writing on *gestus* describes as a 'dialectical-at-a-standstill', an action enclosed in a defined frame with a clear beginning, middle and end, which distils the process of living in flux and confines it to a single moment (1973, 3).

The dialectic – the process of human development advancing through contradictions – is made more visible by the toy Bambi's *gestus*. Bambi's fearful stance slows down the everyday lived realities of war that Western media consumers ordinarily consume at high speed. In the Bambi photograph Jelinek arrests and condenses the contradictions of a world in flux by showing an innocent and harmless animal/Iraqi civilian trying to survive in a dangerous world. In this *gestus*, living flesh is turned into a plastic toy (another consumable and disposable commodity for the West). Intersecting cultural allusions – its childlike cuteness and its Austrian/desert setting can usefully be read as a dialectic-at-a-standstill. Through the deceleration and abstraction of an image of fear and vulnerability, the intertextuality of Bambi as signifier allows readers to more clearly see the suffering forcibly endured by innocent civilians, 'the dear' and 'the deer' of the Iraq War.

On Jelinek's website where *Bambiland* was first published, the description of Bambi as 'poor' and 'pestered' is placed near photographs of Iraqis tortured by American soldiers in Abu Ghraib prison, taken from 'the media'. One of these familiar photographs shows American soldiers holding back menacing guard dogs which move to attack a cowering and naked Iraqi man. In the upper left corner, a military officer gestures to the Iraqi to lie on the floor. The familiar childhood image of Disney's Bambi who embodies innocence and should be protected from man's violence is rendered strange when set alongside the photograph from Abu Ghraib. In the photograph, the cowering Iraqi with his hands behind his head, his arms shielding his ears, and his knees knocked together in an attempt to protect his genitals and preserve his dignity constitutes another *gestus*. This *gestus* highlights the Iraqi's position of abject powerlessness and his loss of agency.

Unlike the Disney Bambi, however, the Iraqi prisoner has no Austrian woods to escape to. There is only a closed cell behind him. The *gestus* of the Disney Bambi is rendered sinister when placed alongside the *gestus* of the Abu Ghraib prisoner. The intertextual relationship between these two *gests* – between the toy of a fictional children's character and the harrowing realities of war – creates a dialectical interplay that feeds into Jelinek's broader critique of the surface appearance of a 'clean' war and its practices of torture and abuse. In these juxtaposed images, 'Bambiland' becomes the place where the most vulnerable creatures are denied humane treatment.

Furthering the *gestus* of the Bambi-like Iraqis, Jelinek ironically describes Iraqis as having deer-like physical attributes. The narrator offers a markedly Western view of Iraqi desperation and helplessness in the passage:

> I tear up the picture book of time, and they all look at us doe eyed, the fruit vendor, the farmer with his shotgun, the toy people whose ruler played games with it for so long, it wouldn't recognize itself anymore. All these big watery Bambi eyes looking at me. All these swift animal legs staggering along the thorny way of history with their inexperienced infant legs. The very old, the babies, the small children, the pregnant women. All one. (Jelinek 2004, np)

The 'I' in this passage is the Western subject in whose eyes the images of Iraqis converge into an undifferentiated mass of suffering. The Western narrating voice looks at the invasion with distanced sympathy, safe in the

knowledge that they control the historical narrative of the war in the 'picture book of time', while the Iraqis flounder and stagger with their 'swift animal legs' through day-to-day survival.

Significantly, however, the 'doe eyed' Iraqis with their 'big watery Bambi eyes' look back at 'us' – the Western invader, Western reader, Western spectator, the Western author or narrator. In these depictions of Iraqis mimicking Bambi's *gestus* – sorrowful eyes, poised alert and ready to flee – Jelinek exposes the underside of 'Operation Enduring Freedom' and its impact on 'the babies, the small children, the pregnant women'. As 'they all look at us' they return the penetrating and often patronizing gaze of 'the media' and the West to see the hunter beneath the visage of the liberator, the trap in the promise of freedom. By reading Jelinek's modes of critique as *gestus* or the dialectic-at-a-standstill it allows readers/spectators to more clearly grasp the workings of Jelinek's complex critique of the suffering endured by innocent civilians in the Iraq War.

## War Profiteering

Similar to other Disney animal icons such as Bagheera from *The Jungle Book* or Simba from *The Lion King*, the Bambi figurine that accompanies the title is also a symbol of mass commercialization and the global dominance of American culture. The title '*Bambiland*' connects the 2003 Iraq invasion and the military and media presence of America in present-day Iraq to American cultural and commercial hegemony. As the narrator explains: 'One toy land is made into another toy land, a game of marbles' (Jelinek 2004, np). The perspective of the West sees Iraqis as Disney Bambi figurines, 'a toy people', once malleable to the will of the dictator Saddam, and today, to the will of American interests. The multilayered intertext of Bambi shows that the 'toy land', the 'Bambiland' that is Iraq, is a game to be passed from one ruler to the next. The promises of 'freedom' offered by the invading forces at the beginning of the play are shown to disguise the West's interest in Iraq's rich natural-oil resources.

The name 'Bambiland' came from an amusement park built by Marko Milošević, the son of Serbian dictator and war criminal Slobodan Milošević. Consequently, the title further reinforces the association between violence, war, war crimes and entertainment. Milošević's Bambiland opened a few weeks after the 1999 NATO bombing campaign in Serbia ended. Its construction was intended to signify the former Yugoslavia's resilience and determination, but, as Tom Hundley explains: 'Most people saw it as

an example of the Milošević family's odd disconnect from reality' (2000, np). The convenient inability of the Milošević family to recognize the widespread dislike of the dictator and his family further parallels Jelinek's portrayal of Western forces' confusion over the hostility with which their 'liberation' attempts in Iraq are met. The intertextual allusion of the title '*Bambiland*' symbolizes innocent civilians suffering at the hands of an unwanted political leadership who experience a 'disconnect from reality', whether it be the Milošević family in Serbia, Saddam Hussein in Iraq or the Western coalition forces in Iraq.

Parodying Bush's cartoon-like rhetoric around the war and his allusions to cowboys and Indians and *Star Wars*, Jelinek makes an explicit link between Disney, Disneyland and Bambiland, Iraq and the Iraq War. These connections estrange the idea of a 'fun' war, showing a grotesque 'amusement park' in the images of Abu Ghraib and descriptions of terrified small children and pregnant women. The intertextuality of the title and its allusions to the unequal social relations between Iraqis and the invading American forces enhance Jelinek's representations of Iraqis as a bullied and hunted civilian population, rendered animal-like. Iraq is not portrayed as a nation in the process of being liberated by benevolent peacekeeping forces, but, rather, as a nation being exploited by foreign commercial interests. In Brechtian terms, Jelinek shows that 'war is the continuation of business by other means' (Brecht 1964, 220). The interplay of these signifiers highlights the invasion's historical precedents, its commercial profiteering and the manipulation of war reporting in the media. *Bambiland*'s critique of the commercial investments of the Iraq War is strengthened by its anti-commercial aesthetic that resists becoming another easily consumable commodity in the marketplace of culture.

Jelinek's wide variety of intertexts create *Verfremdungseffekte* and *gestus* that encourage readers/spectators to view the American involvement in the Iraq War with a sceptical eye. The Bambi *gestus* invites readers/spectators to overcome the 'perceptual numbness' of the everyday received representations of the invasion and see it with 'new eyes' (Jameson 1998, 39). Jelinek's intertextual form suggests that she is interested in 'association' rather than 'interpretation', a key feature identified in Barnett's post-Brechtian model. Taking this one step further, I suggest that, in *Bambiland*, the way in which the intertexts are woven between competing voices might more accurately be described as a dynamic, dialectical exchange.

This intertextuality relies on a relational interplay of references and narratorial commentary in a dynamic exchange of images, allusions and possible readings that may not be recognizable to all readers/spectators. Yet, the anti-interpretative nature of the aesthetic of *Bambiland* is indicative of its post-Marxist context and its epistemological uncertainty. As we saw in Chapter 3, an aesthetic that refuses to fix or pin down a single definitive meaning by always identifying the next contradiction is usefully described as dialectical. In *Bambiland*, pedagogy is replaced by intertextual irony, a strategy that is commonly associated with Brecht and which will be considered in the following sections for its ability to invite spectators in on 'the joke of contradiction' (Brecht 1964, 277).

## Representing the Zigzag of War

The rapidly changing personal pronouns and free-floating signifiers in the *Bambiland* polylogue offer few markers to orient the reader. Yet, as Bandhauer points out: 'There exists, however, a clear hierarchy among the voices. It is the Bush (junior/senior), Rumsfeld, and Cheney-"trinity" that provides the reasons for the invasion of "Bambiland"-Iraq' (2010, np). Rather than a causal plot-driven narrative, it is the competing voices in *Bambiland* that propel the text and create its dynamism. The contradictory positions and perspectives on the war convey what Brecht might call 'the unexpectedness of logically progressive or zigzag development, the instability of every circumstance' (1964, 277). To characterize the language structures of *Bambiland* in Ollman and Smith's terms, Jelinek's 'mode for conveying reality' (2008, 4) is dialectical.

The stream-of-consciousness form of the text is a formal choice that indicates Jelinek's refusal to represent the history and future of Iraq as linear, progressive and teleological. One passage describes a dead Iraqi soul, caught between the past, present and future chaos of war:

> There, a spirit has got lost in the labyrinth of the future, looking back to see where he came from, which flesh he is made of, and it is only then that he sees, that so much more can be destroyed at this Tupperwar party. And he runs and runs and runs, but he runs back, perhaps he has his face at the back and he runs in the opposite direction, but he runs and runs and runs. Part of him runs to one place, part of him to another. He doesn't know where, he has lost his face. But it's just an example. I mean I'm not sparing anyone, and certainly not one who has his face on both sides and simultaneously runs backwards and forwards. (Jelinek 2004, np)

The Janus-headed spirit that Jelinek describes is the God of beginnings and transitions in Roman mythology – a fitting allegory for Iraq in the process of mass political and social upheaval as the Western forces overthrow the dictator Saddam Hussein and attempt to transition the nation into democracy. The image of a figure that is both two-faced and faceless is a *gestic* image that highlights the vigilance required in a war zone. This image is cartoon-like and difficult if not impossible to physically realize in staging the play but, nevertheless, it offers a symbolic idea of a subject's attitude towards the inherited conditions of war.

Moreover, the Janus-headed figure offers a dialectical view of the war that moves according to what Brecht would call a zigzag logic as it 'simultaneously runs backwards and forwards' (Jelinek 2004, np). The two-faced/faceless figure in *Bambiland* shows the interdependence of contradictory elements that drive the war. While this Janus-headed figure is making history, he is not doing so in conditions of his own choosing. Instead, the conditions he has inherited from the past break down his subjectivity. He begins to shed parts of himself literally and figuratively all over the battlefield. Finally, he loses his face and also loses face in defeat to become another faceless, anonymous victim. In the imagery of the two-faced/faceless figure, Jelinek represents the historical and social processes of the world as historically intertwined and always in relation to the forces of history and circumstance. Similar to Brecht, she shows the 'unity of opposites' embodied in the image of a figure who is both two-faced and faceless.

In *Bambiland*, as in reality, the process of change in Iraq is neither smooth nor linear. The forces that drive historical change move both forwards and backwards, making it difficult to assess whether any 'progress' has been made in Iraq and, indeed, in the play. The erratic form and structure of *Bambiland*, while highly abstract, is an apposite depiction of the chaotic social, political and economic upheaval in Iraq and the multiplicity of voices and attitudes that depict how this transition is experienced, understood and represented in the Western media. It is a formal organization that emphasizes the dynamism of historical change as contingent and always potentially alterable.

The infotainment that dominates mainstream media is designed to be easily accessible and consumable. Infotainment simplifies complex political, social and economic phenomena through generalization and cliché. Even though *Bambiland* imitates these clichéd texts, their collective intertextual contradictions work against this logic of infotainment by forcing the reader/spectator to work hard to make meaning. As the narrator/

Jelinek describes it: 'I have to conquer this: make war with words' (Jelinek 2004, np). Jelinek resists 'the media's' construction of the Iraq War in words and images with her own linguistic assault. Her retaliation operates by showing what 'the media' tends to efface or self-censor – both sides of war – one that celebrates the military prowess of the 'Coalition of the Willing' and one that shows the suffering and violence of innocent Iraqi civilians defending their nation.

## Dialectical Irony and 'The Joke of Contradiction'

The critique of the Iraq War that develops out of the intertextual form of *Bambiland* relies not only on the incongruity of merging classical, modern and popular-culture images, films, novels and advertising slogans, but, rather, upon the irony and humour of their unusual coming together. Brecht's use of irony through contradiction as a key strategy for politicizing his audiences is well documented. In *Bambiland*, irony is most evident in the organization of the appropriated texts and in the cynical narratorial voice that comments on them. The effect is one of pleasurable disruption that occurs through the incongruous recontextualization of everyday phrases, signs and images.

The mediating device that brings to the surface the irony of the intertexts in *Bambiland* is the voice of the narrator and her self-conscious setting up of the 'joke'. The narrator ironically points out her own lack of objectivity and unreliability, interjecting lines such as: 'But anyway, son is an extremely vague, loose term in the Semitic languages, I've heard, but only of one single one, well, perhaps that isn't true' (Jelinek 2004, np). Such uncertainty casts doubt over received understandings of 'fact' and 'reality', made possible through the device of self-reflexivity. As Adorno notes: 'it is Brecht in large measure to whom we owe the growth in the self-consciousness of the art work' (2000, 256).

Jelinek updates the techniques of Brechtian self-consciousness through her self-insertion into the work. Similar to Brecht who placed the orchestra on stage in full view of the audience or encouraged a self-conscious presentational acting style, the unreliable authorial voice in *Bambiland* reminds readers/spectators that information is always mediated and filtered through various ideological positions. The self-consciously untrustworthy narratorial voice creates epistemological doubt in the reader/spectator that exposes a gap between the surface appearance of reality and the lived reality of war, a strategy that reinforces the play's critique of media representations of the Iraq War.

Literary theorist David Bennett, drawing upon the work of Roland Barthes, describes parodic quotation and self-reflexivity as common features of postmodern literature. In such texts, a 'tissue of quotations' opens up the 'field of interpretive play' by denying *author*-ized or fixed meaning (1985, 28). According to Bennett, authorial self-reflexivity forms the basis of postmodern intertextual parody and irony. A work that foregrounds its own artificial constructedness through self-reflexivity exposes the ways in which the original text legitimizes its own truth claims. A parodistic critical quotation is the practice of:

> reading a text against the grain of prior constructions of the text, adducing in evidence the text's self-consciousness, as it were, or the ways in which it has prefigured its own misunderstanding or misreading. (Bennett 1985, 29)

In the self-conscious acknowledgement that introduces *Bambiland*: 'My thanks to Aeschylus and the "Persians" … The rest is not by me either. It's lousy. It's by the media,' Jelinek invites readers/spectators to approach familiar dramatic, philosophical and journalistic media texts in new ways, to read them 'against the grain'.

By parodying lines attributed to President G. W. Bush, Jelinek's narratorial or authorial voice exposes a mock self-consciousness about *Bambiland*'s artificial constructedness. She highlights the self-consciousness of the original texts – Bush's media statements – showing that he prefigured his 'own misunderstanding or misreading'. This is evident, for example, in lines such as:

> He believes that Jesus is with him, he believes that Jesus is with them all, only thus does he feel well, and only thus does the woman feel well. Only Jesus can protect us like this man, this president is protecting his beautiful wife, and off into the helicopter! Delicately up the stairs. Floating. (Jelinek 2004, np)

Such satirical lines invite readers/spectators to see the desperation in Bush's mantra about Jesus blessing his decisions to wage war in the Middle East. The repetition of the idea that 'Jesus is with him' and that Bush 'believes' in Him, ironically reveals the opposite of its claims, exposing the lack of self-assurance in Bush's rhetoric that his overemphasis on a Christian justification for the war attempts to ward off. In the hyperbolic language that Jelinek attributes to Bush, his fear of being misunderstood and his attempt

to avoid such confusion prefigure his 'own misunderstanding or misreading' and make the reader/spectator suspicious of the repeated message. Furthermore, it couples this language with the hypocrisy of a President who 'believes' in Jesus but, unlike Jesus, runs away from the suffering of everyday people by flying away in his private helicopter.

A key feature of *Verfremdungseffekt*, irony undermines normative and habitual ways of seeing. Irony maintains a 'unity of opposites' in simultaneous dialectical tension by creating a mismatch between literal and implied meaning. Brechtian irony and its dialectical interplay of opposites was a forerunner to the self-conscious kind of postmodern irony used in *Bambiland*. Throughout *Bambiland*, there are countless examples of Jelinek's use of ironic language to deconstruct ideology. In an example that parodies the fetishization of American military technology, Jelinek uses ironical turns of phrase and exaggerated punctuation to parodic effect:

> the miracle of technology, and in comparison a human is just a piece of shit. Nobody has ever made so much effort in the attempt to make mankind, that doesn't take much, but this Tomahawk! You won't believe it! Autonomous directional control system (start it up and then forget about it). Not to mention the satellite navigation system, too complicated, dynamically calibrated inertial navigation system, plus ground radar for terrain contour matching (TERCOM), but what do we do if one stretch of land looks just like any other in the desert? What do we do if they come down in Saudi Arabia, where they have no business to be. What do we do then? At least the Tomahawk knows what to do. And that's the main thing. High precision (50% of the hits in a 2 sqm target window!) through combining several navigation and target recognition systems, and there it goes, honestly, and it even knows exactly where to! I'd like to see you do that! Your whole field of application as a human is crap in comparison, which is hardly surprising when you consider how carelessly you were produced, in any case far too quickly and mostly prematurely. (Jelinek 2004, np)

Jelinek satirizes Bush's Christian rhetoric through surprising incongruities. 'The miracle' in this passage is not the Son of God or the Immaculate Conception as a reader might expect, but rather a man-made machine. The imperfections of the human body are highlighted in the description of it as 'just a piece of shit' created 'carelessly' via a male ejaculation that, Jelinek jokes, occurs 'mostly prematurely'. These descriptions of an inadequate human born of a brief, unsatisfying, casual sexual encounter become ironic when they are juxtaposed against the Tomahawk's 'High

precision', 'dynamically calibrated inertial navigation' and meticulous and careful construction. Where the technology is described in high-tech jargon, humanity is simply 'crap in comparison' (Jelinek 2004, np). Here, the bleak 'joke' of contradiction suggests that, in the face of rapidly developing technologies, the human body has become devalued, dehumanized and rendered abject.

A literal reading of these lines in *Bambiland* would overlook Jelinek's critique that, in the 2003 Iraq invasion, human casualties (including soldiers on both sides of the conflict and civilian 'collateral damage') are no longer important in the eyes of the Western war effort. Their contribution and vulnerability have been drowned out by the discussions of the latest military technologies and the spectacular images of weapons in action. In this scornful depiction of the present-day value of human life, with its deliberately juvenile or colloquial overuse of exclamation marks, Jelinek renders strange and terrifying the 'oppressive fashions' of revering weapon technologies. She mocks the 'crank theories' of men who attempt to experience the power of reproduction and who value human efficiency and precision as killing machine over the Christian qualities of kindness and compassion.

## Audience Agency

While Brecht used irony to invite spectator self-reflexivity through techniques such as presentational acting or showing the footlights on stage, he did not explicitly include his authorial voice within the plays or write himself as a character into the works, as Jelinek seems to do in *Bambiland*. In the case of *Bambiland*, these overt meta theatrical experimentations suggest a strong post-Brechtian 'epistemological uncertainty'.

The intertexuality of quotes from the news media and Jelinek's decision to publish *Bambiland* on her website, highlight the more recent role of 'the media' in the war and its circulation of images. While the play is critical of 'the media', by publishing it online the work also participates in the dissemination of information and opinions about the war. Jelinek contributes to the proliferation of media voices commenting or reporting on the war and is therefore somewhat complicit with her very object of critique.

'The media' might be said to 'perform' a contradictory view of the Iraq War that reflects its ideological partialities. Jelinek too creates an unashamedly biased performance of the war and its media representations through

a layering of these estranged and mediated words and images. In her work on *Bambiland*, Bandhauer writes that: 'sarcasm and irony provide a way of resisting this powerlessness and of overcoming the paralysis induced by an overwhelming media presence' (2010, np). While the irony of the text certainly enhances its critique of the war, given Rancière's rejection of such cause-effect assumptions, I suggest that its repetitious and imitative form cannot presume readers/spectators will overcome the paralysis caused by 'the media's' war reporting.

While much of *Bambiland* reveals or implies that the American invasion of Iraq is hypocritical and self-serving, there is never a resolution to the contradictions that it exposes. Jelinek's critique is neither didactic nor self-evident and its sarcasm does not offer readers/spectators any practical ways to resist these or future acts of coercion, war or economic imperialism. Despite Jelinek's overt criticism of 'the media' reporting of the Iraq War and her satirical portrayal of the American and British politicians who waged the war, the intertexuality of *Bambiland* and repetitious use of CNN media sound bites run the risk of complicity in the very system that it mocks. The recurrent patterns of imperialism and war are reinforced by the intertexuality of their very repetition in the work.

The play world that comes into being through broken and cyclical phrases and the predictable patterns of war that come 'round again and again' signify Jelinek's characterization of global processes and events in dynamic, dialectical flux. Yet it is a negative view of historical processes, a dialectic that negates without resolution or teleological advance. *Bambiland* creates what Barnett, describing the similarities between Brecht and Adorno's negative dialectic, calls an 'awkward dialectic which does not move effortlessly from synthesis to synthesis but accrues contradiction upon contradiction' (2014, 52). Such an 'awkward dialectic' is evident in lines that describe Dick Cheney's conflict of interest in advocating invading a country rich in oil when he had previously served as CEO for multinational oil company Halliburton and was still receiving 'deferred compensation' from the oil company after the war began. In *Bambiland*, the narrator discusses Cheney and scoffs: 'I can't believe that his interests could be in any conflict' (Jelinek 2004, np). The difficulty of turning Jelinek's cynical quips or negations into a positive or useful praxis suggests an updated Brechtian dialectical aesthetic.

While the intertextuality of *Bambiland* might provide an access point for common cultural understanding for spectators that draws attention to a conflict with global economic, social, political and cultural repercus-

sions, at other times it alienates and confuses those who cannot keep pace with its references. The replacement of characters with decontextualized discourses and layered signifiers makes it challenging and disorienting for readers/spectators to make sense of Jelinek's 'meaning'. Yet such alienation also forces them to develop their own political position on the language and events represented in the play. Furthermore, the intertextual form of the play assumes a familiar set of cultural signifiers whose recognizability shows how we in the West are all inescapably implicated and complicit with the war and its dominant representative forms.

Similar to post-Brechtian playwright, director and theorist Heiner Müller's experimental theatre, Jelinek's somewhat impenetrable play makes no apologies for leaving many readers/spectators frustrated. When Müller was accused of making theatre that left spectators in a state of confusion he commented: 'That's their problem' (in Maclean 2001, 95), an attitude that we might equally expect from Jelinek. Jürs-Munby describes the experience of watching a performance of a Jelinek play:

> It is rather a matter of stirring up *questions* as opposed to presenting us with ready-made answers. As Jelinek generally says about her writing in relation to mediatized reality, 'The television only answers. I only ask questions.' (2014, 224–5)

Jelinek's refusal to offer any clear solutions or paths of resistance to counteract the violence described in *Bambiland* recalls critiques of postmodern texts by Marxists such as Jameson. Jameson accuses postmodern texts of 'blank parody', meaningless sarcasm that lacks an object of political critique (1991, 17). Yet, it is Jelinek's refusal to dictate easy solutions in her ironic critique that makes the aesthetic of *Bambiland* negatively dialectical and thus politically motivated. By not telling audiences what to think or offering glib solutions for the complex politics of war, Jelinek's aesthetic in *Bambiland* aims to turn spectators into dialecticians.

In his early notes on 'Dialectical Dramaturgy' Brecht writes: the modern spectator 'does not want to be patronized and raped, but simply to have human material tossed before him so that he can *put it in order for himself*' (Original emphasis) (in Willett 1984, 208). The intertextual puzzle of *Bambiland* is an extreme form of what Brecht envisioned, a play that tosses material before readers/audiences and asks them to make sense of it. As such, the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic of *Bambiland* with

its parody of 'the media', political rhetoric and self-conscious authorial irony updates Brecht's idea of a spectator who can '*put it in order for himself*'. *Bambiland* risks sending readers/spectators into sensory overload or paralysis but it also trusts in their capacity to organize the collaged materials for themselves.

Yet, it is not only the audiences of the Iraq War and of *Bambiland* who are left frustrated. In an interview, Jelinek suggests that her agency as an author is also limited. Commenting on *Bambiland* she notes:

> The third level to this end are the sarcastic comments of the author, who, completely powerless, simultaneously speaks up and remains silent, because in this case irony is the only tool for helpless observers, to push away, to ban this helplessness. And an anathema is only possible by using language. Language is the only thing, which is at her, the observer's, disposal, and even using language as an author makes it only possible to deliver an inadequate copy; however, it is possible, by using multiple levels of language, to create a kind of mosaic, a new reality, which is constituted of many facets and various discourses, from the poetics of Aeschylus to the most banal comments of television commentators.[2] (Jelinek 2014, np)

Jelinek's claim that the only way she can speak out against the Iraq War is to 'create a kind of mosaic' that is sarcastic and ironic seems to draw upon the language of both Kristeva (in the mosaic) and Brecht (in the emphasis on irony as political tool). The variety of *gestic* texts/images and their proliferation of networks, codes and meanings show Jelinek's poststructuralist scepticism towards the possibility of universal meaning and the problem of artistic intervention in the political where she paradoxically 'speaks up and remains silent'. Even if, as Jelinek claims, language only produces an 'inadequate copy', it does not necessarily follow that *Bambiland*'s multiple *gestus* become pure imitation or relativism. Rather, her unique linguistic form disavows the possibility of a single ideological position in relation to the representation of the Iraq War.

## 'Not for a Theatre Production'

*Bambiland* poses a challenge to anyone wanting to stage or reproduce the work. The complexity and inscrutability of the undesignated voices, the non-dialogic form and the lack of stage directions make its translation to the stage difficult. Describing the relationship between language and performance in her plays from the 1990s onwards, Jelinek claims that:

'These texts are intended for the theatre, but not for a theatre production' (in Fiddler 2006, 85). Jelinek's decision to write a play 'not for theatre production' reaffirms her dislike of traditional 'bourgeois theatre'.

If *Bambiland* is 'not for a theatre production' then why did Jelinek choose to publish it in the 'Theatre' section of her website rather than as one of her theoretical and performative essays? I suggest that the spectacle of media war reporting prompted her to write a work 'intended for the theatre'. The 'staging' of the conflict in Iraq through the filmic or cartoon rhetoric of the Bush administration and the 'spectacular' images of the 'shock and awe' military offensive as they appear in 'the media' suggest that the Iraq War was already 'in production'. What Brady described as the collapsing distinction between performance and the political in a post-9/11 moment, was also noted and parodied by Jelinek in the intertexual form of *Bambiland*. While *Bambiland* might be challenging to stage, it provides a catalyst or, to return to Ollman and Smith's dialectical categories, a 'means to investigate' the performative aspects of the intertextual material, most particularly the 'lousy' media reports appropriated in the work.

A work for theatre but 'not for a theatre production' also suggests that the play is not intended to be presented in a polished form, complete with costumes and sets. Jelinek's enigmatic and seemingly contradictory claim gives the impression that the work was written for experimentation in a theatre, rehearsals and readings without the goal of a finished, consumable product. As Jelinek points out in a recent interview:

> My plays are texts written to be spoken, while prose narrates. Plays are designed for collective reception, prose for individual reception. So you can't simply say my plays are a kind of prose, since they don't narrate anything. They talk. They speak. Although recently I've noticed the differences are blurring, and my prose is increasingly becoming 'speaking.' (Jelinek in Stephens 2012, np)

*Bambiland* is 'written to be spoken' but might better be understood as an updated form of a Brechtian *Lehrstück* – a 'teaching play' or 'learning play' – written for the purpose of experiential pedagogy rather than production before a spectator public. Yet, Fiddler argues that, unlike Brecht, Jelinek is unconcerned about how much the actors learn from the performance:

> Whereas Brecht conceived the 'Lehrstück' as 'an instrument of political and moral (but also aesthetic) education, designed to help the performers come to terms, in various ways, with the kind of problem represented in the action

> of the plays,' the political and moral education of the actors themselves is not an express part of Jelinek's aesthetic programme. Fiddler (1994, 132)

In the post-Marxist moment, after the waning of that which Rancière describes as 'the *pedagogical* model of the efficacy of art' (2010, 136), Jelinek's rejection of the moral education of the Brechtian *Lehrstücke* does not mean that she is disinterested in the collective reception of her plays, or in the 'speaking' they engender. Jelinek sees plays such as *Bambiland* as having a voice or voices that are meant to be heard by a group, a 'collective reception' rather than an individual.

In an essay 'Zu Brecht' ('About Brecht') Jelinek argues that what is useful about Brecht's *Lehrstücke* is 'an ineffable, indescribable residue', an inexpressible element that moves in between 'the gap between the real and what is said' (1998, np). While Jelinek may reject the pedagogical elements of a *Lehrstück* in her claim to make theatre not for a theatrical production, she is, nevertheless, interested in this Brechtian form for its ability to create a tension between appearance and reality, without claiming to offer a 'truth' or final solution for that reality. Jelinek's contradictory Western voice(s) point towards an 'ineffable, indescribable residue about which nothing can be said' (Jelinek 1998, np). The multi-perspectival discussion creates a 'residue' that does not contain the 'answers' to the problem but, rather, provokes readers/spectators into a conversation about the Iraq War.

Contrasting Jelinek with Brecht's politicizing strategies, Bandhauer offers an explanation as to how Jelinek updates what I call the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic. Bandhauer argues that:

> In Brecht's epic theatre, the characters are presented as ideological types spouting agit-prop slogans rather than communicating in a psychologically motivated way. In Jelinek's plays, there are no characters, no plot development, and no clearly detectable, enlightening, or utopian messages at all. Where Brecht's Marxist critique of capitalist society still claimed an educational and didactic effect on the audience, for Jelinek morality is made ridiculous by global power politics and its protagonists. (2010, np)

Bandhauer's reading of Brecht's plays' 'educational and didactic effect on the audience' does not take into account Brecht's dialectical strategies that, as we have seen, were resistant to didacticism despite often being hopeful of Marxist salvation. Today, Jelinek shows that the complexity of late capitalism and globalization offers no hope of any single utopian ideal

that might offer an alternative to capitalism. Her multifarious polyphonic form captures this complexity of the negative dialectic while still drawing on aspects of the Brechtian dramatic form, in particular the Brechtian-style interpretation of Marxist dialectics.

## STAGING *BAMIBLAND*

Despite not being written for theatre production, *Bambiland* received its inaugural 'collective reception' in 2004. Christoph Schlingensief staged *Bambiland* in Vienna's major public theatre, the Burgtheater, the very same theatre that Jelinek mocked in her play *Burgtheater. Eine Posse mit Gesang* (*Burgtheater. A Musical Farce*) (1982). The two-hour performance of *Bambiland* directed by Schlingensief was appropriately irreverent in its use of Jelinek's text although the complete, original text was included in the programme. The performance re-enacts Jelinek's collaging of found media texts through its use of cameras following characters around the stage, as well as extensive use of filmed footage, some directed by Schlingensief, others appropriated from 'the media'. This footage was projected onto large and small screens set up around the stage. Boom microphones hover above the heads of 'important' figures, capturing their sound bites and their image before rapidly abandoning them when a new object of interest catches their attention.

The performance opens with a domestic setting at stage right – an arrangement of couches, coffee table, a lamp, stylish wallpaper and a TV set – a middle-class lounge. The domestic interior remains on stage throughout most of the production. Meanwhile other larger set pieces are constructed and deconstructed around and behind it. While the rest of the changing sets shift between an army watchtower, army barracks, political gatherings, fields of deer and the streets of Vienna, the persistence of the domestic setting, and the television in particular, reminds spectators of the mediation of the Iraq War into our living rooms. It sets up a contrast between the chaos and violence of the external war and the complicity of the quiet, undisturbed, safe Western familial interior.

Schlingensief adds a number of intertextual additions to Jelinek's busy text. In particular, he stages a small political rally. A red flag with a black swastika that includes a deer silhouette as part of one of the arms of the swastika is hung behind the podium. Different speakers approach the podium to take their opportunity to excite the eager crowd and each is framed by the flag showing the innocent deer appropriated by fascistic

forces. In one of the films, figures dressed in US desert army fatigues are protesting in the streets of Vienna. They chant with a megaphone and hold up banners that read 'TERROR FÜR ALLE!' (TERROR FOR ALL!) and 'TERROR JETZT!' (TERROR NOW!). These banners ironically estrange the protests against the Iraq War by showing how the American military also use the media to advocate for their interests. These banners are *gestic* because they remind spectators of the absent placards of the anti-war protesters compared to the dominant power and success of the military forces in spreading their message of 'terror'.

The layers of arresting and alienating imagery do not end there. In the second last scene, a person lies in a bath filled with blood – the outcome of the war in a bloodbath. In this *gestus*, Schlingensief literalizes a sensationalizing metaphor frequently used in media war reporting. The figure in the bath sits in the foreground of a ceiling-high white screen. The bottom corner of the screen shows the two-dimensional silhouettes of people behind it who make shadow puppets out of their hands. The shadows take the form of what looks like a deer's head that seems to drink from a chalice. Projected onto the larger portion of the screen is a film that shows two young and attractive female porn stars masturbating a male porn star with an American flag while an older couple watches. The play ends with the male porn star's orgasm and these three multilayered and overlapping images.

The older couple watch the porn show of the younger generation. They stare at the American flag – the ultimate symbol of American hegemony and nationalistic pride – as it 'services' the patriarchy and distracts the spectators from the bloodbath below. The juxtaposed images suggest that the same networks of capital and exploitation at work in the porn industry are also at work in the bloodbath of war. As the porn star reaches orgasm, all the porn stars and the older couple begin chanting 'Look at this picture' in English. This line is a quote taken from an American father whose son died fighting in the Iraq War and who used the media to try to gain access to speak to President G. W. Bush about its hidden casualties. The tone of the group of porn actors is insistent but also deadpan as the camera places the engorged penis in the foreground of the scene. The overlapping levels of mediation show how the media constructs a 'reality' of the Iraq War that draws spectators' attention away from the gore and violence. In this scene, it is almost impossible not to 'look at this picture' hanging above the stage while the images of war and its bloody consequences below are quickly forgotten and cleared away by the stagehands. Schlingensief's production adds to Jelinek's textual and visual *gestus* in ways that heighten Jelinek's playful aesthetic and further enhance the play's Brechtian qualities.

Morgan Koerner describes Schlingensief's performance as a 'chaotic, excessive and multimedial reaction to her theatre text' (2010, 153). Schlingensief's production uses multiple video screens playing different war images to show the ubiquity of the media. Despite major editing to the text of *Bambiland*, Jelinek claims that Schlingensief understood her text well (in Koerner 2010, 153). Schlingensief not only directs but also performs in the production, putting his body into rigorously demanding and exhausting engagements with language and body art. Koerner argues that Schlingensief's chaotic aesthetic shows the voyeuristic fetishization of war (2010, 156). He notes that: 'Schlingensief's physically challenging performance models an active subject who immerses himself in and experiments with the medium instead of passively viewing from the sidelines' (2010, 164). This open and experimental performance style that Schlingensief is so well known for, further brings out the dialectical possibilities in Jelinek's disorienting text. It also suggests how Brecht's estrangement techniques can be remade and updated in contemporary performances.

## History Repeated as Farce: The 'Residue' of the Iraq War

Through the pastiche of texts in *Bambiland*-from classical tragedy, the mass media, philosophy and popular marketing slogans-alongside her violation of grammatical rules, her melodic and discordant rhythmic wordplay and syntactical elisions, Jelinek unambiguously critiques the second Iraq War. Jürs-Munby argues that Jelinek both thematizes political subject matter and allows the political to appear indirectly through her strategies of 'linguistic, intertextual engagement both with mediatized "reality" *and* with the literary and dramatic tradition through formal innovations' (2014, 212). In thinking through these formal innovations I have shown how *Bambiland* updates the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic for a twenty-first-century critique of war.

In *Bambiland* Jelinek uses dense intertextuality, parody and polylogue to estrange 'the media's habitual representations of the Iraq War and to reveal the unequal power relations between invaders and invaded, Western forces and Iraqis. The intertextual form of *Bambiland* and Jelinek's preference for 'association' rather than 'interpretation' suggest that she wants to turn spectators into dialecticians by using modes that do not close down into a single static and dogmatic political position. Describing the resistance of Jelinek's texts to performance, Jürs-Munby notes that:

'Jelinek proposes a hyper-Brechtian aesthetic model for a different kind of theatre that dismantles the organically unifying relationship between text, voice and embodied character' (2009, 47). Although Jürs-Munby is interested in the relationship between text and its translation to the stage, her description of Jelinek's aesthetic as 'hyper-Brechtian' links Jelinek's formal and dramaturgical modes to Baudrillard's depiction of late twentieth-century society as 'hyperreal', as well as suggesting that Jelinek's aesthetic owes a debt to Brecht. It suggests that Jelinek's texts can be better understood through adapted and updated Brechtian methods.

Jelinek radicalizes Brechtian models by replacing characters who interact and relate to one another with text that interacts with other texts. Jelinek's 'narrative' culminates in a text that Kristeva would describe as a 'mosaic of quotations' (1980, 66). The intertextuality of *Bambiland* combined with its ironic and sarcastic authorial voice shows the Iraq War in a new and strange light that exposes the motivations of power-hungry Western leaders, the dehumanization of Iraqis and the disproportionate enthusiasm for new military weapons. It also uses *gestic* imagery to reveal the repetitious flows of the history of war that comes 'round again and again' (Jelinek 2004, np). In *Bambiland*, Jelinek's *Sprachflächen* create what Marx would call 'history repeated as farce'. Using an ironic authorial-narratorial voice to bring out the 'joke of contradiction' (Brecht 1964, 277), Jelinek mocks and condemns the hypocrisy of the Western powers and the Christian rhetoric they use to justify the war. Her estrangement of such rhetoric reveals the brutality of the West's military invasion and the collusion of the mainstream media with the pro-war argument of the Bush administration.

Where Brecht's dialectical aesthetic showed man's solid relations as determined by the class relations of capitalism, Jelinek operates within the globalized, spectacular and mediatized world of digital images and sound bites. In *Bambiland*, the dialectic becomes a multiplicity of conflicting, contradictory and competing theses, what Brecht would call *Haltungen* or standpoints. These open up a broader range of possibilities for action and for rethinking the necessity of war and its concomitant suffering. In the mode of a negative dialectic, the work offers no concrete resolutions to the problems it exposes but does so without resorting to either relativism or dogmatism. Jelinek's theatre is apposite to the twenty-first century for the way in which it stages the absurdity of Western political subjects who are given the right to speak and be seen as compared with the invisibility of the Iraqi people, what Rancière calls the 'part of those who have no part' (2010, 33).

*Bambiland*'s Brechtian dialectical aesthetic attempts to reposition spectators as active, critical thinkers in a post-ideological age. The play invites spectators to critically reflect upon the 'self-evident' or 'inevitable' language of mainstream media reporting and American political rhetoric. Unlike the work of Tony Kushner or the Théâtre du Soleil – who offer suggestions or practical models for real-life political engagement outside the theatre – *Bambiland* lays bare the mechanisms of power behind the everyday political rhetoric relating to the war without providing any closure or suggestions as to how a praxis of resistance might take shape. Instead, she develops a theatre aesthetic 'not for a theatre production' that focuses on speaking about the unspeakable or what she calls the 'residue' of the Iraq War. Thus Jelinek develops an 'awkward' aesthetic (in the sense of a negative dialectic) that works at turning spectators into critical thinking dialecticians.

## Notes

1. Jelinek is the child of a Jewish father and Catholic mother who lived in Austria throughout the Holocaust. Growing up in fascist Austria and living with the effects of the Holocaust upon her mentally ill father, Jelinek frequently explores the legacy of the Holocaust and Austrian anti-Semitism in her work. Even today she continues to speak and write publicly about Austria's shameful history, frequently berating Austrian citizens for what she sees as their refusal to deal honestly with the nation's Nazi past. Her accusations of an ongoing pervasive fascism in Austria have led to her being frequently labelled in the press as a *Nestbeschmutzer* – a person who befouls their own nest. She is frequently criticized and strongly disliked by much of the Austrian public.
2. My translation.

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CHAPTER 8

# Conclusion

This study of six plays from diverse Western contexts has shown that the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic continues to provide tools for understanding the relationship between the politics of war and dramatic aesthetics in the twenty-first century. Breaking down Brecht's engagement with Marxist theory and its practical interpretation in the Soviet and Chinese governments, we can better see how Brecht's dialectical thinking translates into 'dialectical theatre'. Taking up Brecht's challenge to rethink epic theatre as dialectical, I have demonstrated that Brecht's application of Marxist dialectics to the theatre provides a model for future generations to critique the hidden ideologies that perpetuate the social, economic, political and humanitarian injustices and violences of a post-Brechtian age.

Today it is difficult to speak about 'political art' or 'political theatre' since, as Rancière has noted, the relationship between an artwork's cause and effect, authorial intention and spectator response cannot be taken for granted. However, the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic provides new ways to understand how spectators interact with theatre as well as contribute to real-world debates on the conflicts in the Middle East and their impact upon global economic, political and humanitarian crises. This book has provided a Brechtian-Marxist vocabulary of dialectics for theatre studies scholars, critics and students to better understand and define the history and deep theoretical underpinnings of politics and aesthetics in anti-war plays of the twenty-first century.



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The Western playwrights and theatremakers considered in this book make very different work but they share a common distaste for Western governments' participation in and 'justifications' for war, as well as an ethical outrage over its dehumanizing effects. The plays of Tony Kushner, the Théâtre du Soleil, Elfriede Jelinek and Caryl Churchill demonstrate how dialectical thinking applied to dramatic form can develop aesthetics that disrupt the naturalization of pro-invasion Western political rhetoric, upheld by much of the mainstream media. Each chapter has determined how the formal, structural, linguistic, dramaturgical innovations of the plays examined remake the Brechtian devices of *Verfremdungseffekt*, *gestus*, historicization and active spectatorship for the post-political and digital age. They use dialectics to expose the contradictions of ideology while avoiding the political relativism associated with the post-Marxist historical moment.

## The Spectres of Marxist Dialectics

French philosopher Jacques Derrida describes Marxism as a heterogeneous body that manifests 'spectrality' by refusing to stay dead and buried after the symbolic collapse of Communism with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (1994). The spectres of Marxism are evident not only in the work of Brecht but also in the work of playwrights and theatremakers in the twenty-first century. The workings of dialectics in the chosen plays fall into the four key categories of the Marxist dialectic according to Ollman and Smith. The self-reflexive logic of the dialectic means that the playwrights and theatremakers examined in this book demonstrate dialectical thinking through their characterizations of the socio-historical relations of their play worlds as dialectical, their use of dialectical dramaturgical techniques to reveal hidden contradictions, and the variety of ways these strategies encourage spectators to adopt a dialectical mode of critiquing the effects of Western or Western-funded military operations in the Middle East.

Since 1989, when Fukuyama declared the end of history and argued for the impossibility of an alternative to capitalism, the West has more urgently required the dynamism of dialectical thinking and its praxis and rehearsal in theatre in order to recover some hope of overcoming injustice, violence and antagonism. The plays considered in this book confront the brutality of war by challenging spectators to imagine alternative possible futures through their representation of reality in constant flux. They show that even today, the Marxist dialectic and its application to theatre

remains a powerful tool to resist the fatalistic rhetoric of Fukuyama and reinvigorate a dynamic politics of transformative possibilities, without pre-empting or dictating what shapes those fluctuations might take.

## Dialectics for Contemporary Theatre

For Brecht, 'reality has to be altered by being turned into art so that it can be seen as alterable and treated as such' (1964, 219). Rancière too notes the significance of artistic representation in altering perception by taking it beyond a dialectical opposition of surface and essence and towards new imaginings that are only possible in fictional representations. He writes:

> The point is not to counter-pose reality to its appearances. It is to construct different realities, different forms of common sense – that is to say, different spatiotemporal systems, different communities of words and things, forms and meanings. (Rancière 2009, 102)

The diversity of formal and linguistic experimentation in the plays analysed in this book not only holds together the dialectical tensions in simultaneous suspension but, through their new imaginings, the plays create the possibility of 'altered' or 'different realities'. The Homebody's fractured, erratic language and non-teleological organization of historical narrative in the work of Kushner is one such construction of 'different forms of common sense'. The Théâtre du Soleil's use of the *gestic* props in the *chariots* and Cixous's reflection on the etymology of the word '*l'hôte*' create new associations of 'forms and meanings'. Churchill's depiction of cyber interactions and the online performances of her work experiment with 'different spatiotemporal systems' and Jelinek's dense intertextual *Sprachflächen* create radically 'different communities of words and things'. All these techniques indicate a post-Brechtian mode of theatricality that advances Brecht's dialectical aesthetic while maintaining the Brechtian aim of altering spectator consciousness and depicting complex catastrophes using forms that 'do not progress in a straight line but in cyclical crises' (1964, 30).

By representing 'altered' realities, each of the plays considered in this book presents a view of global relations that differs dramatically from the representations of war in the mainstream media. As such, these plays shift the habitual frames of Western reality by destabilizing 'existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation' (Rancière 2010, 141) to

show that Western aggression, invasion and war are not the only possible or 'inevitable' responses to the elusive threat of 'terror'. On the contrary, their dialectical forms reorient the dominant perceptual space, disrupt consensual forms of belonging and challenge traditional sign usage in ways that provoke ethical responsibility and facilitate response-*ability* in relation to the West's recent incursions into the Middle East.

Central to the aesthetic radicalism of post-Brechtian theatre is what Barnett calls 'epistemological uncertainty' (2011, 337), a sceptical attitude towards received ideas of truth and knowledge. This ambiguity over previously accepted 'truths' contrasts with what he sees as Brecht's ideological certainty, his faith in the salvational narrative of Marxism and his tendency to create plays that do the work of 'interpretation' for their audiences. Yet, as shown in Chapter 3, the Marxist dialectic provided the ideal tool for Brecht's scepticism towards some of the early twentieth-century Communist experiments and his tenuous political *Haltung* towards Communism is reflected artistically in what Darko Suvin describes as Brecht's 'open dramaturgic structures' (1984, 182). As Brecht notes, in the form and politics of his own plays: 'Puzzles of the world are not solved but shown' (in Brooker 1988, 212). It is these Brechtian qualities of openness, doubt, of showing rather than solving, that make the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic so useful for thinking about contemporary theatre aesthetics and its modes of critiquing the politics of war.

This book has shown that what I argue is evidence of Brecht's 'epistemological uncertainty' is exacerbated in playwrights in the post-Marxist moment who no longer assume contradiction can be resolved by the grand narratives of the past. The Brechtian dialectic as it is applied to plays such as *Only We* and *Seven Jewish Children* encourages spectators to debate, think sceptically and critically, and arrive at new creative approaches to tackle the contradictions represented, without imagining that these contradictions can be permanently transcended. While these anti-war plays clearly aim to influence public opinion and mobilize audiences to action, their negative dialectical aesthetics take into account the complexities of solving the problems they address. Unlike the agit-prop theatre of the 1960s, these works do not adopt forms that impose meaning or preconceived interpretation upon spectators without the possibility of alternatives. Instead, they seek to destabilize pro-war attitudes from within a given political framework.

Just as Brecht's aesthetic was designed to estrange the naturalness of everyday occurrences and render them visible as ideological constructs,

the plays *Only We*, *Le Dernier Caravansérail* and *Bambiland* show the unnecessary suffering of the Afghani or Iraqi other, revealing how innocent, vulnerable bodies are impacted upon by the commercial, religious, ideological and power interests of the Western ruling classes, in particular, Western political leaders, legal systems and the media. In *Only We*, Brechtian historicization techniques are updated by Kushner's fantastical imagining of a purgatorial encounter between future casualties of the Iraq invasion and present political figures, a technique that makes the deaths of Iraqi children a foregone conclusion of the war. In *Le Dernier Caravansérail*, the contrasting formal choice of spectacular illusion interwoven with verbatim refugee testimonies expands the Brechtian tension between the abstract and the concrete, the pleasure of theatrical artifice juxtaposed against real-world suffering. In *Bambiland*, Jelinek's self-reflexive voice and intertextual references to CNN news reports, Aeschylus' *The Persians*, Disney films and advertising slogans ironically expose the ideological and economic interests of the Western invading forces and the complicity of the media and its Western consumers in the 2003 Iraq War.

Since Brecht's lifetime, the traditional hierarchies of Western theatre and its modes of spectator engagement and participation as well as the public's engagement with the public sphere have been drastically altered by the invention and growing speed and accessibility of the Internet. The rapid and broad-reaching availability to ever-expanding networks of information and new platforms for social interaction are radically blurring the demarcation between the public and private spheres as well as overturning traditional ways of understanding performance and identity.

Just as Brecht enthusiastically experimented with the technological advances of his day in radio and film, these contemporary plays show how new technologies are enabling theatre to speak to current crises with unprecedented speed and geographic reach. Kushner's use of an online publication to distribute the text of *Only We* positions the work within news media debates around the legitimacy of the war. *Iraq.doc*'s chat room form shows the diverse dialectical possibilities of performative online interactions, while the performances of *Seven Jewish Children* throughout the world and uploaded to YouTube give spectators new means by which to actively participate in political and ethical debates. The updating of the Brechtian dialectical aesthetic through digital innovations offers a multitude of ways for playwrights and theatremakers to rethink the Brechtian refunctioning of the spectator as dialectician for the future.

By examining how form interacts with political content, this book has shown that it is the mode of representation as much as the thematics that informs the war critiques in these six anti-war plays and many more not included here. The negative dialectical forms of these plays and their self-reflexive expansion of the Brechtian emphasis on showing reminds spectators that everyday realities are not all they seem to be on the surface. Rather, critical understandings of 'reality' and its representation in 'the media' require constant estrangement and reinterpretation. The conditions that gave rise to Brecht's dramatic experimentation have altered and thus 'dialectical theatre' is being remade to suit present conditions, reanimated by more exaggerated forms of parody, irony, intertextual quotation, anti-teleological, anti-chronological and spatio-temporal fracturing, *gestic* signifiers, self-consciousness and self-reflexivity, as well as new modes of textual and performance distribution and audience interaction through online communities.

Although combat operations in Iraq formally ended in 2011, the Western military presence in Afghanistan and Iraq remains substantial, the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) continues to destabilize the Middle East and Israel–Palestine negotiations for peace cycle through phases of advancement, stagnation and regression. As such, the anti-war plays examined here maintain their relevance as sites for opening up debate around the ethics of military operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Gaza and their residual effects.

The six anti-war plays in this book show how Brechtian dialectical theatre can expose the seemingly fixed political, social, economic and cultural conditions of society as mutable and transitory. They are plays whose form and structure provoke an ethical rejection of war and seek to invoke an end to the violence in the Middle East. The Brechtian dialectical aesthetic offers a model for thinking about how future playwrights and theatremakers might respond to the contradictory conditions of conflict in the advanced stages of late capitalism and compel spectators to imagine futures where antagonism is eradicated but contradiction remains.

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