

‘Look at the Ground and Imagine its Past’: David Greig’s History Plays

Paola Botham

Abstract: Given the acknowledged importance of Greig’s plays for current debates on globalisation and transnational identities, most scholarly attention has been focused on the geographical component of his work. This article, by contrast, explores the historical dimension. In contemporary British theatre, Greig can be placed among a cross-generational group of dramatists who are giving a new lease of life to the history play, particularly in its ‘radical’ post-1968 version, highlighting the connection between past and present and the possibilities of historical change. Greig’s history plays, from *The Speculator* (1999) to *Dunsinane* (2010), combine Brechtian dispassionate analysis with the Adornian utopian spirit, generating an engagement with the past that is both evocative and politically resonant.

Keywords: History play, political theatre, *The Speculator*, *Victoria*, *Miniskirts of Kabul*, *Dunsinane*.

As many commentators have observed, classifying the abundant and varied dramatic output of David Greig is a difficult task. In their edited collection on the playwright, Anja Müller and Clare Wallace illustrate the range of his work indicating how, geographically, this encompasses myriad places and *non-places* while, temporally, it ‘roams across significant periods or events in (notably European) history’.¹ Given the importance of Greig’s plays for current debates on globalisation and transnational identities, most scholarly attention has been focused on the geographical dimension. This essay, by contrast, examines the historical one. Greig’s engagement with history can indeed be considered a regular trait within his otherwise diverse dramaturgy. It appears indirectly in collaborations with Suspect Culture (for instance, *Stalinland* [1992], *Casanova* [2001]) and directly in some of his plays for young audiences, such as *Petra* (1996) and *Dr Korczak’s Example* (2001). It also features in most of the work that deals with Greig’s native Scotland. The present analysis will focus on two relatively early historical plays, *The Speculator* (1999) and *Victoria* (2000), and two relatively recent ones, *Miniskirts of Kabul* (2009) and *Dunsinane* (2010). The plays selected offer a

¹ Anja Müller and Clare Wallace, ‘Neutral Spaces and Transnational Encounters’, in *Cosmotopia: Transnational Identities in David Greig’s Theatre*, ed. by Anja Müller and Clare Wallace (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2011), pp. 1-13 (p. 2). Greig’s concern with history is also discussed in David Greig and Caridad Svich, ‘Physical Poetry’, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 29.2 (2007), 51-58 (p. 51). The concept of the non-place as a space in between, often applied to Greig’s work, comes from Marc Augé’s *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, trans. John Howe (London: Verso, 1995).

remarkably extensive historical scope, from medieval times to the 1990s. They also trigger – through different devices – an interrogation of the past that is more than thematic, dealing with the operation of history itself. This metahistorical reflexivity, as discussed below, is a key characteristic of the contemporary history play.

The phrase used in the title of this article neatly encapsulates the intersection – and interdependence – of what can be visualised as the two axes in Greig’s work: a horizontal one (place) and a vertical one (time). The quotation comes from an interview, included in Müller and Wallace’s book, where Greig connects his attention to history with his biographical sense of displacement, having been born in Edinburgh and raised in Jos, Nigeria:

if someone asks me where I’m from, I can’t really answer the question. So that troubles my concept of home: where am I at home? [...] I know what it is that makes a place home to someone because it is that which is absent in my experience. Therefore I seek out that experience. I’m very interested in community or the sense of the history of a place. There are lots of speeches in my plays where someone will look at the ground and imagine its past or talk about the social structure of a home or the sense of belonging.²

Greig’s personal anxiety as articulated here might be linked to a more general concern of our times, one that has been exacerbated with the advance of globalisation. On the first page of his seminal book *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), neo-Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson talks of an era that may have ‘forgotten how to think historically’.³ The context of this remark was, of course, the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, when Francis Fukuyama’s infamous thesis on the end of history came to epitomise the triumphalism of the neoliberal right. Presciently, the first version of Jameson’s essay, published in 1984, starts with the observation that ‘premonitions of the future, catastrophic or redemptive, have been replaced by senses of the end of this or that’.⁴ In Britain at the turn of the millennium, critics were also busy forecasting the end of political theatre and, with it, of dramaturgical approaches to history. As

² David Greig and Mark Fisher, ‘Suspect Cultures and Home Truths’, in *Cosmotopia*, ed. by Müller and Wallace, pp. 14-31 (p. 15).

³ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. vii.

⁴ Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’, *New Left Review*, 146 (1984), 59-92 (p. 59).

summarised by Brean S. Hammond,

One by one, the contributors to the recent influential *Cambridge History of British Theatre* point to the clear division, in terms of political commitment, between the ‘older generation of post-World War Two British dramatists – Arden, Bond, Pinter, Griffiths, Edgar, Wesker, Churchill, Hare, Brenton, Barker, Wertebaker – who variously attempted to use or explain history, and to locate the individual within a social, political, and thus often historical context’ and later issue-based writers [...] who have no significant interest in the shaping of the present by past events.⁵

Although Hammond detects a new popular appetite for history, particularly prominent on television, he warns against ‘commodified, packaged, and sanitized’ versions that depoliticise the past and divorce it from the present.⁶ John Bull’s article on two recent history plays on Early Modern England, Howard Brenton’s *Anne Boleyn* (2010) and David Edgar’s *Written on the Heart* (2011), similarly draws attention to the ubiquity of screen costume dramas about this period that are far from progressive.⁷ As further symptoms of the interest in this specific moment of British history, Bull comments on the success of Philippa Gregory’s novel *The Other Boleyn Girl* (2001), adapted for television and film, and Hilary Mantel’s acclaimed books about Thomas Cromwell, *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), which have since been reworked for the stage by the Royal Shakespeare Company [RSC] (2014) and for a BBC television series (2015).

Hammond and Bull are right to identify a renewed mainstream fascination with history and yet be cautious about the political implications of such enthusiasm. However, Hammond is rather partial in his view that ‘[i]n British theater, history is virtually unrepresented’.⁸ I would argue, on the contrary, that Britain relies on a vigorous tradition of historical stage drama *as* a political genre, not just in terms of the foundational Elizabethan history play but especially in the post-1968 incarnation of the form, variously named ‘radical’, ‘oppositional’ or ‘revisionist’, which developed

⁵ Brean S. Hammond, “‘Is Everything History?’: Churchill, Barker, and the Modern History Play”, *Comparative Drama*, 41.1 (2007), 1-23 (p. 2). Hammond quotes Vera Gottlieb, ‘1979 and After: A View’, in *The Cambridge History of British Theatre*, vol. 3, ed. by Baz Kershaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 412-25 (pp. 412-13).

⁶ Hammond, ‘Is Everything History?’, p. 2.

⁷ John Bull, “‘History Repeating Itself?’: Text and Image, Theatre and Performance: Howard Brenton and David Edgar’s Appropriation of the Historical Drama”, *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 33.2 (2013), 169-85 (p. 171).

⁸ Hammond, ‘Is Everything History?’, p. 2. According to Hammond, Caryl Churchill and Howard Barker are exceptions to this rule.

in synergy with fresh historiographical approaches emerging at that time.⁹ It is within the framework of this tradition, currently experiencing a revival, that Greig's historical output can be understood, despite some tensions that will be explored below.

Still Radical?

In the first systematic account of the 'English' history play as a modern phenomenon, Niloufer Harben highlights iconoclasm as a key characteristic that runs from Shaw to Bond, both of whom take the stance not 'of detached critic and observer, but of passionate reformer and participant', using humour to address 'deeply serious moral concerns'.¹⁰ She also acknowledges that the influence of Marxism in the latter part of the twentieth century resulted in 'a tendency to set, in place of heroic figures, material and economic factors as the motor power of historical development'.¹¹ In his 1991 study, D. Keith Peacock concentrates on these later (post-1968) 'radical stages', suggesting as unifying elements 'a concern with ordinary people rather than their rulers' and a shift from an individualistic notion of history to one that emphasises a collective dimension.¹² Richard H. Palmer, writing in 1998, similarly identifies the 'new' history play with a challenge to traditional pretensions of objectivity in favour of specific interpretations, particularly Marxist and feminist ones.¹³ A 2002 survey of the British history play in the 1990s by Mark Berninger also proceeds by recognising a dominant, 'traditional' type against which the 'revisionist' category is defined: the traditional history play focuses on 'the central (mostly male) figures of history' and 'political and military events' and is characterised by 'Eurocentrism', 'stage realism',

⁹ See D. Keith Peacock, *Radical Stages: Alternative History in Modern British Drama* (New York: Greenwood, 1991); Richard H. Palmer, *The Contemporary British History Play* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998); Mark Berninger, 'Variations of a Genre: The British History Play in the Nineties', *Anglistik & Englischunterricht*, 64 (2002), 37-64; Siân Adiseshiah, *Churchill's Socialism: Political Resistance in the Plays of Caryl Churchill* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), pp. 93-98.

¹⁰ Niloufer Harben, *Twentieth-Century English History Plays: From Shaw to Bond* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 216-17. In spite of the book's title, Harben begins with the Irish-born George Bernard Shaw. Here I refer to the history play as a British rather than English tradition.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹² Peacock, *Radical Stages*, p. 6.

¹³ Palmer, *The Contemporary British History Play*, pp. 12-13. Several mainstream plays would fit Peacock's category of 'old' history. Despite its borrowing of some Brechtian techniques, Robert Bolt's biographical work on Thomas Moore, *A Man for All Seasons* (1960), is a case in point, also mentioned by Bull in "'History Repeating Itself'", p. 170.

‘chronological presentation’, ‘adherence to documented history [...] with the addition of fictional elements’ and ‘a subscription to the dominant view of history and the prevailing interpretation of the historical events presented’; conversely, the revisionist history play takes a critical stance towards these features, either in terms of form or content.¹⁴ At the same time, Berninger notes developments ‘towards higher self-reflexivity and fictionalisation’ that bring about the ‘metahistorical’ and the ‘posthistorical’ play.¹⁵ Whereas the former represents an inherent tendency within revisionist histories to interrogate ‘how history is made’, the latter goes even further, blurring history and fiction.¹⁶

My contention is that the contemporary (political) history play, including Greig’s, still responds to the radical or revisionist paradigm, albeit with qualifications and the sceptical attitude towards ideological certainties that typifies our age. As I have proposed in relation to the recent work of Howard Brenton, the so-called Brechtian history play, in which the past is revisited in order to scrutinise the present, is in good health, even though – as David Edgar points out – the Marxist ‘architecture’ underpinning Brecht’s model of historicisation has been discredited.¹⁷ Significantly, it is not only veteran political playwrights like Edgar and Brenton who are turning, or returning, to history in order to shed light on current political preoccupations. Rather, and against previous diagnoses, this is a cross-generational trend on the twenty-first century British stage, where a number of history plays resonate with contemporary matters, mainly of a constitutional kind. At the more factual end of the spectrum is a dramatist like James Graham, whose most popular history play to date, *This House* (2012), follows the precarious operation of British hung parliaments between 1974 and 1979. At the more conjectural end of the spectrum there seems to be a recurrent obsession with the present royal family, in plays such as Moira Buffini’s *Handbagged* (2010 and

¹⁴ Berninger, ‘Variations of a Genre’, p. 39. Berninger’s chosen example of a traditional history play is Alan Bennett’s *The Madness of King George* (1991).

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 56. Despite the clarity of his taxonomy, Berninger stresses that different types of history play coexist and cross-connect, negating linear development (pp. 41-42).

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 40.

¹⁷ See Paola Botham, ‘Howard Brenton and the Improbable Revival of the Brechtian History Play’, *JCDE: Journal of Contemporary Drama in English*, 2.1 (2014), 170-84. Edgar’s comment appears in David Edgar and Janelle Reinelt, ‘“Politics, Playwriting, Postmodernism”: An Interview with David Edgar’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 14.4 (2004), 42-53 (p. 48).

2013), Peter Morgan's *The Audience* (2013) and Mike Bartlett's provocative 'future history' in blank verse, *King Charles III* (2014). Also in 2014, Rona Munro's Scottish trilogy on the fifteenth-century Stuart kings, *The James Plays*, marked the first collaboration between the Edinburgh International Festival and the National Theatres of Scotland and Great Britain, its timing coinciding with the Scottish referendum on independence. Although, in Peacock's vocabulary, these plays are populated by 'rulers' instead of 'ordinary people', they retain the radical perspective from below in their analysis of power, as well as the seminal iconoclasm identified by Harben and the disregard of objectivity described by Palmer.

Most recent history plays are still an exercise in historicisation in the Brechtian (and Jamesonian) sense of connecting past and present, examining the possibilities of historical change. Where this work differs from previous models, however, is in replacing overtly ideological interpretations with open-ended readings of the archive material. In other words, while the suspicion over received wisdom remains a core feature, the alternative on offer is a set of questions and/or possible directions rather than dogmatic answers based on a fixed version of history. Stopping short of the absolute relativism of what Berninger calls the 'posthistorical', Greig's innovative contribution to this corpus of plays preserves key elements of previous incarnations of the genre, such as the epic style, the humour and the focus on ordinary people as agents (and/or casualties) of the historical process, and combines them with unsettling 'metahistorical' strategies.

Rough Histories

'I have simplified things, collapsed time, invented entire scenarios, and imposed numerous anachronisms on the play', writes Greig in the author's note to *The Speculator*, concluding with a fitting pronouncement: '[s]ome of what happens in the play is true. The rest is purely speculation.'¹⁸ This preface reads as a general prescription for Greig's approach to history, where solid research (with sources sometimes disclosed in the printed text) is combined with the aforementioned

¹⁸ David Greig and Lluïsa Cunillé, *The Speculator & The Meeting* (London: Methuen, 1999), p. 6.

manoeuvre of *imagining* a past. Before discussing the specific creative devices employed in each of the four selected pieces, it is important to consider Greig's uneasy position within the British tradition of political theatre in which the radical history play is inscribed.

Given the persistent focus of his work on the state of post-1989 Europe, as well as the fraught relationships between Scotland and England, the West and the Middle East, and the USA and the rest of the world, it is not surprising that Greig would be regarded as a political dramatist. Yet he has been vocal about differences between his work and that of his predecessors. Critical accounts of Greig's career have often mapped this complex and shifting relationship with political theatre in general and, in particular, with that significant generation of dramatists he playfully describes as 'a happy band of 1970s left-wing dinosaurs'.¹⁹ Following some equivocal remarks in the 1990s, Greig attempted to settle the matter in his personal manifesto 'Rough Theatre', written after a life-changing working trip to Palestine which left him 'no longer satisfied with letting my work simply exist and not questioning whether it was helping or hindering the powers shaping our lives'.²⁰ In *Rough Theatre*, the adjective is used in every sense:

as in a 'rough draft' – something done quickly, [...] as in 'not smooth' – something with texture, a form whose joins and bolts are visible. Rough as in the 'rough boys' whom one was not encouraged to play with at school – something threatening and dangerous [...] as in 'rough approximation' – not exact or precise but near and useful. 'Rough' as in 'I'm feeling a little rough this morning' – emotionally fragile, discombobulated, dislocated from time and place, hung over. 'Rough' as in 'unfinished'.²¹

Although this formula was meant to be 'a very tentative proposal for a new model of political theatre which might offer the possibility of resistance in the new conditions of power in the early

¹⁹ David Greig, 'Rough Theatre', in *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s*, ed. by Rebecca D'Monté and Graham Saunders (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 208-21 (p. 212). All recent overviews of Greig's playwriting discuss the political dimension of his work in relation to past traditions. See Janelle Reinelt, 'David Greig', in *The Methuen Drama Guide to Contemporary British Playwrights*, ed. by Martin Middeke, Peter Paul Schnierer and Aleks Sierz (London: Methuen, 2011), pp. 203-22 (pp. 216-18); Nadine Holdsworth, 'David Greig', in *Modern British Playwriting: 2000-2009*, ed. by Dan Rebellato (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 169-89 (p. 171; pp. 188-89); and Clare Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), pp. 9-10; pp. 31-36.

²⁰ Greig, 'Rough Theatre', p. 213.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 213-14.

twenty-first century',²² its origins are nothing new, combining as it does two of Greig's major (conflicting) influences: Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno. The idea of showing 'joins and bolts' is a fundamental part of the Brechtian method of theatre-making, various aspects of which have been adopted by Greig and are well documented. In her recent monograph on the playwright, for example, Wallace dedicates a chapter to the 'epic, presentational, storytelling style' Greig himself recognises as his own.²³ The main inspiration for Rough Theatre, however, is of a different kind: Adorno's concept of negative dialectics, which aspires to transcend the instrumental rationality of capitalism by relying on the power of contradiction. The leading philosopher of the Frankfurt School's first generation, Adorno was a champion of modernist art as a movement oppositional to the so-called culture industry and a staunch critic of 'committed art' as practised by Brecht. 'It is not the office of art to spotlight alternatives, but to resist by its form alone the course of the world', he famously declared. 'Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays [...] have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomimes.'²⁴

An incisive analysis of Greig's work from an Adornian standpoint is provided by Dan Rebellato, addressing the theatre of Suspect Culture. In an echo of Adorno's rejection of Brechtian clarity, Rebellato claims that '[a] commitment to social reality and rationality might [...] be a lethal kind of conservatism that offer[s] no fundamental opportunity to think beyond the system'.²⁵ By contrast, Adorno's utopian vision sees art as 'a source of profound opposition to the empirical reality that has been colonized by identity-thinking and exchange'.²⁶ While this argument is persuasive and chimes with certain elements of Greig's dramaturgy, especially in collaboration with his former company, what is most conspicuous about Greig as an individual playwright is the paradoxical coexistence of Brechtian and Adornian inclinations. In the case of his history plays, these are not entirely resistant to empirical reality or even an educational impulse, yet they deal with

²² Ibid., p. 211.

²³ Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, p. 31.

²⁴ Theodor Adorno, quoted in Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), p. 129.

²⁵ Dan Rebellato, "'And I Will Reach Out My Hand with a Kind of Infinite Slowness and Say the Perfect Thing": The Utopian Theatre of Suspect Culture', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 13.1 (2003), 61-80 (p. 67).

²⁶ Ibid., p. 68.

them in an imaginative and highly experimental way.

Greig is not alone in his attempt to ‘avoid propaganda and to keep the work open and questioning’.²⁷ This is indeed one of the attributes of the present resurgence of political theatre in Britain, whether the plays are produced by veterans of the post-1968 alternative movement – Greig’s ‘dinosaurs’ – or new dramatists; whether they draw from documentary or historical evidence or from pure artistic imagination, or (frequently) both. Most political drama of the 1970s and 1980s was in fact more nuanced and sophisticated than many critics would admit; however, the seismic material and philosophical changes brought about by the end of the Cold War forced a deep rethinking of theatre practices. David Greig’s ‘rough histories’ are intrinsically linked to these ideological crises. While they can still be seen through the prism of the British epic tradition, they also reflect the postmodern aporias recognised by Jameson. And although based on identifiable research material, they often depend on an Adornian speculative leap.

(Post)Modern Ambivalences

The Speculator, described by its first director, Philip Howard, as a “‘rambunctious” postmodern costume drama’,²⁸ premiered in a Catalan translation at the Festival Grec in Barcelona (1999) and in Scots/English at the Edinburgh Festival the same year. Set in Paris in 1720, at the core of European Enlightenment, the piece can be read as an ambivalent reflection on the project of modernity itself. John Law, the Scottish economist who reached the position of Controller General of Finances in France, advocates bank notes instead of gold and presides over one of the first global economic crises, the Mississippi bubble. Although he represents the destructive force of capitalist modernisation, in his downfall he also becomes a quasi-tragic figure.

At heart, Law is an idealist: ‘Our problem isn’t lack of gold’, he tells the playwright

²⁷ David Greig and George Rodosthenous, “‘I Let the Language Lead the Dance”: Politics, Musicality, and Voyeurism”, *New Theatre Quarterly*, 27.1 (2011), 3-13 (p. 4).

²⁸ ‘Directors’ Cuts: Philip Howard’, in Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, pp. 210-17 (p. 213).

Dufresny, ‘but lack of faith’.²⁹ However, the material cost of this monetary illusion is all too real, voiced towards the end of the play by the chorus of the dispossessed, ‘the Beggars and Whores of Paris’.³⁰ This collective character travels to the United States, enticed by Law’s propaganda, and returns defeated: ‘We starved. / We suffered. / We sweated. / And there was nothing. / And we thought – / Nothing is worth this. / Nothing is worth this much misery.’³¹ They are the hard truth behind the speculative smokescreen, but they are also utterly (and ironically) mistaken about the future, as they conclude: ‘And when anyone stopped us and asked us about / America – we said – / Never – never in a thousand years of history – / Will there be anything in America. / It’s worthless.’³²

The playwrights Dufresny and Marivaux are fellow speculators whose short-lived prosperity ends with that of their patron, while Silvia, Marivaux’s abandoned mistress and victim of the speculative nature of desire, is left wondering ‘What if that’s all there is?’ (the final line of the text).³³ Yet there is another dreamer, the adolescent Scottish Lord Islay, whose venture pays off. Having spent all his fortune on presents for his reluctant lover Adelaide, he finally joins her on a very tangible anachronism – a Harley Davidson – which takes them away, probably towards America, as ‘[t]he entire theatre opens up’.³⁴ Adrienne Scullion, who interprets the play in a post-devolution Scottish context, sees this final triumph of speculation in a positive, creative sense, as ‘the theatre itself dematerializes in favour of the open roads of a new set of cultural references’, heralding ‘the possibilities afforded by an aspirational future bold enough to confront and progress away from the assumptions and prejudices of the past’.³⁵

On the flipside, *The Speculator* also anticipates the financial scandals that would plague the first decade of the twenty-first century. Law is, perhaps, a slightly less hubristic version of Jeffrey

²⁹ Greig, *The Speculator*, p. 69.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Adrienne Scullion, ‘Devolution and Drama: Imagining the Possible’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Scottish Literature*, ed. by Berthold Schoene (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), pp. 68-77 (p. 71; p. 72).

Skilling in Lucy Prebble's *Enron* (2009), a play that anatomised by proxy the most recent speculative crash in the USA. Like *Enron*, Greig's play looks across the Atlantic to illustrate the operations and consequences of *laissez faire*. Unlike *Enron*, however, here the dramaturgy itself seems to be speculative (rough?), as if looking for a final form. Howard retrospectively regrets the interventions he made in order to steer the play towards a more conventional structure:

My mistake was to lose my nerve with David's first draft, which was articulated more in the style of a 'masque' of the period: a company of actors; a play within a play, possibly even a play within a play within a play...; a very 'knowing' attitude towards the historical setting.³⁶

The director claims that as a result of his apprehensions, the piece 'became more of a well-made play [...] but something was lost'. Nevertheless, he recognises that the show was '*spectacularly* ahead of its time' in terms of its subject matter.³⁷

The shadowy presence of America would become almost a constant in Greig's subsequent plays. Predictably, US mythology is central to works like *San Diego* (2003) and *The American Pilot* (2005), but it also figures in *Victoria*, his 'trilogy in one play' about the Highlands premiered by the RSC at the London Barbican in 2000.³⁸ Set in the same spot throughout three parts spanning 60 years, with a young character named Victoria in each of them, this elaborate piece is probably the clearest example of the vertical axis in Greig's theatre. At the same time, however, it demonstrates the inextricable link between geography and history contained in the idea of looking at the ground in order to imagine a community's past. As Wallace states, 'in addition to providing a historical panorama, *Victoria* is also [...] an ecologically calibrated epic'.³⁹ People are somewhat imprinted on the landscape, as the third Victoria says to the ghost of her grandfather Oscar:

Can't go forward.
Me and all that made me.
The weight of oldness.
This place.
If I could step out of my body.

³⁶ 'Directors' Cuts', p. 213.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 213. Emphasis in original.

³⁸ David Greig's website, 'Victoria', *Front Step* <<http://www.front-step.co.uk/victoria/>> [accessed 20 March 2014].

³⁹ Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, p. 76.

Leave my skin and bone on the hillside.
 Walk into some new life.
 But I'm half in and half out of the ground.
 Place holds me.
 The shape of me.
 In the mountainside.⁴⁰

There is also an intended extra-narrative connection between different generations, as the three Victorias, played by the same actor, highlight this sense of history as a palimpsest. David Pattie notes that the moments chosen for this epic, 1936, 1974 and 1996, are not the most historically significant but rather years in which 'the world is changing, but the nature of the change is unclear'.⁴¹ The year 1936 is generally still a time of unchallenged privilege, although the battle between fascism and socialism, which two of the characters are about to fight (and lose) as volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, makes a violent but victorious start in the private realm: David, the Nazi-sympathising heir to the estate who rapes Shona, the kitchen maid, is shot by Oscar and left hanging from a butcher's hook at the end of Part One. Meanwhile, throughout the play, the three Victorias are somehow trying to detach themselves from the gravitational pull described above. While the first one finally escapes to the New World (not the US but Argentina), the second – Vicky – is a US-born geologist who survives the crash of an oil-surveying helicopter by instinctively climbing through the hatch and not helping her trapped boss before the machine explodes. She finds a match in the budding pro-American capitalist Euan, who outbids Oscar (his father, now a council officer) to acquire the manor house. In the third part Euan has become a quarry owner whose aggressive expansion plans are challenged by environmentalists. Victoria, his and Vicky's daughter, is an apathetic young woman who eventually finds a sense of purpose by engaging with her dead grandfather's past, even though she ends up burning Oscar's diary with his body, and her money, in the mountain. She justifies the burning thus: 'I read it. Just history.'⁴²

In its re-enactment of the main ideological battles of the twentieth century, *Victoria* has been

⁴⁰ David Greig, *Victoria* (London: Methuen, 2000), p. 172.

⁴¹ David Pattie, "'Who's Scotland?': David Greig, Identity and Nationhood", in Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, pp. 194-210 (p. 204).

⁴² Greig, *Victoria*, p. 180.

characterised as a state-of-the-nation play, another genre mostly related with post-1968 British theatre. However, there is a certain consensus around the notion that, as Reinelt puts it, ‘in place of the objectivity or problem/solution perspective of an older group of writers, Greig is more focused on subjective experiences and individual ethics’.⁴³ Nadine Holdsworth concurs, stating: ‘it is in these small acts of individual agency rather than the metanarratives of socialism that Greig’s politics reside’.⁴⁴ I would question this approach to a certain extent. While it is evident that much of Greig’s writing deals with the failure of the big communal utopias of modernity, it can be argued that he retains one key element of the radical history play, namely, the move from the individual to the collective (which coincided, formally, with the move from domestic realism to the epic). The suffering chorus of Beggars and Whores in *The Speculator* cannot be reduced to individuality, neither could the environmentalists in Part Three of *Victoria*, even though they are metonymically represented through the tenacious activist Annie. Moreover, Oscar’s violent and foundational act of revenge against David in the first part is not pursued in his own name but in that of Shona, her then boyfriend Gavin, and Oscar’s future comrade, Euan.⁴⁵ Even the ‘ghostly’ association⁴⁶ between Victorias through the same actor’s body speaks of an emphasis on the *many* rather than just the *one*.

Although history is, literally, burnt at the end of *Victoria* – in an act not dissimilar to the playwright’s own disavowal of previous practices in British political theatre – Greig’s stubborn concern with the effects of historical processes upon the common good speaks of a strong kinship between his dramaturgy and the political history play. Two of his most recent rough histories, briefly discussed below, are thus central to the contemporary renewal of this genre.

Cardinal Points

Miniskirts of Kabul was commissioned by London’s Tricycle Theatre as part of its series *The Great Game* (2009). The complete cycle of 13 works was intended to offer information and stimulate

⁴³ Reinelt, ‘David Greig’, p. 216.

⁴⁴ Holdsworth, ‘David Greig’, p. 188.

⁴⁵ Pursuing the Spanish link further, the killing echoes the murder of the abusive commander in Lope de Vega’s Golden Age play *Fuenteovejuna*, for which the whole village takes responsibility.

⁴⁶ Greig refers to this doubling device as “‘ghost” narrative under the real narrative’. David Greig’s website.

debate on Afghanistan and may, therefore, be understood as Brechtian in its episodic structure and didactic aspirations. The latter aspect was uncomfortable for Greig, only too aware of his subject position as a Western writer after a ‘bruising’ experience touring his play *Damascus* (2007) in the Middle East, where he was accused of orientalism mainly for creating a Syrian character who kills himself: ‘we were told in every Arab country we went to [...] our young people [...] would never commit suicide, in our culture young people don’t do that’.⁴⁷ Soon after, the so-called Arab Spring was precipitated by the suicide of a young man. Although this tragic event made Greig ‘much less self-critical’ about his story, he had already become ‘very anxious about cross-cultural dialogue’.⁴⁸ For *Miniskirts* he found an ingenious solution, which turned the text into a highly original and self-reflexive history play. The piece uses a journalistic/documentary format, the interview, but immediately subverts it. It stages an imagined conversation between a British female writer and the assassinated left-wing Afghan president Najibullah, on the eve of his brutal murder by the Taliban in September 1996. The meeting is based on research but only occurs in the writer’s mind.⁴⁹ The play is a two-hander on stage but in the printed text lines are not attributed to particular characters. A much quoted passage makes the premise explicit:

Are you from the UN?
 No.
 American?
 I'm British.
 Are you a diplomat?
 No.
 Normally I'm given details of any visits.
 I didn't go through the official channels.
 What channels did you go through?
 This is not a normal visit.
 I don't understand.
 I'm imagining you.

⁴⁷ David Greig and Clare Wallace, ‘Writing and the Rule of Opposites: David Greig in Conversation’, in Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, pp. 159-77 (p. 170). The character in question, Zakaria, was actually based on a man Greig met in Aleppo. See David Greig, ‘Doing a Geographical’, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 16.1 (2006), 160-64.

⁴⁸ Greig and Wallace, ‘Writing and the Rule of Opposites’, p. 171.

⁴⁹ Some sources are directly incorporated into the play: the printed text is prefaced by a quotation from Louis Dupree’s *Afghanistan* (1973) about the miniskirts of the title; the character Najibullah is translating Peter Hopkirk’s 1990 book *The Great Game* (as the real Najibullah did during his captivity), and the writer quotes verbatim from a 1989 article in the *New York Times*.

It wasn't possible to arrange a meeting any other way.⁵⁰

As Dawn Fowler indicates, the play 'simultaneously flags up the impossibility [...] of filling in the gaps in history and understanding, but also the vital need to engage with history'.⁵¹ It is also, I would argue, a self-conscious rehearsal of the non-teleological dimension of the history play, that is, the contingency of history, the idea that things could have been (and therefore can be) different. Najibullah spells it out: 'This is a moment of change. / Every moment of change is an opportunity.'⁵²

Dunsinane, Greig's sequel to *Macbeth* produced by the RSC in 2010, fulfils two briefs at once: a re-writing of 'the Scottish play' from a Scottish (albeit nuanced) viewpoint and a historical drama with recognisable parallels with the present, that is, the invasions and occupations of Afghanistan and Iraq. Greig begins where Shakespeare ended, with the death of Macbeth. Siward, the English general in charge of the mission, shares with his twenty-first century counterparts the mistaken belief that the quick toppling of a tyrant is an effective solution to intractable political problems, or, to use the military cliché, that winning the war is enough to win the peace:

SIWARD: We set light to the forest. Drove them out and into the hills. Eventually they'll find their way back to their homes and their farms. We'll set a new king in Dunsinane and then summer will come and then a harvest and by next spring it'll be as if there never was a fight here.⁵³

Yet he is about to find out that the queen, Gruach (Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth), is still alive and prepared, in her own words, to fight 'again and again and again until the end of time'.⁵⁴

Although he is referred to as 'a good man', Siward's failure to understand the local complexities leads to a horrific escalation of violence on both sides.⁵⁵ Wallace analyses *Dunsinane* as a prime example of Rough Theatre, highlighting its dual elements of intertextuality (with

⁵⁰ David Greig, *Miniskirts of Kabul*, in Richard Bean and others, *The Great Game* (London: Oberon, 2009), pp. 127-49 (p. 130).

⁵¹ Dawn Fowler, 'David Greig's Conflict Spaces', in *Cosmotopia*, ed. by Müller and Wallace, pp. 136-50 (p. 148).

⁵² Greig, *Miniskirts*, p. 147.

⁵³ David Greig, *Dunsinane* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), p. 24.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

Shakespeare) and allegory (of the conflict in the Middle East) as strategies of ‘displacement and ontological instability’.⁵⁶ Despite these features, close to Berninger’s ‘posthistorical’ model, *Dunsinane* also finds Greig once again practising that ‘revisionist’ shift from the biographical/individual to the epic/collective. In this case, the perspective is encapsulated in the experience of a young English soldier who uses direct address to communicate his thoughts and feelings, as if in letters to his mother. In the printed text, these are unattributed speeches that open each of the four parts of the play: Spring, Summer, Autumn and Winter. In performance they were delivered by ‘The Boy Soldier’, whose lack of a proper name makes him representative of the troops as a whole. Like the presence of the chorus in *The Speculator*, this bottom-up angle gives voice to those who suffer the consequences of history. The final lines in the Winter speech are: ‘And running round and round my head like a mad horse / The question I can never ask. / “Why are we here?” “Why are we here?” “Why are we here?”’⁵⁷ Through these words, the stage becomes the place where difficult historical questions *can* actually be asked, even repeatedly. It also stands for the intersection not only of cardinal points (Scotland and England; the West and the Middle-East) but also, as already emphasised, of geography and history.

Conclusion

In Greig’s history plays, actual historical traces are animated by a variety of aesthetic devices, such as meaningful anachronisms in *The Speculator*, mysterious cross-generational coincidences in *Victoria*, a fictional interview in *Miniskirts of Kabul*, and bold intertextual rewritings in *Dunsinane*. In a dramaturgy that manages to combine Brechtian dispassionate analysis with the Adornian utopian spirit, these pieces generate an engagement with the past that is both evocative and politically resonant. If, as I have argued, the radical or revisionist history play is currently being reinvigorated on the British stage by a new interest in historicisation and – in Berninger’s terms – a

⁵⁶ Clare Wallace, ‘Unfinished Business: Allegories of Otherness in *Dunsinane*’, in *Cosmotopia*, ed. by Müller and Wallace, pp. 196-213 (pp. 198-99).

⁵⁷ Greig, *Dunsinane*, p. 129.

‘metahistorical’ turn, Greig’s work should be considered an integral part of this revival. Greig’s serious but playful approach towards historical material invites audiences to question history’s truth claims, together with any straightforward sense of chronological progression. Yet, at the same time, it warns against an eternal present that ignores both the errors and opportunities concealed in the past, especially with regard to pressing contemporary matters such as economic speculation, wealth distribution, political violence and military intervention. In other words, by opening the possibility of imagining a collective past from the ground (even after the fire), Greig’s history plays are a powerful riposte to the malaise of post-historical inertia.

Paola Botham is Lecturer in Drama at Birmingham City University, UK. She specialises in modern and contemporary British theatre, with an emphasis on political and documentary forms; theatre and theory (particularly Critical Theory and Critical Feminist Theory), and Hispanic drama. Recent publications include essays on the work of Caryl Churchill and Howard Brenton, as well as on verbatim and tribunal theatre in Britain and Chile.