The Challenge of Neo-dramatic Writing in the Anglo-Saxon Theater

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With the establishment in the theater of the director-auteur, reversing the traditional roles of "author-supreme text" and "author-servile perform-ance" has advanced startling forms of writing. In the 1990s, dramatic writing re-emerged from its prior state of hibernation and lethargy, claiming the right to exist on stage not merely as an employee to the per-formance text, but as a powerful partner to the director's creative ex-pression. Thus the emergence of a certain type of neo-dramatic writing within the Anglo-Saxon literary canon comes to fill up the need for dra-matic language to reveal its performative potential and for new texts for the stage, which dare reinvent theatrical form in order to capture some of the ambiguity, subversion and indeterminacy contained in post-twen-tieth-century sensibilities. The "reformation" of dramatic writing, an "écriture" enriched with the potentialities of the stage, reveals the on-growing need for the theater's return to the text as well as a need for a strong narrative as a point of departure for performance. Essentially, in neo-dramatic writing textual primacy is restored after having been per-colated through performance considerations. At the same time, the neo-dramatists' emphasis is on how to grant back to language its immediacy, after many years of clichéd usage.

With the establishment in the theater of the director-auteur, who came to dominate the scene between the 1960s and the late 1980s, reversing the traditional roles of "author-supreme text" and "author-servile performance" has advanced not only new ways of de-vising stage narratives, but also startling forms of writing, as well. Repudi-ating the formerly uncontested authority of the director as author, in the 1990s, dramatic writing re-emerged from its prior state of hibernation and

lethargy, claiming the right to exist on stage not merely as an employee to the performance text, but as a powerful partner to the director's creative expression. In Britain and the US in particular, there has been a marked interest towards new plays, with the encouragement of new writing manifest in several playwriting workshops and writers' residencies in various theaters, as well as academic institutions.[1]

This resurgence of dramatic writing has by no means been a smooth, trouble-free operation. The partial setting aside of the dramatic text in contemporary avant-garde theater steadily informed the most daring, imaginative theater productions of the past few decades. In principle, the twentieth century happily celebrated the arrival of the director-auteur, which gave voice to the restlessness expressed in the revolutionary work of artists like Craig, Appia, Meyerhold, Brecht and Artaud, to mention only some of the most prominent ones. As a result, the reconsideration of the role of the director, the broadening of the notion of *text* and the revised practice of the mise en scène as an autonomous art (dating back to the first historical avant-garde and culminating in the establishment of directors' theater in the 1980s) generated hybrid forms of theater largely independent of the playwright's text.

In addition, after Beckett, artists and audiences have been suspicious of verbal texts' ability to capture the intangible and evasive nature of the twenty-first century multifarious experience. Already in 1964 French actor and director Roger Planchon would speak of an "écriture scénique" (scenic writing), which would manifest itself in a wide range of spectacles with a strong visual and physical emphasis. Along these lines, the 1970s marked the declaration of the "death of the author," which consequently encouraged the mise en scène to exist as an open text of scenic writing. Essentially, the role of the author was believed to be equally, if not more viably served by the director-auteur, who had the right to treat the playwright's text as a starting point, a mere scenario, which would flesh itself out in performance. The tendency to view the playwright as redundant became particularly dominant in the 1980s, a decade during which, the institutional glorification of the director-auteur also coincided with the emergence of the theater of images.

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1. Characteristically, in London, the National Theatre Studio has helped playwrights develop their work by providing them with spaces in which to write, relate and network with other playwrights and put up staged readings of their plays. Often, playwrights who have enjoyed the facilities of the Studio go on to have their work staged at one of the specialist new writing theaters, such as the Royal Court, the Bush, etc.

Initiated by visually-minded artists like Robert Wilson, Liz LeCompte and Peter Sellars in the United States, or Tadeusz Kantor, Krysztof Warlikowski and Simon McBurney in Europe, visual formalism, substituting images for words, would dominate the work of several avant-garde artists in the years to come. All of the above taken into account, it was no surprise that the literary text came to occupy a secondary position in theater practice and be considered as just one among the many other materials of the stage, rather than the primary locus of performance.

Nevertheless, without necessarily dismissing the role of the director-auteur, theater audiences seem increasingly wearied of the empty formalism, which has to a significant degree characterized avant-garde performance, and appear hungry for the return of the written text on the stage more than ever before. In the same vein, one can only argue that modern theories of the stage which regard dramatic texts as fundamentally "unstable," mere pretexts for performance, have unfortunately gone too far. Similarly, the staunch polemicists of dramatic theater, who refuse to do justice to language as speech, the way Artaud had celebrated it, actually devalue its physical and incantatory aspect. Thus, the emergence of a certain type of *neo-dramatic* writing within the Anglo-Saxon literary canon comes to fill up the need for dramatic language to reveal its performative potential and for new texts for the stage, which dare reinvent theatrical form, in order to capture some of the ambiguity, subversiveness and indeterminacy contained in post-twentieth-century sensibilities. In this perspective, the "aggressive dichotomizing" of the duality of text and performance, with all its "limiting" and "self-cancelling dualisms" is thankfully re-examined within the dramatic text itself, permitting the terms "text" and "performance" to co-exist as "dialogic," rather than as "mutually exclusive […] allowed to move flexibly and interchangeably when they are in proximity to one another, but reined back toward one another when they begin to drift too far apart" (Heuvel 52).

In effect, within the recent Anglo-Saxon dramaturgy, the author's text began to assume different functions, dictated by the laws of performance and liberated from the necessity to provide a unique and absolute interpretation of the world. Strongly inspired by Beckett's late plays (notably *Not I* [1972], *A Piece of Monologue* [1979] and *Breath* [1969]) which fused literary form with compositional elements (of a visual or purely auditory nature), this new text would now place itself at the disposal of the director's imagination as a malleable, and thus viable, corpus of meaning in search of contextualization. In consequence, texts were no longer in the service of the audiences' innate quest for unity. Moreover, they forced the director to take

on several tasks: determining the play's circumstances, assigning lines to alternative personas and/or isolating actions and characters out of a thick body of text. Similarly, long, dense monologues, lack of descriptive stage directions and logical chronology, removal of all punctuation and an uncanny disappearance of characters, were only some of the characteristics of this new dramaturgy. At the same time, there has been a collapse of traditional linear structure and the idea of psychological conflict as the core of the narrative. In addition, as Donia Mounsef and Josette Feral argue in *The Transparency of the Text*:

> These forms of writing often combine the verbal, the vocal, and the pantomimic, calling upon the stage to give them their strongest expression. They resonate in the body of the actor and in the space of representation; in that interstitial and transcient space between the self and other, the one and the multiple, the individual and the city, at the interface of what is said and how it's lived […] Located at the intersection of presence and memory, duration and transience, individualism and collectivity, meaning and insignificance, poetry and the concrete, contemporary writing is scored throughout by enunciative and corporeal influences […] These texts demand a particular investment from the actor, calling for a style of acting different from the usual representation of a character's psychology […] The actor can no longer simply interpret a prescribed role but must make audible a text, vocalizing its musicality, rhythms, and tempos, like the early poet-dramatists. The playwright is likewise endowed with a new mission. Far beyond the conventional task of storytelling, he or she reinvents language, exploits its fault lines, in other words, infuses writing with performance. (2-3)

The "reformation" of dramatic writing, an "écriture" enriched with the potentialities of the stage, had a following in the late 1970s by European and American playwrights like Heiner Müller, Tom Stoppard, Sam Shepard, Caryl Churchill, Richard Foreman, Maria Irene Fornés and Peter Handke. More recently, the plays of British writers, such as the late Sarah Kane, Rebecca Prichard, Phyllis Nagy (born in the US, but residing in the UK), Mark Ravenhill, to name but a few, all writing within the socio-political framework of "in-yer-face theatre," (a cutting-edge, confrontational and often violent depiction of contemporary life in Britain), but also those of eversurprising writers such as Howard Barker, Martin Crimp, Simon Stephens,

Enda Walsh and of the American playwrights Charles Mee, Suzan Lori-Parks, Mac Wellman and Richard Maxwell, are typical of the new dramaturgy, which pays tribute to the hierarchical shift in recent theater practice. It is no wonder that what fascinates contemporary audiences nowadays is no longer the phantasmagoria of visuals in yet another avant-garde piece, as much as the freshness of the writing. Theater's return to the text reveals a need for a strong narrative as a point of departure for performance.

Essentially, in *neo-dramatic* writing textual primacy is restored, but done so after having been percolated through performance considerations, while simultaneously underlining the dangers of over-exposure to visuality and the limitations of empty formalism. This said, the neo-dramatists' emphasis is on how to grant back to language its immediacy, over the years buried underneath clichéd usage. Phenomenologically speaking, verbal language as a sign system (and as such, a system subject to the individual and subjective understanding and/or misunderstanding of symbols) is much more opaque than all the other sensory and corporeal theater languages. Moreover, the neo-dramatists' decentering of Aristotelian elements and thorough undermining of plot, opens up textuality, testing its limits and potential, while re-focusing both the artists' and the audiences' attention to the issue of representation itself. This is the function of a language highlighting performance issues, as was clearly the case in Beckett's late drama, wherein stage directions constituted a detailed production score. In these plays:

> Theatrical representation is not left to designers, actors and the director but is placed, once again into the hands of the dramatic author. Instead of visual representation, such as stage props, lighting, and the organization of the space of the stage, as well as movement, choreography, and acting, we now have descriptive language. (Puchner 25)

In effect, descriptive language by definition carries within it the issue of representation, assuming directorial function and incorporating notes to actors, whose presence it does not hesitate to acknowledge and foreground. In Stanton Garner's words:

> Whether it has the scrupulously detailed stage directions of a late Samuel Beckett play or the minimal scenic specifications of Caryl Churchill's drama, the written text is both a blueprint for performance and a specific discipline of body, stage, and eye. In its directions for setting, speech and action, the dramatic text coordinates

the elements of performance and puts them into play; reading "through" this text, one can seize these elements in specific and complex relationships. (3)

In the line of Peter Handke's early *Sprechstücke* (spoken plays) *Offending the Audience and Self-Accusation* (1966), in which there is a clear acknowledgment by the author of the performer's (as well as of the audience's) presence, several experimental playwrights place their own creations on bare stages, where actors are allowed to be themselves, unencumbered by the burden of illusionistic setting and the pretext of character. The example of British playwright Martin Crimp is representative of the new dramaturgy's interest in issues of theatrical representation: Crimp intelligently unearths and enhances what Anne Ubersfeld calls "matrices of 'performativity'," the "kernels of theatricality" (8) that exist inside the dramatic text. *Attempts on her Life,* subtitled *Seventeen Scenarios For the Theater*[2] immediately places us on unstable, yet fascinating ground: each "scenario" is an "attempt" to capture the elusive nature of the protagonist, Anne, who is variously described as a terrorist, porn-star, refugee, singles-holiday hostess and brand of car, among other things. In the same vein, Sarah Kane's *Crave* (1998), inspired by her reading of the Bible and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, seems indebted to Crimp's *Attempts*. The play features four characters, each identified only by a letter of the alphabet, dispensing with plot and setting and, unlike Kane's earlier work of highly detailed stage directions, gives no indication of the actions that the actors should perform on stage.[3] The strategy of not allocating any specific lines to any particular speaker was also taken up in Mark Ravenhill's play, *Pool, No Water* (2006), in which the characters also remain nameless and alternate in the delivery of monologues.

A similar dramaturgical frame is present in Simon Stephens's *Pornography* (2007), which deals with the July 7th London bombings and tells the experiences of seven people, all taking place in the three days in 2005 from the announcement of the London Olympics through to the bombings themselves. In fact, the opening directions of the play state that the play can be performed "by any number of actors and it can be performed in any order" (*Pornography* 3). In fact, not only is the dialogue free-form, but there is no mention or description of actual characters, the choice of whom is left to the director. Stephens structures his text around seven stories, mixing mono-

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2. First produced at the Royal Court in 1997.

3 In fact, Kane had openly expressed her admiration for Crimp's writing.

logue with dialogue form, narrative with interaction. In discussing his process he speaks of a desire to basically provide materials for the director and the actors and emphasizes the freedom that his text grants to directors to play around with structure (ordering the sequence of events either chronologically, or episodically) and characters (the casting possibilities ranging from a two-actor show to an operatic staging of over twenty-five actors).[4]

Crimp's, Ravenhill's and Stephens's choices suggest that there is no sense in which any production of their respective pieces can ever be definitive. Evidently, these plays give the director carte-blanche to *realize*, rather than complete their meaning, co-authoring the text, without however tampering with any of the words. As Crimp himself makes this clear in *Attempts*:

> This is a piece for a company of actors whose composition should reflect the composition of the world beyond the theater.
> Let each scenario in words—the dialogue—unfold against a distinct world —a design—which best exposes its irony. (Foreword to *Attempts on her Life*)

In addition, Crimp's non-linear narrative is constantly shifting between dialogue and monologue forms, interspersed with media imagery and excerpts from the discourse of theory. Once again, the playwright contests the possibility of fixed representation, playing meta-theatrically with both the nature of (theatrical) representation per se, and with the "death of character," as Anne is actually a ghost character, existing between presence (as imagined and described) and absence. In typical Pirandellian fashion, Crimp constantly underlines the fact that stable and coherent identity is a myth. In the end, *Attempts* brilliantly elaborates on people's need to fabricate reality, incorporating self-reflexive devices that draw attention to the world as a stage and to life as, ultimately, a performance:

> If on the other hand she's only play-acting, then the whole work becomes a mere cynical performance and is doubly disgusting
> -But why not? Why shouldn't it be/ "a performance"?
> -Exactly—it becomes a kind / of theater (*Attempts,* "11. Untitled: 100 words" 50)

The manipulation of multiple perspectives in theatrical representation is also manifest in British playwright Rebecca Prichard's non-linear play

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4. Stephens in a radio interview with Aleks Sierz. 7 Oct. 2008 ⟨http://www.theatrevoice. com/listen_now/player/?audio⟩.

Yard Gal (2000), describing the dire circumstances of two East London teenagers, Marie and Boo. The play is set to action in a self-conscious beginning, with the two girls urging each other to get the play started. Gradually, the two characters create a bridge of communication with the audience, which ranges from the openly confrontational to the purely confessional:

> **Marie:** Ain't you gonna start it?
> **Boo:** I ain't starting it start what?
> **Marie:** Fuck you man, the play.
> **Boo:** I ain't telling them shit.
> **Marie:** What?
> **Boo:** I ain't telling them shit. If you wanna make a fool of yaself it's up to you. I ain't telling them shit.
> **Marie:** You said you's gonna back me up! You said you's gonna back me up telling the story.
> **Boo:** Is backing you up starting it… Don't start calling me names Marie or I ain't doing this play at all. (*Yard Gal* 5)

In addition, Prichard has her characters engage in vigorous role-playing, impersonating other characters. Moreover, the agility of the text is built on an ingenious use of real story and auto-transformation, mixing third person narration with self-dramatization, enactment and demonstration, Brechtian alienation, real conversation and direct audience address, as well as of pseudo-dialogue and the monologue form.

Unstable representation and a fragmented view of the world are also suggested in a variety of new plays which do not hesitate to juxtapose seemingly opposing narratives and conflicting time reference in a style reminiscent of the collage performances of post-modern auteurs. It was German playwright Heiner Müller (1929-1995), who first treated his plays as "synthetic fragments,"[5] a kaleidoscope of images and memories derived from

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5. Müller's translator Carl Weber, in the introduction to *Hamletmachine and Other Texts for the Stage* defines synthetic fragment as follows: "seemingly disparate scenes, or parts of scenes, are combined without any particular effort at a coherent, linear plot. The result is a kind of assemblage, much like a not yet fully structured work-in-progress […] Müller's fragments are painstakingly crafted texts, 'synthesized' from often widely diverse constituents, as CUNDLING'S LIFE FREDERICK OF PRUSSIA LESSING'S SLEEP DREAM SCREAM, HAMLETMACHINE, THE TASK, and DESPOILED SHORE MEDEAMATERIAL LANDSCAPE WITH ARGONAUTS [author's caps] attest. This is a dramatic structure, or rather antistruc-

past events, mostly from Germany's history. According to him "fragments have a special value today," "because all the coherent stories we used to tell ourselves to make sense of life have collapsed" (qtd. in Holmberg). While directors viewed plays as "production pieces" (*Produktionstücke*), a dense body of material, out of which they could shape their own unique perform-ance text, some playwrights mixed myth with contemporary history, refus-ing to revere classical texts, as for example, in Müller's adaptations of Greek tragedies.[6] The adoption and adaptation of history as a context for language to breathe in is also characteristic of some post-modern play-wrights' revised sense of dramatic form. For American avant-garde writer, Charles Mee, best known for his contemporary revisions of Greek tragedy, drama is an opportunity to expose historical and cultural fragmentation. In his afterword to *The Trojan Women: A Love Story*, Mee describes the process of writing the play as follows:

> This piece was developed—with Greg Gunter as dramaturge—the way Max Ernst made his Fatagaga pieces at the end of World War I: incorporating shards of our contemporary world, to lie, as in a bed of ruins, within the frame of the classical world. It incorpo-rates, also, texts by the survivors of Hiroshima and of the Holo-caust, by Slavenka Drakulic, Zlatko Dizdarevic, Georges Bataille, Sie Shonagon, Elaine Scarry, Hannah Arendt, the Kama Sutra, Amy Vanderbilt, and the Geraldo show.[7]

Like Müller, Mee also expands on Brecht's theory of *Kopien*, a practice by which an author regards texts by others as "inducements to work rather than as private property." Essentially, in both these writers' work, the love of lit-erature is closely linked to their trust in the essentially protean quality of writing and the idea of text as fluid and malleable. In fact, Mee invites us to a form of post-modern (co)-authorship:

> Please feel free to take the plays from this website and use them freely as a resource for your own work: that is to say, don't just make some cuts or rewrite a few passages or re-arrange them or

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ture, he has developed and refined to arrive at a dramaturgy which could be defined as 'post-structuralist' or 'deconstructionist.'" (17, emphasis in the original).

6. See *Despoiled Shore Medea Material Landscape with Argonauts* (1982/1983), *Philoctetes* (1968), *Prometheus* (1969).

7. The writer, in the preface to his web-page "about the (re)making project." 20 May 2008 ⟨http://www.charlesmee.org/indexf.html⟩.

put in a few texts that you like better, but pillage the plays as I have pillaged the structures and contents of the plays of Euripides and Brecht and stuff out of Soap Opera Digest and the evening news and the internet, and build your own, entirely new, piece— and then, please, put your own name to the work that results.[8]

Furthermore, by developing language's visual (spatial), as well as incantatory qualities, Mee's work, like plays by other neo-dramatists, grants language a particularly theatrical status; indeed the density of language assumes a threatening, yet vital physicality. This is a language that no longer claims its function as speech, but rather celebrates its original "vocation" of sound incantation, as envisioned by Artaud's early theories on the re-discovery of language's poetic essence. Indeed, contemporary writing takes pleasure in its newly found freedom, displaying an exciting wordiness. Along these lines, Pavis stresses that in the new conception of dramatic text, where writing (écriture) meets the performer's play (jeu) and the spectator's gaze (régard), meaning is not generated in the words but in the rhythmic associations that are revealed upon the words' enunciation. The playwright and the spectator meet in the performer, who realizes the text's incantatory possibilities. In his exact words: "This is how writing becomes theater, because it mixes material with spirit, and also because it chooses the performer's body as its ultimate destination. The barrier between an act of writing and an act of performing is lifted" (Pavis 27; my translation).

The desire to marry text and performance is often well served in plays of which the writer is also the director of the piece, and vice-versa. This type of self-collaboration foreshadowed by Beckett is the defining characteristic of the plays written by directors like Richard Foreman and Richard Maxwell, to the extent that one can hardly distinguish where in the very tis-

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8. In Mee's web-page (20 May 2008 ⟨http://www.charlesmee.org⟩).
   Similarly, in Mac Wellman's *Anything's Dream*, this process is comically rendered in the copyright pages of the play:
       Adapted from A Midsummer Night's Dream by one
       william shopkeeper by macaw wellman under
       the Power of Certain Nefarious Elves; further
       material has been hammer'd out of shape from
       the works of Saul Kripke, Bachelard, Ortega Y
       Gasset, and of course the shadow playing Wall,
       one Ludwriggle Wittgenstein; copyright 2003
       and Ad Infinitum.

sue of the text the function of the writer ends and that of the director begins. For that matter, New York-based director Richard Maxwell's plays are very much in tune with his vision of deadpan communication. Thus, they feature "idiosyncratic pauses and catchphrases, meaningless utterances, and false-starts," together with "hypernaturalist elements, the intrusion of the Real, and a-thetic performativity to generate minimalist and highly elliptical configurations." In such manner, they function as "postdramatic performance texts that disintegrate traditional notions of character-dramaturgy and unity (of action, time and space) by splitting the common binary oppositions of presence-versus-representation, semiotic-versus-symbolic, signifier-versus-signified etc. into their opposite terms and playing those terms off against each other in performance" (Wessendorf).

In similar fashion, not so much a *neo-dramatist* but an auteur often involved in the writing of his own scripts for performance, Robert Wilson has used his director's sense of rhythm, while literally scripting his production of *A Letter for Queen Victoria* in 1974. Wilson characteristically worked on freeing up words from their signifying structures. His aim was to restore these words' long lost poetry, which had been tied up to accepted meaning. He explained the principle underlying his process:

> By repeating dialogue over and over again you become more careful about what you're saying and what you're feeling when you say it. You also become more aware of what somebody else is saying and feeling at the same time… People can do several things at once. (Wilson qtd. in Marranca 49)

Wilson's theatrical language, his "visual semantics" gave shape to a text which, notwithstanding the intentional misspells and the surface illegibility, remained curiously resonant:

> AND THEN ABOUT THE UM THE UMMM ABOUT THE MOST FLEETING ATTENTION AND ABOUT ABOUT THE ABOUT THE TREES IN IN THE WOODS IN IN IN IN WHERES WHERE WHERE IT IS TO DO THE EXERCISE OF OF THE ADDRESSING KN-KNOWING FULWELL AND THEN SOMETHING IT IS, OF THE PARADISE, PUZZLE OF THE PARADISE. GOOD. *(A Letter to Queen Victoria,* Marranca 52)

Furthermore, these writers' concern with language's potential for unadulterated communication leads to the employment of mechanisms not only for poeticizing the language, as manifest in Wilson's play, but also for direct-

ing the actors in how to enunciate the text.[9] Thus, in the new dramaturgy, as Jean-Pierre Ryngaert, writer and professor of theater at the University of Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle, argues:

> The basic question is no longer "What is the story?" The text exists for its own sake, for its own qualities, for its literariness perhaps, or even for its "theatricality," while the story develops on the surface of the language only, in fits and starts, instead of being a deep and essential structure. (Mounsef and Feral 19)

In this respect, the sheer "materiality" of the word dominates the work of African-American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, who actually defines language as a "physical art," understanding words as "spells which an actor consumes and digests—and through digesting creates a performance on stage" (11).

Like Parks, other American dramatists such as Adrienne Kennedy and Maria Irene Fornés use the violence and absurdity of language to communicate the displacements of contemporary American society, building up with words, as Marvin Carlson points out, "landscapes of the psychic imagination, recalling the earlier experiments of symbolism and expressionism" (qtd. in Fuchs and Chaudhuri 148). In exploring the tradition of dramatic writing, Carlson brings up the example of Gertrude Stein's *landscape writing* and explores the ways in which her essentially Modernist writing reverberates in the powerful mix of "actual physical landscapes of psychic projection with verbal langscapes" that characterizes the work of playwrights like Foreman, Kennedy and Wellman, among others (qtd. in Fuchs and Chaudhuri 148).[10] For Gertrude Stein, the importance of the theatrical event lay in detaching words from their trite or formal contexts (Stewart 63) and placing them against a static dramatic background in a paradoxically dynamic juxtaposition. In the modernist 1910s and 1920s, Stein experimented

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9. A similar tendency can be found in the work of some contemporary Francophone playwrights, such as Swiss-born Valère Novarina, who describes his work in musical terms: "Les acteurs les plus extraordinaires ne jouent pas autre chose que la vraie musique du poète qu'ils font toujours entendre pour la première fois" (The most extraordinary actors never play anything else but the music of the poet, which they always make us hear for the first time; my translation). In Valère Novarina, "L'écriture, le livre et la scène," (entretien avec Noëlle Renaude) *Théâtre Public* 101-02 (Sep-Déc. 1991):13.

10. Essentially, as Carlson notes, Stein's plays are involved with spatial configurations of language itself, that like landscapes, frame and freeze visual moments and alter perception.

with various ways of rendering "alive" human consciousness by means of physicalizing it through language. For her, language *was* the play, words were the stage properties pertinent to each production, and similarly, the characters were created and developed linguistically, their physical selves frequently subordinated to their speech. "Plays are either read or heard or seen," she claimed, "and after, there comes the question which comes first and which is first, reading, or hearing, or seeing the play" (*Lectures in America* 94). Furthermore, in Stein's *language theater* there is no concept of individuality and as an underlying direction the agents of the "action" are usually words rather than human beings. Stein's methods of linguistic subversion and disengagement, as well as of the total obliteration of syntax and the carefully selected randomness of words have served many neo-dramatists' intentions to disentangle theatrical experience from any illusionistic identification with the world outside and attack the preconceived ideas of dramatic linearity promulgated in the Aristotelian poetics. Yearning for a dramatic form to express dystopia, Adrienne Kennedy characteristically bombards her readers with imaginary, yet highly pictorial and linguistically poetic metaphors, such as the Jungle, or the Victorian castle in *Funnyhouse of a Negro* (1962) or the Tower of London in *the Owl Answers* (1963).

On the forefront of all neo-dramatists, British playwright Caryl Churchill has taken performance writing many steps ahead of her time, mixing in her writing different forms of art, such as dance, and faithfully following the tradition of performance inaugurated by Artaud's "Theatre of Cruelty." Her writing clearly shies away from naturalistic representation; fragmentary and highly imagistic, it is also inhabited by surrealistic elements, craftily composed into a totality adhering to a logic of its own. In such light, *A Mouthful of Birds* (1986), inspired by Euripides's *The Bacchae*, is an exploration of madness and violence, structured around a series of seven independent vignettes, each focusing on a different character. The actors play ensemble roles in all scenes other than their own. Dance sequences are at the center of the episodes involving the pig and his lover, the schizophrenic and her hallucinated tormentor, and the serial killer. Churchill succeeds in unsettling her audiences, not only by subverting the notions of gender, race and age in her work, as in *Cloud Nine* (1979),[11] but mostly by

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11. In *Cloud Nine*'s Act 1, set in British colonial Africa in Victorian times, three characters are played cross gender or race: Betty is played by a man, Joshua is played by a white and Edward is played by a woman. In Act 2, set in a London park in 1979, Betty is played by a woman and Edward is played by a man.

resorting to the associative logic of dreams. In the jarring modern-day fairy-tale, *The Skriker* (1994), Churchill's intensely bizarre, Joycean linguistic experiment, an "ancient fairy" flees the underworld in an attempt to communicate with human beings. Similarly, in *Far Away* (2000), Churchill's unbridled imagination manages, through a lyrical, yet terrifying language to strike home the notions of terrorism and global calamity. Subverting the play's idyllic opening, which reveals a colorful scene in the Countryside, is, in American critic Alisa Solomon's words, "a muddled Manichaean total war in which 'the cats have come in on the side of the French,' 'the elephants went over to the Dutch,' and even the weather takes sides" (3). As British theater critic Benedict Nightingale observes, "more than any other writer, [Churchill] has transformed the theater into what it needs to be: a gymnasium that exercises the imagination, shakes up the moral sense, stretches the spirit" (2:7).

It was mostly from the 1990s onwards that Churchill's work developed into a mixed theater of text, dance, and music, manifesting a greater interest in space and movement and hence bringing the stage onto her pages. Such is the case with *Lives of the Great Poisoners* (1998), a narrative in song and dance about the murderous paths of four prisoners from different eras, and strikingly in *Blue Heart* (1997). In *Heart's Desire* there is choreographed repetition in almost every action in the play, while in *Blue Kettle*, despite language's "disintegration" to the level of disconnected sounds, the visual element is capable of holding together the essential narrative. Similarly, Churchill's work with dancers, gave birth to the play *Hotel* (1997), structurally built out of fourteen movement-based visits to the same hotel room. Over the years the playwright has collaborated extensively with several theater companies, trusting that collective research helps her explore the boundaries of writing from a more experiential standpoint.[12] This may explain the perfection of a dramatic language that contains a profound knowledge of the actor's processes and communicates a strong sense of direction.

Last but not least, one should certainly take note of a new tendency in writing, to *display* the writer's text, valorizing its autonomy, and treat it more as a sound or a graphic installation (Pavis 300). In such process there is no interpretation, for speech is divorced from its agent. Rather than ex-

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12. Churchill has collaborated with Stafford-Clark's now-defunct Joint Stock Company (currently known as *Out of Joint*), for *Cloud Nine*, *Top Girls*, *Fen*, *Serious Money*, *A Mouthful of Birds* and *Blue Heart*, among others. She has also workshopped plays such as *Vinegar Tom* (1978) with feminist theater group Monstrous Regiment.

plain (interpret), the writer's desire is now to cite (project/display). This tendency is surely served by a "novelization" of the dramatic text. As Jean-Pierre Ryngaert points out:

> For twenty years or more the dramatic text has been infiltrated by forms that contribute to its "novelization" (Bakhtin's term). [There is] a general tendency for dramatic dialogue to be contaminated by narrative features… The dramatis personae thus come to include all manners of narrators, reciters, monologists, storytellers, and reporters—all manner of mediators between the fiction and the public. (qtd. in Mounsef and Feral 19)

Thus, in Irish writer Enda Walsh's *The New Electric Ballroom* (2008), a play about the lonely life of three sisters who ritualistically reproduce the memory of one single night of their lives ad infinitum, the characters' solliloquies not only constitute the spine of the play's structure, but also reveal a fascination with the non-semantic, purely incantatory aspects of language:

> **Breda:** (*fast and frightened*):
>
> By their nature people are talkers. You can't deny that. You could but you'd be affirming what you're trying to argue against and what would the point of that be? No point. Just adding to the sea of words that already exists out there in your effort to say that people are not talkers. But people talk and no one in their right mind would challenge that. Unless you're one of those poor souls starved of vocal cords or that Willy Prendergast boy who used to live in town and only managed three words. One was 'yes', one was 'no' and one was 'fish'. Yes yes yes. No no no. Fish fish fish. Fish yes yes. Fish no no. Yes no fish. Fish no fish. Fish yes fish. So even he talked. (*The New Electric Ballroom* 5)

Similarly, British playwright Howard Barker's recent play *The Dying of Today* (2008), inspired by Thucydides's account of an Athenian military disaster in 413 BC and the impact of war and devastation on people, largely revolves around the self-conscious narrative of a patron of a barber shop who verbally tortures the barber who shaves him. This is matched by the barber's long monological divination. Barker's play is imaginatively stylized and produces a mesmerizing effect through repetition.

However, for the sake of the argument, it should be underlined that this paradoxically purist conception of language as text, as a fully autonomous

and meaningful drama, devoid of thematic reference, can potentially lead to exaggerated experiments in stylization; in essence, it runs the same risks induced by the suffocating aestheticism of several directors. Traces of this tendency can be found in the plays of Mac Wellman. A poet, as well as a playwright, Wellman sometimes oscillates between the structures of poetry and theater in his dramatic work. As a result some of his plays display a portentous verbosity that actually flattens the characters, cerebralizing and ultimately sabotaging all sense of emotional content. For example, in *Description Beggared; or the Allegory of WHITENESS* (2000) one of the most characteristic speeches reveals the narcissistic trend of writers to over-verbalize, which is in theory similar to some auteurs' image-saturated and as such, fatuous and heavy-handed performances:

> **Fraser**
>
> Can you believe it? I am surrounded by
> maniacs and idiots. It is hard to say
> which is worse, the maniacs or the idiots.
> It is hard to say which is worse, the
> mania of the maniacs, or the idiocy of the
> idiots. For if there is one thing I
> cannot abide it is the mania of maniacs;
> for if there is something I hate even more
> than that it is the idiocy of idiots. (Wellman)

This observation, together with the readers' and the spectators' (revised?) quest for essence and meaning does by no means vindicate a return to the structures of *well-made* plays. As expressed in the plays of Martin Crimp, Caryl Churchill, Richard Foreman, Mac Wellman, Maria-Irene Fornés, Charles Mee, but also in Jon Fosse, the late Sarah Kane, Howard Barker, Valère Novarina, Franz Xaver Kroetz and other neo-dramatists, throughout Europe and the US, fragmentation of character, fracturing and distortion of narrative, and mistrust for conventional representation are key characteristics of the post-1980s dramaturgy, part of the inevitable development of dramatic writing towards the ambiguity and abstraction that express our twenty-first-century sensibilities. Having said this, we can never stress enough that what defines the identity of neo-dramatic texts is a "reformed" type of language. It is a language as sound, as body, as music; a language of multiple and fluid referentiality, celebrating repetition and hesitation. It is also a language that is gradually healing its wounds, emancipating itself from the dictates of linearly conceived meaning. Finally, there is hopeful

evidence that this language is gradually restoring the balance between drama and theater, accepting the dual function of the word as a complex system of mental and symbolic association on the one hand and a generator of sensory impact on the other. Ultimately, as Pavis has often maintained, it is the language that decides on the text's destination. Perhaps we can in conclusion risk an assumption which would hold neo-dramatic texts to be the result of a new fertile confrontation between writer and language.

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