Earthquakes in London

Mike Bartlett is one of the most prolific playwrights of today. His debut, My Child (Royal Court, May 2007) saw him hailed by The Stage as ‘one of the most exciting new talents to emerge in recent times’. He is a winner of the Old Vic New Voices Award for Artefacts (Bush Theatre). In 2009, his play Cock won the Olivier Award for Outstanding Achievement in an Affiliate Theatre, while Contractions was nominated for the TMA Best New Play award. Bartlett was Pearson Playwright-in-Residence at the Royal Court in 2007, and is currently Associate Playwright at Paines Plough. He has also written seven plays for the radio, including Not Talking for which he won the Writer’s Guild Tinniswood and Imison prizes.

Bridget Escolme is Professor of Theatre and Performance at Queen Mary, University of London, UK.
Earthquakes in London

MIKE BARTLETT

*With commentary and notes by*

BRIDGET ESCOLME

Series Editors: Sara Freeman, Chris Megson, Matthew Nichols and Jenny Stevens
Contents

Chronology vi
Epic and Intimate: Mike Bartlett’s Political Theatre 1
Production Challenges 3
Structure 5
Climate Change 7
Climate Change in the Theatre 8
Relationships, Responsibility and the Generation Gap 11
Young Activists, Old Cynics 12
Further Exploration 15
Other Works by Mike Bartlett 15
EARTHQUAKES IN LONDON 19
Notes 177
Chronology


2002 Graduates from University of Leeds with a degree in English and Theatre Studies. Moves to London to start a theatre company with friends.

2005 July Silent Charities plays for one night at the Finborough Theatre, directed by John Terry. Comfort is written and performed for the Old Vic New Voices twenty-four-hour plays.

2007 Becomes Pearson Playwright-in-Residence at the Royal Court.

March Radio play Not Talking broadcast on BBC Radio, winning the Tinniswood Award and the Imison Award for new audio drama.

May My Child, Royal Court Theatre, directed by Sacha Wares.

2008 March Artefacts opens at the Bush Theatre, directed by James Grieve, followed by a national tour and a run in New York.

May Contractions, developed from a radio play called Love Contract, opens at the Royal Court, directed by Lindsay Turner.

2009 November Cock, Royal Court Theatre, directed by James Macdonald.

2010 August Earthquakes in London premieres at the National Theatre, directed by Rupert Goold.

October Love, Love, Love is produced by Paines Plough and the Drum Theatre, Plymouth, directed by James Grieve. A national tour follows.
**December** Soon after the National Theatre production, Abingdon School and St Helen and St Katherine School stage the first amateur performance of *Earthquakes in London*.


**October** 13, National Theatre, directed by Thea Sharrock.

2012 **April** *Love, Love, Love* plays at the Royal Court, directed by James Grieve.

**May** *Chariots of Fire*, Hampstead Theatre, directed by Edward Hall. Transfers the following month to the West End’s Gielgud Theatre.

**September** *Medea*, an adaptation of Euripides written and directed by Bartlett, opens at the Glasgow Citizens Theatre.

**December** Three-part television drama *The Town* airs on ITV.

2013 **February** *Bull*, Sheffield Crucible Studio, directed by Clare Lizzimore, winning Best New Play at the UK Theatre Awards later in the year.

2014 **April** *King Charles III*, Almeida Theatre, directed by Rupert Goold. Transfers to the Wyndham’s Theatre.

2015 **February** *Game*, Almeida Theatre, directed by Sacha Wares.

**April** Wins Olivier Awards for *King Charles III* (Best New Play) and *Bull* (Outstanding Achievement in Affiliate Theatre).

**September** First episode of *Dr Foster* airs on BBC One.

**December** *Bull* transfers to the Young Vic.
2016  **June** *Wild*, Hampstead Theatre, directed by James Macdonald.

2017  **May** Adapts *King Charles III* into a television film, which airs on BBC Two, directed by Rupert Goold.

**October** *Albion*, Almeida Theatre, directed by Rupert Goold.

2018  **February** Three-part television drama *Trauma* airs on ITV.

**September** First episode of six-part television drama *Press* airs on BBC One.

**December** *Snowflake*, Old Fire Station, Oxford, directed by Clare Lizzimore.

2019  **October** *Vassa*, adapted from Maxim Gorky’s *Vassa Zheleznova*, Almeida Theatre, directed by Tinuke Craig.

**December** *Snowflake* transfers to the Kiln Theatre.

2020  **February** *Albion* returns to the Almeida Theatre, directed by Rupert Goold.

**August** Filmed production of *Albion* at the Almeida, broadcast on BBC Four.

**September** First episode of television drama *Life* airs on BBC One.
Epic and Intimate: Mike Bartlett’s Political Theatre

*Earthquakes in London* demonstrates Mike Bartlett’s concerns with how personal and social responsibilities compare and collide and shows how theatrical space can be used to engage audiences both politically and psychologically. It confirms Bartlett’s position as an experimenter with what is possible in the theatre when writing and stage design collaborate to push at each other’s boundaries. Critics of his work have repeatedly responded to its scale. He has been called a ‘laser-sharp miniaturist’ (Michael Billington), a ‘theatrical minimalist’ (Paul Taylor). *Earthquakes in London* was characterized as a sudden leap from the intimacy of his early work to a piece of epic theatrical and thematic scope. But while his early plays for London’s Royal Court theatre, *My Child*, *Cock* and *Contractions*, are intimate dramas written for two to four actors about personal and working relationships, they also ask wider social and political questions, and suggest that every personal issue has not only a political context but its own set of power relations, inflected and infected by broader political and cultural ones. In Bartlett’s supposedly miniaturist work, the domestic and the personal become political, both thematically and through dynamics of power in theatrical space. Interestingly, Bartlett himself calls his early Royal Court work ‘crystalline’, not miniature or minimalist (Bartlett 2018):

1 through the lens of the plays, we see a distillation of power relations at work. In turn, the relationships in *Earthquakes* are painfully intimate. Small, relatively private spaces like the home and the office are invaded by unexpected visitors; domestic spaces blur with public ones. Peter comes uninvited into Freya’s home, Steve into Robert’s. Jasmine turns up at Sarah’s office with Tom; Tom threatens to make private pictures of Jasmine public. We shift from tense encounters between partners, indoors, to big London public spaces full of contemporary music, dancing, swimming, street performance, choral performance of class privilege and images of motherhood.

---

1Interview with Mike Bartlett, National Theatre, 2018. All references to Bartlett 2018 refer to this interview conducted by Bridget Escolme with the playwright.
Reflecting on her work with Bartlett, designer Miriam Buether says in an interview for The Guardian: ‘He is a writer who embraces design and is drawn to explore things spatially.’ She and Bartlett have repeatedly worked together to transform theatrical spaces. For *Game* in 2015, an exploration of surveillance and video game violence, the Almeida Theatre’s auditorium was turned into darkened ‘hides’ from which the audience might at any moment have been invited to join the game of the play’s title: shooting into a family’s domestic space with tranquilizer guns. In *Wild*, Bartlett’s stage directions suggest that the walls of the set should disappear, that objects and even characters should pop and deflate – and finally that the ‘*The whole room suddenly tilts ninety degrees*’. Miriam Buether designed a set for the Hampstead Theatre production in which this stage direction was very literally realized.

Since *Earthquakes*, Bartlett’s work has shifted back and forth in scale from the intimate to the epic, from play to play, and, as in *Earthquakes*, within the plays themselves. In 2011, the National Theatre staged another of Bartlett’s works, *13*, a piece on a comparable scale to *Earthquakes*, this time in the larger, amphitheatre-like Olivier Theatre. Two years after *Earthquakes*, Bartlett’s adaptation of Euripides’ tragedy *Medea* was produced by Headlong, squeezing the vast, mythic fury of the rejected ancient Greek mother into the domestic confinement of a modern private housing estate. Reviewers found themselves commenting once again on these shifts in scale when the two-hander *An Intervention* (2014) was produced soon after what has probably been one of his most positively received works, *King Charles III* – a play the grander scale of which is reflected in his use of early modern blank verse to create a narrative about the power of the British monarchy. The Guardian theatre critic Lyn Gardner recognized the political in the personal in *An Intervention*: ‘A and B are people, but their relationship could represent the bonds between countries.’ She reads this play as an interrogation of our responsibilities as friends and citizens, as *Earthquakes* explores the responsibilities of families, partners and the whole of humanity.
Production Challenges

For the first production of *Earthquakes*, a collaboration between the National Theatre and Headlong theatre company directed by Rupert Goold, Buether and Bartlett filled the National Theatre’s Cottesloe studio with a giant orange walkway and two stage platforms, with the audience sitting and standing in between and around the action, some of them on cabaret-style stools. Bartlett himself, who worked closely with Goold in rehearsal, was surprised at the impact of his stage direction in action:

*Everything is represented. It is too much. The play is about excess and we should feel that.*

The rehearsals focused on the clarity of the narrative but, once the production transferred into the theatre space, the complex design and staging challenges of this play were startlingly evident. It demands ‘a massive production, really loud music, a million costumes’ (Bartlett 2018). In this production, audiences were surrounded not only by the play’s ever-shifting narrative but by multiple projections, an overwhelming soundscape of contemporary music and urban life, and the play’s surreally depicted panoply of figures from contemporary London culture. For Bartlett, it felt like ‘the first flavour of what it would be like to be working on a TV show’: ‘a big piece with a big cast, a big design’ (Bartlett 2018). When the production went on tour, it played to more conventional ‘end on’ theatre spaces, and Bartlett concurs that watching the drama unfold through the cinematic picture window of a proscenium arch might have made its story easier to follow. But he was keen that ‘the fact that the play never settles, its wild energy, for better or worse’ (Barlett 2018) was understood by critics and audiences as deliberate.

Bartlett suggests that the first production’s immersive quality, its placing of the audience in and around the action, worked well to realize the play’s sense of excess. Staged in this way, the first production also suggested that audiences were witnesses to, and responsible for, the climate catastrophe discussed by the play. However, Bartlett also hints that when the first production toured
to proscenium arch theatre spaces, audiences were able to watch the story unfold before them in ways that clarified the complex narrative and sets of relationships in the play. The theatre company setting out to produce *Earthquakes in London*, then, needs to take on the challenges of scenography and narrative it offers. For example:

- The first production used a number of spaces with fluid, flexible meanings – the walkway, small stage areas. It also used projections extensively. Are there other ways in which locations could be suggested in a play that shifts so rapidly from place to place?
- Where are audiences placed in relation to the action? How might an audience be drawn into the action and feel implicated by it? Might actors address audiences directly at any moment, even though stage directions don’t suggest this?
- How might costume be used, not only to reflect age, social status and personalities of the characters but to clarify relationships across the play’s complex narrative?
- How might Bartlett’s suggestion of excess be created with a smaller company of actors then was available to the National Theatre in the first production?
- Should a company producing *Earthquakes* now retain the music indicated in the stage directions, thus fixing it in its period? What new meanings might a contemporary soundtrack produce?
Earthquakes in London is a five-act play, with a prologue to each of the acts. The prologues to the first four acts comprise scenes from the past life of the scientist Robert, in which he is seen meeting his wife Grace, being pressured to suppress his climate-change research, and rejecting his daughters after his wife’s death. The first four acts cut cinematically between the present lives of Robert’s three daughters, written in sharp realist dialogue, and epic crowd sequences depicting London life. The final act is a surreal projection into the future, conjured by the coma-state dreams of the central character, Freya.

For Bartlett, there were two significant artistic influences on the structure of the play. The first was Tony Kushner’s Angels in America (1992). This was his immediate inspiration for an ambitious theatre piece exploring ideas of global import. Bartlett felt that Angels gave playwrights permission to work on the scale of Earthquakes: Kushner’s character-based saga combines a thrilling plot, big set pieces, and political dialectic about gay identity and the HIV/AIDS crisis. Second, Barlett explains, in 2008, the Anglophone world was watching a lot of highly complex television; he cites series like The Wire (HBO 2002–8) and Six Feet Under (HBO 2001–5) and the fact that Breaking Bad (ABC 2008–13) was about to air. These series suggested to Bartlett that audiences can engage with complex plots and with multiple cross-cut narratives: he wanted to know what would happen if a play was given the chaotic-seeming, complicated narrative that television can offer. He had also recently been teaching at Stagecoach, a theatre school for children, for whom he had written plays for casts of up to sixty people. The plays had to have a coherent narrative for audiences of parents to follow, as well as lots of tiny parts. Ideas for moments such as the Hampstead Mothers scene, in which comedy is created through realist dialogue spoken unexpectedly in chorus, came from working on those plays (Bartlett 2018).

The playwright’s other structural influence was the chaos and complexity of living in the twenty-first century: a play might stage significant moments in characters’ lives, explains Bartlett (2018), but in
this century, these moments will happen as one receives twenty emails or checks multiple social media platforms. Life’s important moments are constantly interrupted, and the play is structured to reproduce this kind of frantic, fragmented energy. Bartlett admits that the play was challenging to plan: he has notebooks full of redrafted structures, a testimony to the fact that he ‘let the plan grow organically rather than pushing the characters around to conform to a pre-existing plot’ (2018). He worked around the cliffhanger at the end of each act, fixed points around which the narrative strands made and re-made themselves. His hope was that the cabaret style of the piece would allow audiences to accept and enjoy the sharp shifts and turns of plot.

The dreamlike quality of the final act, which takes place in Freya’s coma world and in the hospital where she lies, was occasionally misunderstood by critics. While it has a magical realist quality of fiction that combines real-world narratives with elements readers are asked to accept as magical, Freya’s visions of a future in which she must save the world with an impassioned speech about the planet then meets her dead mother in heaven are to be understood as taking place within Freya’s mind. For Bartlett, the surrealism of the scene is something TV audiences might have been more familiar with than theatre ones. The play’s dreamlike ending offers audiences a way out of the personal and political dilemmas of the play’s moment, and into a theatrical place where we can contemplate the future.
Climate Change

The outcome of the summit was not fair, ambitious or legally binding. This eluded world leaders because they put national economic self-interests, as well as those of climate polluting industries, before protecting the climate.

Kumi Naidoo, Director of Greenpeace International, December 2009

Climate change was seen as abstract, eliciting a sense of powerlessness, and a phenomenon so far into the future that it seemed impossible to mobilise sustained mass action around. That era is definitively over. The future is already here, and the climate crisis is beginning to take centre stage – and by necessity must be made more central to the agendas of radical movements around the world.

Feyzi Ismail, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, on Climate Change activism, 17 June 2019

International public awareness of humanity’s impact on the world’s climate grew in the 1990s, as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change began to meet annually to discuss global progress on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions. By 2009, when Mike Bartlett was writing *Earthquakes in London*, climate change and its human causes were at the centre of public debate. In that year, the UN climate summit in Copenhagen, so eagerly awaited, had failed to reach a legally binding agreement to reduce world carbon emissions and save the earth from disastrous global warming. Like Tom, the young activist of Eritrean heritage in *Earthquakes*, representatives of African and other climate-vulnerable countries understood that the excesses of the global North would lead to climate chaos in the global South. Representatives of these countries at the summit were disappointed in their hopes for truly significant emissions reductions.
The failure of those who wield political and corporate power to halt global temperature rises has led to the emergence of a worldwide grassroots climate change protest movement in the decade since Bartlett wrote *Earthquakes in London*. The direct-action organization Extinction Rebellion has created a network of speakers to address local communities on the climate crisis, as well as holding its high-profile demonstrations in public spaces that have led to mass arrests of its members. The character of Emily in *Earthquakes* resonates presciently with the figure of Greta Thunberg, the teenage climate activist whose protest outside the Swedish parliament inspired mass school strikes by the generation that will be violently affected by climate change in the future. Today, a young black man like Tom could find inspiration from the Climate Reframe database of global majority experts, campaigners, advocates and activists aiming to foreground the political and social realities faced by ‘Black, Brown, Asian, People of Colour and UK based Indigenous Peoples’ (see Climate Reframe website in the “Further Exploration” section) in the context of climate change.

**Climate Change in the Theatre**

The years around *Earthquakes*’ first production saw the British theatre stage several plays with a direct focus on climate-change science. Playwrights including Caryl Churchill, Mojisola Adebayo and Steve Waters were amongst those reflecting the period’s urgent hopes and fears for the future of the planet (see “Further Exploration” section for details of plays and playwrights). Bartlett set *Earthquakes* in a contemporary London amidst excessive consumption of every kind. As we have seen, the play’s structure reflects the excesses portrayed, and the chaos and violence that Robert’s research predicts will be created by climate change: ‘*Scenes crash into one another impolitely. . . . The production should always seem at risk of descending into chaos.*’ When Ben Power, then associate director of Headlong, told Bartlett ‘we want you to write the play you’re not allowed to write for anyone else. We want it to be large-scale, with big dialectical ideas,’ Bartlett’s first reaction was that a ‘big play’ about the world in that moment had to be about climate change.
(Bartlett 2018). Questioned about the facts behind the corporate conspiracy that leads to Robert suppressing his climate-change research, Bartlett explains that the potential conflict of interest between the desire for profit and the future of the planet produces an obvious dramatic tension. It was interesting and troubling to him that what we now know about climate change took so long to reach public consciousness: ‘we could have taken such a different route if we’d mobilised twenty or thirty years earlier’ (2018).

Bartlett soon came up with the play’s title, which he admits does not precisely fit the topic: there is limited scientific evidence that earthquakes are caused by climate change, and none that they might occur in London for reasons connected to global warming. But, for the playwright, the idea of earthquakes in the play is metaphorical: the play is ‘not only about climate change but about the quakes and shakes within ourselves’ (Bartlett). It is not only the planet that is shaken to its core in this play but assumptions around scientific objectivity, the political perspectives of the characters and the structure of the family.

Since Earthquakes’ first production, theatre’s interest in climate change has developed politically and aesthetically. In 2012, Katie Mitchell, at the Royal Court, directed an environmental scientist, Steve Emmott, in a performance lecture about the disastrous environmental effects of population growth. In 2014, in a collaboration with the playwright Duncan Macmillan, Mitchell undertook a similar project, this time about global warming, with scientist Chris Rapley. Mitchell’s staged science projects raise the question as to whether the form of a play is adequate to the scale and urgency of the subject of climate change. Other theatres, theatre practitioners and climate campaigners suggest that it might be, or at least that plays about climate change continue to be a vital part of the artistic response to the climate emergency.

In 2011, the National Theatre staged their second climate-change play, the multi-authored Greenland. Moira Buffini, Matt Charman, Penelope Skinner and Jack Thorne’s play pulls together a number of climate-change-related characters and narratives around Copenhagen 2009 and features climate experts who actually attended the summit. In 2015, a group of theatre practitioners and activists formed Climate Change Theatre Action to provide free plays for use by climate
change activists and to commission fifty playwrights every other year to write the five-minute plays. As databases and online lists of climate-change artworks demonstrate (see, for example, Chantal Bilodeau’s ‘Creating a List of Climate Change Plays’ and the Ashden Directory), playwrights, performance companies and socially engaged artists continue to create theatre work that responds to the climate emergency, as activist groups grow in strength, and black, brown and global majority communities who have been marginalized from the climate debate insist on being heard.
Relationships, Responsibility and the Generation Gap

The characters in *Earthquakes* span three generations, between Robert Crannock, whom we see as an excited young scientist and as a cynical septuagenarian, and Emily, who appears as a screaming fetus, a newborn baby and a sixteen-year-old activist. Each character in the play has their own generational attitudes and responsibilities. Indeed, this is a play about generational responsibility: personal, ethical, political. Most obviously, *Earthquakes* tackles the responsibility we have for the environment and the planet we leave to our grandchildren. Social science suggests that a lack of ability to think beyond the generations closest to us may be a factor in climate apathy; this play provokes us to do that thinking. We see Emily from within the womb; we see the world we have created for her in 2025.

In the prologues to acts 2 and 3 of the play, it becomes clear that Robert has reneged on his responsibility to the next generation. He rejects his daughters. He has allowed his findings about air travel’s effects on global warming to be suppressed by Roy and Daniel, whose company finances his research then rejects his results. In the ‘present’ of the play, Robert sees it as his ethical responsibility to advise his middle daughter Freya to abort her baby: as far as he is concerned, there should not even be a next generation. Is Robert driven entirely by environmental ethics or does his advice to Freya denote a psychologically damaged cynicism? He has, after all, already reneged on his responsibilities as a father: he cannot love his children because they remind him of their dead mother, so he passes that responsibility to his eldest daughter Sarah. Familial and personal relationship ethics and responsibilities shift and merge with global ethical responsibilities throughout the play.

The play takes place in the absence of the mother of the three central female figures, Grace. While the plot turns on Robert’s determined failure as a father, motherhood also bears some of the burden of ambivalence around generational responsibility in *Earthquakes*. Freya is uncertain as to whether she should become a parent at all. She meets a chorus of wealthy mothers on Hampstead
Heath, whose babies appear to be mere accessories to their glamorous lifestyles. The mother that Freya conjures in her coma dream at the end of the play seems to want to protect her, but also restrict and limit her. Bartlett did not begin with a gender–political agenda, however. ‘People have said to me it’s great that I write strong female characters but I just hope that I write strong characters and 50% of the world are women’ (Bartlett 2018). Earthquakes is a play centred on three women who make the key, dynamic decisions in each of the scenes, while male figures such as husbands Colin and Steve make discoveries but do not drive the action.

The play depicts a series of dysfunctional heteronormative relationships – between heterosexual partners, between parents and children – and these failing relationships are linked to a failure to take responsibility for the planet. We meet Robert and Grace at the dawn of a potentially positive relationship in the first prologue, and we suspect that Grace will be a good influence on the socially inept young scientist. But she dies before the play’s present, leaving Robert certain that he cannot love anyone else, even his daughters. Robert appears in an odd pseudo-marriage with his housekeeper, Mrs Andrews, who seems inured to his open insults and whom he uses as a metaphor for the world in the face of climate disaster. Robert’s eldest daughter, Sarah, and her husband, Colin, are in a bleak relationship of un-equals. Steve is protective of Freya but not honest with her and Freya keeps her deepest fears from him. Freya meets an elderly woman, seemingly dedicated to the husband whose name appears on a war memorial, but who turns out to be merely nostalgic for a version of England that ‘went with him’. It is Freya’s quirkily intelligent pupil Peter and her own daughter Emily who seem to offer wisdom untainted by cynicism or selfishness, their lives unhampered by failing relationships. Indeed, they are the only central characters not fixed in and by relationships at all.

**Young Activists, Old Cynics**

Freya spends much of the play confused and fearful about what is going to happen to her and her unborn child; finally, she is confused about the difference between illusion and reality. But she never displays the cold pseudo-certainty of cynicism, a trait which taints both older and