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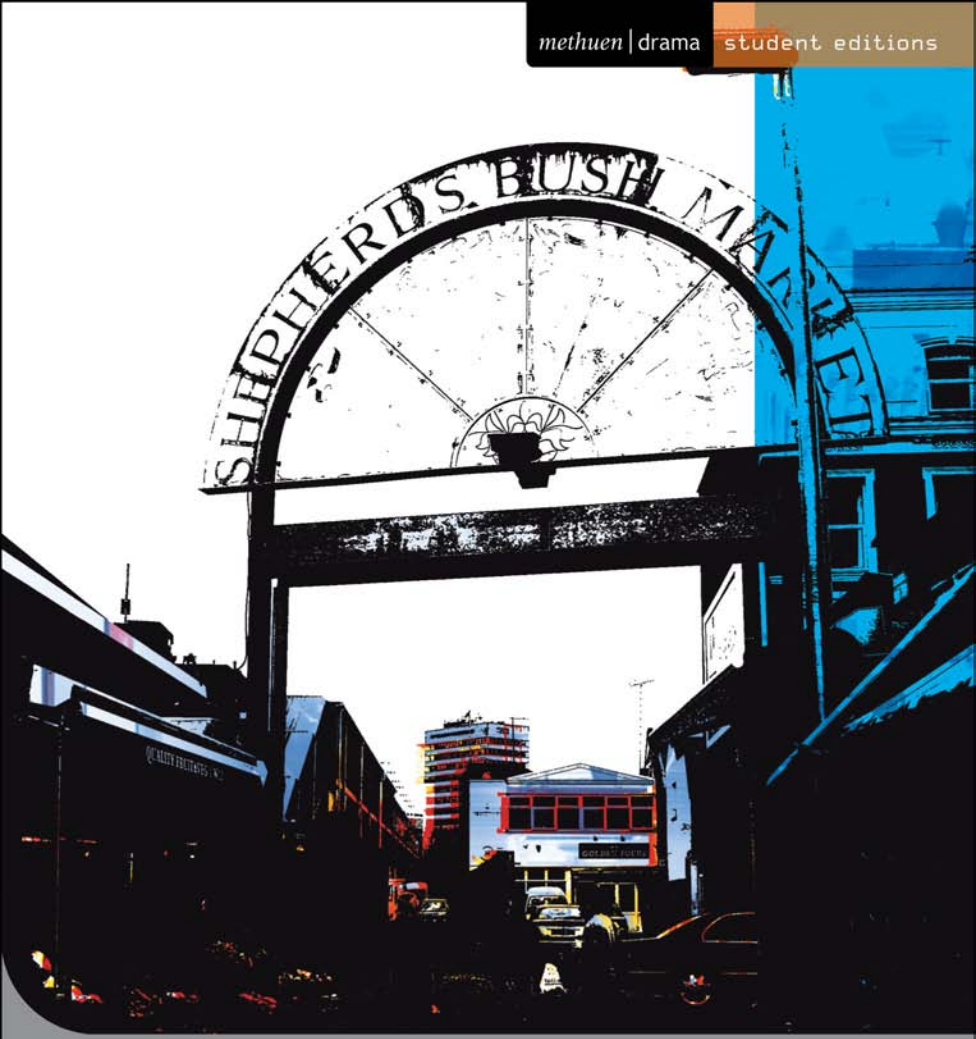

JOE PENHALL

BLUE/ORANGE

EDITED BY RACHEL CLEMENTS

BLOOMSBURY

JOE PENHALL

Blue / Orange

with commentary and notes by
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Joe Penhall

1993 *Wild Turkey* (one-act play) premiered at the London New Play Festival, Old Red Lion, directed by Keith Mattock.

1994 *Some Voices* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre, London, directed by Ian Rickson.

1995 One year writer-in-residency at the National Theatre.
Pale Horse premiered at the Royal Court, directed by Ian Rickson.
Some Voices wins the John Whiting Award.
Pale Horse wins the Thames Television (Pearson's) Award.

1997 *Love and Understanding* premiered at the Bush Theatre, London, directed by Mike Bradwell.
Appointed Literary Associate at the Donmar Warehouse, London.

1998 *Love and Understanding* first produced in the US at Long Wharf, Connecticut, directed by Mike Bradwell.
The Bullet premiered at the Donmar Warehouse, directed by Dominic Cooke.

2000 *Blue/Orange* premiered at the Cottesloe, National Theatre, directed by Roger Michell, winning the *Evening Standard* Best Play Award and the Critics' Circle Award for Best New Play.
Screenplay *Some Voices* produced for FilmFour.

2001 *Blue/Orange* transferred to the Duchess Theatre in the West End and wins the Olivier Award for Best New Play.

2004 *Dumb Show* premiered at the Royal Court Theatre Jerwood Theatre Downstairs.
Screenplay *Enduring Love* (adapted from the novel by Ian McEwan) produced for FilmFour.
The Long Firm, a four-part serial, produced for the BBC, and BAFTA-nominated for Best Serial.

2005 *Blue/Orange* adapted for BBC Four by Penhall, directed by Howard Davies. Winner of the Mental Illness in the Media Best Drama Award.
2007 *Landscape with Weapon* premiered at the Cottesloe, National Theatre.
2009 *Moses Jones*, a three-part serial, produced for the BBC.
2010 Screenplay of *The Road* (adapted from the novel by Cormac McCarthy) released, directed by John Hillcoat.
2011 *Haunted Child* premiered at the Royal Court, directed by Jeremy Herrin.
2012 *Birthday* premiered at the Royal Court, directed by Roger Michell.

Plot

Act One

The play opens in a hospital consultation room at the start of a conversation between Bruce (a junior doctor) and Christopher (his patient). In the room, there is a water cooler and a bowl of oranges. The two men seem to have a reasonably good rapport, although there appears to be some tension around the fact that it is Christopher's 'big day'. Christopher is fidgety and agitated, and the two men have a conversation about the kinds of drinks that Christopher should be avoiding (such as coffee, Coke and alcohol). As the conversation turns to drugs, Bruce seems to be slightly losing control of the consultation, but tries to get his patient to discuss why he is in hospital. We learn that Christopher has been diagnosed with borderline personality disorder.

Just as Bruce is starting to explain to Christopher how he believes that 'recent developments' might warrant a reconsideration of this diagnosis, Robert enters with a cup of coffee. Without addressing Christopher at all, Robert launches into a conversation about his weekend and an evening spent with Bruce and his wife. Eventually, Bruce introduces Robert to Christopher as Dr Smith, a senior consultant, and explains that he's asked Robert to sit in on their session. Christopher seems put at once on edge both by Robert's presence and the fact that he has a cup of coffee and cigarettes. There is a small battle of wills between the three men, resulting in Christopher getting a number of cigarettes but Bruce drinking Robert's coffee. Christopher points out that when he leaves the hospital in twenty-four hours' time, he will be able to do what he likes, and we learn that he's already packed his bags to go. The consultation continues in a rather disrupted manner as Christopher gets increasingly agitated, leading to Bruce telling him that, outside the hospital, people would consider his behaviour to be that of – and here, he quotes Christopher – 'an "uppity nigger"'.

Bruce and Robert begin discussing Christopher's condition, and ask him to wait in another room for a few minutes. Christopher exits, telling the doctors that he hopes they aren't changing their minds about letting him go home because his 'twenty-eight days [are] up'. Bruce tells Robert that he wants to re-section Christopher (currently being held under Section 2 of the Mental Health Act 1983) because he believes that his diagnosis might be incorrect and that he may in fact be schizophrenic. Robert brushes this off, citing medical guidelines, 'ethics', and a lack of bed space, and even goes so far as to imply that Bruce should follow his advice if he doesn't want to jeopardise his career. The two doctors continue to disagree, voicing a range of arguments about the suitability of different kinds of psychiatric care, and are at variance over definitions of conditions and Christopher's diagnosis.

The conversation reaches an impasse, but Robert invites Christopher back into the room. Although Robert wants the assessment to be over, Bruce asks him to stay and listen to Christopher answering a few more questions. Bruce asks the patient what he sees in the fruit bowl. Christopher says that the oranges are bright blue. He also says, slightly reluctantly, that his father was the former dictator of Uganda, Idi Amin. Bruce asks Christopher to go back to his ward. Christopher senses that something has gone wrong, seeking reassurance that he is still going home.

Once their patient has left, Bruce and Robert continue to argue over their differing interpretations of Christopher's behaviour and beliefs. Bruce sees them as evidence of hallucination and delusion; Robert interprets them as neurotic behaviour which might be rooted in Christopher's upbringing. At this point, Robert begins to see Christopher as a potential case study for his own research on cultural specificity and mental health. As the argument continues to escalate, Robert pulls rank, pointing out that he has seniority and that what he says goes. Eventually, he agrees to conduct his own assessment of Christopher, claiming (despite earlier threats and insinuations) that he is on Bruce's side, and that they can make a decision about Christopher the next morning.

Act Two

Act Two takes place later the same night. It opens midway through a conversation between Robert and Christopher. The implication is that Christopher has voiced suicidal thoughts. However, Robert's response is an almost entirely self-centred monologue in which he discusses his own anxieties and professional jealousies, muses on the human condition, and tells Christopher to calm down because he is not actually suicidal. Christopher is incredulous about Robert's advice, and now starts to sound unsure about whether he actually wants to leave hospital. He describes being – or perhaps *feeling* like he's being – stared at, and describes hearing strange noises outside his flat. He also describes his loneliness and the fact that he doesn't have friends or a girlfriend. As in Act One, he says that he wants to go to Africa.

Robert tries to find out more about Christopher's upbringing, following up his earlier thoughts on Christopher's delusions. Christopher claims that he can 'prove' that he is Idi Amin's son, producing a newspaper article which he says his mother gave him, and which discusses Amin's wives, including one who supposedly lives in Feltham. Christopher continues to describe the problems with the area where he lives, but it's not clear whether he's describing real people or delusions.

When Christopher again says that he doesn't want to leave the hospital, Robert suggests that Bruce has manipulated Christopher's thoughts and feelings, which further distresses and confuses Christopher. Robert tells Christopher that if he leaves hospital, he will take his case over from Bruce, and it becomes clear that he is indeed hoping to use Christopher as a case study for his research. Christopher becomes increasingly adamant that he agrees with Bruce that he's not ready to go home, and goes so far as to say that he was lying when he said, in Act One, that he wanted to leave. Robert claims that he understands the health system and its prejudices better than Bruce, and tries to explain his theories of cultural specificity and institutional racism. Christopher becomes extremely agitated, thinking that Bruce has sectioned him because he is black. As Robert attempts to calm him down, Christopher

tells Robert about the conversation that he and Bruce had about recreational drugs, claiming that Bruce told him that recreational drugs are more fun than medical ones, and that Bruce has been lying to him.

Act Three

Act Three takes place the next afternoon. Bruce and Christopher are in the consultation room and Bruce is reading aloud from a report that has been sent to the hospital authority. The report complains of Bruce's conduct with Christopher, accusing him of being 'provocative, unconventional, patronising' and of 'using the racial epithet, nigger'. Bruce is flabbergasted and asks Christopher whether he really believes the charges of the report. Christopher now says that he doesn't know, but that he just wants to go home.

Robert enters, and reveals that the report was presented at a management hearing that morning, but Robert claims that he knows about it because he is 'on' the Authority. Bruce asks Christopher to go back to his ward, and Christopher again voices concerns that the doctors might be about to try to detain him against his will. Once Christopher has left, Bruce asks Robert whether he knows what the report says. Robert claims to have read the report, but as Bruce reads further extracts out, it becomes clear that Robert is the report's author. Bruce wants the report to be withdrawn, but Robert says that a procedure has now been set in motion and Bruce needs to give his own statement of events.

Bruce works out that the report suggests that Christopher should be transferred to Robert's care and, though Robert claims expediency and Christopher's interests as the reasons behind this, Bruce suggests that this is an attempt for Robert to further his own research. As Bruce becomes more irate and more insulting to his colleague, Robert begins to question Bruce's own mental health, and Bruce tears up the report. Robert calls Reception to ask Christopher to come back, but when Bruce tells Robert that he wants to speak to Christopher alone, Robert claims this is not possible. Further, he reveals that he's been keeping a diary in which he records Bruce's

behaviour and which he intends to show to the hospital's management. He claims that Bruce has been consistently insubordinate, racist, and obstructive to his research. Bruce explodes, challenging Robert's interpretation of his behaviour and also claiming that Robert's research is a waste of time and money.

Christopher arrives with his belongings. Robert tells him that he can leave after Bruce has asked him a few more questions. However, when Bruce tries to ask Christopher whether he was upset by any of Bruce's behaviour, Robert intervenes, saying that as Bruce is under investigation pending suspension from his post, he can't ask Christopher such questions. The doctors argue at some length about Christopher's diagnosis and the likely outcomes of him either leaving or remaining in hospital. The argument becomes personal, and Robert suggests that Bruce needs to contact a lawyer.

Bruce turns back to Christopher, passing him another orange, and asks whether Christopher was upset by Bruce's behaviour the previous day. Despite Robert's protestations, Christopher says that he was interested, not upset. Bruce asks him what colour the orange was, and, when Christopher says it was blue, Bruce asks him to peel the orange he is currently holding to see what colour it is. Again, Christopher says it is blue, and Bruce asks what Christopher thinks this means. Christopher says it relates to his father and gets the newspaper article out, but Bruce tells him to put it away. Bruce tells Robert that he thinks Christopher cut the article out of a newspaper. Robert continues to believe that Christopher's mother gave it to him until Bruce reveals that, that morning, Christopher has claimed that his father was Muhammad Ali.

It becomes clear that the complaint to the hospital authority was lodged by Robert. Christopher becomes more and more agitated, and Bruce now insists that he must speak to Christopher alone. Reluctantly, Robert leaves. Bruce tries to explain the severity of the situation, for both of them. He asks Christopher not to go ahead with the complaint and tries to explain why he believes Christopher may have been incorrectly diagnosed. When Christopher isn't very receptive to this,

Bruce becomes extremely agitated, calling him 'an idiot'. Christopher (following Robert's earlier advice) starts laughing, and, not realising that Robert has come back, Bruce loses his temper completely. Robert overhears Bruce being verbally abusive to Christopher – he only stops when he realises Robert is there. Robert discharges Christopher from the hospital. Before he leaves, Christopher asks the doctors, of the orange, 'Have you ever stuck your dick in one of these?', saying that he once tried it with a grapefruit. We assume that this is probably what led to him being sectioned in the first place.

After Christopher has left, Bruce attempts to rescue the situation, trying to apologise and make amends. However, Robert tells him that, as far as he is concerned, Bruce's job in the hospital is over. The play ends with Bruce asking to lodge his own complaint with the hospital authority: he is ready to make his statement.

Commentary

Writing his column rounding up the year's theatre, published in the *Sunday Times* on 31 December 2000, John Peter opened by saying that:

> The big event of my year was what it should always be: a new play. Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange* exploded in the National's Cottesloe like a thunderclap: an angry and fiercely compassionate play about those in the medical profession who put rank and power before healing.

There are a number of reasons for considering Joe Penhall's *Blue/Orange* to be a vital piece of work. It is an exceptionally well-crafted play, which has won a host of awards, and has produced some star performances from a number of well-known actors. It is, as Sarah Hemming said in a 'Platform Interview' with Penhall at the National Theatre in June 2000, 'sharp, fast, funny, argumentative, ambiguous'. More importantly, though, it has considerable significance as a contemporary example of what we might call an 'issue-conscious' play, its themes and concerns resonating potently with a wider set of political and social debates. As a play about race in the year of the Macpherson Report (into police behaviour following the Stephen Lawrence murder), it comments on and contributes towards a dialogue around understanding racism and, in particular, institutional racism. As a play about mental health, it explores a range of tensions around the diagnosis and treatment of serious mental illness. And, perhaps most importantly, the play is interested in language as an instrument of power, and the way it can be abused and 'spun' in the pursuit of institutional agendas. As we will see, this amounts to a critique of the New Labour culture of spin. In short, *Blue/Orange* works beyond the immediate scope of its own plot, characters and themes, engaging with a number of important

political debates, social concerns and philosophical issues that have shaped and influenced contemporary British society.

Context and Background

Penhall, British theatre and representations of madness

> Occasionally I've upset people with so-called outspokenness. People don't like a loudmouth. And I don't understand it. It's part of my job to be a thorn in the flesh. It comes naturally to me.
>
> Joe Penhall, interview with Jasper Rees, *Daily Telegraph*, 30 April 2001

Joe Penhall's first play, *Some Voices*, was first performed at London's Royal Court Theatre in 1994. John Peter, reviewing the play for the *Sunday Times*, called it 'the most thrilling playwriting debut in years'. As Aleks Sierz wrote in his influential book *In-Yer-Face Theatre: British Drama Today*, the production marked the start of 'a momentous era in the Court's history' (p. 210), as it opened a season of work by new young writers who also included Nick Grosso, Judy Upton and, most famously, Sarah Kane, whose first play *Blasted* premiered there at the start of 1995. Partly as a direct consequence of Penhall's inclusion in Sierz's book, the playwright is often considered alongside a range of other so-called 'in-yer-face' dramatists of the mid-1990s.

The mid-1990s saw a sudden explosion of British new writing for theatre, which was characterised, according to Sierz, by a particularly contemporary sensibility, a noticeably urban language loaded with sex, drugs, profanities, shocking acts of violence and a desire to shake the audience by the scruff of the neck. Including Kane's *Blasted*, Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking*, and works by Anthony Nielson, Patrick Marber, Philip Ridley and Jez Butterworth, and often focused on two of the powerhouses of British new writing, the Royal Court and the Bush Theatre, this sudden proliferation of exciting new works which spoke to a range of current issues and young audiences marked an important development in British theatre.

However, it would be a mistake to position Penhall too squarely among this group of writers (indeed, since none of these playwrights ever considered themselves part of a clearly defined 'movement', the same might go for any of them). In Penhall's case though, as Sierz himself notes, there are a number of factors which mean that understanding his work requires a broader context. With the exception of his first two, his plays do not tend towards physical violence (although, as we will see, other kinds of violence can be just as damaging). Penhall's writing is also much more nuanced than that of many in-yer-face writers, and reflects his awareness of the history of political writing in post-war British theatre. Playwrights of the 1960s through the 1980s such as Trevor Griffiths, David Edgar and Peter Nichols form part of a tradition which clearly informs Penhall's ideas of character, structure, narrative, metaphor, and dialectical debate, as we will explore in more detail later in this commentary.

Despite the fact that Penhall's work is very explicitly set in contemporary Britain (more specifically, in London), it would also be a mistake to focus too narrowly on the British tradition, particularly when considering *Blue/Orange* and Penhall's first piece, *Some Voices*. Both plays explore the terrain of mental health and, in particular, of schizophrenia. The social and medical contexts which inform them will be discussed in the following section, but it is worth paying some attention to the literary traditions around the representation of madness. Penhall is not, of course, the first writer to think about and explore ideas about madness: this has been an issue of concern over a wide range of periods, places and contexts. Indeed, there is a considerable body of criticism which (often indebted to Michel Foucault's seminal text *Madness and Civilization*) analyses the way that representations of madness at different points illuminate a whole range of issues pertaining to the contemporary ideas about health, of difference, of mortality and of social relations. From Hamlet's feigned madness, to the way in which the Duchess of Malfi is tormented by being surrounded by a spectacle of madmen, to the despair of Büchner's Woyzeck, there have been numerous theatrical representations of madness.

In Penhall's case, though, the most useful context for the representation of madness in *Blue / Orange* (and *Some Voices*) is the post-war period. In American literature of the 1950s and 1960s there was a strong tradition of exploring the idea of madness as a way into questioning and challenging accepted notions of so-called 'normal' society. A whole range of countercultural writers, including Allen Ginsberg (who is mentioned in *Blue / Orange*), Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs in *Naked Lunch* (1959), Ken Kesey in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1962) and Charles Bukowski explore the figure of the outsider who challenges the 'madness' of power structures in society and is in turn constructed as 'mad'. Penhall has also mentioned being influenced by the short stories of Raymond Carver, vignettes which are frequently peopled by characters whose often rather mundane lives are in a state of dismal chaos.

But if Penhall was influenced by these writers, his plays are also clearly distinguished from some of their ideas and sensibilities. In *Some Voices*, which focuses on Ray, who suffers from schizophrenia and has just been released from hospital into 'care in the community' (in the form of his estranged, if well-intentioned, brother, Pete), Sierz states that 'Penhall sees parallels between schizophrenia and the "human condition"' (*In-Yer-Face Theatre*, p. 211). He quotes the writer as saying that, 'Anyone who is living in a big city, as Ray is, knows that it can drive you insane' (pp. 211–12), and suggests that, for Penhall, schizophrenia is 'a potent symbol of urban alienation' (p. 214). This is a reasonable point, but Penhall's work is very definitely 'not making the facile point that the "mad" are sane and the "sane" are mad' (John Peter, *Sunday Times*). Indeed, when some reviewers of *Blue / Orange* claimed that one of the play's strengths is that we never know how unwell Christopher actually is, Penhall's response was unequivocal. In an interview with Jasper Rees for the *Daily Telegraph*, he said: 'There were a lot of people fluttering around going, "What's so fascinating is that he might not be [schizophrenic]." That's liberal wishful thinking: he really is sick.' And in an interview with Hildegard Klein he pointed out that 'the idea that the mad are sane and the sane are mad is a cliché' (Mireia Aragay *et al.*, *British*

Theatre of the 1990s, p. 85). We will return to the issues around the representation of Christopher's illness and the way in which it structures the play, but here it's worth noting that, although we can position Penhall's work in relation to earlier countercultural explorations, it should not be seen as an entirely straightforward continuation of their ideas.

The connections between *Some Voices* and *Blue / Orange* are readily apparent: Penhall's return to the subject matter of mental health led to him being, for a while, regarded as – in his words to Sarah Hemming – the 'spokesperson of craziness', though he claimed this was unintentional. Both plays take some of their inspiration from Penhall's personal experience of having friends with the illness, briefly working in a centre for those with schizophrenia while in the United States, and from his experience as a local journalist in London during the early 1990s. There are, of course, key differences between the plays, most significantly in their setting and focus. In *Some Voices*, the play follows Ray, and looks at the failures of the 'care in the community' system from the perspective of the care user and the family: we never see any health professionals. *Blue / Orange*, of course, focuses on two doctors and institutional issues and implications rather than Christopher's experience or illness.

In this regard, the play bears comparison with some of Penhall's other works. In *Pale Horse*, first performed at the Royal Court in 1995, Penhall looks at the strange terrain of grief, and the play includes scenes with an undertaker, a vicar and a GP who all seem woefully ill-equipped for dealing with the emotional turmoil which we assume they must be faced with on a daily basis. In *Love and Understanding* (Bush Theatre, 1997), two of the characters are young doctors struggling with their responsibilities and relationship, but the play's real point of interest is the character of Richie, a freelance journalist who returns from overseas to stay on Neal and Rachel's sofa and further complicate their dissatisfaction. Like *Blue / Orange*, the play is a three-hander, and it is here that we see Penhall's interest in 'communication and manipulation' start to develop: as he said to Klein, 'Because Richie is witty, we like him, they like him. I think that's a very political thing' (p. 82).

Penhall's next play, *The Bullet* (Donmar Warehouse, 1998) looks at the corrosive effects of redundancy, while the play that followed *Blue / Orange*, *Dumb Show* (Royal Court, 2004), follows a jaded comedian who becomes the subject of a tabloid sting. Although the plots of *The Bullet* and *Dumb Show* have little similarity to *Blue / Orange*, we can identify a shared concern with the effects of institutions on individuals; and it also becomes clear that, as Dominic Cavendish pointed out in his *Daily Telegraph* review of *Landscape with Weapon* (National Theatre, 2007), 'More than any of his peers, this former journalist has shown a rare aptitude for confronting headline issues of the day, using his gift of the gab as a dramatist to interrogate their underlying complexities and contradictions.' *Landscape with Weapon*, like *Blue / Orange* and *Haunted Child* (Royal Court, 2011) is structured around 'a fraught dialogue between a rampant idealist and a stoical pragmatist' (Aleks Sierz, *Tribune*, 23 December 2011). But where *Blue / Orange* is particularly interesting in this regard is in the complexity with which this debate is staged, so that it becomes difficult, at times, to know which character is the idealist and which the pragmatist.

Penhall has also become increasingly well-known for his work for television and film. Besides adapting both *Some Voices* and *Blue / Orange* (the former into a film starring Daniel Craig as Ray and David Morrissey as Pete; the latter into a TV film which is discussed in the final section of this commentary), he has worked on a number of major projects (the most famous of which is his screenplay of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*). His adaptation of Ian McEwan's novel *Enduring Love* also has a central motif of mental ill-health, while his adaptation of Jake Arnott's *The Long Firm* into a TV mini-series is a character study of a set of 1960s criminals, and is particularly concerned with issues of corruption. His original work, the TV series *Moses Jones*, which starred Shaun Parkes as a black detective, ordered to investigate ritual killings and violence within London's Ugandan community, simply because Jones is also black, works with many of the issues around race, community and belonging which are present in *Blue / Orang*e, but in a very different genre and to very different effect.

Although his most recent theatre works (*Love and Understanding*, *Haunted Child*, and the 2012 play *Birthday*) focus on a distinctly middle-class milieu, at the time of writing *Blue / Orange* Penhall has described how he tended to write about characters who were somehow disenfranchised, and had located much of his impetus for writing at all in the fact that he was 'naturally angry'. So what, in 2000, was there to be angry about?

Social and political context: policy, psychiatry, race

Penhall began work on the play that became *Blue / Orange* in the mid-1990s, but wrote the piece as it stands today over the course of a few weeks in 1999. Although the play was first performed well into the third year of Tony Blair's tenure as Prime Minister, and the play is distinctly marked by a concern with some of New Labour's approaches, to make sense of the political context of the piece, we need to look a little further back, to the General Election of 1979.

Thatcher and Blair

In May 1979, Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister of Britain, leading a Conservative Party that swept to power to the dismay of many on the political left. Thatcher's Conservatives and their policies were markedly more right-wing than any other post-war government, and were explicit in their aim to roll back the Welfare State which previous governments, following principles of liberalism and socialism, had sought to sustain. Many of the agendas and policies which were central to Thatcherism (as distinct from the Conservatism of the early and mid-twentieth century) are still affecting Britain several decades later. Most important is the 'Thatcherite' attitude to the economy. The belief was that all areas of the economy should be open to competition – that the market should be left to its own devices rather than being subject to government control and regulation. Thatcher began a programme of privatisation, starting with the major industries and the rail network. This policy went hand-in-hand with a shift in values towards competition, individualism and individual choice, whereby money became the main measure of success.