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STAGING SYSTEMIC VIOLENCE

British Theatre 2010–2019

Alex Watson

Staging Systemic Violence

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Content Warning

This book – being concerned with issues, theories and representations of violence – frequently references theoretical, invented and real instances of violent conditions, acts and assaults. These include, but are not limited to, gendered violence, gender-based violence, queerphobic violence, racism, race-based violence, murder, war, terrorist attacks and physical assaults. The author has attempted, wherever possible, to write about and cite references to these descriptions and examples in a manner that is not explicit, egregious or graphic.

List of Acronyms

BLM - The Black Lives Matter movement

Fringe - The Edinburgh Fringe Festival

GBV - gender-based violence

NT - The Royal National Theatre, London

RE - The Royal Exchange Theatre, Manchester

RC - The Royal Court Theatre, London

YV - The Young Vic Theatre, London

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Introduction

The man standing in front of us does not look or sound like a perpetrator. He is by turns charming, emotional, funny, relatable, remorseful and disarmingly 'normal'. In this play, he tells us about his family, about his desire to have children, his distaste for the impersonal nature of dating apps, and how sad he is about Holly, his ex-girlfriend, leaving him. We sympathize with him – perhaps we even empathize with him. The playwright, Camilla Whitehill, even notes that some of her male friends 'felt compelled' to state that they recognized 'parts of themselves' in Adam (2016a), played here by Alistair Donegan. However, by the end of this performance of *Mr Incredible* at London's 2016 VAULT Festival, Adam will reveal that, at the end of their relationship, he sexually assaulted Holly. As we reconcile this reprehensible act to this seemingly 'nice guy', we also discover that Adam has been talking to us, the audience, as if we were his lawyer: the office-like set suddenly makes sense.

The cognitive dissonance of this perpetrator's 'relatability' had, for Whitehill's friends, 'kind of freaked them out' (2016a). Yet, the knowledge of his perpetration underlines some issues that may have been gleaned in Adam's recollections throughout – was he really that 'nice' or was he, in fact, coercive and controlling? When we look a bit deeper into his socially normative statements and behaviours, might we see something that could be called *violent*? The production concludes with Adam being acquitted of his actions, thanking his lawyer: 'it was good you mentioned that we'd been out, and she'd been drinking' (Whitehill 2016b: 88), relating to a culture of 'victim-blaming' in British society.¹ Did the same structural misogyny which enabled Adam to be cleared of charges in a court of law obscure our recognition of the violence in his words, behaviours and actions?

Mr Incredible is, in many ways, typical of how new writing in British theatre over the course of the 2010s represented and articulated violence: namely, not as something explicit or spectacular – but offstage, on the peripheries of dialogue, permeating implicitly but almost intangibly through the action and dramaturgy, or in the atmosphere between the performers and the audience. In other words, it was invisible, yet there – and asking the audience to perceive it was arguably central to the socio-political objectives of

many theatre-makers. This approach to representing violence was informed by the wider social context of 2010s Britain: a decade where understandings of violence in public discourse advanced beyond standard, obvious ideas and images like combat, fights and war. Acknowledgements of institutional, hegemonic, systemic and structural violence – or, violence that could not traditionally be ‘seen’ – became more widely disseminated. Although such theories have existed for decades, social movements through the 2010s attempted to alert the public to them. Among the most prominent of these were Occupy, who opposed socio-economic inequality; the various members of the Climate Justice Alliance, who urged a response to environmental crisis; Black Lives Matter (BLM), which sought to combat racial inequality and oppression; and #MeToo, that looked to widely alert the public to the extent of societal misogyny and sexual harassment.

The Royal Court’s artistic director from April 2013 through the rest of the decade, Vicky Featherstone, responded to the latter of these in the British theatre establishment by releasing an industry ‘Code of Behaviour’ (2017a).² Towards the end of the decade, she stated of the movement’s effect on playwriting that: ‘It’s not only people writing with more freedom or more analysis post-MeToo. It’s also going, “that doesn’t feel appropriate any more”. We normalise things so quickly [...] [but] we don’t need to do that. We have a vocabulary now’ (Thompson 2019; see also Fallow and Mullan 2021). Such ‘vocabulary’ is more widely applicable to how the form and content of British theatre was influenced by, and reflective of, emergent conceptions of violence in the 2010s. Namely, violence was increasingly distinguished by redoubled attempts to identify it within cultural norms and the otherwise invisible or banal.

The violence that movements like BLM and #MeToo resisted often manifested in immediately apparent and reprehensible acts, yet the roots of these acts lie deeper, entrenched in culture and society – and might even lie within the everyday behaviours, assumptions, gestures, language and acts of the citizenry that might otherwise be judged as ‘normal’. Therefore, I contend in this study that the concept of performativity is essential to the understanding of systemic violence, and particularly regarding its representation in theatre. Performativity is the effect that words, actions, behaviours and gestures have on (our) reality, that they can ‘do things’, especially when ritualized or repeated over time. And as the influential philosopher Judith Butler contends, just as performativity establishes reality, so too can it change it: ‘the task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat’ (2007: 202–3). Performativity is the (changeable) process of reiterating ‘the way things are’. So, the assault perpetrated by Adam in *Mr Incredible*, for example, is an explicit act of violence; but the attitudes and dialogue

he espouses must be examined to understand where this act comes from – what performatively motivates and authorizes it. British theatre in the 2010s, then, was responsive to ideas about violence that were increasingly being disseminated in public debate. This Introduction continues with four sections: the first outlines the considerations of this study; the second offers a brief history of onstage (proto-systemic) violence; the third returns to *Mr Incredible* to offer an opening analysis of staging systemic violence; and the last section overviews the chapters ahead.

Staging Systemic Violence: Context and Methodology

The rationale for the subject matter of this work is informed by several considerations. The specific time-period of the 2010s follows from the historicization of (particularly post-war) British theatre through decades – seen most notably in the *Modern British Playwriting* series (2012–13) edited by Richard Boon and Philip Roberts. They ‘recognize that there is an inevitable danger of imposing a spurious neatness’ in their decade-oriented classification of British theatre from the 1950s to the 2000s, therefore ‘some account is given of relevant material from earlier years’ (Boon and Roberts 2013: vii), which is an approach I follow here: the influence of earlier work from Caryl Churchill and Sarah Kane, for example, recurs throughout the study. Furthermore, at the time of writing, there is little scholarship that specifically examines new writing in British theatre in the overall context of the 2010s. There have been accounts of twenty-first century work in the Methuen Drama Engage series from scholars such as Vicky Angelaki (2017), Clare Finburgh Delijani (2017), and Marissia Fragkou (2018) which have served as useful touchstones, but due to the time of their publication do not provide studies of the whole decade.

As Boon and Roberts mention, the categorization of decades does suggest a certain temporal and historical ‘neatness’, yet the 2010s can be understood as a period between two prominent global crises – with crises being, as Angelaki states, organized around ‘three interconnected primary areas: political, environmental, financial’ (2017: 1), as well as being central to historicizing and contextualizing time periods and their culture. Alongside Angelaki’s work, Anja Hartl too contends that ‘[a] sense of crisis has pervaded both politics and the arts since the end of the twentieth century’, identifying ‘postmodernism, the demise of socialism and the global spread of neoliberalism’ as factors (2021). In terms of the 2010s, the decade began as much of the world was still reeling from the 2007–9 Great Recession and ended with the discovery of the COVID-19 virus. The crises (the latter being political, environmental *and* financial) have both been global in scale and had specific impact on British society. These phenomena will have lasting ramifications, and both have influenced public perceptions of violence – the former through the financial inequality and often-indirect violence of neoliberalism, the latter more literally demonstrating the catastrophic injurability of that which cannot be tangibly seen.³

This exploration of socio-cultural understandings of violence is legitimized by the material conditions of the medium under discussion.

As Finburgh Delijani writes, theatre ‘has a tradition of taking the pulse of society, politics, economics, culture and history’ and, comparative to ‘most cinema and television [...] it can be realized within modest means [...] [and] respond rapidly to current affairs’ (2019: 5). These characteristics certainly continued through the 2010s, with those movements listed above finding rejoinders, support and responses from British theatre. Moreover, theatre is generally better positioned to represent systemic violence than cinema or television. Like these mediums, contemporary theatre is predicated on the visual – but not nearly to the same extent, with liveness and audience-performer proximity generally seen as distinguishing factors of the form, even if this has been troubled by the necessities of theatre’s adaptation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally speaking, cinema and television have more danger of slipping into ‘spectacularization’, of creating enthralling, absorbing images of violence. This is not to say that such spectacle is always uncritical of violence,⁴ rather, the proliferation of such images can have a habit of ‘running away’ from the message: appearing out of context. Finburgh Delijani, whose work explores ‘watching war’ onstage, contends that theatre can alternatively offer more of a critical distance, drawing attention to how ‘what we watch is framed as spectacle, and how those spectacles might seek to impose certain ideologies on us’ (2019: 12); a contention developed in the first chapter here. It so follows that British theatre – distinguished in the 2010s by its rapid response to social issues and its proxemics over visuals – serves as a more adept medium for representing ‘invisible’, socially maintained forms of violence.

As for exploring theatre from Britain specifically, this stems from personal and political considerations, as well its ability to quickly comment on contemporaneous issues. The rapid response to ‘current affairs’ in theatre is heightened by Britain’s continual supply of new writing (Sierz 2011) – especially, for example, in relation to its close geographical neighbour France which had a relative dearth of new writing (Danan 2013) and Britain’s linguistic neighbour the USA, ‘where theatre is very much a minority art’ (Finburgh Delijani 2019: 6). As mentioned, Britain faced the global crises of the 2010s at a distinct national level as well as contending with more region-specific examples of relevance to performativity and systemic violence. Chief among these was the 2016 referendum to exit the European Union (EU) – otherwise known by the portmanteau Brexit – which was intertwined with issues of structural racism as explored in Chapters 5 and 6. In terms of practical and personal considerations, Britain was also my chief place of residence through the 2010s: being the society I am most familiar with and the theatre of which I attended most. Adhering to Boon and Roberts’ series, I have also elected to explore British rather than UK theatre, with the theatre of

Northern Ireland implicated in that region's formal, cultural and material ties to theatre of the Republic of Ireland; increased debates on its status as part of the UK in the context of Brexit; and its historical colonization and factional violence different to the experiences of the rest of the UK (Phelan 2016). That said, the classification of 'British theatre' here has not been dogmatically narrow – with Chapter 5, for example, exploring mainland European theatre that played on British stages.

Some geographical and representational limits were present in this research and its purview. The majority of theatre I witnessed in the 2010s was in London and, consequently, of the sixteen plays highlighted here, eleven opened in the capital. Although this betrays my address for much of this decade, it also demonstrates London's continued status as the theatrical centre of Britain particularly regarding new writing, informed by a continuation of major cultural inequality between British regions: even adjusted for tourism, 'London has more theatre visits per person by a factor of around nine' compared to the rest of the UK (Rebellato 2018: 20). The Royal Court (RC) remained vital for new writing, debuting five productions closely analysed here – while four more opened at smaller, fringe venues such as the Gate Theatre and the Ovalhouse. Other productions explored in this study have played in Edinburgh, Warwick, Manchester, Aldeburgh, Stratford-upon-Avon, Cardiff and Liverpool; as well as internationally in cities including New York, Tallinn and Munich. It could also be said that the characteristic of 2010s British theatre representing systemic violence took some years into the decade before it was firmly established: three of the productions explored here debuted between 2011 and 2014, whereas thirteen were released in the latter half of the decade – meaning that the temporal spread of the plays here is somewhat uneven.

Additionally, the 2010s British theatre industry was still predominantly made up of white, cis-males – as Whitehill puts it, '[i]f men are in charge of 85% of an industry, it will not always be pleasant for those of us in the minority' (2017). The perpetuation of this structural inequality has resulted in some of the most urgent, articulate representations of systemic violence coming from the new writing of female playwrights: of the sixteen playwrights explored here, ten identify as women, five as male and one is non-binary. Four of the playwrights are Black British, one is of Irish descent, and one is of Jewish descent, while one is Scottish, one is Welsh, eleven are from Southern England, and three are Northern.⁵ These numbers, while symptomatic of the prominence of white, English, London-based theatre-makers in the industry, reveal some effort on my behalf to include a range of backgrounds among the playwrights explored, especially with my identity

as a white cis-male and in the context of work that explores structural oppression of certain identity groups.

This study focuses on new writing, which means that revivals, versions, adaptations and new stagings of pre-2010s texts are not examined in detail here. Although the contemporary direction and dramaturgy of a canonical text can certainly demonstrate relevant issues – with updates of ancient Greek plays or new Shakespeare productions, for example, being a barometer for the issues or styles of the day – new writing still arguably offers more contemporaneous perspectives on social, political and cultural phenomena. Furthermore, with 2010s British theatre providing so many productions that engaged with (systemic) violence, the limits of this work dictate that not all areas could be provided in detail, such as the representation of war. Although Britain was directly involved in the Libyan Civil War (2011), Operation Shader (2014–) and the Persian Gulf Crisis (2019–21), these were not as prominent in the cultural landscape as the Iraq War (2003–09) and the war in Afghanistan (2001–21, with British military personnel withdrawn in 2014). Theatrical representations of war were therefore more common in the 2000s and, although proceeding by established systemic violence, can be considered as more of an explicit example of subjective violence. Furthermore, detailed studies of British theatre and war have already been offered by Jenny Hughes (2011) and, as mentioned, Finburgh Delijani (2017). Other areas not extensively included are mental health, ableism and disability, homophobia and sexual orientation-based violence, classism, and the struggles of Welsh and Scottish national identities; although most of these are, at least, touched on. Again, there is existing scholarship on these topics, as well as definite scope for further research to explore the representation of systemic violence in these areas.

A Brief and Partial History of Onstage Violence

The representation of violence has arguably always been a concern of Western theatre – as has the choice to *not* make violence visible onstage. A retroactive exploration of the canonical drama generally accepted as the ‘lineage’ of contemporary British theatre can reveal dramatic methods and narratives as sharing commonalities (or alike ideas) to theories and representations of systemic violence. Therefore, as a historical and contextual ground for the study that follows, I offer here a whistle-stop overview of some significant, relevant moments along the canonical timeline of British theatre and its predecessors. That said, the subject of violence in theatre history is so vast and complex that it defies easy summary, and so I would invite those interested to seek out specific studies on respective time periods or movements – of which some good starting points are referenced throughout this section.

To begin at the contested ‘origin’ of Western drama, the theatre of ancient Athens saw many narratives depicted onstage that were shaped by both legendary and historical violent events, from the aftermath of Xerxes’ failed invasion of Greece in Aeschylus’ *The Persians* (472BCE) to the titular character’s frenzied familicide in Euripides’ *Heracles* (416BCE). The conventions of ancient Greek theatre demanded that depictions of death, blows, or other physical violence were not witnessed by the audience (Sommerstein 2010) – these ostensibly took place ‘offstage’. That said, the violence inherent in much of ancient Greek myth means that it is reductive to state that violence was practically absent on its stages: not only would it be present in the imaginations and contextual understanding of the audience but could be said to be represented differently to our contemporary, realist-informed conventions of how theatrical violence is normatively represented (Deacy et al. 2023). For example, H. D. F. Kitto writes of Aeschylus’ *The Suppliants* (c. 468BCE) that as the Danaids refused to yield to the pursuant Egyptians: ‘we must imagine the orchestra filled with wild movement, violence made manifest. For the moment, the dance and music are more important than the words’ (2011: 12). This stretch of the imagination (often the case with Kitto) nevertheless reminds us that text was not the primary representational factor in ancient Greek performance, and that violence may have been ‘present’ onstage in ways a contemporary British audience would not grasp.

Still, it is certainly true that mimetic acts of violence were not ‘realistically’ physicalized onstage by our current standards. Although it would be contentious to suggest that this dramaturgical rule was to better alert the audience to the structural violence of Athenian society, the fact that any physical violence that happened during the duration of the plot would not be

seen – even if the audience would be well aware of what such acts generally ‘looked like’, being composed of many who had experienced battle first-hand – likely downplayed visceral spectacle in favour of moral questioning. The Roman theatre that emerged from ancient Greek culture was less modest, with the plays of Seneca drawing on the same legends but not shying away from explicitly dramatizing Medea’s killing of her children or Thyestes eating the remains of his son, for example. This was likely affirmed by the sanguine nature of other Roman cultural events such as gladiatorial contests, though Seneca’s plays have been argued as demonstrative of socio-cultural fragmentation as well as the ethical ambiguity of violence and power (Remshardt 2016). Still, practitioners and theorists including Antonin Artaud have perceived Seneca’s use of represented violence as gesturing towards the inherent chaos of the universe (Crewe 1990) rather than, for example, used for specific critiques of the structural issues of his contemporary society.

During the medieval period, early theatre across the island of Britain also featured the onstage representation of violence – as gleaned from the records of the mystery and saint or miracle plays. Despite the emergence of these performances to better educate the common populace on Christian tradition and morality, they often revelled in drawn-out spectacles of suffering, like the Crucifixion. Sid Sondergard writes that the Cornish *Ordinalia* mystery play cycle (attributed to the late 1300s) ‘reflects an increasing dramaturgical awareness of the sheer entertainment value of amplifying stage representations of violence’ as it seemingly encouraged ‘audience participation in graphic spectacle rather than in contemplative meditation’ (1985: 169). Understanding how it was depicted and interpreted will only be partial due to a lack of documentation, as Clifford Davidson states (2001: 292), though in the case of the saint plays he argues that these representations were necessary to demonstrate the stories of martyrs – who would often endure great feats of suffering – rather than, as Jody Enders contests (1999), the plays being ‘carnavalesque’ precursors to Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty (2001: 314). What can be surmised is that the violence of the mystery and saint plays was likely not used to inspect the structural issues of feudal society, other than perhaps a surface-based urging that it should better adhere to Christian doctrine, regardless of whether the depictions of violence were for revelry or spiritual contemplation.

During the Early Modern period, around the time of the English Renaissance, Seneca had a profound influence in theatre as recognized, notably, by T. S. Eliot (2015). The approach to onstage violence gleaned in Seneca’s surviving texts can certainly be detected in works like Thomas Kyd’s *The Spanish Tragedy* (c. 1582), Christopher Marlowe’s *Tamburlaine* (c. 1587), John Ford’s *’Tis Pity She’s a Whore* (c. 1626), and infamously so in William

Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (c. 1588). The numerousness of these tragedies gesture to the appetite among Elizabethan–Jacobean audiences for violent spectacle (Hiscock 2022), and the intertwining of ‘staged violence’ with absolutist power as Michel Foucault argues of public executions, for example (1991). There were, however, theatre-makers who offered social commentary of hegemonic structures, such as the interludes or *anterliwtau* performed and published as pamphlets (1739–1810) by the Welsh dramatist Twm o’r Nant. Shakespeare’s works, too, appear to have shifted over time from prioritizing spectacular violence to moral anxieties around its use, particularly by those in positions of power (Cohen 1993; Foakes 2002). Tragedies such as *Hamlet* (c. 1600), *Macbeth* (c. 1606) and *King Lear* (c. 1606) show immoral or poorly informed decision-making from leaders as contributing to a more widespread socio-cultural violence and chaos across their domains: plot elements perhaps informed by the rulers of these plays forgoing the ideals of the Tudors and Stuarts’ absolutist belief in the Divine Right of Kings.

Something approaching structural or systemic violence might be said to exist in the History Plays. Jan Kott, who offered a revised perception of Shakespeare in post-war Europe and in the context of movements like the Theatre of the Absurd, characterized these plays as being akin to a revolving wheel of power (1990) in which characters ascend or fall but essentially fulfil the part of various cogs in a machine, locating this especially in *Richard III* (c. 1592). The violence of the History Plays still erupts into representations of torture, murder and battles – arguably in both supportive and critical showings of Foucault’s absolutist power – but the dynastic struggles across their plots give a palpable sense of an invisible mechanism at work. Likely understood by Shakespeare’s contemporary audiences as fate, divine guidance or the inevitability of history, this could retrospectively be perceived as alike to structural violence. Kim Solga, too, examines the politics of violence’s visibility in theatre of this time: specifically, that done against women, which she describes as ‘both visually stunning and culturally invisible’ (2009: 4). This is drawn from the work of feminist historians on ‘the “effacement” of violence against women, particularly rape, in Renaissance English culture’ (8), as well as theoretical explorations of performance and absence (which I return to in Chapter 1). Rather than see ‘Shakespeare and his fellow Renaissance men [as] our “contemporary”’, as Jan Kott does, Solga asks ‘what it means to claim their work as “ours”[?]’ (2009: 28). Although we see the effects of extreme cultural misogyny in their plays, its invisibility in historical context when combined with the discussion of these issues in our current time might throw up questions of how we recognize (systemic) violence now.