

Contemporary Drama in English

**Student Theatre Reviews –  
CDE London Theatre Excursion 2011**



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ECKART VOIGTS-VIRCHOW AND NILS  
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## A Mongrel Theatre and a Perennial *Jerusalem*

*Eckart Voigts-Virchow und Nils Wilkinson (Siegen) berichten anlässlich der Theaterexkursion der Deutschen Gesellschaft für das englischsprachige Drama und Theater der Gegenwart über die aktuelle Theaterszene in Großbritannien. Ergänzt wird der Überblick durch Einzelrezensionen aus dem Kreis der insgesamt 15 TeilnehmerInnen.*

*Eckart Voigts-Virchow and Nils Wilkinson (Siegen) report on the current theatre scene in Great Britain. This overview was spawned by the by CDE-sponsored theatre excursion to London in November 2011. It is supplemented by reviews of individual plays penned by student participants of the inaugural CDE theatre excursion.*

These are momentous times and, probably, times that are getting harder. It is November 2011. Amidst the so-called 'Arabellion', the crisis between Western countries and Iran is deepening. Within Britain protests escalate into riots, whereas the Conservative government, in a bid to protect the bankers and the City, is loosening ties with Europe. Students and activists are picketing Westminster and camping out in front of St. Paul's. University funding has been cut and while utilitarian ideas about applicable science are taking centre stage, the humanities that are devalued and reduced to merely "an

agreeable bonus” (Terry Eagleton), remain lurking in the wings. In this tumultuous climate, the Society of Contemporary Drama in English (CDE) organised a five day theatre excursion to London in the first week of November under the aegis of Eckart Voigts-Virchow and Anja Müller of the University of Siegen. Fifteen MA and PhD students, all sharing their interest in theatre and performance in a wider sense, got together to view and discuss various plays. Does theatre, and if so, how does it respond to the fractured realities of Britain in 2011?

The bulk of contemporary theatre in Britain is still focused entirely on London, with a few regional theatres such as the Nottingham Playhouse, the West Yorkshire Playhouse Leeds or the Crucible in Sheffield and some touring companies (Headlong, Out of Joint, Paines Plough) chipping in. London still is the place to which new playwrights flock and where theatrical trends have emerged in recent years. Across the northern border, the newly-founded National Theatre of Scotland under Artistic Director Vicky Featherstone does not have a theatre building, but strong artistic talent, such as David Harrower, Gregory Burke and David Greig (*Dunsinane*, *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*). In 2010, Lucy Prebble’s *Enron*, taking more than a cue from Caryl Churchill’s 1987 take on the deregulated stock market, offered an indictment of corporate greed that was a sell-out success in Chichester and London, but failed in the US, when it took the expressionist musical extravaganza around the failure of liberalism unleashed to Broadway. *Jerusalem*, Jez Butterworth’s 2009 success, is, again, running in 2011 on its apparently never-ending mission to recover a genuinely English tradition of national mythology via its Romantic outsider Johnny ‘Rooster’ Byron, impeccably impersonated by Mark Rylance. Threatened with eviction, the Romany ex-stunt driver Byron/Rylance embodies both the best and the worst of a decidedly impure Englishness: Drugged and hiding his incompetent masculinity behind tall tales of super-prowess, he is also the antithesis of an anodyne modernity of bureaucracy, shopping malls and inane Morris dancing for St. George’s day celebrations. As ‘the professor’ says in *Jersuaem*, the condition of England is “stoned” and this Jack-in-the Green Byron – mad, bad and dangerous to know – is both its nemesis and a ray of hope for this “England at midnight”

(stage directions for the initial scene).

Mike Bartlett's very-near-future play *13* tried hard to address the state of the nation, but although Thea Sharrock's staging made impressive use of the revolving stage of the Olivier at the National Theatre, unlike *Jerusalem*, it will in all likelihood appear dated in retrospect. The first part focuses on 13 sleep-impaired Londoners around an enormous, rotating, black Kaaba cube that, for the character Stephen, is an empty black box supposedly containing God. The play revolves around the idea of undirected spirituality in the face of crisis and impending doom. The second half focuses on a steely, lonely and benignly conservative female Prime Minister facing tough decisions on the impending war with Iran in confrontation with John (hint, hint), a social-media missionary.

Similarly addressing current global issues, Stella Feehily's *Bang! Bang! Bang!* (Royal Court) revolves around the experience of Sadhbh (pronounced: Sigh-ve), a twenty-nine year old Irish relief worker in Congo. Feehily takes a thoroughly researched look at complications of political and humanitarian intervention and how the humanitarian industry is "buoyed by the benevolence of women" (Feehily). Not all of the plays currently running, however, are as topical as Bartlett's or Feehily's. Some current theatre in London seems oddly out of tune with what is happening around it, aiming, maybe, to transcend the limitations of 'writing to the cultural moment'. Stephen Poliakoff's *My City* (Almeida) looks at a former schoolteacher's idealised past and her present struggle for a meaningful future. Conor McPherson's *The Veil* indulges in an Irish ghost story set in the 19th century. However, its questions about what society to live in, about societal change arising from intergenerational conflict, and about how to achieve it, echoes questions of what we have inherited from past generations and how we can contribute to both the present and the future, especially of the yet unborn who will irrevocably have to pick up the loose ends of their predecessors.

Does it speak volumes that the megatrend of the 2011 theatre scene in London is the rediscovery of the sixties? Arnold Wesker's proverbial kitchen-sink workplace play *The Kitchen* from 1959 (National)

suddenly seemed a timely look behind the scenes of the glamourised world of celebrity chefs, illustrating the unresolved tensions of a market economy gone awry. Even more appropriately and impressively, Edward Bond's *Saved* (1965), seemed to have lost little of its provocative power. Dealing with disillusioned and destitute youths in 60s England, Bond has assigned its first London revival after more than 30 years to Sean Holmes, Artistic Director of the Lyric Hammersmith. The structural violence of a disenchanting and demoralised population, gratefully present in the nerve-racking whining of the baby and his subsequent stoning (the scene that earned the play its notoriety in the sixties), managed to hold even the matinee audience composed of boisterous schoolkids in awe. In a more radical way than Bartlett's *13* (which was criticised for being too benign to its politicians and awkward religion-seekers), the diagnosis is that of a country suffering from a moral and political vacuum. Another classic, Caryl Churchill's famous lashing against the ill-devised feminism of the Thatcherite *Top Girls*, was revived by the director of its original production in 1982, Max Stafford-Clark.

Even the two most popular shows of the year, *Frankenstein* and *One Man, Two Guvnors* (National) were revised classics. *Frankenstein*, directed by film director Danny Boyle (*Slumdog Millionaire*, *127 Hours*) and adapted by Nick Dear, experimented in a clever and substantial way with the casting (Jonny Lee Miller and Benedict Cumberbatch alternating as Frankenstein and his creature). Richard Bean's hilarious and corrosive farce is an adaptation of Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters*. Bean, himself somewhat of a theatrical heretic, won the prestigious Evening Standard Award for Best Playwright for his Goldoni farce and *The Heretic*, a Royal Court play that (in a very different vein from the National's *Greenland* or Mike Bartlett's *Earthquakes in London*) addresses climate change. The inevitable Charles Spencer commented "it is great to see the Court putting on a play which will vastly offend a large section of its audience", but there is much more to Bean than his current status as a thorn in the side of the Royal Court left-wing consensus.

The productions of these classics seemed anything but dated – and

certainly not as dated as *The Veil*, which came across as a harmless and inconsequential pre-Christmas ghost entertainment. It is a question of perspective and judgment to decide whether one play is timeless while the other is entangled or caged in its 'presentness'. Who is to decide? Rather, going to see these plays is not merely about experiencing the difference between then and now, itself reason enough to do so. Much more so, it helps us see how the present is an expression or result of past generation's actions. *Top Girls'* famous first act, a dinner scene of six women of different historical periods, purposefully utilises this form of estrangement. Theatre is the circulation of social energy, thus motifs negotiated in a play, no matter how current or oriented to the past, will reverberate with the audience and its current existence. In a fringe production of Shelagh Stephenson's 1997 play *An Experiment with an Airpump* (Giant Olive Theatre) we see a 1799 and 1999 setting of scientists and their families juxtaposing issues of science and ethics, making us aware of how far back current political debates reach and explaining further the topicality of the Boyle/Dear *Frankenstein* adaptation. The discussion of inherited tradition still looms large on the London boards: it is a vital aspect of the engagement in, and love for narrating one's identity in both Poliakov's *My City* and Butterworth's *Jerusalem*.

Formal innovation? Due to lack of public funding, British theatre has never been very good at that. True, there still is the live art of groups such as Frantic Assembly and Kneehigh (which could be seen at a Live Art Festival in Leeds). During our stay at London, for instance, there was a site-specific interactive *Office Party* (Ursula Martinez and Chris Green). Ontroerend Goed's *Audience*, a transfer from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, was too confrontationally interactive for lots of reviewers. But this is a Belgian group from Ghent. Naturally. At the Bush Theatre, which has moved to new premises on Uxbridge Road, the marathon show *Sixty-Six Books* (Josie Rourke) put the King James Bible on stage in a 24-hour durational performance, with Jeanette Winterson, Carol Ann Duffy, Andrew Motion, David Edgar, Billy Bragg, Wole Soyinka and the Archbishop of Canterbury among the 66 writers, 23 directors and 130 actors.

Meeting up with theatre specialists Aleks Sierz (London), Graham Saunders and John Bull (Reading), we asked them about the state of British theatre today. The answer is mixed: No surprise that “a mongrel nation in constant change” (Sierz 2011: 242) cannot help but offer a mongrel theatre.

More about Contemporary British Theatre: *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Theatre* (a companion to the previous *Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary Irish Theatre*) has just been published. You can also refer to Aleks Sierz’ *Rewriting the Nation* (Methuen, 2011) and, closer to home, Merle Tönnies’s *Das englische Drama der Gegenwart* (WVT, 2010) – and, of course, CDE publishes an annual volume packed with up-to-date material on contemporary theatre and drama and also boasts a book series. Our upcoming conference Mülheim, 7-10 June 2012, organised by Anette Pankratz) will focus on *Bodies on Stage*.

LISA PETER (TÜBINGEN)

## Mike Bartlett, *13* (National Theatre)

### *Doubt and belief as driving forces in societies*

In a fictional version of contemporary London, where the streets are unquiet, people are protesting against rising tuition fees, rioting, being arrested and questioned by the police, the Prime Minister is forced to contemplate war against Iran to prevent nuclear conflict. In Mike Bartlett's *13* we follow twelve people who wake up night after night from the same nightmare: disturbing images of darkness and explosions keep them up, setting them all constantly on edge.

The only one who sees the connection between these dreams is John, the thirteenth character in the play and a graduate in his late twenties who has just reappeared in London after years of hiding following his best friend's death. He becomes the charismatic leader of the peace movement, drawing ever bigger crowds with the help of social media. In his speeches in the park he addresses those nightmares and links them to the importance of belief in the possibility of change.

The Prime Minister's long-time friend and fervent atheist Stephen (quite obviously modelled on Richard Dawkins et al.) rhetorically locks horns with John in the central scene of the second part of the play to fight for nothing less than Britain's soul. Doubt and belief are the two underlying forces at the centre of the play: what drives a society, what holds it together, is it asking questions or knowing the answers? Can any of the two show the right way and provide solutions?

This battle of ideas is a setup that could make for some truly tedious and didactic theatre but in this case it presents the most gripping engagement with fundamental beliefs I've seen in a long time. Not for a single moment does Bartlett's crafty and pacy dialogue slacken its pace. On top of this, he succeeds in avoiding the pitfalls of oversimplifying his protagonists' positions. Both creeds eventually lack their ultimate goal, their dream. They are both believers of some kind, but what they believe *in* remains largely in the dark. This essential emptiness leaves the PM and the other dreamers – and with them the audience – with the only option "to make it out for [themselves]".

*Ideas fill the stage, not the scenery*

There's a lot that can be said about Mike Bartlett's *13* and the current production at the NT: that it feels more like two plays in one; that the set of the massive black cube is sadly underused in the second half of the play; that the scenes are very often too intimate, too concentrated for the vastness of space that the Olivier stage provides. But there's one thing that becomes very clear in the course of the play: *13* might be afraid of the big stage, but it certainly isn't afraid of big ideas and the big picture of contemporary British society.

ARIANE DE WAAL (BOCHUM)

## Dystopia or YouTopia? Mike Bartlett, *13* (National Theatre)

When you are reading this review in 2012, it might already seem a bit dated. It is about a play that won't be running at the National Theatre any longer, which might not be shown by any major British theatres and not even be talked about any more. When you are reading Mike Bartlett's *13* in a few years, it will feel quite heavily dated. The young people launching live and virtual protests against tuition fees and preventive wars might still be roaming the streets and the net. But the idea of a Conservative Prime Minister joining the US in launching a war against Iran to stop its nuclear programme might, to expect the worst, have turned into a grim reality. And a far less grave but perhaps far stranger feel might be exuded by stage directions that require an elderly lady to sing a song by pop star Rihanna that is not even played on the radio any more at the time I'm writing this.

Mike Bartlett has not been afraid of dating his latest play. He has, however, been audacious enough to date his play in the present. This is – given its being staged at the same time at the National Theatre as Conor McPherson's new play *The Veil*, a nostalgic 19th-century ghost story – a relief, to say the least. Asked about the questions that drive his playwriting, Bartlett recently told the *Guardian*: “[y]ou should open the door of the theatre and say, ‘What is this?’”<sup>1</sup> The doors of the National Theatre don't literally open to it, but less than two miles down the Thames, St Paul's Cathedral is being besieged by a protest

camp in the wake of Occupy Wall Street, while theatregoers are watching a play about protest.

*13* is, more specifically, about protest in confusing and sometimes disorienting times when young people increasingly use social media to communicate and gather, and it is about how effective protest needs a leader. The play also engages with preventive or 'humanitarian' wars, with the role of religion in a secularised society, with capitalism as opposed to its alternatives. Bartlett stuffs all these big topics into five rather crowded and asymmetric acts, at the expense of fully developing his characters, with which he should – despite numerous critics' complaints – not be reproached. The play is, rather, a neo-Shavian play of ideas. Whether a contemporary playwright would take that as a compliment is a different matter.

### *13 Plotlines*

True to its numerology, *13* has at least 13 different plot lines. Largely, the play focuses on John (played by Trystan Gravelle), a Jesus-like leader who begins to gather his 12 disciples by randomly preaching to them in a park, until he eventually leads them into the anti-war protest directed at Ruth (Geraldine James), a Conservative but sympathetic Prime Minister who struggles with loneliness and the decision whether or not to join the USA's military campaign.

The other characters and plot lines are all more or less connected to these two antagonists. There is the desperate lawyer who pays the young woman for sex who films John's speeches and puts them on the net; the woman's grandmother (yes, the one who's performing Rihanna) in turn profits from the lawyer's assistance in a small legal dispute free of charge; the ambitious academic couple brooding over the protests, career and relationship problems; the American diplomat negotiating the campaign against Iran, whose wife slaughters their daughter because she is outgrowing them intellectually or, as she justifies it, becoming morally debased. The scenes switch between these figures increasingly swiftly, at a rate that might sometimes overexert the non-MTV-watching part of the audience (or critics, for that matter) but which also renders the play

energetic, youthful, exciting – to a point.

The play builds up a momentum over the first three acts that entirely fizzles out halfway through the fourth. The suspense that is sustained until the interval, which in Thea Sharrock's production begins right after the said grandmother has discovered the diplomat daughter's chopped-off hand while jogging, deflates at the beginning of the second part. The audience is left to wonder about questions that have been raised in the first part, the most interesting of which (why are all these Londoners plagued by the same nightmare?) are never answered, the least interesting of which (why has John disappeared and now come back?) are not solved in the most inspired way.

*Private Politics*

This, to me, seems to be the play's biggest shortcoming. Slightly weird and mysterious (the nightmares) and the big political questions (the war, capitalism) either remain unanswered or are dealt with only on a private level. The second half of the play consists mainly of a lengthy scene that some critics have called a "set-piece debate"<sup>2</sup> between John, PM Ruth and her one intimate friend and unofficial advisor, atheist-academic Stephen. The dispute on whether or not to intervene in Iran does not yield a new perspective on preventive wars. Stephen recycles the Bush-Blairite rhetoric of defending freedom, "[i]f we refuse to take control of this now, [t]here would be no freedom at all in the world. True freedom is only ensured through leadership and government" (IV.8), just as he earlier did with the discourse of humanitarian intervention: "the Iranian regime is, simply put, brutal. They have clung onto power, rigged elections, kidnapped, tortured, repressed, and murdered their own people" (III.5).<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps even more problematically, the 21st-century religious leader, John, fails to articulate a clear strategy to counter the military and capitalist agenda of mainstream politics. The debate goes from boring to simply unrealistic when he naively proclaims how he will prevent the war: "I will tell the country to stop work. I will ask them to think of the people of Iran, and bring peace and I will win" (IV.8). What further defuses the conflict is that PM Ruth does not checkmate him politically but by staging a social media scandal on the grounds that

John has in some way or other been involved in both her son's death (hence his long disappearance) and the more recent incident of the diplomat's wife slaughtering their daughter.

It would however, be pointlessly dated to go on outlining the play's flaws – who would want to read about that even in the nearer future? – especially since that has already been done at length by Billington-bashing *Guardian* comment posters.<sup>4</sup> Instead, a more timeless approach to criticism is evidently to ask about a play's timelessness. *13*, despite featuring Twitter, YouTube and Barclays Hire bikes, does have more dateless qualities.

#### *Religion Gone 21st Century*

Take, for instance, the play's stance on religion. John might not really bring across any appealing religious messages, but Bartlett's construction of a young man who pulls crowds in the park by performing small miracles (predicting the weather) and promising that "all that's needed [...] is belief" (II.11) is revealing in a different way. Critics' complaints that it is barely comprehensible why anyone would follow John – it is not only the *Telegraph* reviewer's "main problem [...] that [he] never believed that the Jesus-like hero [...] would ever gain such a following"<sup>5</sup> – go some way towards proving precisely that longing for a charismatic leader that Bartlett hints at. The idea that such a longing may become more persistent in times of global financial crises and unstable markets is not so far-fetched as, to go back to London's protest camp, a poster by a Christian group attached to the camp's fences reads: "if Jesus were with us today, where would he be? Would he be sat discussing among the protesters?" Yes, indeed, *13* seems to suggest. The play asks what roles a contemporary Jesus might take on, and how he would attract his followers. If critics don't feel him convincingly attracting, this only shows that there still is a readiness to see anyone that way.

The harmlessly peaceful Jesus-like preacher turns demagogue, however. The crowds' chanting of the slogan he makes up, "In our name!" (IV.1), is oddly reminiscent of the 'Third Wave' teaching experiment of the 1960s. It also creates moments that are genuinely

uncanny, which Sharrock captures well in the bigger ensemble scenes.

*Staged around a Cube*

What adds most to the sense of uneasiness is Tom Scutt's simple but gigantic stage design. The Olivier's revolve is used quite excessively but to great effect in the first part of the production. A massive cube that is mostly lighted in bluish, cold shades (lighting designer: Mark Henderson) revolves, parts and descends below stage. The most gripping and ghostly scenes are those featuring the ensemble inside the lighted cube waking up from their shared nightmare. Incidentally, this is also the point of intertextuality with Kane's 4.48 *Psychosis*: the Londoners keep waking up from their nightmare at 7.13 am, as alarm clock letters show.

Sharrock's production features strong actors, although the casting stays fairly close to the text, unless one would call Trystan Gravelle's Welsh accent a great divergence – it does add a nicely melodious note to John's speeches, which might otherwise come across a bit bland. Adam James gives unexpected depth and shades to the character of Mark, the sexually desperate lawyer, and Geraldine James's performance of the Prime Minister stays nuanced throughout, subtly hovering between the modes of professionalism, doubt, rough loneliness and cold conviction.

The playtext bears some traces of having been written slightly too fast. Bartlett doesn't always get the technological facts right (the Prime Minister once answers a call on an iPad, which tech-savvy forum users assure me doesn't normally work), but its best passages indeed show that he "has his finger on the pulse", as Billington attested him to much dismay.<sup>6</sup> There are lines that, spoken with a mixture of confidence and uneasiness, as in Sharrock's production, resonate impressively:

So we shrug and walk away, and learn instead the comfort of the downbeat, the safety of irony and pessimism. We sleepwalk from weekend to weekend, looking forward to the simple comforts. We earn we buy, we live we die, we earn we buy, this, we are told, is enough. (II.11)

*Dystopia or YouTopia?*

With its sleepwalking, bad-dreaming Londoners who gather around a figure who at least temporarily promises to guide them towards “kindness, politeness, welfare, equality” (IV.1) and against war, the play is dystopian and utopian at the same time. The mobile phones and tablet computers that are ubiquitous in both the play and the original production offer faster ways of getting connected for good (anti-war) causes but also damage reputations far too easily, as the dissemination of the information on John’s darker sides shows. It is staged dramatically with a threatening countdown: “[i]n twenty minutes your friends will find out”, Ruth warns John (IV.8), before she continues to count down the minutes until there is a simultaneous ringing of phones at the proclaimed time. Yet one can hardly get rid of the impression that Bartlett does or at least wants to believe that that Britain will find the charismatic leader it needs, the “manager” (IV.8) that handles compromise and caters all its diverse citizens’ needs.

And it seems that the prescribed way for the charismatic leader to come is to exploit the advantages of the new media, which Bartlett ultimately posits as weapons for change. Picking up an iPad, John declares: “we’re voting every second of the day [...]. Every second every subject, not simply yes or no, this or that, but millions of views, opinions, solutions, the true complexity of the world” (IV.8). Although it is precisely this ‘voting every second’ that will speed John’s downfall, it also promoted his ascent to leadership. A former PM advisor’s statement in the final crosscutting of short monologues, “I quit. Got myself cleared off Twitter, cleared my Facebook account” (V.1), does not appear to be a valid solution but rather as sneaking away from the ‘true complexity’ John preached. The play, for all its dystopian nightmarish ambiance, does come across as a new media utopia of sorts, a contemporary YouTopia.

<sup>1</sup> Maddy Costa (2011). “Mike Bartlett: Earthquakes Everywhere.”  
*Guardian*, 18 October. 28 November 2011.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/oct/18/mike-bartlett-13>>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Michael Billington (2011). "13: Review." *Guardian*, 26 October. 28 November 2011.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2011/oct/26/13-review>>.

<sup>3</sup> For all references to the play, see Mike Bartlett (2011). *13*. London: Methuen.

<sup>4</sup> Billington's rather favourable review provoked, in his own words, "a volley of abuse", as almost all *Guardian* online readers were disappointed with the play. Michael Billington (2011). "My Review of 13 Provoked a Volley of Abuse, But I'm Sticking to My Guns." *Guardian*, 30 October. 28 November 2011.  
<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/2011/oct/30/critics-notebook-michael-billington?intcmp=239>>.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Spencer (2011). "13, National Theatre, Review." *Telegraph*, 26 October. 28 November 2011.

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/theatre/theatre-reviews/8848998/13-National-Theatre-review.html>>.

<sup>6</sup> Billington (2011). "13: Review."

JULIANE GROH (LEIPZIG)

## Haunting the City: Stephen Poliakoff, *My City* (Almeida Theatre)

After twelve years, Stephen Poliakoff's new play, *My City*, runs successfully at the Almeida Theatre. The intimacy of this theatre coupled with excellent stage design and eerie lighting creates the mysterious atmosphere for a quiet, quirky play, which offers a collage of stories featuring some of Poliakoff's familiar themes such as verbal images of an inscrutable city incessantly haunted by the ghosts of its past.

Tales of memories and nocturnal wanderings begin with a chance encounter. Retired teacher Mrs. Lambert – played by Tracey Ullman with inspiring dignity and heart – is found lying on a bench one evening by her former pupil Richard. He follows her into the night, accompanied by his school friend Julie and flanked by Lambert's odd colleagues Summers and Minken. Their conversations, interrupted by flashbacks to school assemblies, explore the equally demanding and nurturing dynamics between teachers and pupils.

The conflict is between their generations, to whom the present days do not yet or no longer belong. Richard lapses back into his childhood stutter – a brilliant moment in Tom Riley's performance – whereas the teachers retreat into the night. They haunt their city like ghosts chained to stories of a lost past, hiding from the city by day, the present of a younger generation. David Troughton as Minken captures

their sense of detachment with intoxicating energy when he demands to have his city back.

But these ghostly characters are left with nothing but an obsession with historical records, memories of 'their city' and the times they were relevant to its life. Thereby, the storytelling deliberately reduces impressions of this production to the sense of hearing. Characters constantly mention the presence of noises and listen to verbal time travelling, flashbacks, audio tapes and numerous stories interwoven into a dreamlike mosaic, which slows down the performance to a purely narrative mode, at times.

Herein lies the play's potential for truly enchanting moments. Yet, *My City* cannot fully unfold its magic but loses this potential in predictability and an anticlimactic ending. It seems as if the beautifully rendered verbal images lack a frame, a 'big picture' to make sense of its parts. Still, at its best, Poliakoff's haunting vision of living city ghosts is as gripping as it is strange and unfamiliar.

ILKA ZÄNGER (PADERBORN)

## Stephen Poliakoff, *My City* (Almeida Theatre)

*“My City“: A London homage?*

Considering the title of Poliakoff's new play “My City“ one probably expects the piece to run in a specific direction – especially with regard to the illustration of the posters and programs showing a collage of characteristic vertices of London city such as the Gherkin, St. Paul's, the Tower, Big Ben's large clock and of course double-decker busses and the tube all located among the River Thames. Right from the beginning “My City” plays with these expectations of a London homage, a presentation of life in this vibrant city with its extraordinariness and ambiguities. As the action starts to evolve, however, these expectations are numbed by the alleged contrariness of the action which seems to wrap around spacial London as a blanket almost hiding that which is vociferously commended by the play's illustration.

*London's negative image: the bleak present*

Richard, a young man around thirty and his former classmate Julie meet their primary school teachers Ms. Lambert and her colleagues Mr. Minken and Ms. Summers. While Richard and Julie might at first sight represent more or less typical Londoners, Mrs. Lambert does not fit in this concept. By the light of day she lies down on a bench in front of St. Paul's to have a nap absolutely unaware of the uncommon

nature of this action. Soon it turns out that she roams the streets of London by night. Being asked about the nature of her nocturnal walks she talks of meeting people living on the fringe of society: a boy with a gun threatening to shoot people, a desperate mother craving the contact with her lost son, women who clean the tube tunnels. She even accompanies them into London's underground, clearing away the litter of people living beyond the innards of the city. Just as unconventional are the places she chooses as meeting points with Julie and Richard. A bar at the top level of a shopping mall and an underground pub several stories below street level – each time bare of any other guest. Ms. Lambert escapes into anonymity, she escapes the everyday social space and turns towards the margins of the city, to that which is all too naturally left unnoticed by others.

*The assemblies: a glimpse of the glorious past*

The bleakness of her present life that forms the underlying linear structure of the play is contrasted by flashbacks to her past professional life. These sequences have an almost unreal and fictional quality and show a different Ms. Lambert, one who discards her passive reclusiveness and is perceived as an authoritative yet enthusiastic and likable teacher with an unconventional quality: in the so called morning assemblies she tells stories to her pupils eager to vitalize their imagination. She calls their attention to the sounds outside the window and thus conjures up pictures of ancient Victorian London. She tells a fantastic story of a dog and a raven who fell in love with each other and learn to communicate. Richard's and Julie's comments highlight the extraordinary quality of Ms. Lambert's stories.

How much relevance these past events have for her present life is indicated by the smooth transitions between the present and the assembly scenes. While sound is used to merge both time sequences into a single unified narrative, Ms. Lambert's companions Mr. Minken and Ms. Summers actively engage in what seems to be a theatrical performance of the past events. Thus Mr. Minken embodies a different character each time he takes off his jacket, among others the dog from the animal love story. In this context, it seems clear why her

former colleagues apparently are Ms. Lambert's only company. As she is attached to her past unable to engage in an active life in the here and now, she necessarily clings to everything still existing from the past. She seems to have left her soul in school now roaming the streets in search for something never to be found hiding her pain by her sober and distanced nature.

*A hopeful perspective?*

Only in her physical contact with the past, embodied by Richard and Julie, is she able to actually address her emotional wounds. Both of them soon detect Ms. Lambert's paralysis, her dissatisfaction and unhappiness. In the end it is Richard's persistent questioning which prompts her to confide her pain. She tells him that she cannot cope with her retirement from school. She has the feeling that her life's content, her profession as a teacher, is simply vanishing into meaninglessness, fading into irrelevance. The sound of children's voices frequently to be heard in the course of the play is now seen in a different light: it is this sound of children on their way to and from school that keeps Ms. Lambert from shifting her life to the night. Only here she considers herself save from these painful confrontations with her past. Richard now helps with Ms. Lambert's own means: imagining her in the future still stalking the streets but in daylight, he now invents a future scenario that opens up a new perspective for his primary school teacher. And in this way, without giving her platitudinous advices but instead a little realistic glimpse of hope he is the one able to help her.

*What about the title?*

The question left to answer then is why Poliakoff chooses the title "My City". Definitely, first expectations are not fulfilled. "My City" is not a homage to London, it's not a portrait of the city's nature. Instead it highlights another aspect of the title which at first sight remains to be hidden in the possessive pronoun "my". Thus it is not a play about a city which imposes itself upon an individual's life. Instead, living in the city is represented as a performative act in which the individual engages with his surroundings in a special way. Each individual's life

is a narrative set in his surroundings, formed by the individual's acts and thoughts, by his active engagement with space. The city thus becomes a formable prop in one's personal history, a narrative crafted in the act. From this angle, the assemblies function as programs for the entire play. Here, history is not experienced in one of London's favourite museums but is only created by the teachers' and pupils' imagination. It becomes vivid not via visual stimulants but via city soundscapes, as Poliakov calls them, able to create entire inner landscapes, such as imaginations of the city's past or the confrontation with inner losses. It is the sound of the city that merges into visual imaginations – not the other way round. London does not exist independently but is created by the individual's imaginative force. Poliakov's play is the representation of the city as set in its inhabitant's lives. As Ms. Lambert cleaves to her past she is not able to take part in the conventional city life but instead draws back into the city's margins. Thus when people talk about "their cities" it is never just a tribute to favourite places, to sights, people and one's favourite night out, but it is the portrayal of the intense amalgamation of one's performative subjectivity with the city's spacial materialization. All senses absorb the city which is transformed into inner narratives of personal life stories. A city does not exist without its inhabitants. Biographical relevance is what breathes life into its concrete. Biographical relevance is what forms the city, it is the buckling perceivable in the middle of the play's illustration, that which moves away from a photographic image of London. London, in Poliakov's play is wrapped in the biographical blanket of its protagonist's, Ms. Lambert's life. She tells the story of her city – not the other way round.

*The production*

This biographical aspect with its vivid narrations triggered by the city's aspects and soundscapes functions well in Almeida's production. As a play which is deeply rooted in the traditions of narrative it is able to entertain its audience in a nearly forgotten way. The audience catches themselves in the act of diving into the teachers' stories enjoying the simple pleasure of listening to gripping narratives. This

again creates an interesting bond between the audience and the cast: as the teachers always directly address the audience, they slip into the pupils' role and identify with their enthusiastic account of Ms. Lambert's stories. But in spite of the respectable performances of the actors – especially David Troughton as Mr. Minken gives an impressive portrayal, possibly transgressing the character's boundaries as set by the play – the performance ends in an anticlimax. In the face of the sublime and intelligent message of the play one can't help missing a final turn and is left with the question: Is this really how it ends? Where is the final big story? It is in the end that a tremendously brilliant narrative play falls prey to its own means.

MIRREN AUGUSTIN (HILDESHEIM)

## Stephen Poliakoff, *My City* (Almeida Theatre)

One evening, Richard is on the phone in a park when he sees his old primary teacher lying on a park bench. Intrigued, excited, he asks to see her again, and she arranges to meet with him and his school friend Julie in the top deck restaurant of a newly opened mall. In the basement bar they are later united with their other two 1980s primary teachers. From there they move to Mr Minkin's apparently subterranean flat to have the "best" school dinner cooked in London, and finally to an all-night café where the retired teacher trio often has breakfast.

Richard and Julie's enthusiasm for their teachers is explained like this: these were the only people in their childhood who did not ignore their learning difficulties, but used teaching methods that focused storytelling to support them to become more self-assured pupils. This personal history is paralleled by the storytelling elements that inform the structure of the play, which alternates between scenes set in the present and the past, all of them tinged with nostalgia and longing. It includes stories told by the teachers to their pupils (the audience), ghostly stories that Miss Lambert tells of her nightly walks through London, as well as the teachers' reminiscences of the stories their pupils imagined, most memorably about the sounds of Victorian or of Wartime London before they were drowned out by new layers of noise.

*Stories, secrets, revelations and disappointments*

We soon realize that this is not a story of happy reunions, but rather one of unfulfilled hopes. The emphasis is too strongly laid on secrets and people not wishing to tell the whole story... which is eventually wormed out of them. Furthermore, the teachers are decidedly strange: they meet at night, live by night, and seem to hide themselves from view. The City they talk about remains one of the past, as Mr Minkin – who has scrupulously been keeping records of the past (children's paintings, cassettes, slides) but is now in the process of frantically getting rid of all of them – complains of the loss of innocence of the children they taught in their careers and of the London they live in. These teachers are out of synch with their surroundings – that much is obvious – and the world they represent seems doomed.

Sadly, this is the impression also given of Poliakoff's play. Stories don't connect up and aren't carried through to a logical conclusion. Topical mentions of bankers and hedge funds don't go down very well, as the play and the characters are not bound to real time. Miss Lambert and her friends are lost in a limbo of not knowing what to hold on to, and so are the spectators, left waiting for meaning to be created or, at least, for something meaningful to happen. Poetic though the material might have appeared in film, the play and Poliakoff's own production do not work out on stage.

MARTINA THEISSL (WIEN)

## Jez Butterworth, *Jerusalem*

Every once in a while you get to experience a play which hits all the right buttons, where every element of the production is in sync with every other. *Jerusalem* is such a play.

It is hyped by various critics and theatre goers as being the best play of the year. And truly, there is no escaping Jez Butterworth's play in London since its return to West End's Apollo Theatre from prior successful runs at Broadway's Music Box Theatre, the Royal Court Theatre and the Apollo. The heart of the production is Mark Rylance's performance as Johnny 'Rooster' Byron, a highly ambivalent character who enters the stage by performing a handstand over a water trough, consequently wetting his entire head and the front rows in the theatre. Rylance's Rooster is full of comedy, wit and incredible stories and the plot of the play revolves around his downfall from a much sought-after character to a deserted loner. One is drawn to his figure as are all the other characters in the play that lionise him, although he is living off alcohol and drugs as an outcast from society.

The setting of the entire play is a place in the woods in which Byron's rotting trailer appears like a mansion. The set functions as a playground for lost teenagers as well as lost adults who cannot seem to exist without him as a father figure or drug provider. The play lives off its comedy, references to Englishness and folklore stories that are ingeniously woven into the dialogue. But as the production proceeds a more serious tone takes hold of the story and the characters. Tragedy

and brutality become central to the play and are displayed in violent acts or subtly presented in the questionable behaviour of the characters. And even though Byron is the most dubious of them all, probably having done more good than bad in his life, one is bound to vote in his favour in the end. You are persuaded to forget his flaws in that final breathtaking scene in which Johnny Byron plays the drums with a broken body after having been abandoned by every person he knows in his woods. It is in that exact scene that you get the full extent of hopelessness and tragedy of this play. Even the most critical mind must, at that point, put aside all their doubts and acknowledge that this is theatre at its best. In the end there is nothing you can do but to sit there thrilled and speechless. This production does what theatre should do - enthrall and excite!