

THEATRE IN TIMES OF CRISIS

20 Scenes for
the Stage in
Troubled Times

Mojisola Adebayo

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Vinay Patel

Morgan Lloyd Malcolm

Chris Thorpe

Laura Wade

Anne Washburn

Simon Stephens

With an introduction by Edward Bond
Edited by Dom O'Hanlon

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Twenty Scenes for the Stage in Troubled Times

Edited by
DOM O'HANLON

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Introduction: The Drama Species

The present crisis is bigger than the coronavirus epidemic. A crisis is a situation that can't be resolved within the situation where it occurs. That means that society is confronted by itself not by any particular happening within it. This is an age of crisis. Two world wars, Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Auschwitz, cold wars, climate and territory destruction. Existence is a relation between a being and its site. If the being destroys its site it destroys itself. Whatever we do to our environment, nature, weather, animals, they do to us, whatever we do to them we do to ourselves. It's the logic of reality.

Historically money enables society to negotiate within itself. But bankers and financiers now create money that is really debt. The 'price of contemporary money' overburdens society so that the system crashes. The bankers *created* the 2008 financial crash and the public (mostly poor) were forced to bail out the bankers. Under the jiggery-pokery of the economy and industry society is bankrupt and morally twisted. The crisis began to worsen in the 1980s under Thatcherism (drama prefers the spelling 'Thascism'). The normality the state now wants to return to was its disease. Coronavirus is not our 'deadly enemy'. Viruses don't have intentions, they are not even alive, they are parasites within cells and can't replicate without a host. Coronavirus didn't attack us, we invited it in as the guests of the way our economy runs society. Society has become its own enemy. What has this to do with drama? Everything. Drama is not just the house, it is the key to the house

Two and a half thousand years ago Athens created the first urban democracy. It was the first society to accept responsibility for itself. That responsibility meant it needed to understand society and its members. It's why it created the first public theatre. The founding subjects were and are government, community, family, self. They are the sources of the human dilemma. They are bound together by morality. However remote and diverse its plots may be, drama's one subject is justice (just as the object of all jokes is truth). The plot asks what is right and what is wrong – or in social terms what is fitting, seemingly, appropriate. Drama is so basic it makes the subjective seem objective. Yet it remains the most subjective conundrum, paradox, in all human societies. Drama binds the ultimate extremes of any possible reality and only tragedy can resolve the paradox.

Drama is about justice. Greek democracy needed to know who decided what is right and what is wrong. It's said the voice of the people is the voice of God. The Greeks brought the audience into the theatre and God

onto the stage. God decided right and wrong. But there is a dangerous (often fatal) existential division between religion and politics. God is not a politician but democracy must solve the political problems of the demos, of people and state. The first Greek dramas avoided the problem, partly because the Greeks were blinded by the brilliance of their new invention: drama. But after some time, about the length of a lifetime, the problem couldn't be avoided. The most fundamental of all human crises is the clash between politics and morality. The law can't define justice, justice must first define law. And it would degenerate to allow aesthetics to define justice, so justice must be the subject of drama and drama's structure must implicitly be derived from justice. The first Greek trilogy is the *Oresteia*, the story of Orestes. It ends with God granting Athens a new law court to replace revenge with justice (really that fobbed off the problem because only the stage, not the law court, can resolve justice or even understand it). The subject was an obsession. Each of the first three great Greek dramatists deal with it. Orestes' father murdered his daughter, Orestes mother murdered his father for murdering her daughter, God ordered Orestes to murder his mother because she murdered his father and when Orestes did God ordered him to be punished for murdering her. Orestes asked why he should be punished for obeying God's order. (Legally he was just acting as God's hangman.) This was the clash between law and justice that the Greeks had created drama to solve. So Euripides wrote another Orestes play. In it, in full hearing of the audience, a character says that God had made a mistake but keep it quiet. With that the first great age of Greek drama came to an end. Gods aren't allowed to make mistakes. The source of morality had been confounded by this clash with politics, the clash democracy had founded theatre to resolve. It meant that the theatre of Dionysus would turn into the Roman arena and its brutality and blood. Actually the Christian religion was the last Greek play – but morally it compromised with political power. That confounded the problem instead of resolving it. It is still unresolved. It is our problem, the problem of all human societies. I read an incident of it today in the morning papers. If from the Greeks till now you trace the contorted inter-development of morality, government, public administration and industry you will find that the failure to resolve the problem is the reason why we are now faced by the coronavirus epidemic. If we don't resolve the problem we will be destroyed by it and our effort to ignore it. Only drama, in some form, can resolve it. That is because drama's foundation subject is justice. All this is brilliantly illustrated by the first play in this book. The whole of drama is there: a victim, a machine, a policeman and a community. As in all drama, the incidentals are there to present the ground

problem. Drama is axiomatic with human consciousness. Other animals may be in dramatic events but not in drama. If that were not so our slaughterhouses would be obscene. Drama's subject is justice and we are the drama species.

What is drama? All its different forms and practices reflect a basic drama. The new-born child creates basic drama when its consciousness enters reality. We don't have to learn to be conscious. Consciousness evolved to apperceive reality as the relation of things, cause and effect, as practically and morally consequential. That is an extraordinary ability. (It's why in drama we seek motive.) Consciousness creates meaning – meanings aren't given genetically. A human is a tool that knows itself. It is all a matter of 'stages of development'. Typically it takes a form such as this. We think of walking as going somewhere. An infant doesn't. For it walking is standing still. Then, typically, it 'recalls' that its hands and arms can reach. It first moves as a four-legged animal. It learns that it is in a complexity of situations of learnt and imposed meanings. There is a boundary to experience. Later in a shock it learns the boundary is death and looks for a door in the boundary. Hence drama. Drama walks on the boundary – that is why even the child assesses things as comedy and tragedy. The child's conception of tragedy lacks only money. These things are not genetic, they are learnt with responsibility. Our life *is* this play. In the house, kitchen, bedroom, street, the institution, we are in the play. The difference between being in, say, the street and in theatre is that in theatre we dissemble reality in order to find what play our lives are in in the street. To the play it adds the child's pleasure when it learnt, say, to walk. Creativity is in fact dis-assembling. All artists know you can't draw a human face without commenting on it. In the stage play you learn your role. The actor amalgamates his life (the elaborations, processes, I've pointed to) with the life of the character. The actor's life authenticates the characters' 'reality'. Theoretically the character could play the actor. (This would then be impossible only when the actor's performance was inauthentic.) The performance involves (occurs in) two brains: the actor's brain and the spectator's. The spectator's brain is involved in the performance in the way the actor's brain is involved in the character. More exactly, because this is a social discipline the character's brain is involved in the actor's brain. In fact three brains are involved: the Greeks created the stage to be a public brain, a social reality for actor and spectator to enter. (As a church is a place said to be inhabited by God.) This isn't a municipal abstract pretence, the site is cathected simply *by* being the pretence of 'the site of a social brain' – as a saw is inherent in

the table it makes. We think imagination escapes the bounds of reality but imagination is the only way we can 'enter' the complexity of the facts of reality. All other facts are mechanical. It means that only drama makes us human. It does this not abstractly but by confronting us and our situation in the intimate and the universal, the private and the ontological.

I am introducing a book about modern drama but write about Greek drama. Why? It seems surprising. I do it to stress the vital function of drama. It is the moral centre of humanness and is essential to our survival. Morality is the greatest evolutionary device. We cannot survive without it and drama is morality's centre.

Read this story. 'The prison warder serves the condemned his last meal. The condemned refuses to eat it. Why? Because there is no salt in it. The warder says weep on it.'

The story is the image of our present society. The convict is free not to eat, the warder free to control and contrive. Is that tragedy or farce?

The Greeks constructed tragedy because it's the only way they (and now we) can live with the problem they couldn't solve and we haven't solved. The problem makes us human by our attempts to solve it. This is why we are the drama species. For two and a half thousand years we have sought to solve it. In all that time drama has remained contemporary, even when it was absent from the stage and confined to libraries. We may now be about to destroy it. The economy, market, technology, industry can't solve the problem. They can only tamper with mechanical constructions and contrivances. If we ignored the problem our passions would become feral and our relations pathological. If that happens we could not be able to escape into oblivion but be vegetables that suffer. Tragedy and farce share the same problems. When a sane viable society confronts a tragic situation it may resort to farce as a breathing space that still allows it to reassemble its strength to celebrate the future and trust the practicality of politics. But now we need to understand how the inner contradictions, contortions, of tragedy are comic. If it were otherwise we would be the devil's species.

Our crisis is that we no longer know the difference between tragedy and farce. The one subject of all drama is the audience, their lives and society. Drama asks why the audience came to the theatre. That is, what are we doing with our lives? But now we have no drama. In its place we have the entertainment industry. It is part of the industry-finance complex I describe in the first paragraph of this Introduction. Like all modern industries it has the defects of post-enlightenment society. The audience

are the entertainment industry's raw material. It exploits and degrades them as other industries exploit and degrade the natural world that is our *only* means of survival. Theatre and politics are essential aspects of one another. This is why the tragedy of our present crises has turned into farce. Inevitably farce has penetrated or threatens to penetrate the institutions of society. Our democracy was already an oligarchy of the rich. Now we elect Trump and Johnson. A few years ago that was unthinkable. Trump doesn't just lie he *is* the lie. So how could he understand himself or what he does? He rants and sneers with virtuosic glibness but is intellectually immobile. He would recommend lavatory cleaner as a prophylactic mouthwash against coronavirus. And Johnson isn't even a politician. He is an Eton wha-wha boy who stands on the sidelines and shouts, 'Come on, chaps and chappesses – we can do it!' They are dangerous men who turn our present tragedy into farce. Farceurs can't control government or run affairs (other than amatory) and when they try to control the social chaos their farce has caused, the farce turns into the politics of fascism. That is a law of politics and drama. It lies before us.

Is the story of the warder and condemned a tragedy or farce?

Uncannily this book presents the whole of theatre's present crisis. The first play in the book is a classical example of the structure of drama. The last play seems to throw everything open again. Its actors and characters move in and out of each other's parts, imagination and reality swap and re-swap their places, and the function of the audience is changed. These two plays illustrate all I've written in this Introduction. This is a book of excerpts but together they have an awesome complexity and completeness. It's like looking at the stars not through a telescope but a microscope. They clarify our situation. We are the constellation.

One line in the book is like a signpost that points at the future and stabs it: 'I worry that we'll fall back into traditional modes of storytelling' (Chris Thorpe, *Manchester*). We must not try to imitate the Greeks or any other drama. (We couldn't even if we tried, the social change is too great.) Even if we got rid of the coronavirus epidemic we wouldn't be cured and we certainly wouldn't be saved. The crisis is unprecedented. Our whole existence – society and culture – are in crisis. Not in an epi-crisis but a mega-crisis. We have to create a new drama or – remember the theatre of the theatre of Dionysus – we will turn into pop-barbarism.

The story of the warder and the convict shakes the whole of the entertainment industry – even a skeleton would shiver.

Stay awake all night and think about the story. Can you tell if it's tragedy or farce?

On its last day on earth must the human race go on hunger strike to prove it's human?

Don't weep. Create the new drama.

Edward Bond

August 2020

<https://edwardbonddrama.org>

* * *

Excerpt: *The Shoe Thief* by Edward Bond

The Shoe Thief is the second play in a trilogy about crises. It deals with coming social collapse. *Dea*, the first play is about the ideological distortions of morality. The last play, *The Rust Coat*, is set in a time after a series of crises in which cause and effect has broken down in both objectivity and subjectivity. The first two plays were written before the present crisis. The third play is still being written. The trilogy dramatises the arguments in the Introduction.

Three

Leonard, *twenties*

Grace, *his wife, twenties*

The flat. Evening. Low light. L half-dozes in an upright chair at the end of the empty table. Silence. A noise off. G comes in. She wears outdoor clothes. She carries a largish supermarket carrier with a garish advertising image on the sides. She sees L.

G I let myself in.

L *stands. Stays at the chair. L and G look at each other.*

G I should have told you I was coming

L How are you? Where d'you live now?

G Im all right. Are you?

L Yes.

G I live on the other side of the city. I rent a bedsit. Its quite comfortable. (*She comes to the table and stands her bag on it.*) You look well.

L Why've you come? – Sit down. (**G** *doesn't sit.*)

G D'you live on your own?

L Yes.

G Ive come to collect a few things. Clothes and –. You'll be glad to get rid of them.

L (*slight pause*) No. They're not in the way.

G Well. I should have warned you.

L Sit down. I kept all your stuff. Its in the cupboard.

G *sits. She doesn't bring the bag nearer to her. She puts her forearms on the table-top.*

L What's the matter? (**G** *shrugs slightly.*) What happened in the end? I didn't try to find out. I'd've had to go back up.

Silence. G puts keys on the table.

G Im returning your keys.

L Ta.

G What I don't take you can throw out. I just need a few bits . . . I never imagined one day I'd sit here like this. (*Slight pause.*) The first thing I do when I get here is lie. I didn't come to collect my things. Anything of the past. It was an excuse. I have to finish with that. Nothing's gone right since then. I should keep it all to myself. Not come and chatter. Waste your time.

L *comes a few paces closer to her and stops.*

G I do everything wrong these days.

L Don't blame yourself for what happened. You did what she wanted you to do.

G (*silence*) Yes. I said I would. I tried to move her nearer the edge. Make it easier for when she died – just push her over the – not drag. When I touched her I felt she was happy. Her whole body was happy. It was wonderful. Id never felt that in my own body. She said her baby – it

laughed. It was happy to be coming in the world. She was killing it. She called me daughter. You'd run off. Shouted you wouldn't do it. I'd said I would. She was dying and I'd given her something at last – something of her own. (*Sits up. Hugs herself.*) I saw it in my head. – She was standing in the street – holding out her coffin like a begging bowl for me to put something in. No one had ever given her anything. She was afraid I'd change my –. Quick quick – she knew I was already changing – get me to the edge – you won't have to carry me – push me off the – you promised. She patted my arm. Like being stroked by a claw. I go over and over it in my –. She pushed herself up the – with her walking stick. I wouldn't – she knew. All her life nothing. (*Tries to control herself.*) I saw it. Nothing – swallowed up by the sky. I pushed her away – she howled like the baby in her –. Wait I'll fetch him – bring him back to – I'll make you – I knew you wouldn't – you'd said no – I watched you go down the – I didn't even call – please let her die thinking I'll come back – fetching you to –. She was writhing on the – trying to hold on to the dirt – like an animal in human rags – it was a relief to look at it – I couldn't see the nothing she'd lived in all her life. I go over and over it. I was hated by a dying woman. How can you be so lonely?

Silence.

L I shouldn't have built the house.

G I went to her hut. Lived there a year. In the mountain it was quiet. I managed it. I did well. Pretended I talked to her. 'Look Im sweeping your floor. Being useful. Looking after your place like a daughter.' Making up for what I didn't do. There were cracks in the walls between the –. I began to think they were eyes looking at me. They were crying her tears. In the mountain you get –. Water dripping from the holes making puddles on the – I saw myself in her tears. I hadn't seen myself for so long. I left. I left her when she was dying so she'd expect me to leave again. I brought that down with me. I live with it in my bedsit. What's the difference between a bedsit and a hut?

L (*quiet*) What did . . . ?

G (*not having heard*) Sorry?

L Was anyone there to help when – throw her from the cliff –?

G I don't know. – Only the blind boy. He couldn't.

L Then she killed herself? Is that it? Threw herself down with the baby, to have something not nothing.

G I'll get my things. Pretend that's why I came here. If I get that right perhaps I can pretend I understand the rest.

G *stands. For a moment she wanders vaguely.*

G I've forgotten where the door is . . .

L *stands. Goes to the door. Turns on the light.*

G Yes. *(Pause. She laughs a little.)* I remember something. *(Half-apology.)* It was in the hut. I couldn't leave it. No one would steal it. But it seemed wrong. The hut was damp. Rats came in out of the cold.

G *gives L her bag. Goes out through the door. L takes out from the bag a folded linen sheet. He stares at it. Undoes it a little. It is dirty. Damp stains. Some of the stains mark out a grid pattern of the folds. He stares at it uncertain. Touches the surface with one hand. Takes the sheet to his chair. Hangs it on the back. It partly unravels, hangs down. Damp sticks some of the clumps together. Ragged tears where rats pulled at it to eat. Silence.*

G *comes back. She is calmer. She has the bag. It bulges.*

G I feel better now Ive been here. Given it to you. Cant keep it. Its too big for a bedsit. *(No response.)* You know its her sheet? From the meal.

L Thank you.

G Im sorry I spoke so much.

L No.

G *(looks at the sheet)* I didn't know it was in that state. I never touched it. Its as she left it.

L I should have talked to her. Answered her questions. Not leave you with her.

G I'd promised her. Let's not keep asking –

L Questions have to be asked. She told me what she needed. Id liked to ask the baby what it wanted. Die with its mother – or?

G Lets leave it.

L *(nods at sheet)* Its right you brought it. Im glad Ive seen it. Tomorrow it can go in the dustbin. – The curfew's started. The mobs'll be on the streets. Shouting. Blowing their whistles. They'll take your bag.

G Is it so late? I spoke too much.

Slight pause.

L If I asked the baby it would say it wanted to learn to climb cliffs.

G (*pause*) Why do the police let the crowds on the streets? A curfew. The streets are supposed to be empty. They have a new game. If one street catches someone from another street they throw them out on the road. The traffic runs over them. The women get drunk and piss on the blood to wash it away.

L One day the shouting will stop and they'll miss it, be sorry.

L goes to the door.

L Come on. (*Stops in the doorway.*) You can't go out now. Is too late.

G *puts her bag on the table.*

G (*speaks quietly*) But why do the crowds –

L The streets are the edge. They don't know it. They don't know who they are, where they are, where they came from or what a question is. They're like the dead who get drunk to feel alive. They yell. Its their democracy freedom party-time. Entertainment. Nothing works anymore. There'll be riots, street war. It'll solve nothing. It'll be too late. Then a disease will break out in the debris, then a disease and another disease. Then it'll go quiet. No yells. They'll walk passed the bodies in the streets and not notice them. Children wont ask how to climb cliffs anymore. Reality's grown sterile. When that happens they'll walk on top of the dead piled on street corners and not see them.

L and G go through the door. They don't touch. The sheet is on the back of the chair. The bag and keys on the table.

Theatre in Times of Crisis

On 12 March 2020 theatres across New York including Broadway went dark. In the UK, government confusion over official guidance led to theatres falling dark on 16 March across the country, plunging the theatre industry into chaos. Plays that were in performance were told they were now closed. Plays that were in previews never had the chance to open to the press. Plays that were in rehearsal never got to move into the theatre. Plays that were on the page never managed to rise to their feet.

The Covid-19 crisis is unlike anything experienced in modern times. Global economies ground to a halt almost overnight. Citizens faced lockdowns in their homes. All around the world governments flanked by scientists and advisors were clearly working on the back foot, attempting to appease citizens with contradictory advice. Slogans were designed to ‘brand’ the crisis in a certain framework and health workers and key workers became more relied upon than ever before.

After weeks of campaigning and lobbying for clarity on the dire situation the theatre industry found itself in, the UK’s Conservative government finally issued the news that a financial package of £1.57 billion was being made available for cultural institutions to ‘help them stay afloat while their doors are closed’. Proudly called ‘the biggest ever one-off investment in UK culture’ the money was designed to ‘provide a lifeline to vital cultural and heritage organisations across the country hit hard by the pandemic’. Whilst the news was of course welcome across the sector, at the time of writing no clarity has been given over how this money will be distributed and exactly who it will benefit. The government went on to approve the re-opening of theatres from 1 August 2020, only if social distancing measures were put into practice – something that almost all saw to be an impossible commercial task with reduced capacity audiences. The Broadway League in New York announced that live performances wouldn’t be able to begin until January 2021 at the earliest, with producers such as Cameron Mackintosh signalling that his West End productions would follow suit, remaining closed until 2021.

I sincerely hope that you’re reading this book at a time in the future when theatres around the world are back open and some sense of ‘normalcy’ has been restored. Perhaps it’s not the same normal we were familiar with before March 2020; perhaps it is in fact the often cited ‘new normal’ that politicians were preparing us all to accept. Either way, I hope that this book acts as a snapshot and documentation of a crisis that affected people

around the globe, across different jobs, industries and backgrounds yet one that disproportionately affected those most vulnerable in society.

‘Crisis’ is a buzzword within theatre even in normal times and has come to mean many things to many people. Critically, it can be used when describing structure, often in place of the word ‘climax’. In ordinary parlance it is frequently overused to describe everything from a trivial inconvenience to a horrendous accident, rendering the word itself somewhat meaningless in terms of relative scale.

This book was born out of the idea that this particular moment of time needed to be captured in written form, and who better to do that than twenty of the world’s finest playwrights? I have often found that conversations with writers about their work and practice during ‘normal’ times often raises this sense that theatre has the ability to deal with difficult moments in the most effective ways. Theatre, as these examples all show, has a profound, unique and uncompromising way of moving its audience and placing them in a specific moment, primarily through shared feeling and a sense of collective breath. With live events and theatre shut down for, at the time of writing, the foreseeable ten months, there was painful irony in the fact that a space for collective healing, discussion, education and togetherness was being denied to us at a time where we need it most.

Rather than commission rapid responses to this time or quick pieces, I was more interested in the writers’ previous work speaking for itself, outside of the specific context for which it was written. I was interested in the idea of ‘crisis’ and how that manifests on stage amongst different circumstances and through a range of characters, experiences and situations. Writers were given a scant brief in terms of selecting their own work – some found this an immediate, easy task, others offered up a number of different suggestions each as relevant as the last before finally settling on one extract.

What strikes me looking at this collection of twenty scenes is how different they are in terms of crises that they represent. The majority of these plays have been written in the past decade and so themselves reflect anxieties of everything from the post-9/11 period to the War on Terror and contemporary issues including police brutality that continue to be discussed on stages around the world.

The first time I read Chris Thorpe’s extract from *Manchester* from *The Mysteries*, I felt a shiver down my spine. Its ability to speak to a collective

moment of terror yet extend beyond the specific proves exactly why theatre as a form is unique. I could feel how it connected to Simon Stephens's chosen scene from *Motortown* and again to Chris Shinn's post-9/11 play *Where Do We Live*, in reflecting wider moments of global crisis in highly personal and singular moments and situations.

Alistair McDowall's extract from *X* explores crisis in form in a way that is able to transcend the structural confines of theatre itself yet manages to resonate with both Morgan Lloyd Malcolm's *Emilia* and Laura Wade's *The Watsons* where characters 'step out' of a moment and question not just the situation they are in but find the crisis existential and direct. They seem in dialogue with Tim Crouch's scene from *Adler & Gibb*, equally boundary-pushing in terms of form, captured here in a transcendent moment of imitation and abstraction. As the central character of Anne Washburn's *The Internationalist* shows, sometimes these moments are impossible to understand and comprehend. Together they present complex feelings that I think many faced with lockdown could relate to.

Tanika Gupta, Frances Ya-Chu Cowhig and Hannah Khalil each take historical moments that in turn find resonate points of crises and manage to extend these beyond the frame of the storytelling into a wider frame that makes us question character, plot and historical truth. Along with Sudha Bhuchar's powerful *Child of the Divide* they show how theatre can explore stories rooted in history and real life that should encourage the education and understanding of what has happened, and indeed is still happening, in communities and countries all over the world.

James Graham, Lucy Prebble and Vinay Patel offer couples facing their own moments of intense crisis that manage to speak within and beyond their immediate relationships to offer authentic voices in extreme environments. Zoe Cooper's monologue from *Jess and Joe Forever* offers a beautiful and powerful crisis of character that compounds metaphor and shows a resolute moment of clarity and strength. That intimacy is echoed in Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti's *A Kind of People* as honest conversations stir feelings and discussions that compound a number of different crises that occur throughout daily discourse, an idea that continues into Inua Ellams's scene from *Barber Shop Chronicles* which is cross-generational and multi-faceted in terms of the questions and issues it presents an audience.

Philip Ridley's landmark play *The Pitchfork Disney* broke all the rules when it premiered. I'm delighted to see that spirit continue into Phil's response to the theme which offers an artist's view of the questions

through fragments that individually stir powerful feelings and collectively sear into your soul and demand repeated study.

Mojisola Adebayo's play *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* is included here in its entirety. A short play originally written in 2017, its relevance is felt again now as a direct response to the Black Lives Matter movement and the events occurring around the world following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota on 25 May 2020. Verbatim and urgent, its point of crisis is clear, and it is described by the author as 'a play of what is happening now and what must stop happening, forever'.

Connecting with each playwright I conducted a number of interviews via Zoom, software which overnight became the main method for professional communication. Zoom plays, Zoom monologues and Zoom readings have become the norm over the past four months and when the story is told of how we collectively overcame this crisis, most probably by one or more of these inspiring writers, Zoom will no doubt feature as a central character. Keeping questions simple and related to the text each had chosen I was interested in their responses to the wider topics and the immediate problems facing the theatre industry and the creation of new work. Whilst there was a unanimous response to the need for government intervention in the arts, something that thankfully came mid-way through creating this book, responses to the nature of crisis in theatre and how its function in drama were wide and conflicting.

The point of this brief wasn't to look back through plays and pull out moments of 'doom and gloom' or indeed try and find moments on stage that point to this specific situation, a pandemic or global shutdown. Instead the scenes consider the word 'crisis' in a much broader sense, as a narrative or structural point of contact within drama. The idea being that theatre of differing forms written at different periods of time can each offer methods of understanding and coping within present situations. They each demonstrate theatre's ability to speak to crises on multiple levels which in turn give audiences the tools and abilities to cope in different ways.

Edward Bond's 'moment of clarity' came up in multiple interviews with authors who cited his anecdote about being involved in a car crash. In that moment, as the car spun out of control he entered a moment of increased clarity which he described as 'accident' or 'emergency' time. As Simon Stephens in his interview later in this book comments, 'it's in an emergency that our bodies are more alert, it's in emergency or crisis when our synapses are firing and our pores are more open, our brains are

awake'. These twenty scenes each show that specific moment of crisis and present a clarity in a manner that only theatre can achieve. Together they show that in this deep moment of global crises we need theatre now more than ever before.

Dom O'Hanlon
Senior Commissioning Editor, Methuen Drama
July 2020

MISSING / LIVE / THEATRE

Scene/Change #MISSINGLIVETHEATRE Tape Action

Scene/Change is a collective of stage designers driving positive change for theatre and the design community through art, advocacy and action.

From early on in the Covid-19 lockdown, Scene/Change was uncomfortably aware of the negative visual imagery and sadness around closed theatres. Buildings usually teeming with life were dark and bleak. Some were even shut away behind hazard tape like danger zones, to prevent them inadvertently becoming places of gathering.

Scene/Change wanted to wrap our theatres in a positive message, to send out a message of hope and visibility to the industry and the millions of audience members, and to place the positive role of design at the centre of our recovery.

Working with designers, venues and production photographers across the UK, specially printed #MISSINGLIVETHEATRE pink barrier tape was used to wrap and decorate theatres all over the country in dynamic and eye-catching ways.

This heartfelt phrase became playful and subversive when printed onto hazard tape. Here was a declaration of affection, wrapping these buildings with ribbons and bows, and also the visual language of a serious incident, a place of loss.

It was a way to publicly celebrate these buildings at the heart of our cultural life and communities – from the National Theatre to local arts centres and amateur companies – while also highlighting the ongoing financial and employment crisis as they remained closed.

The tape installations stayed at each theatre for one week before the tape was recycled and sent to another venue to use. Throughout July 2020, over 400 designers and volunteers worked with 20 kilometres of tape and 110 venues from Plymouth to Inverness and Belfast to Norwich, to create a truly national event.

The #MISSINGLIVETHEATRE tape project ran for just three weeks but for many, the images of the installations remain the definitive visual record of the theatre industry at the time.

www.scene-change.com

Instagram and Twitter @_scene_change

#SLENECHANGÉ



The Interrogation of Sandra Bland

Mojisola Adebayo

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Mojisola Adebayo is a playwright, performer, director, producer, workshop facilitator and lecturer. She has a BA in Drama and Theatre Arts, an MA in Physical Theatre and her PhD is entitled *Afrika Theatre: Creating Black Queer Ubuntu Through Performance* (Goldsmiths, Royal Holloway and Queen Mary, University of London). Mojisola trained extensively with Augusto Boal and is an international specialist in Theatre of the Oppressed, often working in locations of crisis and conflict. She has worked in theatre, radio and television, on four continents, over the past twenty-five years, performing in over fifty productions, writing, devising and directing over thirty plays, and leading countless workshops, from Antarctica to Zimbabwe. Her own authored plays include *Moj of the Antarctic: An African Odyssey* (Lyric Hammersmith and Ovalhouse, London), *Muhammad Ali and Me* (Ovalhouse, Albany Theatre, London and UK touring), *48 Minutes for Palestine* (Ashtar Theatre and international touring), *Desert Boy* (Albany Theatre, London and UK touring), *The Listeners* (Pegasus Theatre, Oxford), *I Stand Corrected* (Artscape, Ovalhouse, London and international touring) and *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* (Bush Theatre, London). Her publications include *Mojisola Adebayo: Plays One* (Oberon Books), *48 Minutes for Palestine in Theatre in Pieces* (Methuen Drama), *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland in Black Lives, Black Words* (Oberon Books) and *The Theatre for Development Handbook* (Pan, co-written with John Martin and Manisha Mehta) as well as academic chapters published by Methuen Drama, Palgrave Macmillan and various journals. Mojisola Adebayo is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature; an Associate Artist with Pan Arts, Building the Anti-Racist Classroom Collective and Black Lives, Black Words; an Honorary Fellow of Rose Bruford College, a Visiting Lecturer at Goldsmiths and a Lecturer at Queen Mary, University of London. She has recently been awarded a Fellowship at Potsdam University (Germany). *Wind/Rush Generations* and her new play *STARS* both open in 2021. Mojisola is currently writing *Family Tree*, commissioned by Matthew Xia of Actors Touring Company and Young Vic. See www.mojisolaadebayo.co.uk for more.

What does the word ‘crisis’ mean to you in a theatrical sense?

My teacher and mentor Augusto Boal often referred to the kind of crisis that we explore in *Theatre of the Oppressed*. Augusto referred to it as ‘Chinese crisis’, inspired by the Mandarin symbols for crisis which are both danger and opportunity. Augusto didn’t speak Mandarin and neither do I but the point has always stayed with me: that in a Forum Theatre play in particular, we see our protagonist reach a point where there is both great danger and great opportunity for something to change, personally and politically.

How do you feel theatre has the ability to represent/respond to global crises?

Theatre for me is the art of human relationships in space – in the now, it is the art of being human on planet earth – together, it is the art of dialogue in the sense of working things out with one another (with or without words), it is the art of *ubuntu* – to quote the Southern African philosophy of humanity, empathy, understanding and compassion which broadly means, I am me through you and you are you through me or to quote Muhammad Ali: ‘Me, We’. So because of all that theatre is at its core, I feel it is *the* most necessary art form for understanding, questioning and coming up with solutions for problems that human beings have created on this planet.

Why did you pick this specific scene? What is this scene doing at this point of the play?

When you kindly asked me to share a scene of crisis, I thought immediately of *The Interrogation of Sandra Bland*. It is both a scene and a play that represents a black woman at a point of intense crisis, of danger and opportunity (to refer to Boal and the Mandarin symbols for crisis mentioned above). The danger is that Sandra Bland will die a brutal death in a police cell. The opportunity is that she will win her battle with an unjust police officer. The police officer, Encinia, is also in great danger of a kind; he is in danger of betraying his own humanity and hers, in danger of being the worst of whiteness and he has an opportunity to be his best self and to undo his racism and sexism. In turn, as performers and participants in the drama, we are all forced to consider our position in relation to Sandra Bland, how far we are victims and survivors of the danger of racism, and what power and privilege we can assert, in this great opportunity at this time in history to end discrimination. As a black

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woman, I know I could have been in Sandra Bland's shoes, in Sandra Bland's car. For a white person reading or participating in the play (even silently listening) they are also forced to consider their position in all this, how whiteness implicates them in this drama. The play demands that whatever the colour of your skin, you ask yourself, could I have been Sandra Bland, and if yes, how will I fight on and also protect myself and heal from racism, and if I could not have been Sandra Bland, then what am I going to do to betray the racism and sexism that leads to the conclusion of the scene? How will I be, to quote Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, a 'race traitor'; i.e. what will I do to dismantle the structures of white supremacist power that have given me this position of privilege? You are either part of the solution or part of the problem. You are either a supporter of white power or you are a traitor to it. You either are Sandra Bland, live in active *daily* solidarity with Sandra Bland or you are, and you are with, Encinia. The time for silence is over. The time for complicity is over. The time for apathy is over. There was indeed never meant to be a time for any of it. Enough.

How does this scene speak beyond the wider context of the play?

The scene is a play that speaks to and from the Black Lives Matter movement, it is verbatim and urgent, it is a play of what is happening now and what must stop happening, forever. It is a play that I would like my grandchildren not to understand, because I want them to be confused when I tell them what racism was, because it is a strange idea of the past, the past, the past.

As a writer, do you feel a point of crisis is always necessary in a play to create/maintain/sustain drama?

Yes. Crisis is a point of high stakes tension, where the story could go one way or another, where the audience cannot predict the outcome, and where the audience are invested in the decisions of the characters, yes.

Does theatre as a form allow for a more effective exploration of crisis in terms of what can be explored, presented and communicated to an audience, in relation to other creative forms?

For me, theatre has a unique power and possibility because it is the art of art forms. All art forms can be part of theatre (music, animation, light, sound, digital arts, circus, literature, dance, poetry, painting, puppetry, sculpture, cabaret, ritual, film and so on). Yet you can also make theatre

with nothing but people in space and time, stripped bare, without even a word spoken . . . but what you have got to have is a want, a deep and urgent want that is deferred, or has an obstacle before it, or someone else's want blocking it – conflict and this conflict inevitably leads to some kind of crisis, internal or external, some point where things could go one way or another, to be or not to be, to live or to die, to arrest her or let her go free . . .

What do you feel is the biggest threat to the creation of new drama and plays given the current global crisis? Do we need theatre now more than ever?

I feel the biggest threat to theatre is that we forget that theatre is happening in every moment, in living, in being in relation, and theatre can happen in your living room or under a tree, we can enjoy all the aesthetic wealth and craft of course, we can enjoy being close and sweaty in rooms together but fundamentally we don't need buildings, we can do it without funding . . . We just need to be alive. If Covid-19 were to close every theatre building, if all the money dried up, even if the playwrights stopped writing and the actors stopped training, theatre would still be in us, because it is the art of being us, in relation to each other, the art of understanding each other; all we need is to be alive. White people are still killing black people because of racism, capitalist nations destroying ecosystems, more people trafficked in slavery today than during the transatlantic slave trade, thousands of refugees being allowed to drown in the sea . . . those are threats, that is crisis. Theatre people need to stop fretting about the future of theatre and focus on what it is for. Theatre was in us before humans scrawled symbols on slates that became words and it will go on being, even if no one writes another word. And of course we will go on writing plays . . . the point is what will our plays do?

***The Interrogation of Sandra Bland* premiered at the Bush Theatre, London on 24 March 2017 with the following creative team:**

Writer/Dramaturg Mojisola Adebayo

Director Omar Elerian

Assistant Director (Community Chorus) Mojisola Adebayo

Performers all playing Sandra Bland:

Sheila Atim

Akiya Henry

Judith Jacobs

Sapphire Joy

Sarah Niles

Juliet Okotie

Indra Ové

Plus a large community cast of women all playing Sandra Bland

Performer (playing Brian Encinia) John Last

Performer (playing Female Officer) Ruth Minkley

Background

In June 2016, Simeilia Hodge-Dallaway of Artistic Directors of the Future (ADF) invited me and several other black playwrights to write a fifteen-minute play for the first Black Lives, Black Words event in London, at the Bush Theatre. The brief was to respond to the question, ‘Do black lives matter today?’ I felt both overwhelmed and humbled at the gravity of the task. I had no idea where to begin. Then I remembered Sandra Bland, having followed (like so many of us have done) an appalling online trail of humiliations and violations of our African kin, across the Atlantic and on our own European island, Britain. I remembered how awed I was by Sandra Bland during the roadside interrogation that led to her brutal arrest and eventual death by hanging in police custody, recorded on the dashboard camera of the police car that pulled her over. I was moved by Sandra Bland’s courage, her wit, intelligence, integrity, strength, tenacity and helplessness in the face of the arresting police officer. The interrogation also struck me as a horribly gripping and dramatic ‘scene’ that escalates with devastating dramaturgical effect. I thought I could not write anything more compelling or important than this. I could not write anything that demonstrates more acutely the various levels of anti-black racism and white supremacist mentality in action than this. However, I did not want to just re-stage the real-life scene. Anyone can click on YouTube to see it. I have no taste for verbatim plays that only translate reality rather than transport the audience imaginatively. I want theatre to do something